

The Executive's performance in the 2011 to 2016 mandate

KEY:

CG: Cathy Gormley-Heenan

RW: Rick Wilford

(MUSIC)

CG: Well, I think I'll start with Peter Robinson's interview to the Belfast Telegraph in which he had himself said that the Institutions, which includes the Executive, were no longer fit for purpose. Now, that was at the beginning of a period of crisis for the Executive, and the Assembly more broadly. It led to the temporary resignations of a number of DUP ministers from the Executive and it called into question, I suppose, whether or not that temporary resignation of resigning and then coming back in six days later to resign again, the 'hokey-cokey' as they called it: whether or not that was a breach of the Ministerial Code.

Some people would argue that it was, because you weren't upholding the spirit of the role and you were playing politics, effectively, with it. Other people didn't seem to see it... They saw it more as a political masterminding than anything to do with the Ministerial Code of Office. The withdrawal, then, not long afterwards of the Ulster Unionist Party from the Executive on the back of paramilitary activity and claims about the IRA would suggest that the Executive didn't function particularly well towards the end of the mandate. However, the fact that it's still standing is a measure of its success in some way because a lot of people thought, at a minimum, it would have been suspended following the temporary resignations and that didn't happen. This was one instance where we managed to work through things.

RW: Yeah. I think, I perhaps take a slightly more jaundiced view in the sense that, what was significant about that particular episode was that Peter Robinson didn't resign. How rather he put in Arlene as Acting First Minister during that period and the fact that they were resigning and then immediately, as it were, reassuming the role for a period to make some decisions that were on their desks, their respective desks, but then resigning. It just looked ridiculous.

But what was politically significant was the fact the DUP didn't actually pull the plug because, had he resigned, and had the whole ministerial team resigned, rather than engage in this roundabout or revolving door approach to Ministerial Office, then actually we would have been plunged full-scale into a crisis here and we would have probably had an early election. So I think what was significant was that Peter Robinson actually stepped back from the brink and it was evident then that actually, the DUP wanted to keep the devolution show on the road and I think that became apparent when they eventually ended up plumping for Claire Sugden as the new Justice Minister, you know, which was Plan C as it were.

Plan A being an Alliance Minister and Plan B being one of the two Green Party MLAs and then Claire, as it were, gets it almost by default, although she didn't have to take it, of course. But that's interesting in and of itself, because had she not taken it then we would have been on the verge of yet another political crisis. So things have teetered on the edge throughout, particularly the latter part of the last mandate.

I think the other thing to observe was the number of occasions that the SDLP and the UUP voted against the draft budgets, which are, nominally anyway, fully agreed by the Executive. They didn't agree on any one budget during the course of the mandate. They voted against them in the Assembly. Which is another signal, if you like, of the intense conflicts that were going on at the top table. They were then played out in public, whether it was in the Chamber or whether it was through the media, you know, and there was a lot of antipathy amongst the parties and a lot of animosity at times between and among the parties, particularly DUP and Sinn Fein.

So I suppose the fact that we've hauled ourselves through that crisis and now we're in a position where we've moved from a five party Executive to a two party Executive, a diarchy, which has reasserted itself between DUP and Sinn Fein, is maybe a symptom of the fact that our politics are going to be rather more stable this time around and in fact, I suppose they have to be because the DUP and Sinn Fein are now, as it were, themselves alone around that table and they need to cleave together.

And it's interesting, I think, that so far all the kind of niggly, tricky, really difficult issues of have been somewhat parked... During this initial period of the new mandate to enable them to make some progress within an agreed program for government. And actually, I don't know if you recall, but one of the things that was apparent to me going through the manifestos at the Assembly election, was the extent of common ground there was between Sinn Fein and the DUP. You know, sufficient certainly to enable them to come up with a set of common proposals for the program for government.

CG: But that was because this election campaign focused exclusively on bread and butter politics which, you know, everyone wants to live in a prosperous society and reduce poverty levels, etc., etc. It was telling in its absence, that the manifestos did not mention dealing with the past, paramilitarism, cultural issues etc., etc. Actually, it was more telling that in one of the very first political programs after the election outcomes, that the DUP representative very quickly batted away the idea of an Irish language Act when it was raised. So, I think the degree of common ground was because there was an unspoken agreement that they would focus on the bread and butter issues that you could have agreement on and leave those more 'wicked problems,' shall we say, until after the honeymoon period was over.

RW: Yes. Sinn Fein had some advantage because the DUP published their manifesto very early and Sinn Fein published the week before the election itself, you know, so. But there is that kind of, you know, even the targets on extra spending on health or the number of jobs which are being

specified. The other thing that struck me during the Leaders' Debate was, during the course of the campaign, was how studiously Arlene Foster and Martin McGuinness avoided criticizing one another and rather turned their guns, as it were, metaphorically speaking, on their communal competitors.

So, Arlene attacking Mike Nesbitt, and Martin McGuinness, in particular attacking Colum Eastwood, I think because they were competing within the same electorates for votes. So, I think, I don't know whether there was kind of a 'nudge, nudge, wink, winkery' going on, but I was struck by the commonalities that existed between their two manifestos and indeed there was quite a lot of common ground across the front part of the manifestos of all five parties. There were clearly areas of divergence, and you identified one in particular which is, I think, salient and that's the Irish Language Act which bulks very large in Sinn Fein and the SDLP's manifestos and is nowhere to be seen... And in fact, Simon Hamilton, I think it was, during the course of the campaign who batted it away, the mere suggestion of there being an Irish Language Act. But what's interesting is how, as you say, you know, that they've put those in the pending tray rather than, as it were, as things to do now. So I think this thing has got to bear down a bit before they grapple with that.

(MUSIC)