

Clare Rice Talk

KEY:

C: Dr Clare Rice

C: I am looking here at key issues in Northern Irish politics over the last 12 months. I've given this talk for four or five years now at this stage. So I'm picking up or trying to pick up where I left off last year.

Essentially, when I got the remit for, speaking about this, this year, I did have to stop and think what actually has happened because we're into a second phase of protracted political hiatus in Northern Ireland. Arguably there hasn't been much happening, but, hopefully I'll be able to show that.

There, there has been a little bit going on in the background, leaving aside the local government elections, which I know David is going into in more detail in his talk. So please bear with me. It's a largely fairly grim statistics and information that we'll be talking about here, but hopefully useful in terms of painting a picture as to where we are after the last 12 months.

So, I'll start off by setting, a little bit of context, just to get going here, what has changed, within Northern Ireland in the last 12 months? I've mentioned arguably very little, this time last year we were without a functioning or assembly or executive.

We were looking at a political situation coming off the back of an election last year. It was assembly election this year it's the local government. And then reflecting on what's been going on, much of it has been in terms of things that have happened, that Northern Ireland has been involved in rather than necessarily things that have happened within Northern Ireland. Otherwise that would've been the natural focus of a presentation such as this.

So there is an element of looking outwards in, what I'll be discussing here today. It has to be said that even with those, those rather peculiar dynamics, what there is to discuss in terms of Northern Ireland's internal politics and government governance, as I've mentioned, there's been little of any real good news. I have tried as much as possible to be optimistic from, the, the state of play and how things have developed from last year, but I have tried to forewarn you.

It's, slim pickings to be fair. So in terms of some of the key developments, leaving aside the election, as I've mentioned, there are three sort of broad areas. Of note, Garth, I'm not sure if he's still here, but, essentially a lot of what I was going to say around the Windsor framework point has already been dealt with. So I'll, be skimming over that, in slightly less detailed than I'd planned to be doing.

Firstly, in terms of public finances, so Northern Ireland, public finances weren't in a great state as it was last year. They're even worse now. We've heard in recent days that there are plans to withhold funds, that had been earmarked for Northern Ireland as part of the, so-called leveling up project of the current UK government.

The recent floods here in Northern Ireland have again emphasised the extent to which, Northern Ireland's departments are essentially financially struggling, with it being shouted about from all corners, of the political spectrum that more help financially was needed from London.

In terms of the, the cleanup and the, the overall recovery from those. In September this year, the Secretary of State directed Northern Ireland's departments to launch public consultations on how to raise more revenue on how to more effectively use their budgets.

In a recent report from the Department for Finance, detailing the context for these consultations, it was noted that 88% of Northern Ireland's annual income currently comes from the treasury, and 6% comes from revenue raised by dormant departments. What's clear from this document, in addition to the mounting speculation from within political and policy circles, is that options such as, for example, introducing fees for prescriptions, water charges, a consultation on increasing student university fees, these are all on the agenda for potential ways that Northern Ireland could begin to address its financial challenges.

It's clearly stated that hard decisions need to be taken, and I think seeing, seeing in black and white the sheer extent and the potential reach of what some of these tough decisions could be really put starts to put into perspective the challenges that Northern Ireland is facing at the moment. There are attempts to ensure that no fiscal stone is left unturned at present, and we can be rest assured that when it comes to seeking additional money from London, the one thing that all the parties have consistently stood shoulder to shoulder on is this, this pursuit of getting more funds, from London. So if we're looking for a glimmer of, of hope in amongst all that darkness, there is that, level of collaboration across the political parties. Yet we still have no functioning assembly or executives. So it obviously isn't a panacea, it isn't enough in and of itself to trigger things to get it moving.

So there's a bigger picture play here, which has been touched upon in previous presentations as well mentioned about the Windsor framework. At the root of the current political hiatus, impasse, whatever phraseology you wish to use with it, has been essentially Brexit, the Northern Island protocol, the Windsor framework, that's much the same as what I was talking about last year. There hasn't been a lot of change in terms of that as a core theme. And the idea of essentially trying to land on a roundly satisfactory set of arrangements for Northern Ireland in the wake of the UK's decision to leave the European Union. Some of the, the minutiae of that have, altered but ultimately it's still, still there as a core issue.

This time last year, it was the protocol. This time now, it's the Windsor framework. So it's really terminology on, on those finer details, or those alterations have happened. I will go into a little bit more detail, with regard to the Windsor framework later in the presentation.

Again, sort of skimming over in a little bit as Gareth has gone into, a lot of the detail around the procedures. And yeah, it'll make sense in due course, hopefully.

Which brings me to the third of the points that I have here. And the question of political progress more generally. Has there really been any since last year?

It depends on your perspective. So there are suggestions that we might be as close as we have been, so far to the conclusion of these talks between the DEP and the UK government. It would be expected that once that happens, there'll be no obstacles to return to our return to dormant crystal ball. All, ideas welcome.

We'd heard, just over the last couple of days and this morning about comments from, former leader of the Democratic Unionist party, Peter Robinson, with regard to essentially, a perspective where unionism needs to think differently about the deal that is on the table to, effectively accept what deal is there? Maybe start to see that there isn't much more that can be, drawn from the process and to start thinking about getting back into the institutions from as far as things were. Certainly up until the point I come in here this morning, it seemed that the party themselves were somewhat distancing themselves in those comments without actually saying that they didn't agree with them.

So there, there was a lot of potential reading between the lines there, with that. But, as Garth mentioned earlier, there's perhaps more reason to be optimistic this morning than there was, 24 or 48 hours ago. So hopefully it's, it's the start of something, the start of some form of an end game anyway, in relation to all of that, even when that is a great grade though, will it all be straightforward?

Well, parties will have to think about what they need to do before getting back in. So is it the case that there will need to be cross party conversations that happen ahead of a return to Stormont potentially? Is it the case that Stormont could, and I use Stormont, just to broadly refer to institutions? Is it the case that things could get going again with these conversations happening in tandem?

I personally struggle to see how things could in any sort of pragmatic and sustainable way get back up and going without there being some form of conversations as to when that will happen or when the parties would be minded for that to happen. That's not really for me to be deciding that's for them themselves, but I think particularly if you're dealing with an arrangement between the DUP and the UK government that, as the DUP wants, addresses, the seven tests that the party has, it's unavoidable that there will have to be cross-party involvement in accepting whatever this arrangement is.

What's happening between the DUP and the UK government isn't happening in a silo from everything else. All of that will have to be intermeshed and more incorporated before anything can effectively get going again.

So it's the choreography of how all these things, are planned going forward, that will ultimately dictate how quickly it happens, but also how sustainable things might be going forward. I think if this isn't tackled appropriately with enough depth and with enough earnest and serious conversations happening, then we're on an even quicker road to the next collapse than what we experience between 2020 and the current impact that we now have.

So in any case, all of this means that we here, and I still find ourselves in a situation locally in Northern Ireland, where the political impasse isn't being driven solely by factors internal to Northern Ireland. This is the same situation we were in last year. The driving force behind this the challenges and the impasse that we have at the moment is very much an external conversation that's happening.

So in effect, Northern Ireland is caught in a little bit of a limbo. We don't really know what we can do, and as always ends up being the case with these situations, it's the everyday people that are suffering as a consequence.

So let's see. So to look just briefly at what has actually happened within Northern Ireland, then despite this externality of the, the political crisis itself if my maths is right, we've had six times

at the assembly has been recalled in an attempt to elect a speaker, this has happened on a whole range of issues. And on none of those occasions since the last collapse of the assembly, has this actually been achieved.

Of course there's always a degree of political game playing a little bit of strategy in these things in terms of the timings, the topics and so forth. But the fact that there were so many issues of such serious, and significant, importance that have emerged in the course of this impasse so far such that debates were salting them only demonstrates that just because the power sharing itself has stalled, it doesn't mean that everything else has everything else is trending on, but the politics and the issues that politicians should be dealing with are only continuing to mount and get more complicated.

I've mentioned about the, the public finance situation in terms of the context that it sets, but further to this, it's not just the presence or the lack thereof in terms of funds that's important here, but also what's possible in terms of the decisions that can be made on how these funds are spent.

So during the, the last breakdown of power sharing, it was clarified through case law that there were very clear limitations or relatively clear limitations on the decisions that civil servants are able to take in the course of fulfilling their, their duties. That still remains the case. And indeed, there's a level of reticence within the civil service around overstepping the mark because of this previous legal action.

So there's a restriction there on what can actually be done, even with the funds that are there at the moment, ultimately, as well, civil servants might be able to keep things going. They can keep the lights on and keep things ticking over, but there are simply decisions that they can take. Decisions that ministers i.e. elected representatives within departments need to be making, and that isn't happening.

The longer the time has gone on with this under the state of affairs, the bigger this backlog effectively has become, and the more challenging it inevitably will now be, even if everything gets going imminently, the public sector strikes that we've seen on at this stage will feel like an almost weekly basis in different areas from healthcare workers to within education are all reflective of a system that, if I can put it this way, it's slowly grinding to a halt, certainly in terms of how we know it to be and how it normally should operate, or one would expect it to operate within a DeVol context.

So, as another example I've also referred here to the PSNI, the attempted murder of a constable earlier this year. The data breach of officers and several months of upheaval and turmoil, between the resignation of the chief constable and the appointment of a successor are all moderate of deep concern. If they're not, they should be.

It's well acknowledged that in places where political vacuums exist, they'll always be filled, and more often than not, this filling is dominated by more sinister elements within society. And the political upheaval that has been in Northern Ireland in recent years across two separate protracted periods of political hiatus now in addition to the cost of living crisis and so forth, has arguably contributed to just that picture emerging here in Northern Ireland as well.

Our Northern Ireland isn't on its own in terms of that kind of dynamic playing out. It's something that we see playing out internationally as well. But we're here to talk about

Northern Ireland, and it's having a very real impact on that wider political context for everything that's going on.

I did try and warn you there'd be a little bit of positivity and optimism in this review. But in a year in which everything has developed and progressed, and every angle of life for people in Northern Ireland has been impacted by this bigger picture. I think there's an element in Northern Ireland that we tend to be quite pessimistic. We need to try and look for the optimism. Can you see, I'm trying to lift the situation a little bit.

So that's not me trying to argue by the way that a return to the institution would offer total and immediate remedy for all of these challenges that are happening far from it. And the longer the impact goes on, the longer it'll take to recover. But what I am trying to say at least, is that if the last 12 months have shown us anything things potentially will only get worse. There'll be much more reliance on political will in order to get things sustainably back up and going again, whether or not that political will actually exist currently, I can't say that it does. Things may be different once institutions get back functioning again. So again, that's something we'll just have to wait and see what.

Garth has spoken quite a bit here about the Windsor framework. Essentially this is one of the biggest changes since I last spoke to y'all, round about this time last year.

This time last year, it was uncertain what was going to happen. These technical conversations were still going on between the UK and the EU. There were lots of rumours and hypothesis about what would come of it. And finally this year, within a few months of the talk last year, we had the deal announced.

As Garth explained earlier, we had the green lanes, the red lanes as a core component of how the Windsor framework would produce an operationally distinguished way of dealing with the challenges of post Brexit trade relationships, relations between the UK and the EU separate and in an attempt to address some of the issues that were seen with the protocol in Ireland, Northern Ireland in its original form it was hoped that the Windsor framework would be acceptable to the Democratic Unionist party.

We knew at that stage that the party had identified seven tests that it would measure any agreement between the UK and the EU by, as you can see, this is a direct quote from Sir Jeffrey Donaldson taken from the DUP website. That hasn't been the case. And the fact that we're still sitting here talking about political impasse and the hiatus shows that it really, yeah, we maybe tried too hard to think that there would be a quick resolution to all of these issues back when the Windsor framework was agreed.

Garth has also mentioned about the Stormont break. Now. It's something that remains from a political perspective, more contentious, or differently contentious aspect of the Windsor framework, insofar as there are different political perspectives on it.

So from the DUP's perspective, they're very much minded that the Stormont break isn't effective enough. It doesn't go far enough. It's little more than a delaying mechanism. It's intended to be a process that allows MLAs within Northern Ireland to offer a response to EU laws or changes to existing EU laws in relation to those trade aspects of how the Windsor framework operates in practice. It's a protracted, complex, very long drawn out process. There's no two ways about it. It is something that there are varying levels of concern across the political parties in terms of how it operates.

The Secretary of State has been very clear in saying, effectively, I don't really care about that at this stage. Get things back up and going, and then we can have a conversation about working all of those finer details out. But that is something as well, that is, it's kind of lingering a bit like the elephant in the room in terms of, it's not just getting institutions up and going, but there's a whole different responsibility, if I can put it that way on MLAs in terms of this, this broader post Brexit picture. It has an active role in terms of how to engage with that going forward. Albeit part of the criticism of the way that it's arranged is that actually the UK government can, there is a route whereby the UK government can step in and override the decision of the Northern Ireland assembly with regard to that. Even when the break is pulled, it depends very much on the issue. There are elements of those later stages of the process. It still remained to be tweaked and actually worked out in practice that I imagine should it ever rise, we'll be done in a bit of an ad hoc way, a bit of an ad hoc basis.

So there's still a lot of unknowns, even when, if and when we see an arrangement or any agreement reached between the DUP and the UK government that might on the face of it, facilitate a return to the institutions here actually, when they dig down into the finer detail, either the DUP or one of the other parties might struggle to see how things could operate in practice, which comes back to the point I was making earlier about for things to be pragmatically done, the need for parties to be talking to each other and further to be good relationships fostered between all of them before things properly get going again, otherwise, we're just staring down the barrel of the next collapse.

In terms of the DUP's broader response, we've had the seven tests, as I've mentioned, and are well documented by this stage on a very narrow rating of what they contain and what they're looking for. No, the Windsor framework doesn't make them, there's no two hours about it. It doesn't meet them. You could argue that on a more expansive or a broader rating of things, there's room there where they might be able to effectively reach a deal that can be sold. It mightn't in practical terms, necessarily produce anything much different, but the way in which it can be packaged and marketed and sold to party members and indeed to people more generally in Northern Ireland, could just be enough to tip the balance and save the reputation, so to speak, of the DUP. And going back into power sharing, listening to some of the comments this morning from some within the political sphere in response to what Peter Robinson has been saying, I don't think it'll be as easy as that.

And again, the challenges, the internal rifts within the DUP is only making that much more complicated. How will the party itself be able to steer the ship going into this really quite complex and challenging situation in such a way that it won't have wider options, not just within unionism, but in terms of how politics is operating within Northern Ireland, and the wider way in which the post Brexit arrangements that are in place are viewed, understood, and indeed operated.

In response to the announcement that the Windsor framework had been agreed, the DUP set up an I member panel is panel of it comprised two former leaders people from different backgrounds trying to bring together a range of perspectives across businesses, various sectors. And in order to try and inform the DUP's position on how to proceed going forward, the DUP have been clear that it has informed what they have taken forward and how they've acted since then, but it isn't actually clear what the findings of that panel were. So essentially there's still a lot of background work that's going on.

I got the sense from an interview on the radio this morning. Connor Murphy from Sinn Féin was asked very pointedly, do you know the details of what is being discussed between the UK government and the DUP at the moment? For one reason or another, he didn't give a clear yes

or no response to that, which politics would suggest probably there is some element of communication. If I recall rightly, his line was that the party has been dealing with both governments in relation to this which would suggest that there is a level of communication about what's going on. I think that's sensible. It needs to be the case that it isn't just one party that's engaged with all of these conversations, that other parties are informed on it, that's my personal view on it, whether or not they actually are or not.

As I say I'm reading between the lines here of what was being discussed, but it does go to show that at least there's some sort of momentum going on. And I put the question mark here in terms of talks ongoing, because just a few weeks ago, it was suggested that the talks had stalled. So how much of what we're hearing is actually what's going on, and how much of it is testing the water to see public response, to see internal party responses, to see membership responses and use that as a driver for dictating how things will pan out going forward, and the decisions that the parties will take going forward as well.

So yeah, a lot to digest just with that element of the Windsor framework in addition to what we heard earlier in terms of how it operates in the various mechanisms and committees and so forth that have been set up in relation to it.

Another element or another event I should say that we had over the last 12 months was the 25th anniversary of the Belfast Good Friday agreement. It would, it was hoped this time last year that it might have proven to be an incentive for the DUP to get things back and going. The optics of having the international media all eyes focused on Northern Ireland and celebrating the success of a peace agreement against the backdrop of the institutions not functioning, wasn't lost in anyone.

I personally can attest to the level of international interest that were shown in this place during that time, and the level of questions that I was getting from international outlets, and the general gist of it was, but why is this happening? Why won't the DUP go back in the most fundamental questions? And I have to be honest, the more that I, the more time that I spent talking about these issues and answering the question in situations where I had to explain the backdrop and the context of everything, it became harder and harder to actually justifiably explain the situation that we were in. It just became more, more apparent that we are in a very, very strange situation.

And justifiably international audiences were completely perplexed, quite frankly, at the situation that we're in. Northern Ireland is heralded as having been not a success story of power sharing, but the success story, certainly within academic circles, a lot of the scholars working on association and power sharing, they want to engage in Northern Ireland. They want to know about Northern Ireland.

It's the case that everyone wants to study as a relatively successful, example of how it can work. And in the context of all of that with world leaders, key figures from 1998 all coming back together to discuss how well things had been going. They were all at the same time having to say get back to work. And that's not a great look for Northern Ireland. The DUP were very clear from the outset, I should say, that it would never be an incentive for them. Not

unreasonably. So it has to be said given, history, and given that the issues that were being dealt with weren't once, it could be easily swept onto the carpet.

And it should be said as well that the Brexit scenario, and indeed the situation facing unionism within Northern Ireland, particularly when it's contrasted against the activism that we've seen within nationalism with regard to Irish unification the new, the so-called New Ireland discourse and dialogue that has gained prominence over the last few years. It becomes pretty clear that the Good Friday agreement attention that Northern Ireland received was also a prime opportunity for the party to be able to project their concerns, to be able to voice their interests with regard to particularly the Windsor framework and the, the operation and design of those post Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland and indeed Northern Ireland's constitutional place within the United Kingdom, which is as far as we know, part of the basis for those conversations between the UK government and the DUP currently.

So it maybe wasn't the event that everyone had hoped that it would become. And very much that was emphasised as well in President Biden's visit to Northern Ireland. tur 24 hours was spent by the president in Northern Ireland. Most of that time was in Grand Central Hotel down in Belfast sleeping because it was overnight, we had little more engagement than what became known as a bilateral, which was a new phrase to me, a bilateral meeting with the Prime Minister in that hotel.

There was no fanfare in ordinary times. He would've expected that he would've been up here, he'd have had all the politicians, he'd have had the media, would've been a whole big, joyous occasion, a big deal with the US president coming to visit. Where had he to go in Northern Ireland, you know, he went to Ulster University to give a speech. He did meet party leaders, but even that was a very haphazard, fairly informal type of engagement, that happened there. It very much just showcased that Northern Ireland was a place drifting ever further apart.

We were told about all these opportunities between the president and between the trade envoy to Northern Ireland that Northern Ireland could harness if it was able to get power sharing up and running again, if it was able to ensure some stability in terms of its governance going forward. A lot of focus in President Biden's speech was on young people of Northern Ireland and the opportunities that they could harness going forward, where does all of that come from?

So it's not just within Northern Ireland that we're seeing a level of suffering in terms everyday services, in terms of everyday life as a result of the cost of living crisis but also in terms of that longer term picture as well, because the longer that the status the political state, hiatus goes on, the more uncertain economic investors are going to be about Northern Ireland as a place to come to, as a place to do business. And of course, the consequence of that then is in terms of jobs, in terms of the local economy, in terms of opportunities for young people when they go off to university or start apprenticeships, what is there to keep them in Northern Ireland, quite frankly.

So this isn't just about the here and now. This political situation isn't just about what has happened since say, 2017 with the first collapse in of, of the two most recent. It's about what happens in the future and all of this. It's a different type of backlog. It's not quite the same level in terms of, you know, practical checklist backlog that ministers will be dealing with whenever they get back into their departments. This is a backlog in terms of the intergenerational impact that could potentially be had on young people in particular in Northern Ireland in the time going forward.

So that brings me to this then.

So I've looked a little bit at some public opinion work, really at it to some of the themes that I've covered here today. And I've picked out just a couple of interesting bits.

Both of the graphs that I have here today have been taken from the test, the temperature polling that's conducted by Queens University Belfast. That's a periodic study that's conducted as part of an ESRC project that's led from there.

The first one that I look at here is in relation to trust and managing Northern Ireland protocol related interests. And this is data that was collected in October, presented in November of this year, just the start of the month. What we see, and I've circled here, is that the body or the group with the highest level of trust in terms of representing Northern Ireland's interests with regard to the protocol Windsor framework, are business leaders, right? So if we look at the far left of the screen, some of the least trusted actors are the UK government and the Northern Ireland executive. Albeit that's a fairly hypothetical query given the political situation we're in. But this is a deeply political situation.

Yes, there's a huge practical aspect of it. It's the people with the expertise, the everyday day-to-day knowledge with regard to the operation of the protocol or the Windsor framework and practice those Red lanes and Green lanes, the movement of goods across Northern Ireland and within Northern Ireland. It's the businesses that are dealing with it. So it's maybe not unreasonable that this is, and it has been a consistent finding within this polling. The business leaders are the most trusted. If politicians are in a position where they can't be trusted, this raises a huge red flag. Again, thinking about if the institutions get back up and going in terms of what comes next.

So, Garth had mentioned about the 2024 vote, be just over a year's time that that's scheduled to happen. If people in Northern Ireland are outta state where they can't trust or, they're saying that they can't trust their politicians to represent their interests with regard to this most fundamental key issue that has underpinned so much of the political strife and turbulence of the last few years here in Northern Ireland, then what way forward is they're from that? How do people come back from that? How do politicians come back from that? How, how do the institutions actually survive a storm like that?

Arguably, you could say, well, you know, we're used to political apathy to a certain extent in Northern Ireland. Voter turn out consistently would suggest that there's an element at least, of disinterest whenever it comes to politics here. Politics in the sense of politicians and the jobs that they fulfil.

But otherwise an interest in politics in terms of how people's everyday lives are being impacted by the decisions that are taken within political spheres. If we're looking to build or rebuild, reconstruct, a form of power sharing in Northern Ireland that is actually in some way sustainable going forward.

It's not just, as I mentioned previously, those relationships between the political parties that need to be assessed and thought about in one way, shape, or form before things would get going again or in tandem with things getting going again. But it's the relationship between politicians and political parties and the general public that needs to be repaired as well, because there's a complete or close to complete breakdown in trust there around this issue.

It's one of many, but we consistently see through other pollings that the protocol is not seen as one of the highest priority issues on the agenda at the moment. So when it comes to the likes of healthcare education, is that still the same in terms of how people are thinking of their politicians and can not be repaired or at least some level of trust instilled in terms of how all of those, those elements come together and work in practice?

Again, this is a bit of a crystal ball scenario that I'm, I'm looking into at the moment. No, well, no, obviously until such time as things get going again, but it's particularly interesting that we see that Northern Ireland is in, in terms of thinking about the political sphere. It's fracturing in a way that's certainly through the work that I've done in Northern Ireland. I haven't seen it go like this before. So there's, there's a lot going on there. A lot of new territory being crossed into that needs to be dealt with.

Second of all and this is from the testing, the temperature survey as well. They asked a question around preferences for high MLAs should vote in the 2024 protocol Windsor framework vote. As you can see, 56% are in favour for continuing the application of articles five to 10. Essentially keeping things as they are. 34% are against a continuation of articles five to 10.

As Garth mentioned, this is in relation only to the trade aspects of the Windsor framework and how it works. There another element that deals with human rights in relation to article two of the protocol in particular, and that, that all stay the same. So, it is only in relation to those trade elements.

What this shows is that 56%, pre-Brexit, you might have said that was a fairly sturdy majority post Brexit, maybe not so much. And again, it's only a small sample size of the whole body of people here in Northern Ireland. But if we do see in terms of the bigger picture that this is roughly how people would vote in terms of their preferences for how they want their MLAs to vote, in 2024 on this issue, then we're in trouble because what we're starting to see then is there is a split around how people want to proceed. Even if it's the case that things get going again to a point where the institutions are functioning at the time of this vote, it's still an issue that is going to be protracted. So if the institutions were to get up and going again in the morning, this is gonna be dragged out until next year.

The Windsor framework, the protocol, Brexit, all of those arguments, narratives, concerns, problems, issues, everything that we've heard over the last number of years in relation to all of this in these post Brexit arrangements are just going to continue to play out. It's already brought down the institutions. It's created a huge black hole in terms of how Northern Ireland functions, how it operates. It's created a governance gap that quite frankly, can't be plugged without ministers getting back into post within the executive.

All of this is just going to be compounded and bear in mind as well, this is going to be happening in the context of a lot of uneasy relationships between the political parties should things get back up and going again as well, which is why I'd said earlier that I am expecting, unless things are really seriously and concertedly dealt with from the outset that we're looking at an even quicker timeframe until the next inevitable collapse.

So I can get this to move. There we go. Lots of positivity to look forward with.

Then we'd mentioned about the general election. That's something as well that's going to be fading into those wider political considerations for particularly the DUP and Sinn Féin, the

Alliance Party as well going into the next number of months. As Judith has said, there's, there's no way of knowing at this stage for certain when it might happen, but we know the window within what it will. That's something that I would be surprised if it doesn't also factor into thinking around whether or not the DUP would accept or reach agreement with the UK government that would be sufficient to encourage them back into power sharing indeed whether or not other parties would be happy to accept whatever this arrangement might be or how they will respond with more generally that is all going to be shaped by this broader election question.

In terms of thinking about Northern Ireland's political impasse I welcome all suggestions on a postcard because I have no idea quite frankly, about how things will go in the coming our days, weeks, months.

I think much like everybody at this stage, we hope it comes soon. We've seen the extent of challenges that there are in terms of public finances and what that means for services in Northern Ireland. I don't need to speak to this audience about challenges on the ground in terms of what's happening within education and within schools as well. All of this, it needs to come to a head at some point.

I feel like we're a lot closer to it than we were this time last year, but there's still somewhere to go and quite how that will all pan out. I'm not sure from the perspective of thinking about, and I hate focusing on one particular party and anything that I do, but as the DUP is the party at the centre of things at the moment, please forgive me for focusing on, on them.

Essentially there's no obvious way that they can go back into to power sharing at this stage where there won't suffer consequences. And what I mean by consequences is in terms of its electoral standing in terms of its internal cohesion. We know there's a lot of divisions and rions there.

I'm not confident that the party has the structural integrity still remaining to be able to navigate something so significant to that at this stage. I expect it would recover, don't get me wrong, but I think it would present a lot of difficulties and challenges there that will ruminate within unionism and that will present further ructions within unionism in terms of how traditional DUP voters might think about redirecting their votes. Particularly thinking about the Westminster election coming up.

If it's the case that the DUP is looking for something that is akin to the likes of the Internal Market Act, for example, that's a no goer. If it's a case that the DUP is looking more with regard to effectively a type of rehash of the Good Friday agreement and the Northern Ireland Act in terms of securing or reifying, Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom, that's going to present challenges internally, probably more so given the delicate balance that has had to be developed in '98 and has had to be instilled throughout every element of governance here in Northern Ireland in the time since there's no easy way forward for the party, for Northern Ireland, for the institutions quite frankly, for international relations with regard to the United Kingdom, if this issue isn't resolved. But it has to be. So something has to give somewhere. I'm not sure where it's going to give. And until it does, this is kind of where we're at.

So, if I'm invited back next year hopefully I'll have something a bit more positive to say. But in the meantime I've included some further resources and I'm very happy I've given you my

contact details as well, if there's any questions or anything further that, any of you would like to discuss at some stage, but I will wrap it up there if that's okay. I'm happy for any questions.