

Key Issues in Northern Ireland Politics in 2024 - Dr Clare Rice

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CR: Dr Clare Rice (University of Edinburgh School of Social and Political Science)

CR: Hi. Good morning, everyone.

As Anne-Marie has alluded to, this time last year, I was probably not the person that you needed to hear. I stood here and, basically, I felt a little bit like the filler of a negativity sandwich. We had the talk from Judith, and then we had the election results presentation from David, and I was here telling you all, all the bad things and how things could only really get worse, and how awful it was, and how all really that we had to cling onto was a bit of hope that there might have been a little bit of movement that morning towards something that might eventually lead to a restoration of power sharing here.

So, I am beyond delighted to finally be able to talk today about something to do with functioning institutions in this place. I've been doing these lectures for several years at this stage but, now we're back up and running, and, yes, hopefully something more positive to draw upon this year.

Of the several years that I've been doing this, I think the majority of them actually have been at times when the institutions haven't been functioning, so this is a rare pleasure for me to be able to talk in this capacity.

So obviously within 12 months a lot has happened, so I'm not able to cover absolutely everything. So what I've chosen to do is just to pick some of the key moments from the last year.

Obviously wider general knowledge and current affairs will fill in some of the gaps, and there will be time at the end, hopefully, for question and answers as well. So, I'm happy to delve a little bit further into anything I cover here, if there's anything you would like me to do so. There we go.

So, what has actually changed in the last year, then?

Well, aside from the fact that we actually have, to use that horrible phrase, the 'institutions up and running again', we are in arguably a much better position in terms of, not just from a democratic perspective, having elected representatives back in operating the institutions, but we have something at least beginning to form in terms of forward looking agendas and strategies going ahead, a little bit more direction in terms of public services in Northern Ireland, even if, in some cases, that is only just a better understanding of how bad the picture is for them. We have a different relationship, let's say, that's starting to emerge, I think, between east/west, so the island of Ireland and Great Britain, and of course, as we've already been hearing today, the change of government in Westminster brings a very different dynamic and context for all of this to be happening within.

So, first of all, I'm going to start by going back a little bit. So, I'd say this time last year, if I remember correctly, it was the morning of this event. It looked like there was a little bit of movement within the negotiations that were happening between the Democratic Unionist Party and the Secretary of State. We were sitting here talking about, maybe this might be leading to something. Turns out it didn't, not immediately anyway - it was a few months before we had a signed agreement in the form of, 'Safeguarding the Union'. And we see our former Secretary of State here with a copy of that document.

Now, this was an agreement that yes, it was positive in the sense that it laid the bedrock that permitted or enabled a return to power sharing here, but it was deeply controversial for quite a few reasons.

First of all, the fact that it was a conversation that was focused on one political party in Northern Ireland and the UK government, through the Secretary of State, was itself a point of contention, as it would be anywhere, but particularly so given the dynamics of our political arrangements here. That was something that was viewed with scepticism, I think it's fair to say, across the political spectrum in Northern Ireland, and indeed in terms of the general public's perspective of what was happening with that. But also within the political parties themselves, and indeed, even once the deal was reached within the Democratic Unionist Party itself, the content of that agreement was something that was quite divisive.

It wasn't sufficiently divisive in the sense that it split the Democratic Unionist Party, but we did hear voices coming forward that were quite vocal at times in expressing that they didn't agree that it was a sufficiently strong deal for returning to power sharing or indeed that some of the content actually just didn't go far enough. So, there was a lot of unease with it as a deal, much as it was lauded in wider media for it actually being something that got power sharing going again. So, I'll leave it there - everyone has their own perspectives on that aspect of the 'Safeguarding the Union' deal.

But if we look a little bit further into what the content of that deal actually is obviously, and I mentioned this last year as well, the DUP, the Democratic Unionist Party's focus on what needed to be achieved in this was condensed into this idea of seven tests that needed to be met. This idea that the Windsor framework, which was the follow-on or the amendment updates, so to speak, of the protocol in Ireland, Northern Ireland didn't go far enough in addressing Unionist concerns with regard to Northern Ireland's post Brexit specific arrangements.

'Safeguarding the Union' was an attempt to try and address those shortcomings as they were seen. I think it's fair to say, and there there's been a lot of analysis and academic work done on this, that if you're looking objectively at those seven tests, know the 'Safeguarding the Union' document doesn't make those. And even some voices within the DUP were quite open and saying, 'No, it doesn't'.

But if you look at it in the round, what was argued by the Democratic Unionist Party was that there was sufficient movement to offer reassurance to the DUP and, from their perspective, to the unionist community, that it would be beneficial to return to power sharing at that stage and subsequently have some areas that could be revisited to an extent thereafter. So yes, it's one of those, and I'm struggling to sort of articulate it and sort of remain middle-line on it, because there are so many different views on it.

You would expect that, from a Unionist perspective, politically speaking, that there would be a lot to be celebrated, in the sense that it does bring about changes.

So, if we look at the movement of goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, the so-called 'green lane' as it was once known, it has been rebranded and operationally slightly changed, to become the UK 'internal market lane'.

We have the question of Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the United Kingdom shored up in the sense that there were active steps taken in order to try and reaffirm that.

So, there is a degree of positivity in that sense, but whenever you've got the benchmark of those seven tests, you've got the whole Brexit process, you've got all of the trials and tribulations of the Brexit process to look back upon, you can see where there is some discontent with the arrangements that have been agreed through 'Safeguarding the Union' and that's probably most vocally been demonstrated by particularly Jim Allister from the TUV.

He's been very critical of the Democratic Unionist Party, saying that they have sold out, saying that Northern Ireland will still effectively be ruled by foreign laws, that there is still an Irish Sea border, all of these things, and I'm sure David will get into this in talking about the election. The ripple effects of all of that shaped the discourse and the dynamics of that election earlier this year as well.

In a more sort of practical sense, thinking about how Northern Ireland's place could be protected or shored up within the United Kingdom, in the context of trade differentials for Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the United Kingdom, one of the key elements of the 'Safeguarding the Union' paper was the introduction of new bodies.

So, I've mentioned a couple here. We have Intertrade UK. If anyone's familiar with Intertrade Ireland, it's basically the same model as that, but in the UK context, the idea being to support and encourage businesses with regard to trade and production of goods within the United Kingdom. And as you might also have heard, our former First Minister, Baroness Arlene Foster, is the chair of that body.

We also have this UK/East/West Council which is intended to be, effectively kind of a deliberative forum, if I can put it that way, between the Executive members and the leaders of the other constituent parts of the United Kingdom, and with a particular focus on Northern Ireland and Westminster in that body. The direct quote in terms of how it's described is "to strengthen cooperation on shared challenges and opportunities with an east/west dimension across the UK'.

Now, you'd be forgiven for thinking that you might have heard that kind of language before. There is a lot of ambiguity around what this body actually is. It has met - it met with seemingly a positive conversation that happened. Progress around issues such as Casement Park was discussed, funding streams, quite heavy issues at the time with regard to that east/west relationship for Northern Ireland. But where there's a little bit of a question mark is, first of all, does it have any teeth? In other words, can it actually affect change or is it just a talking shop?

And second of all, where does the function of this body actually differ to those bodies that were already established under the Good Friday agreement in terms of bolstering and supporting east to west relationships? So there's still quite a lot unknown about the outworking of these bodies.

Now of course, it wouldn't be an arrangement or an agreement or a deal in the context of Northern Ireland if there wasn't a financial aspect to be considered as well. And there was a hefty one that came with this particular arrangement, around about the £3 billion mark.

So that included around £30 million for tackling waiting lists, we had an agreement to reconstitute or reconfigure how the Barnett formula is applied, increasing it by around 24% per head for people here in Northern Ireland. And we had the guts of £600 million to address the public sector pay rise gap that was in Northern Ireland's finances.

So this was by no means just a piece of paper that was enough to sign off and say, 'Let's get going again' - this was a really, really tough and a really, really strong agreement that was put into place, not just to, in an ideological sense, lay the basis for a return to power sharing, but also to try and address some of the shortcomings and the issues that had arisen as a result of the institutions being down for several years prior to that, and to try and help the institutions get going again, to a certain extent, as I'll get to later on. It hasn't been quite as straightforward as that. But that's where we are at the moment. Okay.

So we have the 'Safeguarding the Union' arrangement in place and the next step from that then was to actually get back into Stormont and get things going again.

Things are a little bit different - they look a little bit different this time. First of all, we have the first Nationalist First Minister, and for most of the international interest in power sharing being restored here, that was the focus of it. It was about the symbolism of that. What does it mean for Northern Ireland? Not just politically, but in a more ideological sense. Is it a sign of a different way of thinking about Northern Ireland, not just in constitutional terms, but in how its politics will be addressed?

I'm in a good audience here to share my absolute frustration at the idea that so many outlets were professing about the idea that Sinn Féin had won an election and could form a government. You'll understand my frustrations with that, but that was the kind of analysis that was happening on an international stage of what was happening with our politics here.

I think in an interesting sense that showed that even the way that Northern Ireland is viewed internationally has changed quite a bit over time because it wasn't purely about the significance of getting things going again - it was about who's doing it?, why are they doing it?, and how are they doing it?

So it was a much more in depth way of discussing and thinking about the politics here, albeit with some, thankfully rare, but still there, occasions where our nuances of our politics and our political system here kind of got a little bit lost. But this is where we are - we have the first Nationalist First Minister, in terms of the Executive formation then, and we have a picture of our new executive here.

We have two women leading the Executive. We have Ministers, hopefully you're able to see it in the picture there. We have Ministers there from a range of parties, as is normal given our compulsory coalition aspect of our institutions here.

We have now an official opposition. Now, this, as you'll know, was effectively a kind of experiment. A few years back, the Assembly collapsed after a few months, so it didn't really have an opportunity to get bedded in. In many ways, this is the first opportunity that there

really has been for an official opposition to find its feet for the provisions that are there for an official opposition to really be tested to see how effective or otherwise they are. And for the overall structures of the Assembly, with the presence of an official opposition to be properly analysed and thought about in the round, this is all assuming that things do continue as they are.

So as things stand, this is actually a very positive way of approaching the political dynamics here at the moment.

Looking purely from an institutional perspective, we've also had several leadership changes, within the political parties. So, within the DUP, we now have Gavin Robinson as a leader, the UUP has changed from Doug Beattie to Mike Nesbitt, and the SDLP, we now have Claire Hanna, albeit she isn't present within the Assembly itself.

But all of these signal that there has been a lot of change, not just in terms of the sort of high level politics here in Northern Ireland, and the way that the institutions, or the parties, sorry, within the institutions are engaging with each other, but actually what the parties are doing internally as well.

There has been a shift in those dynamics that will inevitably play into how those broader conversations are happening between the parties, how agendas are being set, and how those relationships are going to form and continue to develop going further.

So I mentioned here as well about institutional reform. I've put this in here because it ties in with the question mark that I have at the top of the slide. The reason being that the very first day that the Assembly sat again, the first question that was asked was, how long is this going to last? When will the next collapse be? Is there any point in us getting familiar or comfortable with the idea of sustainable governance in Northern Ireland?

If things can be brought down, again, in the process of the last institutional collapse in particular, there was a lot more emphasis on the conversation and the discussion around institutional reform, effectively not to think about things in a procedural sense, to make them more efficient or effective, but in a much more fundamental sense - how can we ensure that the institutions can't be brought down in a state of collapse again? And if they are, how can things be made a little bit easier?

With that, the 'New Decade, New Approach' agreement made an attempt, a first attempt, at addressing that with some success insofar as there wasn't an immediate cliff edge whenever the institutions were last collapsed then a few years ago but ultimately, we were still left in a protracted period of political impasse with no governance, so to speak.

So there is still a lot of room there for institutional reform to perhaps step in and take some of the weight where the political parties themselves aren't able to balance those agendas. But what that institutional reform needs to look like, there are different arguments for that across the different political parties.

Even from a more academic perspective, there are different ways of thinking about it because of the nuances and the particularities of our political system here. And indeed, there's the ever-pertinent question about why would the larger political parties even be interested in the idea of political reform or institutional reform when politically they are, if I can put it this way, they're benefiting from the set of arrangements as they are currently?

So all of this is something that's kind of playing into the ether as well, thinking about going forward, and I will caution as well that there is an element of circularity here, insofar as, yes, the institutions are going again things, touch wood, seem to be relatively stable so far, there doesn't seem to be any appetite at this point for collapsing the institutions again, but when the question is constantly being put around the sustainability of the institutions, does that then feed into a loop that almost can be perceived in the political sphere as people asking the question about an inevitable collapse and when the opportunity will be for that?

So there's a circular argument going on there that could potentially be at least partially broken with a more concerted and focused debate around institutional reform, in my view anyway. That said, it has been relatively successful so far, and again, touch wood, things so far, it's only been less than a year at this stage that the institutions have been going again, but there has been some progress with that that has been welcomed.

We have a Programme for Government which is the first one that has been in place since the 2011 to 2016 mandate. There was a Programme for Government agreed in 2016 and went out for consultation, but never actually got implemented, so that's why I'm using that timeframe.

Everyone kind of expected it to be quite grand, given the sheer level of issues and matters that were on the agenda after several years of political impasse and indeed even that coming on the back of the COVID pandemic and the previous political hiatus. So there was a lot of hope and expectation that this would do a lot, and for some that is the case.

We've got nine priority areas that are quite broad reaching. They include growing a globally competitive and sustainable economy, cutting health waiting lists, delivering more affordable childcare, protecting Lough Neagh in the environment, which is a particularly topical issue, and reform and transformation of public services, to name just a few of them.

But the devil was in the detail when it came to looking at this. And while the nine priority areas seemed -to be quite far reaching in terms of their scope, actually, whenever the detail was drilled into, it wasn't particularly clear how all of these aims, first of all, were going to be tackled, and second of all, whether or not they would be achievable in the remaining time for this particular mandate.

So you have to again, balance the fact that there's a positive aspect here, that we have a Programme for Government, that the Executive have been able to sit down and agree this, with the fact that a lot of the plans in it are quite ambitious to the point that they might not be achievable.

And that leaves a lingering question about what will that mean for the next mandate and for the political parties and members within the Executive themselves, going forward with this. Will this be enough in itself to put a strain on future relationships, is where my thinking is going with that.

With the Programme for Government, what we also have to consider is that we have a very short amount of time left within this mandate, as I've alluded to. The financials that accompany that are also a point of difficulty for the political parties.

So, whenever it came to divvying out the funds for the, and I'll change the next slide.

First for the departments to work towards achieving these aims within the Programme for Government, it became clear that there was a lot of discontent amongst the Executive with that - indeed, even the Ulster Unionist Party didn't vote in favour of the budget for Northern Ireland.

The Health department received the biggest chunk of the money of course, given the expenditure that was required for it, but none of the departments have enough money to actually make up the shortfalls that they have resulting from the last number of years, nor do they have the financial backing or financial underpinning to be able to work towards achieving a lot of the aims that have been set out within the Programme for Government.

So things are positive in the sense, as I'm trying to get the balance here, because I don't want to be Miss Negativity as last year, things are positive in the sense that we have a budget, we have a Programme for Government, but the financials aren't there to actually really pull things through to the end.

We see that, whenever it came to the Northern Ireland finances, the First Minister, and it's quoted here, noted that "it's critical the Executive has the right resources to deliver effective public services for all our citizens". And it notes here that they will engage with the Prime Minister to achieve what's cited as our shared objective.

That's significant and we have seen that there has been quite significant engagement between the Finance Minister and the relevant people within White Hall and Westminster to that end, in order, effectively pushing to try and get more money for Northern Ireland to try and address these shortfalls and ensure that Northern Ireland, for this financial year at least, won't be in a deficit, as that will have a trigger and a knock on effect for the subsequent financial year.

The recent budget in Westminster under the new Labour Government gave a much more enhanced package financially to Northern Ireland than was expected, I think it's fair to say. The expectation had been it would be about £500 million, as it is there is £640 million for the remainder of this financial year, and approximately £1.5 billion for the next financial year that's coming into play.

But even with this, and as we see here, our Finance Minister has said that while this is welcome for public services, it still won't address all the pressures the departments have identified for this year.

Effectively, we're talking a shortfall of, I think it's a roundabout £100 million or thereabouts, even with this additional money coming in, and that means that departments will still have to make cuts in this financial year before looking towards the next one.

So there's a lot of really difficult conversations happening, a lot of very difficult challenges facing the Executive Ministers, and I think there has been a degree of good communication in the sense that it's widely out there that the financial situation isn't great. But I think there's a gap somewhat in terms of communicating just how bad the situation potentially can be and what it will mean for public services within the next 12 to 18 months.

So there's a lot going on there. Effectively there's some positivity to take in the political sense, but in the practical sense, a lot remains to be desired, let's say.

And this brings me to thinking about the challenges for the next wee while. I'd mentioned about intra-party controversies and inter-party relationships.

The change in leaderships is just one aspect of that we know within, particularly DUP and Sinn Féin in recent times, that there has been a lot going on internally that has shaped and

reconfigured how those parties will be interacting with each other, how they'll be engaging with each other, certainly on the floor of the Assembly.

By all accounts, within the Executive, it's not just as fraught as that, but the way that those parties publicly are presenting themselves and how they have to be seen in many ways to be presenting their views about each other is something that could itself lead to a little bit of unravelling going forward.

So that's something that the parties will need to show a level of maturity in many ways to navigate. They'll have to work through a lot of these internal issues in the context of those bigger picture issues that I've discussed so far, all while having a general public in Northern Ireland that is deeply sceptical about what the institutions are doing, how the politicians are acting, and indeed how trustworthy those institutions are at representing the views and interests of people in Northern Ireland.

So I don't want to say that things are leading to another collapse. I don't see it at this point, but certainly if you look at the picture that is building now compared to previous situations, the pieces are there. It's just whether or not the parties themselves will be able to navigate around that in order to keep the institutions on track.

I'd mentioned the budgetary constraints, which will add additional pressure. The fear is particularly that if it looks as though a collapse of the institutions could more favourably benefit Northern Ireland financially in the longer term.

So, for example, if there are departments that are particularly vocal about the idea that they can't do X, Y, and Z that are top level priority issues because of the budgetary situation, that in itself could be an underpinning reason for, not working towards institutional collapse, but that could potentially lead to that as an outcome - as a way to try, not to sound sceptical about this, but as a way to try and find a way to extract more money from Westminster in order to help with that.

We know in the past that that is potentially something that has fed into those wider discussions. There's no reason that that should change particularly, and I go back to it again in the absence of institutional reform to bolster these situations and to prevent them from arising in the future. So there's issues there, not just in a practical sense with the budgetary constraints, that need to be kept in mind.

I include 'Legacy' here because of course, this is a very deeply controversial topic. Whenever it comes to how it's being addressed by the UK government, so far we have the ICIR (Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery), we have legal cases coming forward with regard to the legality of the Legacy Act, we have a legal action from Ireland against the UK, an interstate legal action, with regard to that legislation.

All of these are shaping the wider dynamics within which these conversations are happening. And indeed, the east/west relationship between Ireland and Great Britain is impacted by this, albeit that the nature of that relationship has changed to an extent by default of the fact that there's a different government in place now, but we're still very early days in seeing how that will work out and indeed, even the actions so far of the new government would suggest that there is room there to be sceptical about how they will approach the situation in the time ahead. So that's something as well that could be a potential tipping point.

Brexit - I've captured a lot in this one word with Brexit. Effectively we're the guts of a decade now since the Brexit referendum vote, but the ripple effects of what happened in that vote, and happened subsequently, continue to permeate our politics here.

Again, thinking of the recent general election, it was the Brexit narratives, thinking about the sovereignty of the United Kingdom, thinking about the constitutional place of Ireland, sorry, of Northern Ireland, within that debate, and even the way that those debates are contributing to narratives and debates around, Ireland's - the island of Ireland's - constitutional future are all boiling together in quite nuanced ways that probably couldn't have been foreseen back in 2016 to the extent that they are now.

But all of these are putting into the ether, in a sense, a question mark about Northern Ireland's constitutional future in the sense that it is pushing into the foreground a question around the border poll, so-called border poll question - how that will be conducted, what the criteria for that will be, when such a border poll might be called, and if so, what will the political parties themselves do about it?

And particularly those parties within the so-called 'centre ground' of Northern Ireland, where they will direct their campaigning intentions, and indeed that block of 'don't knows' or 'unknowns' within Northern Ireland consistently popping up in surveys who said that they don't know how they would vote in the event of a border poll, who effectively are key to determining the outcome of that.

So this is again a question for thinking about the future of the Northern Ireland Assembly because that in itself could feed into wider political thinking and strategies with regard to that bigger picture on a border poll going forward.

And finally, I mentioned here Article 18 - Democratic Consent Votes. This is Article 18 of the Windsor Framework, as now known, formally the 'Protocol in Ireland/Northern Ireland'. It is due to happen by the end of this year, so it will be December sometime. Essentially, what it is, is a mechanism that will allow the Northern Ireland Assembly to vote on the continued application of articles 5 to 10 of the now Windsor Framework.

Those are articles that relate to trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. They're very much the trade heavy aspects of that arrangement and what it's intended to do is allow the Assembly a vote, a democratic say, in whether or not those articles can continue to apply to Northern Ireland.

Now, I have to thank my colleagues here in the Assembly for this diagram, and I've included a link to the paper that it comes from outlining what the different options are for that.

So, either we have a vote that says, simple majority, whereby Members will say, as a simple majority, yes, we're happy for these to continue, in which case there's another vote within four years. We have cross community majority where a vote will enable, or a vote in favour will enable, a subsequent vote in eight years' time, so it kicks it out a little bit further.

Or there's a vote that says, no, we don't want the continued application of these rules, and that triggers its own process - it's quite a lengthy process so it isn't the case that, if the Assembly were to vote 'no' in this case, that it would be an immediate disapplication of EU law in Northern Ireland. It would be the beginning of a process that is actually several years long

before it might get to a stage where those laws would not, or Northern Ireland wouldn't be subject to those laws.

Even at that, because of Northern Ireland's particular arrangements, because of the legalities around the UK's exit from the European Union, and the challenges as we saw play out through Brexit with regard to the Good Friday agreement and the nature of the institutions here, it's not necessarily as straightforward as some political entities would perhaps lead it to be believed.

As things stand, we would anticipate that it'll be a simple majority when this vote is held. There's a prior process to the one I've outlined here in terms of how that is triggered. And the Secretary of State has already initiated that first letter so that process is underway towards reaching the stage where a vote then will be held.

But what we need to be mindful of is the fact that even though we know it will probably end up that way, actually it's the narratives and the discussions and the debates and everything that will come with that, the symbolic resonance of what this vote will mean, that will be picked up within the media, that will be discussed more widely, and that the political parties themselves will be arguing about over the next few months.

Effectively, Brexit isn't going away anytime soon, it's just a conversation in a slightly different vein that we'll be having over the next few months. But we know how divisive that was, 2016 onwards, there is the potential for that to arise again at this point going forward.

The only plus side is that it's already kind of known that it should be simple majority, so that a lot of it will be political posturing as opposed to attempts to persuade thinking or decisions in other directions.

And this brings me to thinking about public opinion. So, with regard to the Democratic Consent Motion itself and, again, I have to thank colleagues at Queen's running the 'testing temperature data' for the last couple of years now, I think it was 2021 that they started with this, essentially looking here at how you would like your MLA to vote in the event of this.

So this data runs up until June this year. They released a second batch of data, or third batch of data, sorry, for this year, just last night, which I think it's only one or two points in the difference at the end.

So basically the picture remains the same up until November of this year. And what we see is that the majority of people, 57 per cent of people in June 2024, want to see full application of the protocol or Windsor Framework. And that's how they would like their MLAs to vote in this democratic consent vote that will be held in due course as well.

And another element that I'll bring in with regard to public opinion: now last year, I emphasised the fact that, in the absence of the elected representatives being in the institutions here, the quarters are the areas of Northern Irish society that were deemed to be the most trustworthy in terms of dealing with Brexit and its outworkings were Northern Ireland business and civic society groups. And as you can see from the last two columns here, that remains to be the case. And indeed that's reinforced again with the data that was released yesterday for this 'testing the temperature' set of results.

So it's quite remarkable that even with the institutions back up and running, with politicians that are day and daily talking about these issues, with politicians that, in a matter of weeks will be voting on the continued application or otherwise of articles 5 to 10 of the protocol, it still remains the case that actually non-elected actors are the ones that are most trusted in dealing with these issues.

So how that relationship continues to develop will be one that's particularly interesting to watch. But it's worth noting in the event of a simple majority that the UK government then will be compelled to initiate a review with recommendations into how the Windsor Framework is working in practice and indeed, where there are issues, how that could be improved going forward.

So that will draw very much upon NI businesses and civic society groups, academics and other professionals, in building that picture. So there is an opportunity there for that to all, in a sense, come together and inform things to an arguably slightly better degree ahead of the next vote, which would be in four years' time.

Now, I'd mentioned briefly about this reconfiguration of the relationship between east/west, and I think this picture that came out whenever the two leaders met a few months ago, signals in many ways that things, at the very least, set off on a much better footing than that which it had had been left upon.

We had the 2024 UK general election, which brought in a Labour Government. They had made promises about repealing and replacing the Legacy Act, which I mentioned had been the source of legal action by Ireland to the UK.

We have a different outlook, I suppose, in terms of how Northern Ireland is thought about. It's a party that was instrumental in the Good Friday Agreement therefore it's got a slightly different level of knowledge and perceived interest, at least in how the politics of this place works, and how the peace process develops. It was essentially a fresh footing for that relationship to begin to grow again.

Now of course we have another election coming up now in the Republic of Ireland, so this could reshape the whole thing again, but certainly things seem to be more positive setting off, and there's been some polling to suggest that that is the case in terms of how that has been received.

Indeed, if I go back to my previous slide here, over the far side, we see the levels of trust in the UK government. Actually, compared to last year, that has increased slightly, and indeed for the 2012 results, it's much the same. We're not talking drastic leaps here, but things are looked upon slightly more favourably with the new government in place in terms of that level of trust in dealing with these Brexit related issues. So this is the wider context within which all of these other plethora of issues that I have mentioned are being dealt with.

Now, anything that is a positive relationship, I think has to be harnessed whenever it comes to this place. And certainly when it comes to east/west relations, this is something to be looked upon favourably.

But, as I mentioned, there are sticking points. It's still very early days and, again, it will be a level of maturity and diplomacy in order to navigate some of the really, really deep and,

frankly, quite existential questions that both sides will be dealing with in the years ahead. So that's where we are in relation to that.

So I'm going to round up by saying, looking ahead, I fear I've actually, in the way that I've presented a lot of this information today, ended up coming across more negatively about the prospects for this place than I did even last year.

I do want to emphasise that, while I've been discussing a lot of the pressure points and potential areas for friction to arise that could lay the bedrock or lay the path towards more institutional issues, instability of sorts, I'm more hopeful than I was this time last year about where things are at.

I think looking across the data, looking across the bigger picture, we are in a good place insofar as we actually have the elected representatives in, they're dealing with the issues insofar as they're engaging with those civic society groups, they're engaging with practitioners, they're engaging with people within unions.

All of that needs to be seen in a positive light for what it is, it's engagement that simply wasn't possible to happen in the way that it is currently with the political institutions down.

That said, we have a hell of a lot of issues ahead of us, not least in terms of the budgets and the finances. And while the ambitions may be great, even in some cases the ambitions aren't particularly great, it's just to tread water and get things back up to the level they should be at, not necessarily looking to build forward just yet.

In some areas we have to be mindful that those are ambitions on paper at this point, and the actual achievement of those will be quite a different matter, not just in terms of dealing with finances and all those sort of practical elements of it, but politically as well.

There will be many, many bases upon which political parties will be able to essentially tear each other apart, and it's whether or not that can be done in a kind of staged way in the public eye to present that type of a front, or whether it's happening in reality and actually tearing things apart from the inside out, within the Executive, within the Assembly, and so forth. That will dictate how things go from this point on.

I apologise for being so negative in how I've come across with that, but hope springs eternal when it comes to this place, and I think that's what needs to be harnessed when we're looking at the picture here at the moment.

So, if I haven't depressed you all, I'll wrap up there and I'm happy to take any questions.

Thank you.