The impact of devolution on everyday life: 1999-2009

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—Opening Address
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—Has Devolution Delivered a Shared Society in Northern Ireland
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THE IMPACT OF DEVOLUTION ON EVERYDAY LIFE: 1999-2009

Opening Address—Sir George Quigley.

Has Devolution Delivered a Shared Society in Northern Ireland—Tony Kennedy.
This paper will look at what has been achieved at the Government level and compare this with progress at the community level, citing Lederach's pyramid as an illustration of the need for interaction.

Closing Address—Martin Mansergh, TD.

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The conference was part-sponsored by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.
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Tony Kennedy is a Board member and Chair of the Policy and Communications Committee of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council. Previously he was Chief Executive of Co-operation Ireland from 1992 until December 2008. Tony is also a Board member of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, chairing its Audit Committee, Director of the John Hewitt Society, and a board member of a number of other organisations, including IBIS.

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I must warmly congratulate our Director, Professor Jennifer Todd, on putting together such an outstanding programme for today’s Seminar. What I propose to do is offer some brief personal reflections on the period since the restoration of devolution 20 months ago, identifying some of the big issues which I feel it will be vital to track in the years ahead.

You will recall the condescendingly male chauvinist remark by Dr Samuel Johnson about a woman preaching being like a dog walking on his hind legs; “It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all”. I find equally patronising the remarks of those who are so relieved that peace has (for the most part) arrived as to think it somewhat ungracious and ungrateful to apply normal standards of evaluation to what has come afterwards. Northern Ireland should have large ambitions for the future and we all have to step up to the plate—leaders and led—to ensure they are delivered. We are understandably still in transition but the severity of the challenges to be addressed precludes our lingering there any longer than is strictly necessary.

There are obvious positives in the past 20 months. Much of the stridency has gone out of the tone of much of the political debate. There is a mutual civility there never was before, exemplified by Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness as First and Deputy First Ministers.

An early triumph for the Executive was reaching agreement on a Programme for Government and budget priorities. The very well-organised US Investment Conference last May showed off the new system to excellent effect—making it all the sadder that the image of a united coalition which meant business was somewhat marred by the subsequent stand-off when the Executive failed to meet for 5 months. Mr McGuinness, however, is on record that, remarkably, during that period, he and Mr Robinson never fell out.

Equally positive has been the cordiality of North/South relations, signalled by the obvious rapport developed between Dr Paisley and Mr Ahern. There is a recognition that practical co-operation to mutual benefit—with the development of the island energy market, for example, now part of the conventional wisdom—represents common sense. Inter-Trade Ireland has really made a difference through the fostering of a web of cross-border relationships, and the employers bodies North and South, particularly IBEC and the CBI, conduct an outstanding collaboration.
There is, of course, much more to be said on the positive side but I want to focus the rest of my remarks on what I hope are constructive comments on some of the questions that arise from experience to date.

First, whilst the Governance structure ranks high as a clever political contrivance, the jury is surely out on whether it can, routinely, produce cohesive, decisive government, particularly in circumstances where party manifestos have taken markedly different stances on important policy matters.

In voluntary coalitions, the parties have no option but to compromise their positions as part of the political bargain which gets them into power. Once there, although without the normal bonds of party, they have to hold together for survival, even though, behind the scenes, they may behave (in Walter Bagehot’s wonderful phrase), “Like a rather disorderly board of directors”. The diffusion of power within Northern Ireland’s arrangements for mandatory coalition frustrates the development of such a system.

The complex decision-making process in Northern Ireland has a number of variables. There are the manifestos on which each party has fought the election. There is the Assembly, comprising parties of whom only some provide Ministers for the Executive. There are Committees shadowing each Department, and the number of Departments does not make the task of achieving joined up government any easier. There is the Executive which, like any cabinet, has to arrive at a consensus on issues which need its endorsement as the quasi corporate body responsible for the strategy and the overall impact of government.

There needs to be an acknowledged critical path through all these variables so that there ultimately emerges, on the basis of the inputs from all quarters, that essential consensus. The sequence in which the various inputs are made is also obviously important. Does the Executive reach a provisional decision, which is then tested in the Assembly and its Committees, who have an opportunity to improve it if they can? Or is the process kicked off in the Assembly and the relevant Committee and, if so, what role do the Minister and the Department play at this stage? Does the Minister let the Committee get on with it and then take the Committee’s work into account in shaping a proposal to go before the Executive?

At the stage where the Executive has to settle the issue and reach a consensus, there clearly exists the possibility that it will not be able to do so. However, the imperative of effective government—certainly where vital matters are concerned—surely cannot allow the issue simply to drift and remain unresolved. It may be that in stipulated circumstances there have to be arrangements for a plebiscite to decide what the parties, despite best efforts over a reasonable period, have been unable to decide. This might be considered an extraordinary device in the UK context but the governance structure itself is unique and the merits of introducing a safety value may have to be seriously considered.

I hope that, somewhere within the government machine, these issues, which go to the heart of the functioning of the system, are being urgently addressed.
It also puzzled many who are anxious to see a strong Executive why the differences which gave rise to the 5 month standoff prevented the Executive from meeting at all rather than causing it to meet more often than it had ever done in order to resolve them, particularly since, concurrently, the world outside was turning upside down and it was precisely at such a time that Northern Ireland needed leadership.

I appreciate the reasons for what I described earlier on as this clever political contrivance but it will be important that full advantage is taken in due course of the opportunity to review it.

Of course, the more our parties’ contours cease to be tribal and become a cross section of the population at large, held together only by the support they engender for the policies they espouse on economic, social, environmental etc issues, the wider the range of options for our system of governance becomes, with the prospect of what is described as real politics finally moving centre stage.

It can be argued that we are seeing more now of that kind of politics. But when the chips are down, the old politics continue to loom large, since they are the greater part of the raison d’être for the present party structure. It is often said that the constitutional position was settled by the Good Friday Agreement. But the Agreement merely indicated the circumstances in which the constitutional position could be altered. It would, of course, be by consent, but so long as there are those who wish to mobilise support for change and those who wish to argue for the status quo, and so long as identity is defined in unidimensional terms, the old politics will inevitably come to the fore.

II

The second issue concerns the economy. It is part of the rationale for devolution that it gives the devolved entity greater control over its economic future. People expect it to make a difference to their economic fortunes. Witness the questions presently being asked as to what the Executive is really doing about the current crisis. And yet the crisis shows the extent of the limitations on the Executive’s competence, no matter how great its commitment.

That is why I argue strongly for our having a much reduced rate of corporation tax which would greatly enhance our substantial existing attributes as a competitive business location.

The Government’s pre-Christmas decision to reduce the rate of VAT from 17½% to 15% provides an example of how the argument for flexibility on corporation tax might usefully be extended. The merits of the VAT reduction are highly suspect. It would have been helpful for the Executive to have at least had the choice of keeping VAT at 17½% and taking the cash equivalent of the resultant savings to the Exchequer in the form of an addition to the Executive’s budget. There would no doubt be argument as to what the figure should be but a reasonable estimate would be of the order of at least £250 million. Such a boost would have given the Executive some very real policy choices.
We should not, therefore, be afraid to push for greater policy autonomy for the Executive where this would better enable it to make a real difference and where there is no loss of revenue to the Treasury. Local politics would acquire a new dimension.

The strength of a local economy resting on more solid foundations and with more substance and less veneer must be reflected in the transformation of disadvantaged communities. Continuing to have wards where 60% of the population is unemployed or economically inactive is bound to cause disillusionment with the political institutions. I was delighted to see at page 80 of the Report of the Consultative Group on the Past a recommendation that the proposed Legacy Commission should act as a determined champion to keep attention focussed on the most deprived areas so that the economic benefits are equally experienced there.

III

The third issue must be how we nurture the social solidarity and inclusiveness that has so far eluded the deeply divided ghettoised condition which reflects the mutually reinforcing fear, distrust and antipathy which are a legacy of our history. There are, of course, the good news stories known to all of us which mark progress. One reported in the press recently is the Lisburn housing scheme where the Clanmil Housing Association has had 100% sign up to the Shared Futures charter by the tenants, who are all committed to living together in a mixed neighbourhood. But there is still an Everest to climb before we can say that it is inclusiveness and social solidarity which characterise our province.

IV

I pass on quickly because I think the fourth issue holds the key to this and much else. It is in fact the topic—how we deal with the past—on which the Consultative Group, to which I have already referred, reported last week.

The black American writer James Baldwin got it exactly right when he said that "history, does not refer merely to the past. History is literally present in all that we do". And for us, that history did not begin in 1968. The two grand narratives which hold sway traverse the centuries. One is a narrative of dispossession, oppression and national destiny unfulfilled. The other, emerging from the 17th century struggle for supremacy, has been described by historian Oliver MacDonagh as a narrative of the past as “an endless repetition of repelled assaults, without hope of absolute finality or of fundamental change”.

When I wrote about this in my Review of the Parades Commission I suggested that neither of the great streams of Irish history had a consistent vision of an inclusive society. Both contributed to the development of confessional politics, with religion as the badge of identity. And the roles of the historical actors, as always in history, were often determined by circumstances as much as by deliberate choice. I suggested that both traditions had to try harder to see all the historical actors as people
caught up in the complicated choreography of tragic conflict and that a history which knows only black and white must perpetuate and even sharpen present antagonisms.

As the Consultative Group points out, the past is a concern for society as a whole, not just for victims. I suggested in the Review that both traditions should seriously explore together what they have no choice but to regard as a shared heritage and to discover together how to remember without replicating.

I believe that, as Professor Richard English has pointed out, historians have a crucial part to play. As he says, they can challenge simplistic or self-servingly amnesiac accounts and dispel some of the more unhelpfully outrageous readings of the past. They can erode the notion that one’s own sectional and contemporary view of the past is the only truly valid one. And, very importantly, the historian can demonstrate the contingency rather than the inevitability of our past so that political responses can be made with an awareness of the importance and the range of the choices in which we can all participate.

We can break up the old crust of ideas which no longer serve. We can escape the entail of history. We have the freedom to choose. Convincing all of us of that could be devolved Government’s greatest achievement.
HAS DEVOLUTION DELIVERED A SHARED SOCIETY IN NORTHERN IRELAND?

Tony Kennedy

Although I am on the programme as being from the Community Relations Council, I should start by making it clear that views I express this morning are my own, not those of the Council, nor indeed those of my former organisation Co-operation Ireland, from which I retired just over a month ago. I am however drawing on my experiences as Chief Executive of Co-operation Ireland for over 16 years and on my wider involvement in promoting community relations, including my involvement in the One Small Step campaign. I should say that I’m delighted to be on a platform with my successor in Co-operation Ireland, Peter Sheridan.

When George Mitchell was appointed Middle East envoy by Barrack Obama last week much of the comment reflected “the success of his work in Northern Ireland” and that, of course, is how the world sees the Northern Ireland conflict. We have been placed in the box marked solved and the world has moved on to other challenges—not least the credit crunch. This opinion is so strong that on occasions where I have raised with US politicians the view that there remains work to be done, it has been made clear to me that this is not welcome information and complaints have been made that I am spreading negativity and pessimism.

Certainly we should recognise that in the last ten years much has been achieved in Northern Ireland and in Northern Ireland’s relations with her neighbours. Few would have imagined, even at the time of the Agreement, that we would find out that Martin McGuinness was a cricket fan, or that Ian Paisley would develop such a warm working relationship with both Irish Government ministers and with Northern Irish republicans, or that Peter Robinson would go out of his way to encourage people from the Republic to visit Northern Ireland (even if it is just for their shopping)—but all this has happened and we have taken it in our stride. We have also got used to our process being used to illustrate the success of dialogue and even seen our leading politicians telling people from other areas of ethnic conflict how they can learn from our experience.

And at one level this is deserved. Despite the failure to tackle some major issues—and education is the current clearest example—the politicians are at least finally working together in the forced coalition. This is no mean feat. Much attention and criticism is focussed on the difficulties of the Executive but we should remember that we are requiring politicians with completely different worldviews in economics, in social issues and in constitutional issues to work together on a coherent programme. We should not be surprised that it is difficult—we should be surprised that it works at all.
Nonetheless we do have a right to consider the effectiveness of the results.

I ask in my title whether devolution has delivered a shared society. But it is fair to ask first whether a shared society should be our goal—or even one of our goals. And oddly enough the person I call to speak most eloquently for this goal is not someone from Northern Ireland, Ireland, or even Great Britain. It is Mayor Bloomberg of New York in his underreported comments at last year’s investment conference when he said:

the best and the brightest don’t want to live in a city defined by division. They don’t want to live behind walls. And they don’t want to live in a place where they are judged by their faith or their family names. The historical cultural barriers are slowly coming down, and the sooner they do—and the sooner the physical barriers come down too—the sooner the floodgates of private investment will open.

It is telling that one of the clearest challenges to how we live has come from a man who is not based here and who we had invited over to encourage investment. We are clearly being told that, if we want a secure economic future, building a shared society is not something we can ignore, or decide on later: it is an integral part of achieving that goal.

II

So how are we doing? The answer is that we are not doing very well. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive, which defines housing areas as segregated if over 90% of residents within each estate are of a particular community background—that is Catholic or Protestant - confirms that within Belfast 98% of its estates are segregated with 71% segregated throughout Northern Ireland and it is assumed that segregation is still rising despite some initiatives such as the shared neighbourhood programme and the small shared future housing projects.

This is supported by the recent research undertaken by the Institute of Conflict Research for the Community Relations Council which brought together material on the nature and location of interface barriers in Belfast—amazingly the first time this had been done systematically—and recorded 88 barriers in Belfast, including 15 parts of the city where there are identifiable clusters of barriers. I am sure Neil Jarman will speak more on this subject this afternoon.

We also know that education remains divided and indeed in recent days a commentator has indicated that one side effect of the failure to agree a way forward in secondary education could be separate Catholic and Protestant selection tests for separate secondary schooling.

The one area where serious progress has been made in breaking down barriers has been in employment, including policing.

Why, ten years after the Agreement, is society so divided?
We should recognise that it is easier to divide a society than it is to bring it together and the impact of over thirty years of division will take generations to overcome. This is particularly the case if there is a history of conflict. Before the recent Troubles—as we call them—there were civil disturbances in Belfast roughly every twenty years from the early 19th century. Each time during the violence minority populations would be expelled from areas, each time after the violence there would be some reintegration, though never to the extent which had existed before—the so called ratchet effect. When there was some mixing it was precisely these families who prepared to mix who were intimidated or attacked the next time. We may think we have solved it this time—but would you bet your family’s life on it?

Added to this is our difficulty in addressing the issue. For over thirty years we mostly dealt with the division in society by not talking about it. This made sense. When I was in charge of the housing service in the North West in the early 1980s we employed people of a wide range of political opinions, all dedicated to delivering a fair housing service. If we had got into a discussion about the impact of the latest atrocity—a bombing or a shooting in a pub—there would have been a danger that working relationships would have been damaged, so we avoided it.

But what worked then is now counter productive. If we are to build a healthy society we have to be able to discuss differences freely both to increase understanding and to dispel misunderstandings. However it is difficult to unlearn a habit of 40 years.

This is made more difficult because separation reinforces separation. By this I mean that if people live separate lives it both becomes harder to get to know the other group in a range of ways—there are physical barriers, of course, but there are also psychological barriers. When we do make the attempt we can be surprised. I have one friend—a Catholic—who told me of an occasion where late at night over a few drinks he discussed the Police Service of Northern Ireland with a Protestant friend of twenty years. He said that he supported the police. His friend was surprised as he, the friend, thought that as a Catholic he would be against them—but had never brought the subject up as he thought it could have damaged their friendship.

And separation has been made worse by changes in society. To give two examples: in the 1960s there was still a strong trade union movement based on heavy engineering industries—the shipyards, the aircraft factory in particular. This meant that Protestant working class leaders got involved in trade union activities and in this way, and politically through the trade union linked Northern Ireland Labour Party, got to know and work with Catholics. These links no longer exist.

Similarly in rural areas it used to be the tradition that farmers would hire machinery together and work together to bring in the harvest and get to know each other in this process. Again this no longer happens.
III

I have set out the problem. What we now have to consider is how to resolve it and whether devolution is helping.

As I mentioned earlier the area of greatest progress in breaking down barriers is that of employment. There are a number of reasons for this. Legislation was put in place, backed by systems introduced to ensure implementation. There was a clear political will to enforce the legislation and regular reports on progress. Significantly also there was no perceived conflict between the breaking down of barriers and the idea of equal opportunities—except in the recruitment to the PSNI where a robust defence was made for the need for extraordinary measures to achieve the goal of creating a police service which represented all parts of the community. We have however failed to learn from what works.

There is a legislative requirement to promote good relations—the second part of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires Public Authorities “to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, and racial group”. But unlike the first part requiring the promotion of equality this has had little attention or impact. Again, the devolved Executive in its Good Relations Baseline Report in 2006 said that it was a priority to “make Northern Ireland a place where people of all backgrounds work, live, learn and play together”. If this is a priority it is a shame that almost three years later we are still waiting for an agreed action plan—the triennial action plan put forward under direct rule (inadequate though it was) being abandoned when devolution arrived.

In practice there has been a failure to follow through on the stated objectives. Although all parties claim to support promoting good relations, the recent Assembly debate showed a clear reluctance among backbenchers, particularly Sinn Fein backbenchers, to make this happen.

This failure has a continuing impact, much of which was identified in The Cost of the Troubles survey which was commissioned under direct rule but dismissed when it reported to the devolved administration but buried. Part of the rationale for the dismissal was that it was a direct rule initiative—as if the accuracy of a report could be dismissed merely because someone else initiated it!

The impact is also visible on the ground in simple examples like the two bus stops 100 metres apart on the Crumlin Road in Belfast (and in other locations ) where Catholics and Protestants getting the same bus are spared the problem of having to queue together. The official mind-set behind how our society works is illustrated by the fact that although there is clear policy for erecting a dividing wall, there is no clear policy for taking one down.

It is not as if we don’t know what to do. There has been any amount of research, some of it undertaken by IBIS, with others including CRC, Co-operation Ireland, the Institute of Conflict Research, and the Special EU Programmes Body. All of it points
to the need to build linkages between our divided communities, creating what Put-nam called shared social capital to rebuild what has been lost, or in some cases never existed.

We also have the experience of knowing what has worked on the ground—again supported by evidence based research and evaluation. I know that Co-operation Ireland is keen to measure the impact of its projects, to learn from them and to share this learning, and it is not alone in this. Its programmes have steadily evolved and the current project involving building long term linkages between whole communities in Protestant and Catholic East Belfast and Finglas South in North Dublin is a fine example of how much difference targeted activities can make. It has not been easy. When first floated there was suspicion in the communities. Even after the community leaders had been won over, there remained, and remains, the task of engaging the wider community. However with private sector support a real difference has already been made in relationships between the three communities. It remains to be seen whether this work can continue at the present level, as the private sector seed funding will soon come to an end.

This is by no means an isolated example of Co-operation Ireland’s work—nor is the work of Co-operation Ireland unique. A wide range of organisations, many existing on a shoestring, have made valuable contributions to cross community harmony.

The frustration is that no matter how goods a project is—and this one is good—securing funding is still haphazard. The failure of the states to work to a clear vi-sion, and to have clear indicators of success means that there is no proper assessment and that success is not built on or rewarded.

This has meant that we have been happy to have our community based peace building funded by outsiders—either the United States government as major contributors to the IFI, or the European Union through the Peace Programmes. The advantage of this has been that we got the funding. The disadvantage is that this work has not been the subject of serious political debate in the argument for resources. A side effect of this is that as Peace money and IFI funding reduce, good initiatives collapse as funding is withdrawn, with no clear logic as to which survives and which folds.

Building a shared society should be the core work of our devolved administration. It is as important as economic policy because, as Mayor Bloomberg pointed out, our ultimate prosperity depends on solving this. There needs to be a clear strategy, clear measurable goals within this strategy, and an approach, which engages the vibrancy and commitment of the non state sector in partnership with state agencies. Enforcing the legislative requirement for good relations should be treated as seri-ously as equality legislation.

Sometimes it is useful to take a historical perspective on this. We think we are the generation, which has learnt how to manage the ancient enmities in Ireland. Last summer I was browsing in a bookshop in Galway and picked up a book, which con-sidered Northern Ireland and its relations with the Irish Republic. It concluded that
the bad old days were behind us and that under the new circumstances we could look forward to a brighter future. The book was written in 1964.

The current political settlement has given us the opportunity to reach a real settlement which does break down our divisions, but unless we, and the devolved administration start to seriously address how we build a shared society, I fear that in 40 years time our current optimism could seem as misguided as that view in the heady days of the early 1960s.
THE IMPACT OF DEVOLUTION ON EVERYDAY LIFE, 1999-2009: CLOSING ADDRESS
Martin Mansergh, TD

I

I am very glad to have been invited, not for the first time, to address an IBIS Conference, and I compliment IBIS on its continued good work. I am conscious of the fact that over 70 years ago in 1936 my father, a young man of 26, at that stage more a political scientist than the historian he subsequently became, wrote his second volume on the political institutions in the two parts of Ireland, The Government of Northern Ireland. A Study in Devolution. The tone of it was prescient and ultimately quite pessimistic, mainly because of the icy state of inter-community relations.

I was sorting through some unread newspapers from the time of the last General Election last weekend, and came across an interesting and relatively unguarded interview that Rev Ian Paisley gave to Die Welt on 18 April 2007, a few weeks prior to the restoration of devolution. I will quote two passages: “We gave our lives in defence of Britain, and Britain has deceived us. Now the time has come that the wish for freedom grows. Not for freedom from Britain, but for freedom to govern ourselves”. He was later asked in the interview about 30 years unrest and 3,500 dead. He replied “There may have been things which I did or said, which, if I had to say or do them again today, I would do differently”. He added, however, that the general thrust had been right.

The connection between betrayal and devolved government is something Isaac Butt and the founders of the Home Government Association equally felt in 1870, at the time of Church disestablishment. Paisley’s rationale would also have been understood by the self-proclaimed patriots of Grattan’s parliament, who wanted legislative independence but mostly had no desire to break links with Britain.

As Alvin Jackson demonstrated, it is possible to write a history of Ireland from 1800 to 2000 around the theme of Home Rule rather than independence. Largely on the fringes of political discourse in the South, with the exception of one recent Taoiseach, who was not on the fringes, there is a certain nostalgia for the what ifs of Home Rule. Home Rule could have been an historic compromise between Repeal, let alone separation, and the Union, but was fiercely contested for 30 years by Unionists, imperialists and Tories. Post-1916, it was accepted by most of those same interests on a dual and partitionist basis, but no longer by Nationalist Ireland. In the intervening 90 years, this part of Ireland has both enjoyed the advantages and paid the cost of independence on an ongoing basis. The historical clock cannot be rewound.
II

The 50 years of devolution at Stormont were broadly speaking good to Unionists, even if there may have been an element of false consciousness about it in working-class areas, as David Ervine was fond of pointing out. But Nationalists were kept out in the cold, except in so far as the British welfare state was able to penetrate. Initial checks and balances, non-discrimination, PR, the Council of Ireland, the Boundary Commission, were removed. After the suspension of Stormont in 1972, there was a lot of ambivalence about restoring devolution, whether majoritarian or power-sharing, both amongst Unionists and Nationalists. Unionists were not sure as to whether they preferred integration or devolution, and arguably were not ready for power-sharing in 1974, let alone an Irish dimension, though the latter was blamed for the breakdown of Sunningdale. Nationalists were not sure that they could accept a return to majority rule, even as the price of a united Ireland, hence the preference for a unitary state, though of course Britain is still a unitary state, even with devolution. Nor were they sure that they could accept devolution without an Irish dimension, a so-called purely internal solution. As Taoiseach, Charles Haughey would have preferred an Irish dimension without power-sharing. His opponents were more inclined to the opposite. The only group, apart from the Alliance Party, wholly committed to restoring devolution, was the British Government, working to rebuild an arms-length relationship. As a member of New Consensus admitted to me in the late 1980s after a two-hour meeting pressing for a devolution-only solution, he was not sure, if a power-sharing government would have been able to push through new tougher fair employment legislation enacted the previous day. Even post-Good Friday Agreement, a major reform, such as policing, had to be put through by Westminster. Arguably, devolution could only work, when the big political, constitutional and security issues, which were an obstacle to its implementation, were taken out of the way.

Devolution became much less difficult for Unionists, when it became the norm for other outlying parts of the UK, removing any sense of exceptionalism. What of course no one envisaged in 1998 was a situation, in which SF and DUP would become the main players, but it is a tribute to the strength of the architecture that it can, admittedly after a lengthy breakdown and many rounds of negotiations, accommodate that as well as, if not better than, before.

Even though community barriers remain, practically all political barriers have been lifted. 20 years ago, dialogue both North and South and between the main constitutional parties, was only just beginning. Political representatives often had no previous experience of dealing with one another outside the rhetoric of their firmly held positions. Today, as a Minister of State, I can open a joint Art of the State exhibition as well in Portadown as in Wexford, or raise the flag with Rally Ireland in cordial partnership with the Northern Arts and Leisure Minister Gregory Campbell, with his colleagues Arlene Foster and Michelle Gildernew looking benignly on.

Power-sharing has brought politicians into close proximity with one another, and has enabled them to look beyond ideology and deeply-held convictions to the practicalities of administering and governing. Of course, one can expect setbacks and
frustrations, which incidentally are the lot of all who govern, and there has been some of that this past year. However, all who have an interest in Northern Ireland have every reason to ensure that setbacks are managed and worked through, so as to help parties move beyond their fundamental differences. In recent months, the Executive has managed to reach agreement on progressing a range of issues, including the devolution of policing and justice.

The framework of close support provided by British-Irish inter-governmental co-operation has also been essential to achieving the present relative stability. In more recent times, when the Executive faced difficult decisions on a number of issues, including the devolution of policing and justice, the Governments maintained a supportive and advisory brief, consulted regularly with one another and the parties, all the while willing them to reach agreement among themselves.

I remember addressing an economic conference in Belfast last autumn at the height of the international banking crisis, and saying that “whatever else is keeping heads of government awake at night, it is not the stand-off in the Northern Executive”.

Children's education; higher education and skills; infrastructure; accessible and affordable healthcare; job creation; these are fundamental concerns for all, particularly in these times of global economic uncertainty. The interests of the people of Northern Ireland are best represented by locally elected politicians, who have the closest knowledge of these issues, as they affect the day-to-day lives of their constituents. Likewise, access to local representatives is a key part of creating a system that accurately reflects and addresses the concerns of society.

The responsibility for policing and managing the justice system is a central function of any normal democratic administration. The transfer of these powers will in some senses represent the last pieces of the devolution jigsaw, and will ensure that locally elected representatives are accountable to their constituents on important issues such as crime prevention.

Obviously, effective, responsive and representative power-sharing government is a central element of the reconciliation process. Members of the Executive and Assembly lead by example. But this cannot be a top-down exercise, or one left solely to professional politicians to sort out.

Across Northern Ireland, from Belfast to Derry, in communities urban and rural, at interfaces and in predominantly single-community areas, people need to work to create a society imbued by tolerance and mutual respect rather than the scourge of sectarianism. Their responsibility is to create a positive, forward-looking Northern Ireland, where in time communities cease to be separated by physical and psychological barriers.

Devolution provides a basis for the operation of the North-South Ministerial Council and six implementation bodies plus Tourism Ireland. Outside of those, we have also succeeded in establishing a single electricity market for the whole island. Their
work is complemented by the British-Irish Council, which brings together all the Executives of these islands with the two Governments, and of course by a huge network of less formal East-West cooperation.

Practical cooperation to mutual benefit North and South has underpinned the Irish Government’s historic investment package in roads within Northern Ireland to Derry and Letterkenny and from Belfast to Larne. It is the same logic that is working to renovate and restore the Ulster Canal from Clones to Upper Lough Erne, and that drives joint investment in the island’s economic future by providing funding for cross-border research and innovation.

III

As one example of the effect on everyday life, we only need to take a look at the health sector. Where once families often had to travel long distances to receive treatment or care, now the Government and the Executive are working hard to make sure the border is less of an issue in cases of urgent medical need. Patients in Donegal are now able to access out-of-hours GP services in Derry, and parents and their children in Armagh can do the same in county Monaghan. There are some 65,000 people in border areas, whose closest doctor lives and works on the other side. The same rationale is seeing radiation oncology treatment in Belfast extended to patients in county Donegal, and paediatric and congenital cardiac services in Dublin being made available to patients from the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast.

Administrations in both parts of Ireland, as well as Britain, like most countries round the world, face a truly globalised acute budgetary, banking and employment crisis. The vulnerability of States from the largest to the smallest has been underlined. Jokes involving Iceland have been made about both Ireland and Britain. It is a moot point as to whether it is a greater advantage to be inside the Euro or outside it, and we have to work out the consequences of both positions, in our case accepting a substantial across the board drop in incomes of 10% to 12%. A larger entity, whether it is in the EU and the Eurozone in the Republic’s case or the UK in Northern Ireland’s, provides some limited protection from some of the worst of the fallout. Both devolution and membership of the Eurozone limit the levers available to either Belfast or Dublin.

Both parts of Ireland will have to act and concert within the scope that we have. In our case here, what we do will largely determine whether we sink or swim. It is very important and valuable to have partners and interlocutors North of the border, with whom we can now work closely, whenever necessary. One of the few bright spots on the horizon, in huge contrast to the misery inflicted by violence and terrorism in the past, is that the peace agreement, the lynchpin of which is the Northern Executive, is working.
The Institute for British-Irish Studies was established in 1999 as an interdisciplinary resource. Its aims are:

- to promote and conduct academic research in the area of relations between the two major traditions on the island of Ireland, and between Ireland and Great Britain, from an inter-disciplinary social science perspective.

- to promote and encourage collaboration with academic bodies and with individual researchers elsewhere who share an interest in the exploration of relations between different national, ethnic or racial groups.

- to promote contact with policy makers and opinion formers outside the university sector, and to ensure a free flow of ideas between the academic and the non-academic worlds.

The Institute’s working paper series is based on work in progress. The Institute accepts no responsibility for views offered. When later versions of papers are scheduled for publication elsewhere, this is indicated on the back of the title page.

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