

Reform of the Institutions is in our shared interests

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It was the wisdom of the framers of the Good Friday Agreement which ensured that Review mechanisms were built into the Agreement's provisions, in order to provide for "adjustments necessary in the interests of efficiency and fairness".

At the heart of these provisions was a recognition that political institutions must evolve if their "efficiency and fairness" is to be developed and secured amidst inevitable social, cultural, economic, and political changes.

What is more, of course, the Review mechanisms also implied a recognition that what was necessary for the political architecture of the institutions in the immediate post-conflict context of 1998 might not remain appropriate for Northern Ireland in decades to follow.

Despite the political wisdom shaping these provisions of the Agreement, the political will - principally in Belfast, but to some extent also in Dublin and London - to act upon the provisions has been self-evidently absent.

The one serious initiative to reform the workings of the Executive and Assembly in the interests of "efficiency and fairness" - the Assembly and Executive Reform Act of 2016 - was not only a private member's bill (necessitated by the absence of any attempt by the Executive parties to promote reform), it also faced entrenched opposition from particular parties and thus could only

pass the Assembly when key provisions were either removed or significantly diluted.

The result of this stasis is the absence of meaningful cabinet collective responsibility, official opposition in the fullest sense of the term, and a robust parliamentary culture within the Assembly. Both in the Dail and in Westminster, these practices and characteristics are understood to be essential to the proper functioning of representative, parliamentary government. This should be no less the case in Belfast.

The designation system is particularly responsible for preventing the emergence of a serious and meaningful parliamentary culture, as it enshrines the influence of sectarian blocs rather than providing for the flexibility, compromises, and pragmatism associated with the workings of parliamentary institutions.

While designation had an obvious role in 1998 in building trust regarding the workings of the institutions, it no longer fully captures or reflects the breadth of political opinion in Northern Ireland, as recent election results have indicated. To maintain designation contributes to preventing the emergence of a post-Agreement politics no longer entirely defined by the constitutional question.

Designation, in other words, has 'frozen' the institutions in the politics of the immediate post-conflict period, now nearly three decades past.

The absence of serious and significant reform of the institutions has not only undermined the ability of the Assembly and Executive to govern with “efficiency and fairness”: this is now also undermining public perception of the institutions in Northern Ireland and risks the support and participation of the post-agreement generation, for whom the terms ‘unionist’ and ‘nationalist’ do not adequately or fully define our politics.

Irrespective of the future constitutional position of Northern Ireland, it is clear that the political institutions established in Belfast by the Agreement will remain as the means of administering the region. This being so, it is surely in the shared interest of all in these Islands to encourage, promote, and facilitate reform of the institutions in order to secure their future efficiency and fairness.

In the words of a great Irishman who served in the Westminster Parliament - Edmund Burke - “A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation”. The failure to heed this wisdom is threatening the efficiency, fairness, and stability of the political institutions in Northern Ireland. This outcome is not in the interests of any of us who share these Islands and who desire a deepening relationship characterised by peace, reconciliation, and prosperity.