

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Stormont reform, HC 245

Wednesday 17 June 2026

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Members present: Tonia Antoniazzi (Chair); Claire Hanna; Simon Hoare; Adam Jogee; Mike Kane; Gavin Robinson; Robin Swann.

Questions 1-66

Witnesses

I: Matthew O'Toole MLA, Leader of the Opposition in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

II: Eóin Tennyson MLA, Deputy Leader of the Alliance Party.

III: Jon Burrows MLA, Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party.

IV: Gavin Robinson MP, Leader of the Democratic Unionist Party.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Matthew O'Toole MLA.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's session on Stormont reform. For panel one, we have Matthew O'Toole MLA, the Leader of the Opposition in the Northern Ireland Assembly for the SDLP. I also note at the beginning of the session that Gavin Robinson MP, the leader of the DUP, who is normally a member of the Committee, will be sitting and watching, because he is giving evidence in the last panel.

Thank you for coming, Matthew. Can you explain to us the impact of the relationship between Executive parties and Ministers on the implementation of the legislative agenda and Programme for Government?

Matthew O'Toole: I suppose the short answer is that it does not have enough of an impact on their behaviour, because we have a legislative programme that starts off very aspirational. In the case of the current mandate, the initial legislative programme was full of carry-over legislation—things that civil servants had been working on, such as the Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill, which is really creating vires for Ministers. There are other bits and pieces, but they had not really agreed any ambitious legislative programme.



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It took them a year to finalise a Programme for Government, but that was extremely unambitious and light on specifics. What that meant, and what that continues to mean, is that Ministers and the Executive do not adhere to a coherent plan, which makes for incoherence in government, and it makes for the public being unable to discern exactly what the Executive is doing.

Clearly, when you have parties that are ideologically different, shall we say, not just on the constitution but on matters of broad left-right preference, you need to have an agreed set of priorities, both on what you are going to prioritise spending money on and what your targets are, whether it is waiting lists or building social homes, as well as the trade-offs that you are willing to make to achieve those, and what your legislative priorities are—that is, what laws you are going to use Assembly time to pass.

They do not really do any of that in our political system at Stormont, so that is one of the things that needs to change, because what you get is incoherence and a word salad of aspiration, meaning that, frankly, the public do not know what is going on. I think that culture reinforces all the other bad behaviours and poor cultures that we have in our devolved set-up.

Q2 **Chair:** What is the impact on your constituents?

Matthew O'Toole: I think the impact on everyone's constituents is that they can't really see the benefit of devolved government. We talk about delivery; obviously, politicians everywhere talk about delivery. In a sense, it is always a challenge for all politicians to explain delivery, because we are not literally going out and building roads, driving buses or doing operations in hospitals. But what we try to communicate is that the people who are elected are making decisions that are making a meaningful difference in your public services and the community you live in, and it is very, very difficult in Northern Ireland for people to see what meaningful improvements Stormont makes to their lives. That is really pernicious, particularly in a society where democracy, basic governance, has been so challenged for so much of our history. For people to just not believe that there is much point in it or that it is achieving very much is really toxic, whatever your preference on the constitution.

In relation to the main impact it has on my constituents, I could go through specific things for my constituents, but you have on the Committee a south Belfast representative who can keep you updated on those things as and when.

Chair: Absolutely. Robin wants to come in here.

Q3 **Robin Swann:** Thanks for coming to give evidence, Matthew. In your comment there, you talked about the impact of not making decisions on spending money. We are now 10 weeks into this financial year, and the Executive have yet to agree a budget. You are Chair of the Committee for Finance, so what impact is that having and what impact can you in your



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role then have in bringing that forward and making the challenge?

Matthew O'Toole: Our not having a budget is fundamental. I have this in my notes, in front of me: it is a perfect example of the dysfunctionality of politics as it is currently structured. You are right—I am chairing the Finance Committee this afternoon, so I am going to take my leave after this and go straight to the airport to chair the Finance Committee. You correctly say, Robin, that we are two and a half months into the financial year with no budget. Just for this Committee's information and for the record, I don't think people quite understand the legalities of what is going to happen in terms of us not having a budget. You probably do, Robin, because you have been through this rodeo before, although when you were a Minister, they did actually pass a budget.

If we do not pass a budget Act, it is basically an appropriation Bill that will authorise spending. This stuff gets quite techy, but it is important. At the end of July, we are going to fall back on the Northern Ireland Act authorisation, which basically gives civil servants the right to authorise 95% of last year's budget. So there is basically an automatic 5% cut on the budget of last year. That means the Executive will be imposing on themselves a 5% cut on everything. That is not just the day-to-day departmental spending. That is AME spending, so benefits—it is insane that we are in this situation and people are not shouting from the rooftops about it. We as the Opposition have been shouting from the rooftops. I just think it's crazy. There is also a challenge with the media, who do not tend to, I think, understand quite how grave some of these things are.

The failure to set a budget is one example of dysfunction. In a reformed Stormont, where you had, for example, two parties or multiple parties that were in an Executive together and were more signed up to a programme, even if they disagreed on the constitution and a whole range of other things, they could say, "Right. We disagree on a load of things, but we are passing a budget so that we can get waiting lists down by x, build x number of social homes, deliver the railway to Armagh from Portadown"—or whatever it is. These are our priorities, and we are going to make trade-offs and decisions and set a budget accordingly." You hopefully would not get into a situation where you are two and a half months into the financial year and you are involved in low-level bickering with the UK Government over funding. There are important questions about funding at the level of need that need to be addressed, but this is not the way to do it.

Q4 **Adam Jogee:** Good morning, Matthew. Thank you for coming to see us, and have a safe journey home when you leave us. Your party—you, your leader and your colleagues—has pressed the British and Irish Governments to initiate urgent talks to trigger the conversation on reform of Stormont. You have touched on this, but can you give us an explicit answer as to why the SDLP believes that reform of the institutions at Stormont is necessary?

Matthew O'Toole: Probably the best way to answer that or one concise way of answering that is to look at levels of trust—things like the Northern



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Ireland Life and Times Survey and the LucidTalk polling on levels of trust in politics. We know that around the world, people have less trust in politics and democracy. Some of that has to do with the online space, but there is a very specific frustration that people in Northern Ireland rightly have, which is about the dysfunctionality and repeated collapses at Stormont. So one easy way of answering your question, Adam, is to say that it self-evidently cannot go on like this indefinitely, because the public have completely lost faith in devolution.

That is a tragedy when you think that this is a society that came out of conflict, and when so much hope was invested in those institutions—not just in the institutions in an abstract, academic sense, but in the idea of partnership. There should be something hopeful there. In lots of places people are losing faith in democracy, the democratic process, and the idea of governance and being elected to things. All of you have stood for election, and you are here in good faith to try to serve people.

In Northern Ireland, we had decades of conflict. We then created these institutions, which were supposed to be about partnership, resolving differences and making progress by resolving conflict in a democratic context—through sharing power and common purpose. But there has just been stalemate, certainly in the last decade and a half. It has been about stalemate and the negation of one another's mandates. That cannot go on in the way it has. I am happy to get into detail on our specific proposals, but in an abstract sense, I do not know how anybody could argue that the status quo is working.

Q5 Adam Jogee: In your view, are we in this place because of a failure of political leadership, or is there a structural challenge that comes from how the institutions were established?

Matthew O'Toole: It is probably both. On the political side, you are right to say that our party, particularly under Claire's leadership and through our role in opposition, have put a particular focus on reform, not just the specific, technical amendments to—

Adam Jogee: With a small "r".

Matthew O'Toole: Yes, indeed—you have to be careful about this now. We are talking not about Nigel Farage's Reform, but about reform with a small "r".

Claire Hanna: We don't support that Reform.

Matthew O'Toole: No, indeed. Leadership requires you to stand up and make arguments. For example, you make arguments about how you need to change the way things work, even when they are slightly tricky. I will give an example. We are very clear that we think the titles of First Minister and Deputy First Minister should be equalised. It is an absurd differential that helps to create a culture of one-upmanship and, bluntly, a green-orange race to a title with zero differential. You can talk about all the shibboleths in our history and all the reasons for that. There are reasons why Michelle O'Neill's election as First Minister was highly symbolic, but at



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a certain point you have to say that we do not need to keep feeding this. We can equalise the titles in equal roles.

We got a lot of flak for that. Whenever we brought a motion to the Assembly and used Opposition time to debate it, we got a lot of people—Sinn Féin-supporting accounts—telling us we were traitors and all that. But you have to make an argument. You have to be willing to stand up and make an argument, even when it is difficult. That is the political leadership bit.

A broader part of political leadership is the culture and wanting to engender a culture—this one does come down particularly to Sinn Féin and the DUP—of common purpose. The blunt truth is that Sinn Féin and the DUP have a structural political interest in permanent opposition to one another while being in permanent government with one another. Structurally, that is challenging. You are not going to completely end that: one is a strong Unionist party and the other is a strong nationalist party. We are a nationalist party, but we also believe in common purpose and good governance.

Ultimately, structures will not change that culture unless those parties and their leaders want to make that cultural change. The structures can then help to inculcate that. There are structural changes that you are looking at, and that we and other parties have suggested, including Sinn Féin most recently. That is somewhat belated, but definitely welcome. Structural changes are important, and they can move you in that direction, but you need a cultural shift, too. You need people to want to lead people in the right direction. That does not mean negating or undermining your own constitutional or ideological preferences. We certainly do not do that.

Q6 Robin Swann: Matthew, you used the phrase “cannot go on like this”. Without reform, what do you see as the future of the institutions?

Matthew O'Toole: First of all, we will get to the election next May. I hope that we will get to the election without the institutions collapsing, even if the Executive are not delivering—in broad terms, I do not think they are, although obviously I would say that, as the Leader of the Opposition. But I assume we will get to May.

Just in parenthesis, the first thing I did in my role as Leader of the Opposition was ask the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to confirm on the record that they would not resign their offices before the end of this mandate. They did not do it, and they still have not done it. I have asked them repeatedly. That is a mad situation. Can you imagine any other Head of Government being asked by the Leader of the Opposition to confirm they will not resign, and them refusing to do it? That is just a bit of context.

We will probably limp towards an election. Hopefully at some point they will pass a budget, and I hope that we can do some of the reforms before an election. Claire has talked a bit about the things that we think can be



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done before the election, but if we do not do them—to answer your question, Robin—I think the decline of trust in politics will continue. It is also arguable—we have made this point to both the British and Irish Governments—that if we make no reform, make no progress on this agenda before the next election, there is a meaningful risk that it is much harder to form an Executive after the election.

As you will know, because you have probably been on many more doorsteps than me, the public in Northern Ireland are canny and cute, and they can see the cracks. Sometimes, they are ahead of where politicians are. I remember knocking doors in 2022, in our constituency, and people kept saying, “Fair enough, you seem like a nice man. I’ll vote for your party, or give you a number”—three, four or whatever—“but I don’t think there’s going to be a Government after, because I do not think the DUP want to.” I would try to persuade them—“Oh no, let me tell you about our policies and what’s in our manifesto”—but some would just say, “Look, thank you. I will consider this. I will definitely, if I go out and vote”, and others, “We’re not going to bother voting, because we just do not think the DUP are up for it after the election.” In a different context, it might have been Sinn Féin, but in this context it was the DUP.

I worry that the public have developed this in-built cynicism ahead of an election, and that is a problem. I think what might happen after the election is—to posit a situation—that we could have a more fragmented set of representatives. It might not happen, but we might have a slightly bigger Opposition, or we might have more parties, including ours, which elect to be in, or think that they might make more of a contribution in, Opposition. I think that that would make it difficult for the DUP to form a Government with Sinn Féin, in the current politics, the two of them. I think they should, but I think it is highly probable that they would not be able to form a Government or that they would decide not to.

Imagine if we had a few more of the TUV in Stormont. At the minute, there is one TUV MLA and one TUV MP. The DUP is absolutely petrified of the TUV. It leads the Unionist discourse—people like yourself, Robin, honourably excepted—driving the Unionist discourse all too often. If there were a bigger group of the TUV, even if only a handful, and if the system is not reformed to make it structurally more likely that we have to have a Government, I think it is highly possible that the DUP would not, or might not be able to, form a Government after the next election.

By the way, the British and Irish Governments will have been told that, and if they have not acted, they will have no one to blame but themselves. That, by the way, is one reason why one big reform that you could do—you would not even have to convene a big multi-party summit at a stately home somewhere—is to change the way the Speaker is elected. If you change how the Speaker is elected, you at least are more likely to prevent the Assembly from collapsing and there not being any devolved representation, let alone a Government. That is why the Speaker election reform is really urgent. There should not be parties vetoing that, as it



could be done tomorrow, with parliamentary time and an amendment to the Northern Ireland Act.

Q7 Robin Swann: You mentioned Opposition. I was there at the time when both our parties went into formal Opposition voluntarily. Some have said that the reason for collapse at that stage was because of the pressure we put on the DUP-Sinn Féin duopoly at that stage, and the fact of politics. You mentioned a number of reforms such as changing the First Minister and the election of the Speaker. For me, the changes made at St Andrews reinforced that vote for First Minister to prevent somebody else getting it, and we have seen the fallout from that. Of those reforms—you spoke about what you believe to be necessary to secure a future Assembly and a future Executive—what priority would you give them?

Matthew O'Toole: Which priority would I give to the different reforms? We have said that for practical, pragmatic reasons we need to be realistic about how to phase reforms. I am happy to be the leader here, but correct me if I flub any of our proposals. We are basically up for phasing, in that what we do not want to do is create no progress by trying to boil the ocean all at once, as it were. We are basically up for discussion of any reform, up to and including discussion on things like designation, but realistically, we are probably not going to get to a place where we fundamentally reform things like designation before the next election.

We are certainly up for discussion on those things. What we have suggested is a number of short, sharp interventions—keyhole surgery—before the next election, and then convening a bigger process after the next election. You could look at the findings from reports that will come out from this Committee, the AERC at Stormont, which I sit on, and others. Indeed, there was a report from the think-tank Pivotal yesterday. Innumerable reports have been written about this.

That could be post election, but up front, the three things we have suggested by the end of this year—over the summer, when Parliaments or Assemblies are in recess—are: changing how you elect a Speaker; reforming the titles of First and Deputy First Minister; and changing the so-called St Andrews veto inside the Executive, to make it easier for Ministers to get business done. We do not think any of those are a fundamental change in the principles of strand 1 of the agreement, and we do not think they are any threat to anybody's identity or to core communal protections. We think you could do those quickly. That is not that they are by themselves the most important or transformative reforms; it is that those are the ones we think could be done quickest and would create impact.

Then I think you need to convene a bigger discussion about the formation of the Executive, but also things like strengthening the rights and privileges of Opposition—I am advocating for that, but I may or may not ever benefit from it personally in my party—such as changing how the Justice Minister is elected; there should not ever be a situation where that role is hived off and privatised, and people with my particular political designation are prevented from holding it.



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There are a whole range of other things. The ministerial code has been broken more than once in this mandate, and there has basically been no sanction for the Ministers. As I said, it is clear that the Programme for Government is a brochure, really, with a set of aspirations rather than a set of clear targets. We want there to be a much more precise Programme for Government that is agreed before or as an Executive is formed, rather than it being a case of forming an Executive, getting your Ministry—"I've got my Minister and you've got your Minister"—and getting paragraphs of this and that shoved into a Programme for Government that probably do not get delivered.

Those are things we would want to see as part of that bigger discussion on reform, and we are very keen to see all of those. But we recognise that some of them—particularly fundamental changes, such as the ability of one of the parties to collapse the institutions; in other words, the nuclear option—would require more cross-party discussion. We acknowledge that.

By the way, we do not think the status quo is defensible any more, but in terms of sequencing, maybe more than prioritisation, those initial reforms would give you bang for your buck very quickly, and you would not have to convene a big multi-party talks process. The British and Irish Governments could get on with it, and the NI Act could be amended by the end of this year, if not earlier.

Q8 Claire Hanna: Matthew, you have led the Stormont Opposition for two years. Do you have any observations specifically from that process for the functioning of Stormont?

Matthew O'Toole: Yes. First of all, Robin mentioned the previous period of opposition, where there was a joint Ulster Unionist-SDLP Opposition, and there have been some changes to the role and privileges of Opposition since then. There is now a title of Leader of the Opposition, which did not exist before; it exists in Standing Orders. That person can nominate the head of the Public Accounts Committee, and there are specific procedural privileges and opportunities you get. By the way, we have to fight for them. This is a pair of shoes that are quite stiff, and we have had to wear the leather in. It may be that other parties in the future are availing of our hard work. We get an Opposition day every month, although I should say—I do not think I am breaking any huge Business Committee confidences—that other parties would quite like to take that time off us and have been trying to take Opposition time off us this month, and we have had to fight back against it.

To go back to your question, Claire, one of the big observations is how difficult it is to focus the political conversation on delivery, and that is really what it should be about. Of course, we have a disagreement about the constitution, and there are difficult issues in our past. Of course, the parties will have different views on issues that are traditionally left and right. Broadly, the DUP faces right and, broadly, Sinn Féin faces left. We are a centre-left, social democratic, Irish nationalist new Ireland party. We do not sacrifice our position, but there should be a coherent Government who are signed up to a set of priorities and held to account for it. That has



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not really happened properly in our system. We have tried to focus the conversation back on delivery and say, "There is a Government. Even if they share power, and even if they disagree with one another on key things, they are responsible for delivery."

Let me give a couple of examples of where they have not been joined up or even just done the basics of a Government. One is the budget, which we talked about earlier with Robin. No. 2 is the awful violence over the last week or two. There have been warm words or words of condemnation from Executive Ministers. There has not been a joined-up and coherent plan from the leaders of devolved Government. We should absolutely condemn and stand strong against violence and racism, but we need to see a plan. How are people made homeless going to be rehoused? There are people still homeless right now in Belfast. What is the plan for statutory agencies, councils, the Housing Executive, the health service and, of course, the police? What is the plan for future disorder and, hopefully, mitigating future disorder this summer? What is the deradicalisation strategy? Any normal devolved Government would be held to account for that. That is what we are trying to do—to shift that conversation back. I suppose the main observation is how difficult it is to create that culture in our politics.

Q9 Claire Hanna: The Secretary of State has said that the Government are "open to conversations about ideas which can command a consensus" on reform. You have said that the SDLP proposals were initially developed to do exactly that where there is obvious common ground or no detriment to any community. How should discussions take place and who should be represented in them? You have also put a number of motions to the Assembly on reform in the last couple of months. Can you give us the character of the support? I think there is majority support for reform.

Matthew O'Toole: I think there is. First, it is important to say that every one of the parties with a significant number of Members, that is, more than one Member, in the Northern Ireland Assembly—Sinn Féin, the DUP, the UUP, the SDLP and the Alliance party—has at one time or another endorsed broad reform of how Stormont works. There is consensus. There are not that many other issues where you would get that level of consensus, but they have all agreed.

Some have been more consistent about it than others. We have been very consistent in opposition. It is worth acknowledging that the Alliance party has talked about it for a considerable period of time, although I think people will ask why that was not more of a theme when they got into government with a bigger mandate. There is now a consensus, or there has been; there is not quite a consensus at this moment, it would seem. There are statements from all these political parties saying that they support reform.

This was in the DUP manifesto. They seemed to copy and paste it for about 20 years into different manifestos. It was like, "Yes, we should reform Stormont and get rid of mandatory coalition." That was the fully nuclear option. Now, apparently, it is unbelievably offensive for Unionists

to even talk about changing how it works, which is bizarre. A parallel is that, for a long time, Sinn Féin talked about equalising the titles of First and Deputy First Minister. Now, equalising those titles is a sop to hard-line Unionism and loyalism. There is a degree of slightly cynical comedy hypocrisy here. The key principle is that everyone has signed up to reform in principle at some point.

To go back to the point about phasing, for some of the short, sharp reforms—changing how the Speaker is elected, for example—I do not think you need a massive talks process at some stately home somewhere where everybody comes in, has tea and sandwiches and then traipses out to camera crews and updates them every few hours on what is happening. The British and Irish Governments could pretty much say that they want to make some of these changes, particularly around the Speaker election, and get on with it. Then I think you would need a talks process. That would probably need to happen in slightly slower time, but it should not be an open-ended process. We need to delineate how we do these two things. We need to try to make progress on some of them before the election, because if we do not, it is possible that an Executive will not be formed after the election.

Claire Hanna: Thank you very much, Matthew. The Chair has her beady eyes on me and the clock, so I will leave it there.

Chair: Thank you for taking the time to speak to the Committee today.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Eóin Tennyson MLA.

Q10 **Chair:** Welcome to panel two on our session on Stormont reform, and welcome to Eóin Tennyson MLA, the deputy leader of the Alliance party. What is the impact of the relationship between Executive parties and Ministers on the implementation of the legislative agenda and the Programme for Government?

Eóin Tennyson: Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to present evidence. Relationships are critical to the operations of the institutions, though relationships are probably a secondary consideration in terms of the structures themselves. Undoubtedly, particularly in recent months, we have seen a situation develop within the Executive where, increasingly, the two largest parties are wielding vetoes at the Executive table to hold one another's legislative proposals hostage, and are not respecting agreements made in terms of the Executive's legislative programme.

For as long as either the DUP or Sinn Féin has the ability to hold the business of Government to ransom, by not even allowing pieces of legislation or policy proposals to come to the Executive table, sometimes for discussion never mind agreement, we incentivise this quite juvenile

relationship between the two parties, where they can effectively take the ball and walk off the pitch.

The structures we have around the Executive were designed to bring together opposing sides after a period of conflict, in the hope that over time, and if operated in good faith, we could build trust and operate the institutions in a spirit of co-operation or collaboration. We have to acknowledge, having now road-tested the institutions almost to the point of destruction, that what has actually happened is that the kind of community designations and the system of vetoes that exist have simply incentivised parties to battle one another around the Executive and treat Departments as warring fiefdoms, rather than as part of a joined-up vision for Government.

Q11 Chair: How does that impact your constituents and people in Northern Ireland?

Eóin Tennyson: Hugely. If we look back over the history of the institutions, first of all, they have been down for about 40% of my lifetime. The consequence is that we have some of the worse health waiting lists anywhere in western Europe. We operated for 10 years without a Programme for Government. We have shocking levels of economic inactivity. Between 2017 and 2024, we had three different economy Ministers, from different parties, with three different visions for how to tackle those issues. It has completely undermined our ability, when there have been opportunities and money has been available, to do the proper sustained transformation of public services.

One point I have consistently made to the Secretary of State is that, if you do not have sustainable public institutions, you cannot build sustainable public services beneath that. Our public services—be it health, education or housing—require sustained leadership over the medium to long term, a coherent vision and a coherent plan, with all parties working together to that aim. If you asked any of my constituents, they would say that Stormont has served them fairly poorly over the years in that respect.

Even when the Executive is functioning, we see a complete inability to deliver any kind of progressive change. In this mandate alone, we have watched as vetoes have been abused to prevent the implementation of an independent environmental protection agency, despite all parties signing up to that at the New Decade, New Approach agreement, to deal with the huge ecological crisis that we have at Lough Neagh.

We have seen progressive legislation to enhance employment rights blocked around the Executive table, despite what I believe is broad support in the Assembly chamber. Just this week we had a petition of concern wielded against legislation that was intended to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Northern Ireland—something that is based on evidence and would not differentially impact nationalists or Unionists. Yet effectively, one party, working with a couple of others, is able to prevent that progress from happening. I think we are condemning the institutions either to death by a thousand collapses, which is possible,



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or worse and more likely, death by a slow bleed of public confidence in the ability of those institutions to deliver on the democratic will of the people of Northern Ireland.

- Q12 **Robin Swann:** Thank you for attending. You used the phrase “point of destruction” and “inability to change” and referred to the ineffectiveness of the Stormont institutions. Do you think there comes a point where, if there is an inability to reform, Stormont then ceases to serve its purpose?

Eóin Tennyson: I think that is a decision that will be made by the public. I genuinely worry that, given that there was a seismic change at the last election, the fact that Northern Ireland is no longer a majority-minority society, and we are all minorities, whether people are Unionist, nationalist or do not fit into either of those boxes, and that, in the round, the people in Northern Ireland voted for broadly progressive and moderate parties, if those people do not see their democratic wishes being reflected by the Assembly, and the policy changes and legislation that they want to see delivered honoured by the institutions, then what is their incentive to go out and vote? What is their incentive to take part in the democratic process? Why should they have any confidence in the ability of the political institutions to represent their interests?

I think that should be of grave concern to all of us who believe in devolution, but more fundamentally, to those who believe in democracy. The core principle of democracy is that the people go out and vote; they elect representatives who then take decisions on their behalf. Instead, what we have is a position where either of the two largest parties can effectively govern by diktat—to the detriment of everybody else in society—and pursue only their narrow, selfish political agenda. I am incredibly worried and I am going to be watching closely the turnout in the next Assembly election to see just how engaged people are with the structures that we have. I think that is why it is very important that parties like yours, Claire’s and my own have been making strong arguments for, in my view, democratic renewal, to rebuild that public confidence and show that an alternative path is possible.

- Q13 **Robin Swann:** Regarding those reforms, if they do not come, what will your party do? You said you will watch the turnout at the next election. It will be a joint Assembly and council election. If the turnout drops, what is your reaction to that? What does your party do?

Eóin Tennyson: We set out very clearly earlier this year that our participation in the Executive should not be taken for granted. We have an absurd situation at the moment where, when a cross-community vote is called in the Assembly, the votes of genuine cross-community parties are discounted from that process. Take the example of the minimum age of criminal responsibility: a valid petition was lodged by 30 Members, and that means that the vote of the First Minister and her colleagues, and the Minister who was bringing the original legislation, is not counted in that process. That is a perversion of democracy and an affront to the rights not of my party, but of the people that I represent, who are effectively being treated like second-class citizens by their own political institutions.



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We take that really seriously. We made the case for reform when the Assembly was down previously, and we were told by the two Governments then that now was not the right time, we could not move the goalposts while the institutions were in stasis, and they needed to be up and running in order to have that conversation. We honoured our word and we, in good faith, went into the institutions to put our shoulder to the wheel to try to make them work, on the proviso that the two Governments would honour their word that they would look at serious reform of the institutions. The Irish Government have moved and have honoured their word. The Secretary of State, to be fair, has in recent weeks indicated that he wishes to have an engagement with local parties, and that is to be welcomed. But if at any point we feel that that progress has stalled or that we are being taken for granted as part of that process, we will take a different course. I think the public and other parties should be under no illusions about that.

Q14 Robin Swann: Are you saying that reform of Stormont is a prerequisite for your party to come back into the Executive after the next election?

Eóin Tennyson: We have not set our manifesto for the next election. We will have a detailed discussion as a party in terms of whether there will be prerequisites for us to go back in, but I think it is fairly clear, given how dysfunctional the Executive has been over the past two years, that we would not be returning to the Executive without either a significant change in attitude from the two largest parties or some change to the structures—or at least a process to get there.

Q15 Robin Swann: Just to clarify, you did say that the petition of concern that was tabled was valid and did meet the conditions of what is required—did I understand that right?

Eóin Tennyson: Yes—it was technically valid under the rules.

Q16 Claire Hanna: Eóin, you said in response to Robin that the last election was seismic, and it rightly was. Your party doubled its seats. What were its priorities going into the Programme for Government negotiations, and was reform among them?

Eóin Tennyson: It was. We submitted a number of submissions throughout the Programme for Government process. Many of our priorities, as you will understand, were foundational priorities around issues such as waste water infrastructure, dealing with health waiting lists, speeding up the justice system and tackling environmental challenges, but reform was a key part of that response.

We also acknowledged, though, first of all, that any Programme for Government would have to be agreed by the First and Deputy First Ministers—and, of course, on contact with the Executive Office, reform disappeared off the list of priorities for the Executive, which I believe was a missed opportunity. It speaks to the kind of perverse vetoes that exist at TEO that even the Programme for Government becomes a *fait accompli*—designed by the two largest parties and presented to the smaller parties. I think that has been the experience of Alliance, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists in successive Executives and, to the point about relationships, I



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don't think it is conducive to positive relationships or joined-up working if that is the attitude at the outset. So I think that needs to be addressed.

We are also conscious that, ultimately, legislative power to change the structures at Stormont does not rest with the Assembly and so, in my view, there needs to be a concerted effort from both the UK Government and the Irish Government. I have heard the Secretary of State argue, Claire, that there needs to be consensus or that this must come from the parties. First of all, the Good Friday agreement was all about "sufficient" consensus. Not every party in Northern Ireland supported the Good Friday agreement and yet here we are. Also, if it had not been for an activist Secretary of State and an activist Irish Government in 1998, pulling the parties in the right direction and banging their heads together, we would never have got the peace accords, which we all benefit from today. We need to see the same engagement now, to ensure that the institutions reflect the society that we are and the needs of the people that we represent, rather than the divisions that we have inherited.

- Q17 **Claire Hanna:** Matthew O'Toole spoke about potential sequencing. He talked about not boiling the ocean, in effect, but getting to some short, sharp reforms to give confidence that the institutions will return after May, before moving on. Would you support that logic, and what do you think should be prioritised?

Eóin Tennyson: I think there is a certain logic to that. In our "Democratic Renewal" paper, we have set out immediate and more medium and long-term priorities. In relation to immediate priorities, we believe that the ever-present threat of collapse needs to be addressed in terms of the vetoes that the two largest parties hold over Executive formation. We have also said that we need to move from parallel consent to weighted majority voting as a measure of cross-community support, because that is a fundamental issue of equality—all elected Members' voices and votes counting equally in the Assembly—and we need to restrict the use of cross-community votes and the petition of concern and return them to their factory settings in terms of what was intended in the Good Friday agreement. I believe that would go a long way, alongside reforms to the three-meeting rule and the St Andrews veto. Those things would go a long way towards making the institutions more functional, stable and able to deliver.

The one thing that I would say, in cautioning about this kind of keyhole surgery approach, is that sometimes when the patient is flatlining, they don't need keyhole surgery—they need resuscitation. I think we are in that space with the institutions. For example, there is a risk, if we do small reforms about just the titles of the First and Deputy First Ministers, which I absolutely support, and a weighted majority for the election of a Speaker, that you could have an Assembly in name only—a zombie Assembly that does not have an Executive there to scrutinise or legislation to scrutinise. I think that could further damage public confidence.

- Q18 **Claire Hanna:** Do you see the risk, if everything is on the table, if every party puts in all its hopes and dreams for political efficiency, that that



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could run a little bit longer than next May?

Eóin Tennyson: Absolutely I do, although I don't believe that with the right leadership it should. Every party that I have heard and that is in the space of reform of the institutions—we have set out our proposals. They are probably among the most radical—I accept that—but we have also said that we are willing to talk to other parties, that we are willing to try to reach consensus and that we are not going to get everything that we want and nor is any other party. We are realistic about what can be achieved. I would welcome, in the window of opportunity that we have before the next election, engagement with all parties to reach that point.

Q19 **Claire Hanna:** Your headline proposal is, if an eligible party refuses to nominate for First or Deputy First Minister, to move to the next largest party. I think we share an aspiration to get beyond designation and its salience in the institutions. Would that be to the next largest party in general, and what protections do you envisage if we have an Executive who do not, under those proposals, include either Unionism or nationalism?

Eóin Tennyson: The first thing to say is that, under our proposals, the right of every party to be in government is protected. What would change is that no single party would have the ability to exclude everybody else from Government. We are not abandoning the concept of mandatory coalition altogether, but we also recognise that if a party, no matter its size, legitimately wishes to go and hold an Executive to account from the Opposition Benches because it does not agree with the policy direction, it should have the same right to do that as my party does. That is an argument, first of all, about equality.

Yes, our proposal is that it would move to the next largest party, but there would be safeguards around that—for example, in order for an Executive to function and pass things like budgets, it would require weighted majority support. In reality, you would need four of the five other parties to be in a space where they are happy to continue, so there are still safeguards and protections there. The Executive could not function in the absence of things like a budget or a Programme for Government—those key decisions would require weighted majority support—and nor could a single party exclude 70% or 75% of the Assembly from government, which is an affront to democracy and has now happened on two occasions in the past 10 years.

Q20 **Robin Swann:** On a point of clarification about the First Minister and Deputy First Minister nominations, in your proposal, if a party refuses to nominate a First Minister or Deputy First Minister, should it still be able to take the Executive positions it is entitled to? Sinn Féin and DUP are entitled to two Executive Ministries. Is it the Alliance position that if they say they do not want to be First Minister or Deputy First Minister, they are automatically the Opposition, or can they still retain their Executive Ministries?

Eóin Tennyson: Our proposal would be that all Executive Ministries, including First Minister, Deputy First Minister and the Justice Ministry,



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would be allocated through the D'Hondt process. Theoretically, you could have a party that uses its first pick to take the Department of Health or the Department of the Economy instead of First Minister or Deputy First Minister. That is up to that individual party, but I think that it is unlikely in reality that any party would choose not to occupy one of the two largest posts when they are qualified to do so.

They could take the decision—as other parties have the right to do at the moment—to refuse to select any Ministry and to occupy the Opposition Benches. Choosing opposition is a very legitimate decision for a party to make. Opposition is a key cornerstone of our democracy and plays a very important role, so choosing to sit on the Opposition Benches and hold others to account is not an illegitimate or undesirable decision for any party.

Q21 Robin Swann: So it is not about parties refusing First Minister and Deputy First Minister; you want those positions to be allocated through D'Hondt as well.

Eóin Tennyson: Yes.

Q22 Adam Jogee: Welcome to Westminster, Mr Tennyson. It is excellent for me not to be the youngest politician around the table—you must come back and see us more often.

I heard your comments about the First Minister and Deputy First Minister positions, but will you touch on your party's proposals for the election of a Speaker and a new weighted majority voting system? How would that work in practice?

Eóin Tennyson: This is probably one of the most perverse outworkings of our institutions at the moment. I was elected for the first time in 2022. I walked into the Chamber and the first question that was asked of me was, "Do you want to sign in as a nationalist or a Unionist?" I signed in as "united community" because I feel that that is a better reflection of my political aspirations and ideology. However, because I did not designate as either nationalist or Unionist, when we moved to elect a Speaker, my vote effectively did not count. As a result, despite over 70% of Members present voting to elect a Speaker, one party—namely, the DUP—was able to block and veto that appointment.

I do not believe that any party in our society should have the ability to prevent the legislature—the very foundation of our democratic system—from operating, sitting and giving voice to the views of our constituents on the issues that we are elected to preside over. We are proposing—not just for the election of a Speaker, but for any vote taken on a cross-community basis—to move to a weighted majority system for key decisions. That would likely be in and around the region of 60%, but we are comfortable about having negotiation and debate with other parties about what would be an appropriate measure of sufficient cross-community support.

The irony is that, when a cross-community vote is called in the Assembly, genuine cross-community parties are excluded. I do not think that is



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sustainable, and it does not reflect the changes that have happened in our society. We are no longer a majority/minority society, as I said—we are all minorities—and we are not just two communities that do not meet in the middle; 40% of people in Northern Ireland have mixed and multiple identities, yet they are written out of the story of our political institutions.

- Q23 **Adam Jogee:** I have two follow-up questions, if I may, Chair. First, out of interest, Mr Tennyson, what political engagement are you and your leadership having with other political parties in Northern Ireland to either seek support for your proposals or work constructively across party lines to make the case for change?

Eóin Tennyson: Engagement has been happening through the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. I appeared at that Committee to give evidence and answer questions from politicians from other parties. Representatives of other political parties have done that as well. I think it is positive that four out of the five parties are now articulating the case for change, and I would say that among three of those, there is a fair degree of consensus about the kind of changes that we want to see. We have also been making a fairly consistent case to the Secretary of State that he needs to bring the parties together to have that discussion, which I believe is really essential.

- Q24 **Adam Jogee:** Lastly from me, I asked Mr O'Toole whether he thought the situation we find ourselves in is a result of failure of political leadership or of how the structures of the institutions were designed. Which do you think it is?

Eóin Tennyson: I think it is a combination of both. I do believe there has been a failure to operate the institutions in good faith—that is undoubtable—but I believe the structures were designed at a point in time when we were seeking to bring about peace, and they have been less effective at delivering the kind of progress and prosperity that people of my generation now aspire to in Northern Ireland.

We have to accept that it is a peace process. Just as our society evolves and changes, so too should our political structures and institutions. The Good Friday agreement was not written on a tablet of stone. There was a review mechanism built in because, in its wisdom, it foresaw that changes would happen in society and that the institutions would have to reflect that. If you believe in devolution, in upholding the principles of the Good Friday agreement and in upholding public confidence in those institutions, it would be a dereliction of duty not to have this conversation at this juncture, when we know that public confidence is at a low ebb.

Chair: I would just like to say that Adam Jogee is 34—you are a lot younger, Eóin.

- Q25 **Claire Hanna:** You referenced the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Do you think that is a serious piece of work? Do you think all those around the table are seriously interested and determined to make progress and have this issue resolved in the lifetime of the current Assembly?



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Eóin Tennyson: No, I don't; that is my honest assessment. It is the only forum that we have in the absence of a wider process led by the two Governments. Reform has been looked at in the abstract at the AERC in previous mandates. Very little has come of that. There has been very little willingness to find agreement or consensus, and it risks becoming a bit of a talking shop.

That is not to say that there has not been some good work and some good discussion that has happened at the committee. It has provided an opportunity for parties who have put proposals on the table to be scrutinised on them. That is important, but it is not a substitute for a wider process of engagement led by the two Governments or, indeed, meaningful civic engagement, because we have seen a number of think-tanks and organisations enter this space who are also articulating their own proposals for change.

- Q26 **Claire Hanna:** On that point, I know the SDLP hosted a roundtable with civil society organisations, being clear that most of the asks they would bring to parties for their manifestos would likely not be delivered because of Stormont failures. We are ready for a process convened by the Governments, but if that does not happen, would your party be prepared to work with other parties on like-minded proposals to advance this goal?

Eóin Tennyson: Absolutely. I think there is a great deal of consensus between ourselves and your own party, Claire. There has been some consensus with messages that the Ulster Unionists have put out as well. We have supported motions from other parties in the Assembly when they have brought these issues forward for debate. We are always happy to build that broad coalition for change, because ultimately, this will not be delivered by any one party on its own; it will require that coalition. That cross-party working is important.

- Q27 **Simon Hoare:** Mr Tennyson, I think it is probably safe to say that there is nobody in Northern Ireland, either politically engaged or a member of civil society, who would think that the institution is working as well as it should or could; instead, it is probably more focused on process than on output, and it is far more interested in navel gazing than answering the electorate's questions. We are agreed on that.

It was mentioned earlier that the Secretary of State has recently said that the UK Government are "open to conversations about ideas which can command a consensus" on reform. Can I ask you to comment on two words that the Secretary of State used, and which I have some anxiety about? First there is the informality of the term "conversations". Given the pressing nature of the task at hand and the consensus that nobody thinks it is working brilliantly or as well as it should be, is "conversations" too relaxed an approach?

Eóin Tennyson: It absolutely is. I have said publicly that I believe that the Secretary of State has taken a hands-off approach. Unfortunately, this is a pattern that we see repeatedly. I refer to the Pavlov's dog mentality where the UK Government only seem to engage when a financial or political issue at the Assembly boils over to the point of crisis and someone



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threatens to use a veto or walk out of the institutions in order to bring about instability. At that stage you get the Treasury opening its cheque book or the NIO convening a series of all-party talks. Then when things appear to be functioning well, there is no engagement and no attempt to fix the roof while the sun is shining. I think that is a dereliction of duty.

The message from the NIO has evolved in recent weeks and months. I think that the absence of a budget for the current Executive has brought focus to the fact that even the most basic functions of Government can be held to ransom around the Executive table. That serves no one's interest, including the UK Government's and the Treasury's.

Q28 Simon Hoare: I am inclined to agree. I think that on both sides, whether in Stormont or in Westminster, there is a view that the Executive, in its functioning, is a little bit like a piece of Ikea furniture: I don't know how I have got it to stand there, but don't touch it, don't use it, don't put any stress on it, don't put anything upon it and it won't fall down. It is just the fact that it is there that seems to be the success story, rather than what it is doing.

Can we talk about another word that the Secretary of State used: "consensus"? Given the contested issues that we all know about, and the implication that consensus means unanimity, do you think that consensus is possible? Should we, through a more interventionist approach by the Secretary of State—and one would have to include Dublin in this as well—try to find a pragmatically negotiated solution where all parties advocating for some degree of reform have some skin in the game and nobody has entirely lost face, but nobody has run off with the cake and the cup either?

Eóin Tennyson: I agree. It is important that we nail this idea that either the institutions have to operate by consensus or changes to the institutions must have unanimous consensus. That is a nonsense. The word "consensus" appears in the Good Friday agreement once, and that is in reference to the operation of the British-Irish Council. Nowhere in the Good Friday agreement does it say that the institutions should operate entirely by consensus, because that would not be practical and it would not be democracy. Disagreement is the very essence of the democratic process.

The institutions have already been reformed. They were reformed at St Andrews at the behest of the DUP and Sinn Féin and against protestations from every other party in the Assembly. It is not true to say that reform requires total consensus, because the UK Government and the Irish Government have been willing to make changes where there has not been consensus in the past. I am not asking for change in the interests of any particular political party; I am asking for changes that polling has consistently shown the people of Northern Ireland want and recognise are needed.

As I have said, it would be a complete dereliction of duty, in circumstances where the Assembly has been down for 40% of the time and the consensus is—because there is a consensus on this—that it is not working



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well when it is operating, not to look at the structures and how we can change them to make them work better. I often use the analogy that if you had an appliance in your house that did not work half of the time and then when it did work it did not function well, you would not just say: "Well, that's okay; that's how it's written in the manual." You would go away and get an engineer in to have a look at it and get it fixed. We have reached that point with the institutions of the Good Friday agreement.

Simon Hoare: You touched on something that I want to ask Mr Tennyson his view on, and on which I think we will agree. A predecessor Committee was struck by the fact that the vast majority of the population of Northern Ireland, irrespective of traditional attachments and political affiliation, were streets ahead of the politicians with regards to what needs to be done, why it needs to be done, the merits of doing it and the benefits to policy outcome that were likely to accrue as a result of reform. Has the political class in Northern Ireland become so cowardly and timid that it cannot face into that and realise that the state is servant and not master, and that politicians are usually signing their own notice of eviction if they do not respond to what the electorate wants in a timely fashion?

Eóin Tennyson: I think it is a case, to be blunt, of some parties placing their own party political interests ahead of the interests of the people they represent. The DUP and Sinn Féin can agree on nothing, but they can agree on their mutual obsession with titles. When proposals were brought to the Floor of the Assembly about equalising the First and Deputy First Minister titles, so that we could have elections based on policy and people's record of delivery rather than an artificial race for an artificial title, the DUP and Sinn Féin came together to oppose that proposal. So I think there is an element here of turkeys not wanting to vote for Christmas—but, whether the turkey votes for Christmas or not, it is going to end up on the table.

Q29 **Simon Hoare:** This is my final question. I guess the answer will be yes, but do you think it would be helpful for both Westminster and Dublin to make it clear that it is in the interest of public service that reforms accrue and are delivered; that—irrespective of standing in the polls or party representation in Stormont—no one party has the whip hand on this, no one party has the hand on the handbrake and no one party can derail the whole thing; and that talks about reform should be commenced and people sitting on the outskirts moaning should not inhibit those talks taking place?

Eóin Tennyson: I could not agree more. That has been one of the outworkings of the system that we have. There is an attitude sometimes within Government of, "Oh, we can't touch that because x party might walk." That incentivises and rewards bad behaviour. We often hear the Secretary of State saying, "I cannot keep coming over and white knighting you and throwing lots of money at a problem," but until you deal with the structural issues and instabilities that exist in the institutions, that is the inevitable outcome. That leadership would be welcome and really important in giving this debate the momentum it now needs.

Chair: Thank you very much. We will end this session there, Eóin. Thank you for your time.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Jon Burrows MLA

Q30 **Chair:** This is panel three of our Stormont reform session. Welcome to Jon Burrows MLA, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. What is the impact of the relationship between Executive parties and Ministers on implementation of the legislative agenda and the Programme for Government?

Jon Burrows: I think the impact of those relationships is too much dysfunction, too much drama and not enough delivery. We see consistent problems with getting legislation on to the Executive table, then into the Chamber and then in for proper scrutiny in Committees. I am afraid that the relationships and the set-up in Stormont are not conducive to good governance.

Q31 **Chair:** How does that impact on your constituents and the people in Northern Ireland?

Jon Burrows: It impacts very significantly because of the deep issues that affect Northern Ireland. Stormont was, I suppose, set up to exist, not to excel—it was designed to get many people around the table at a time when we were looking to establish peace, but it was never designed to have the most efficient delivery of public services governance, and to keep up with the changes and challenges in society.

I have villages in my constituency in which there are places where we need to build houses: developers have land and want to build houses and the houses are badly needed, but there is no access to water. The planning permission cannot be granted because the waste water system is at capacity. I have villages that are literally dying, because people move out of them when they need to start a family. The village shops and the schools then close, and that is a tangible example of how the failure to deal with the issue of waste water and reform our infrastructure is affecting villages and towns across Northern Ireland. We see that right across the piece. Stormont needs to change how it does business in order to deliver for people in Northern Ireland.

Q32 **Chair:** Why does your party believe that reform of the Stormont institutions is necessary?

Jon Burrows: The first thing to do is to repeat, I suppose, that strapline that the institutions were designed to deliver peace, to get as many people around the table as possible and to maximise inclusion and participation over effective delivery and efficient government. We now need to change that. Northern Ireland has achieved so much: we are at our most peaceful ever; we have record levels of employment; while we will never be complacent, last year not a single person was killed in a security situation

in Northern Ireland, and the number of bombings, shootings, public disorder and parade-related disputes is vanishingly small.

Now is the opportunity to have a prosperity process. Some basic changes to Stormont would make all the difference in delivering effective Government. For me, one big-ticket item would be to change the title of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister—I will expand on that in a moment—to a joint First Minister title. That would just put that matter to bed. More importantly, I would like a fully functioning Opposition, with a shadow Justice Minister, shadow Economy Minister and a shadow Minister for Infrastructure; that would be vital.

I also would like the introduction of a Bills Committee, like those you have in Westminster, because the level of scrutiny in Stormont is very poor. The statutory committee that I sit on, the Committee for Education, should be focused on the performance and delivery of the Minister and on driving performance in education. Statutory committees do not properly scrutinise amendments and proposed legislation, then we have bad legislation in Stormont. We need to do a number of things to strengthen the Opposition, strengthen scrutiny and strengthen delivery.

It is important to say two things at the outset. First, previous reforms were driven almost in the shadow of the guillotine when there was a crisis—Stormont was down—and therefore they were driven with a deadline at the behest of agreement with two big parties. That is not a good way to reform. It should be more evolutionary than that. Secondly, I want to make really clear that I think talking about the two Governments' roles in this is counterproductive. This is a strand 1 issue. We need to couch it terms of the United Kingdom Government and the parties. I am the only leader of a Unionist party who believes in reform. When we talk about the "two Governments", it spooks Unionism into thinking that there is something to fear here. This is a strand 1 issue and it should be dealt with by the parties, overseen by the UK Government.

Q33 Claire Hanna: Jon, this week you signed a petition of concern on the age of criminal responsibility. You and others are absolutely entitled to your opinion on that matter, but do you understand that such petitions feed the sense of opposition being expressed only ever as veto? Will you talk about how that interacts with your views on Stormont reform? What efforts were made to reach an alternative, rather than stopping dead a political conversation on a measure that appeared to have majority support to pass?

Jon Burrows: I will deal with that directly; it is important. I think that the petition of concern has been overused and misused in the past. It should not be used frivolously or to avoid accountability. It is an emergency brake that is part of the Good Friday agreement. There are many things in the Good Friday agreement that would not be purest democratic. The prisons were emptied of people who committed the vilest crimes against our citizens, both loyalist and republican. There were things that are not normal politics and not normal democracy; a petition of concern is one of them.



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I was faced with a situation where amendments drafted by Back Benchers and slotted into the Justice Bill were going to fundamentally change our justice system. The people who drafted those amendments—I will be frank—did not understand what they meant. They would have created a situation in our society where, if someone was a day under 14 and committed the most heinous crimes against women and girls, those girls and women could not see justice and the police could not even investigate the crime. I gave numerous examples: if the Jamie Bulger case were replicated in that exact form in Northern Ireland, the two suspects could not even be arrested, and the police could not even seize their clothes to get forensic samples—they would have to ask by consent.

No matter how much I talked about the dangers of this, the people who were proposing it—Sinn Féin, SDLP and Alliance—simply would not listen, and we were on the precipice of passing a law. I do not apologise for using a democratic lever to protect the most vulnerable in our society from a piece of legislation that was deeply damaging. Here is why that came in as an amendment; it would never have got through the Executive table. We had a Justice Bill, and someone wrote an amendment on the back of a fag paper and shoved it on to it, and it was deeply dangerous. I used with great reservation the only option I had to protect victims in our society.

Q34 Claire Hanna: I know that we are not in normal politics, and Stormont is not a normal Parliament, but people will say that we disagree across this House all the time on issues. I do not know whether you tried any alternative amendments or tried to express your views and your party's views in the form of an amendment, but do you understand that the culture of, "The majority of other parties were going to do something that I didn't agree with, so therefore it had to be shut down because I don't agree with it" feeds a lot of the dysfunction? Do you appreciate that your belief that you knew better than a majority of MLAs, so you should therefore have the ability to shut down the conversation, feeds into some of the sense of dysfunction and lack of democratic legitimacy in the Assembly?

Jon Burrows: I think what feeds into the lack of democratic legitimacy is a Stormont that legislates in a blundering way. I have concerns about the level of overall competence of people whenever they are bringing legislation that will fundamentally do things that they have not thought through. We have an Executive strategy to tackle violence against women and girls; when I asked whether an amendment that changed the law around justice had even been screened against that, I was told that it had not been.

Whenever I give specific scenarios to Members of the Assembly, they shake their heads and say, "No, that's not true", but then they come back a few minutes later and accept what the amendment that they were proposing fundamentally meant to a victim of crime. I will give you an example of a sexual assault and a burglary. When I walked out of the Assembly, a female approached me who was the victim of a sexual assault and a burglary by a 13 and a half-year-old suspect. Under the proposal that was put in front of me, the police would not even be able to arrest



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that suspect and they would not be able to take forensic samples off them; they would simply say to the householder, "That was not a crime."

I vowed to do anything that I could to stop that. It was hasty and it was not thought through. It should be done through a youth justice Bill. Frankly, I do not believe that it would have happened in the House of Commons—that a Back Bencher would have slipped in an amendment and we would have fundamentally changed the age of criminal responsibility to 14 without any thought or any safeguards. I do not apologise for taking action on that. I wish I did not have to, but that was the position that I was in.

Q35 Robin Swann: Thanks for your attendance, Jon. Eóin explained earlier that the use of the petition of concern was valid and met the rules despite the wider conversation around that, but I share your concern that it was brought by an Alliance Back-Bench MLA to an Alliance Justice Minister's Bill. In comparison, the Speaker here decides which amendments get taken, whereas in the Assembly, all amendments are taken if deemed necessary, so there is quite a different democratic process for that.

To come back to today's evidence session, your party—our party—has indicated the willingness to engage with the reforms, but can you explain and articulate which reforms you think should be prioritised? We have heard from Alliance, and Sinn Féin suggested in a written submission that, if an eligible party refuses to nominate to the position of First Minister or Deputy First Minister, it should move to the next largest party. What are your views on that?

Jon Burrows: We really need to sit down and think that through, because by its logical consequence, my understanding is that you could then have a Unionist First Minister and Deputy First Minister or a nationalist First Minister and Deputy First Minister. I think that is unworkable; it needs a little bit more thought. I am open to discussions that try to prevent the collapse of Stormont. It is wrong that one party can collapse Stormont—it is a dereliction of duty. As a Unionist, it plays into the arguments of Sinn Féin that Northern Ireland would not work, so I have some concerns about the operationalising of that.

A big-ticket item that could be done fairly quickly and would reflect the views of the majority in the Assembly would be to equalise the titles of First and Deputy First Minister to Joint First Minister. That is just a legal reality. It would be a step in the right direction and it would show the Government taking a lead in something and setting a tone.

That is important because we talk about polarisation in our politics in Northern Ireland, and every time we have an election we have parties that will say, "Vote for us, not because you prefer my party, but because we're the ones who can keep Sinn Féin from being First Minister." Likewise, Sinn Féin says, "It doesn't matter if you want to vote SDLP; vote for Sinn Féin because we are the ones who can get First Minister." That polarises our politics.



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The second thing that would normalise our politics is reforming how we vote for the Speaker. Rather than it being cross-community, you could have a weighted majority of 66% or two thirds. De facto, that would need some support from Unionism and some support from nationalism, but it would not be saying that that is a cross-community vote. That is a way of normalising our politics towards normal, democratic principles, as opposed to a carve-up between communities.

The third thing is to look at proper Opposition. Claire's colleague, Matthew O'Toole, the Leader of the Opposition, does a good job, as best he can with meagre resources—and that is high praise—

Claire Hanna: Sounds it. I can feel the warmth.

Jon Burrows: But a proper Opposition with the proper titles of shadow Justice Minister, shadow Health Minister and so on would provide that flagship accountability. They should also be properly resourced so that they can do their job properly and give people the scrutiny and accountability that they need, which is sorely lacking.

There are some other aspects we could look at in terms of how Committees operate. A lot of this is operational reform. In many of the Committees, the Minister rarely comes and, when they do come, they are not there for long enough. They filibuster with a presentation, and you really do not get the chance to cross-examine them. I do not know whether that happens here.

I add that to the Bills Committee, which should be a proper committee that is dedicated to scrutiny. That might have resolved that issue with the petition of concern with the age of criminal responsibility, because we would have delved deep into the amendment and explored what it actually meant in practice.

When you take that as a package, you start getting less polarisation—through the First and Deputy First Minister—a shift towards moving away from two communities having vetoes in the majority voting for the Speaker and proper accountability, scrutiny and delivery. Then you might connect with the people in Northern Ireland, because what they are seeing now is a Punch and Judy show at Stormont, as well as endless non-binding motions, where we have sixth-form debating society debates about number of things. I have been in Stormont now for about nine months and I have spent probably 95% of my time in the Chamber on non-binding motions, and the remaining 5% on legislation.

That package of reforms would fly well. I say this: the people of Northern Ireland expect better than what they are getting. Most of them are not engaged by Stormont. Most of them have no faith in Stormont. But I reiterate: we should take this away from two Governments and say it is the UK Government with the parties. I would put an incentive at the end of it—carrot and stick.

A really powerful incentive would be: "If you get it sorted, we will allow you to reduce corporation tax, and give you the funding that allows you to



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do that, and we will give you a UK pilot in Northern Ireland of having a lower VAT rate on hospitality and tourism.” Imagine if you then said, “There’s a package of reforms. There’s the golden pot at the end of it. Get on with it.” Which party is going to say no? Those are game changers for Northern Ireland. We had a peace process; now let’s have a prosperity process. That is the sort of approach I would take.

- Q36 **Robin Swann:** On a point of clarification, not all Ministers didn’t attend scrutiny committees. As a former Minister who attended 14 times in two years, there is an opportunity to do that. I agree that there are some who avoid the scrutiny committees.

Jon, you spoke of fundamental changes to strand 1. Some of the changes that you are talking about are common sense—basic building blocks of Stormont’s functionality. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee has been mentioned. Do you see it actually achieving anything, or could some of those changes be done by changing Standing Orders? That could be done solely by the Assembly if it had the will to do it.

Jon Burrows: Clearly, any changes to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister would be legislative. The reality is that that particular Committee is not going to achieve those things. It needs the political parties to step out of the structures of Stormont and set up a negotiation with a blank page. I just do not think that Committee is going to achieve that.

I gave evidence to the Committee; I know that the SDLP and all the parties did. It is a Committee with very good people on it, but frankly some of them, for example, will not be the party leaders; they will not be the people who you would appoint to negotiate. This must be done holistically. There is probably a window after this election and before the next Westminster election—about two years—where you could try to hammer out an agreement. We could start appointing key negotiators and developing principles now, but I do not see this being delivered through a Committee at Stormont.

- Q37 **Adam Jogee:** Mr Burrows, it is good to see you again—welcome back to Westminster and thank you for making the effort to join us this morning. I asked Mr Tennyson and Mr O’Toole whether they thought that the demands for change across Northern Ireland and the majority of political parties in the Assembly, broadly speaking, were a result of a failure of political leadership or the way the institutions were designed in the first place. Which do you think it is?

Jon Burrows: I think it is both. They were designed in a way that, as I said, got people around the table and in many ways cemented division—but in a non-violent way—by carving things up. However, political leadership has failed to evolve those institutions. That is where the political class has been left behind by society.

You have a generation of young people who, thankfully, do not know what the troubles were, in the same way that when I grew up, world war two was history. For them, the troubles are something very distant. However,



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for many of our communities it is something they struggle with—the legacy and trauma—and we need to be treating them with respect.

Political leadership has failed to move with society and evolve those institutions and make them effective. The disconnect is palpable. To give a tangible bit of evidence, if you put a social media post up complaining about Stormont and the political class, it really resonates with people. There is a feeling that that place is a basket case. That is what the public think. It is a sentiment I pick up particularly about Stormont that does not exist with other devolved assemblies in the United Kingdom, Westminster or indeed the Dáil.

Q38 Adam Jogee: You touched earlier in your evidence that—I paraphrase, because I was scribbling as you were speaking—there should be less of a conversation between the two Governments and more of a relationship between Stormont and the United Kingdom Government. On that point, His Majesty's Government have indicated that they are open to engage with reform, with a small "r", to see what consensus can be formed. When and how should those conversations take place?

Jon Burrows: The Secretary of State could begin by calling a meeting with the leaders. We could have a conversation about the modalities, put initial papers in, identify who will lead in respective parties, and have interim discussions in the run-up to the election, then intensify them after it. I genuinely believe it would be good politics for the UK Government to set out very clearly what could be achieved and what reward is at the end—"If you agree a budget, reform your institutions, roll your sleeves up and show the maturity to deliver, here is what is what we're prepared to do for you."

There are two tangible things. It would transform lives in Northern Ireland if there were a corporation tax reduction—we have the power but cannot do it financially, for various reasons, without support. Likewise, we are in a situation where VAT is going down to 9% in the Republic of Ireland for tourism and hospitality, while we are sitting at 20%. What a prize that would be at the end of it for the people of Northern Ireland—the prosperity, opportunity and hope that would bring. That would be a compelling case for change, and woe betide any political party that did not engage in that process if that was to be the outcome at the end of it.

Q39 Adam Jogee: I concur with that long list of potential benefits. I hope another would be that we would never again see the events and violence we saw last week. Doing whatever we can to neutralise that situation would be better for all of us—not just in Northern Ireland, but across the country.

Mr Burrows, you touched on the topic of my last question in your answer just now, when you said woe betide anyone who does not want to engage. Is it possible to secure the suggested or required reform, with a small "r", without the support of the two big political parties?

Jon Burrows: The reality is that if you are going to agree these reforms, you will have to have a broad consensus. That does not mean that



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everybody has to agree everything, but there will have to be a broad consensus—that is realpolitik. If it is designed right, that is eminently possible, because you have some really positive dynamics.

The public want change; that is what all the polling says. The parties that are up for change should put their best step forward in a process that has a clear framework and has no role for the Irish Government. I do not say that by way of any hostility to the Irish Government—I have a very good relationship with them and have no ideological barrier to co-operating with them—but as a Unionist leader, I think it undermines the ability of Unionism to engage when you say that there is an Irish Government aspect to a strand 1 issue. If you have all those things—you have the dynamic of people wanting change out there; you have the UK Government leading on it, with a structure that is not the UK Government; and you have a prize at the end of it—I think all parties would participate. I cannot see any not doing so.

There is now a real opportunity to go for the next stage. We have had our peace process; let us have our prosperity process, and changing and improving our governance is one of those things. We struggle to make difficult decisions in Northern Ireland with our Executive, because if it is your party that says, “I’m going to reduce the number of schools,” you are not saying it as part of the Government. It is not like the Labour Government saying, “We’re going to take a hit on this; it’s unpopular, but it’s right, and we have other, popular countermeasures in health.” You as the Ulster Unionist party will take a political hit if you run education and you say, “I’m going to start closing some schools,” or if you are the health Minister that says something, your party will take the hit.

Therefore, with our multi-party Government, people do not want to make the deeply unpopular but proper decisions. That includes revenue raising. Whichever party has responsibility for that—it may be with the Department for Infrastructure—does not want to mention doing so with water charges, because that party would take the hit, not the collective Government. We need to square that circle a bit, so that the parties in a coalition Government can say, “Here’s a package that we are all collectively responsible for.”

Chair: That was very interesting. I call this panel to an end. Thank you very much for your time, Jon. We really appreciate it.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Rt. hon. Gavin Robinson MP.

Q40 **Chair:** Welcome to the fourth panel in our session on Stormont reform. Welcome to our Committee member, the right hon. Gavin Robinson, who is also the leader of the Democratic Unionist party in Parliament. Gavin, what is the impact of the relationship between the Executive parties and Ministers on the implementation of the legislative agenda and the Programme for Government?



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Gavin Robinson: Good morning, Chair; thank you for having me. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee and for completing a bit of parliamentary trivia, as I am the first member of a Committee to give evidence twice over a decade. We have achieved something at least.

Chair: Well done.

Simon Hoare: We could have a pub quiz. That is the knockout question sorted out.

Chair: We do appreciate it.

Gavin Robinson: I think about some of the reflections of the witnesses already. It is all too easy to forget that in Northern Ireland, we have an important system of government and a Government of necessity. If you were to compare and contrast it with Westminster, you would have a Cabinet with Labour, the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens and Reform, all working together in the interests of the people they represent, in a system that encourages them and requires them to work together unless they opt out.

Within that system, relationships and the willingness to deliver are crucial, but there are tensions. You will have people with diametrically opposed views coming together to do what is right for their constituents and, in my view, for Northern Ireland, but that is not without difficulty. Very often, you get clamour, particularly from parties of opposition or minor parties within the system. They will clamour incredibly quickly after an election to say, "We need to see progress. We need to see a Programme for Government. We need to see the headline figures. We need to see targets."

That happens without any space or scope for those charged with delivering government in Northern Ireland to come together and agree a collective programme. Robin, who is a member of the Committee, will have been through this process before. Very often, it is informed by departmental priorities with no political involvement whatsoever. Then the Government are held to headlines that were created hastily.

That is something that needs to change. There is a need, in my view, to have a more realistic but agreed sense of a coalition agreement when people enter government in Northern Ireland, rather than a hastily arranged, pre-packaged legislative programme that does not have content or detail, and therefore has no ability to reflect the strains, the tensions or the dynamic between the different political aspirations that exist within the Executive.

Q41 **Chair:** But you recognised there that some reform needs to happen. How would you achieve that and build that consensus?

Gavin Robinson: I think I gave you an option. It is not an aspect of reform necessarily, but I believe it would be useful to have a coalition agreement in advance of an Executive being established. I think you can



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construct such a thing through agreement when you see manifestos in advance of elections.

I understand that you will be encouraged to believe that there is no interest in reform, but we are a party that has engaged in reform previously. The St Andrews agreement is but one example. We as a party sought and secured consensus from the majority of both designations on reform. We were the party to advance the reduction in the number of Government Departments to streamline the effectiveness of Government, to streamline the number of Assembly Members in Northern Ireland and to create the Fiscal Council. We agreed to the creation of an Opposition, the reduction of special advisers and the removal of former paramilitaries as special advisers. Those are all aspects of reform that were capable of providing consensus.

Similarly and separately, but more importantly, we believe that no reform should undermine the fundamentals that exist within the Belfast agreement and that ensure we have a system that reflects, suitably and appropriately, the community balance within Northern Ireland. We cannot countenance a scenario in which, for 20 years, Unionists were told, "You cannot take decisions that are of detriment to a minority," only to find Unionism in the minority and that those protections are no longer suitable. We cannot agree to that.

We also think there is a need for reform within our civil service and in the effectiveness of the information available to Government Departments. There are many areas where there can be consensus, but not if they undermine or remove the fundamental structures that ensure cross-community consensus and, therefore, the greatest ability for Government to reflect the needs and wishes of our community in a way that respects our past and delivers for the future.

Q42 Robin Swann: To pick up on one point, Mr Robinson, with regard to your process for establishing a Programme for Government after an election, do you agree that if you pack that out, the next step is a Programme for Government supported by a Budget before d'Hondt? Is that something you would be willing to endorse and support, rather than just this collective of manifestos?

Gavin Robinson: As you know, a Budget can be singular, or it can be annual. At the moment, it is outrageous that we do not have one at all. I am not sure that it is a constraint that is necessary, in this instance. You will have manifestos from each party. Some will be in the future Executive and some may not be, but you will know what the competing aspirations are and you will know where there is common cause.

You will remember in the 2022 election, the Democratic Unionist party, my party, championed £1 billion of investment in the health service over the forthcoming five years. That was delivered within two. But it also had some complementarity with the commitment from Sinn Féin at the time on £1 billion of investment in the national health service.



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You will find that there is complementarity of aspiration. You will also find that it would give you a better opportunity to discuss and encourage consensus around issues where there is disagreement, because there will always be tensions and disagreement in a Government that is created from completely differing aspirations. That is one of the fundamental challenges that we have to deal with, and, as I say, deal with collectively.

Opposition is an important function of democracy, but it should be constructive. Sometimes I worry that we will not achieve any reform at all if we do not have a period of stability. There are some who seem to wish to talk up a crisis. They seem to wish to inject crisis within our political system, detrimentally and, sometimes, purely for electoral benefit.

We heard one witness this morning indicate that they struggle to get people to give them a higher preference—if they were going to vote at all—because they did not believe my party's veracity in standing for election and assuming elected office. But we never put that in doubt; that was created by the very same people who were asking for their vote. Again, today you heard them suggest that there would be questions around our willingness to serve in a future Executive, with no basis whatsoever.

One of the last periods of time that we should have these discussions is in the run-up to an election, when you start to see common sense, constructive attitude and will being set aside for electoral benefit, and suggestions being made that have no basis in foundation whatsoever.

Q43 Chair: As a Committee, we see some of the infrastructure issues. People tell us that planning, water infrastructure and housing are issues. All of those are devolved. We hear Jon Burrows, the leader of the UUP, talk about that and how it impacts his constituents, but we know it impacts everybody in Northern Ireland. These are issues that have just not been resolved, so how does Northern Ireland move forward? You talked about consensus and that is really important. Is reform needed to implement and move forward and get that consensus, or does the DUP not want what we have heard the other leaders talk about today, which is reform? I believe the good will is there, but after the views that you have heard today, how do you move forward?

Gavin Robinson: First, I question that the good will is there. The lack of delivery that we have seen comes out of a lack of willingness to constructively work together or to recognise that the fact that we have a system that has protections built within it, but that should lead to engagement, consensus and agreement about what can be achieved, rather than to obstructively and obtusely hitting the buffers, which is what has happened on many occasions.

I still struggle, scratch my head and wonder why colleagues did not ask the question, "How on earth would a change in the titles of First Minister and Deputy First Minister deliver water infrastructure in Ahoghill?" It would have absolutely no impact on the ability to change planning or water infrastructure at all. Nor would a change in the way in which a Speaker is



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elected. It would have absolutely, fundamentally no impact on water infrastructure in Ahoghill. That is why it boils down to will.

The greatest reform, as I have said on a number of occasions, has to be internal. The greatest reform has to be an attitude and a will, and has to be in the desire for elected representatives and leaders to work together to deliver. As you know, I sit here as leader now, but I was a special adviser in the office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, when we had a First Minister and Deputy First Minister working well for the people of Northern Ireland. I have seen other Executives since then that do not perform as well. They do not have the same personal desire and willingness to deliver—or cannot.

What we have at the moment, as you know, is a First Minister and Deputy First Minister working well but constrained by a two-year window of a five-year mandate. We know the history of that and the reasons for it. I almost sense there is a quest of urgency around notions of reform, some for electoral benefit, some insatiable one-upmanship from a number of parties that wish to outdo one another on reform.

The titles of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, whatever else, would make no fundamental ability to deliver on the issues that you and I agree on, such as planning, infrastructure, the reform of public services and getting waiting lists down. It would make no impact whatever; you need the will to deliver on those issues.

Q44 Claire Hanna: Gavin, you said that relationships and willingness were at the core of the dysfunction. How would you characterise those relationships? What do the DUP do to improve relationships and build trust and confidence?

Gavin Robinson: You have heard me say in this Committee a number of times that I get frustrated when people talk about vetoes and blocks. Because that is the end of the process, when people have failed to engage or compromise, and want to inject majoritarianism in a system that by necessity requires consensus. If you take just this week, when there had been a debate on the minimum age of criminal responsibility, my party tabled a petition of concern, which we encouraged others to sign, and they did so in dribs and drabs, but it came during the middle of the debate and caused some consternation.

Whenever we first tabled that petition of concern, how many discussions do you think were had about building consensus? Not only will I tell you that the answer is none, but I will tell you that the reason the answer is none is because majoritarianism was going to kick in and win through in the Assembly in a way that does not work or serve us well. The shock you got on Monday evening in the Assembly was the shock and surprise that the petition had received the 30 signatures. Up until that point, there was no willingness to engage, discuss or to understand the problems.

Q45 Claire Hanna: Had your party sought to reach a compromise proposal, for example, through amendment? Can you give examples of where the DUP



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has not sought to use its veto on an issue it disagrees with? I suppose there is a perception that the DUP will not allow anything to go forward that it does not approve.

Gavin Robinson: I am making the point to you, and you can accept it or not, that somebody wishing to change the law may wish to engage with colleagues, reach consensus and understand why there is resistance and, furthermore, challenge the attitude that infected this process, because a decision seemed to be reached that would get a majority anyway and consensus does not matter. That is a danger for politics for Northern Ireland; that is not the way it should be.

There is another challenge. There has been reform to the petition of concern system. The number of MLAs fell but the number for a petition was not reduced. You now need to have Members from at least two parties, where in the past one party could do it alone. More importantly, there is a 14-day standstill period. I am not aware of any encouragement, engagement or discussion around trying to reach consensus in the intervening period.

We will see what happens in the next fortnight. There are too many people who now use the lexicons of veto, frustration and objection when they have failed in the first test, which is the willingness to work together, to find agreement, even if it is not all you want, but the willingness to work together to get agreement in a way that allows us to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

Q46 **Claire Hanna:** I suppose that the most high-profile use of a petition, which will resonate most with people, was on the issue of equal marriage for people from the LGBT community. Consensus was demonstrated, but it was not to the taste of the DUP, and it was repeatedly blocked. I think that is how people understand the use of that mechanism. Your colleague Baroness Arlene Foster said that reform is viewed with suspicion by Unionists, and as being done to one section of the community. Obviously, that would give concern to many of us. Is that your view? Specifically, could you outline—however effective you think it would be—how equalising the titles of First Minister and Deputy First Minister or allowing the Assembly to return without Executive power would injure any one community?

Gavin Robinson: I do not think you can do this with an à la carte approach. The strand 1 protections—the strand 1 requirements about cross-community consent—are at the heart of our system. Setting aside the ability to bring the majority of both designations with you is not something that you should fear; it is something that should be protected and understood. Having engaged with SDLP negotiators over many negotiation periods, I can tell you that their obstinance to any change that would in any way threaten what they perceive to be the nationalist community was present, was there and was not going to change. By the way, I remember that the idea of an Assembly functioning without an Executive was famously put to SDLP negotiators, who responded by saying that they could never countenance a Prior Assembly again.



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Q47 **Claire Hanna:** Could you outline how equalising the titles could injure any one community? You have not done that, and I would just like you to answer the question that I asked.

Gavin Robinson: Well, I have, and you have to hear, rather than assume.

Q48 **Claire Hanna:** You are talking about things that happened, but you have not answered the question. How would equalising the titles or the Assembly returning injure any one community? It is a very straightforward question.

Gavin Robinson: You have to hear, rather than assume.

Q49 **Claire Hanna:** I appreciate that there are things that you would like to say, but I have asked you a specific question, which you are refusing to answer.

Gavin Robinson: There is no refusal, because I started my answer by saying that these things cannot be dealt with in an à la carte way. That is my answer. My answer is that if you are going to have a discussion—

Claire Hanna: There isn't an answer.

Gavin Robinson: I have given you an answer not only once but twice now. If it is about strand 1, you cannot just cherry-pick. I have heard witnesses today suggest that they could improve the world if you change the designation of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, but I am suggesting to you, first, that that is fanciful; secondly, that it would not work; and, thirdly, don't move away from the whole purpose of the institution system that we have, which is to reach consensus. I assure you that it is not just the people I represent who can hear very clearly this majoritarian approach, which is about shutting down and shutting up the people I represent, and saying to them that, in the past, when Unionists were in the majority, they had to compromise, concede, engage and reach consensus, but if the shoe is on the other foot, those standards do not apply. That cannot work.

Q50 **Chair:** It is quite interesting, because the UUP would like to see that, and they are a Unionist party. I just wanted to make that point. It is just interesting that the UUP want to have that equalisation—

Claire Hanna: And the TUV, who have not been known to be soft in terms of the interests of the Union.

Gavin Robinson: My response to that is twofold, Chair. The first is that it will make no practical, material difference to the litany of issues that Jon Burrows outlined. It will not deliver water infrastructure in Ahoghill, so I think you need to be very careful about why it is being asked for.

My second response is that we cannot have these discussions in an à la carte way. There has been a suggestion from the SDLP, which is limited. You heard Matthew O'Toole say very clearly that it is designed to reach consensus—so three, not a whole panoply of changes—but you have



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already heard him suggest that it would not just be the singular election of Speaker, or the election of First Minister and Deputy First Minister; it would apply to the budget, to key cross-community decisions and to the mechanism itself.

When you start on a process where one tries to get agreement on a singular aspect—but they are all interlocking, intertwined and part of strand 1, a suite of measures to encourage confidence in our community, so if you pick at those—you engage in a process where they will all change. I am suggesting that to remove fundamentally the *raison d'être* of the system—the system that recognises that people have to work together but that protections are required within it—would be a foolhardy move, and not one that is likely to reach consensus in the majority of Unionist communities.

- Q51 **Claire Hanna:** I do not think we have heard how the Assembly existing, or synchronising the titles would injure one community. We have heard views on how reform can and cannot progress. You rightly said that your party has championed reform. Matthew O'Toole set out that for years very substantial reforms, including to mandatory coalition, were outlined by your party. The Saint Andrews reforms came about through a privatised DUP and Sinn Féin process, with the two Governments, after a period of no Executive, when public services deteriorated. If you do not like an *à la carte* approach, how and when should and can reform be progressed, given that you accept that there is a consensus outside of your party? There is a consensus that reform should happen, so how would the DUP like that to go?

Gavin Robinson: There is no consensus that reform should happen. When you say that, you just confirm your majoritarian—

Claire Hanna: You said that your party is pro-reform. I just want to establish—

Gavin Robinson: No, I am sorry, Ms Hanna, but you have just confirmed your majoritarian approach to this.

- Q52 **Claire Hanna:** Your party and you sitting there today have talked about how your party has championed reform—

Gavin Robinson: In the past.

Claire Hanna: In print and available online, you have talked about how your party framed itself as the party and champions of reform. Every single other party, including, yes, the Ulster Unionists, the Traditional Unionist Voice and independent Unionists, have supported specific elements of reform in this calendar year. There is a consensus about reform, but I accept that your party does not support some of the proposals on the table. If we are to have a conversation about reform, how and when would the DUP deem it acceptable for that to happen?

Gavin Robinson: I am glad you corrected yourself—



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Claire Hanna: I did not correct myself. Listen, you can dance on the head of a pin if you want, and you can run the clock down—I accept that you are not interested. As others have said, you opposed the Good Friday agreement and now you are opposing any changes to it, except the ones you have said. If there is to be a process—you do not like to say veto, so you are not vetoing a process; I am just saying, if we are to have a discussion—about reform, how and when do you think that should go forward?

Gavin Robinson: I will answer your question. I think it is important that if you are interested in the views of the DUP, then you hear them, rather than hear what you wish to.

Claire Hanna: I would like to hear the views of the questions that I have asked you, rather than the questions you would like to answer.

Gavin Robinson: Again, you interrupt. Chair, in fairness, I am here to give evidence. The Democratic Unionist Party position is this: the ARC is engaged in this discussion and is continuing in its work. I regret the fact that it has been said that there is consensus on reform, but that we sit outside that. I have indicated in the past where we have engaged with and agreed reform. I have indicated to you the fundamental principle that we do not believe that you can take an à la carte approach to the protections that are in the system, or indeed, that it would be beneficial collectively to set aside the mechanisms, the protections and the spirit of working in a way that reaches consensus.

Chair: I am going to move on. We will go to Simon, and then Mike and Robin.

Q53 **Simon Hoare:** Protections for whom and against what?

Gavin Robinson: For communities against others—you know very well, Mr Hoare, the history of the system that we have. You know that it can only operate with the confidence and commitment of our collective communities. You know that we have a system where—which is right—communities, neighbourhoods and those with competing aspirations work together to deliver for people in Northern Ireland—

Q54 **Simon Hoare:** But protections against what? What, in your heart, are you fearful of? Because one only needs protection if one is fearful, worried or anxious. What do you perceive? I take your point that an à la carte, Woolworths pick 'n' mix approach to reform is not desirable—it needs a strategic overview; I hope there is unanimity on that—but what protections do you think could be at risk today, in 2026, that were deemed to be vital and important in 1998?

Gavin Robinson: I do not wish to be alarmist, but I do not have to go back many months, never mind years, to give you examples of people misusing executive power, misusing ministerial office and engaging in political discrimination. That is not years ago; that is within our recent past, so the ability to hold people to account, and the protections that are there when you think of the functioning of the Executive—for example,



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that no singular Minister can take decisions that are significant, cross-cutting or controversial—are important safeguards within the prism of a Government that contains people with so many different strands, political aspirations and outlooks. You do not require those in Cabinet, but you have collective responsibility in Cabinet in Westminster.

- Q55 **Simon Hoare:** Why would that be in danger if, for example, the mechanisms of the election of the Speaker were to change? We know that the First Minister and Deputy First Minister literally cannot go to the loo without the other one signing it off in duplicate. If one was to have a modernisation of those differential titles, one would still be able, surely, to have in place a robust set of governance rules and behaviour and code of conduct, in order to not just militate against but prohibit with sanction ministerial abuse of power, under equality regulations, if nothing else.

Gavin Robinson: I can only answer the question in the same way that I already have. I do not believe that we can deal with these aspects singularly. You have raised one singular aspect. You have some parties that will push that; you will have some parties that will move others. I think we need a more considered way of dealing with these things, and I think that is through the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

- Q56 **Simon Hoare:** That is a view, Mr Robinson, that you and I share. Does that not inexorably take us, on the basis that we have nothing to fear but fear itself, to this? Some people will say, "I'm not going to be the first to jump in." Should we not be pressing for—it may come to nothing at all, but at least the process will have been gone through—a more interventionist approach, the formalisation of conversations as talks, and more of a leadership role from the NIO, rather than the slightly laid-back, reactive, passive position that the Secretary of State has taken, which is almost, "I will only respond if somebody comes to me and says, 'This is something to which we've all signed up'"? I paraphrase, but that is just the politics of never-never land, isn't it?

Gavin Robinson: I do not think it is the case that all signed up. Some may lament the 2006 reforms, but they were attained and agreed by the majorities within both communities; consensus was reached, not by everybody, but by the majorities. In "New Decade, New Approach" there was publication of the Governments' views. There was not full consensus by all parties on the contents of "New Decade, New Approach", but the Government know well that if the system is to be sustained with the confidence of both communities, you need the support within them, electorally and politically.

The Assembly and Executive Review Committee took evidence a number of weeks ago from international experts, and there was frustration from some that those international experts, who were not, I suspect, big fans of ours, suggested and encouraged and reminded that you will only see progress on this when it commands cross-community support.

- Q57 **Simon Hoare:** Can I ask for a yes or no answer to this question? Would you and your party colleagues welcome a more activist, small a,



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interventionist, small i, approach from the Secretary of State?

Gavin Robinson: I have already answered. This process is engaged with the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and that process should continue.

Simon Hoare: Mr Robinson, forgive me. In which case, I have not had the mental dexterity to discern what you said. Could you just give us a yes or a no?

Chair: We are moving on. I will bring in Mike and then Robin. In the interests of time, we need to wrap up in about five to 10 minutes.

Q58 **Mike Kane:** Hi Gavin. Thank you for being here. Of the two main parties, at least I can ask you the questions that I would like to ask of the other main party—but obviously they are not here for historical reasons. Without getting into the issue of what happened in 2022, because I will ask about that next, do you think the collapse of the Executive and the Assembly has led to so much reputational damage that they have been holed below the waterline? Is one of the ways of re-ballasting that for the parties to agree that they cannot walk away in the future?

Gavin Robinson: I have indicated very clearly my support for devolution, my belief that devolution is fundamental to Northern Ireland and its place within the United Kingdom, and my commitment to devolution. I cannot indicate to you, Mr Kane, what will happen in the future—not just for events within my control, but the position that others adopt. I remember very clearly the political exposure created after a murder in my constituency in 2015, when the Ulster Unionists left the Executive and we had to take what were probably uncomfortable positions to ensure that devolution was sustained.

When devolution fell in 2017 for three years, that was not only wrong, but it was proven through public inquiry that the reasons for devolution falling were wrong. From 2000 to 2002, devolution fell on four occasions, and it has fallen a number of times since.

Devolution has to deliver for people. It has to attain respect and regard within our public—within our population—but it is not doing that currently. Nor do I believe that discussions such as this debate, as acrimonious, frustrating and annoying as they can be at times, are going to make one jot of difference to the lives of ordinary people in Northern Ireland. Whether the Speaker is elected by cross-community consent, as I believe should happen, by two-thirds majority, by 60% or by whatever other majoritarianism is described, it will make no difference whatever to people on a hospital waiting list in Northern Ireland. It will not fix one pothole. So the discussions around financial support and people's willingness, as I have mentioned, to deliver are much more fundamental than these discussions.

Q59 **Mike Kane:** I would say in response that having an Executive does help people to get off waiting lists and does fix the potholes.

Gavin Robinson: And we have one.



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Q60 Mike Kane: On the 2022 issue, I do not want to be critical of the DUP but, in people's political zeitgeist, what do they remember about that collapse? Do they remember a technical protocol issue, or do they remember the fact that 90 MLAs had 730 days off legislating and scrutinising, on full pay?

Gavin Robinson: I know that some very hard-working MLAs would not like that categorisation.

Q61 Mike Kane: I know, like all of us around this table, that it was to redress a grievance, and they carried on doing that.

Gavin Robinson: They would not like it at all. The truth is that you will have people of differing reflections and recollections. You will have people who were happy that a stand was taken on a constitutional position, and on something that, by the way, did not have the consent of the people of Northern Ireland—a decision taken over the heads of not only the people of Northern Ireland, but the elected representatives here in Westminster and through the consent mechanisms in the Assembly. Others will lament the fact that government was not there. I believe in devolution, and I want to see it continue, but I want to see it in as effective a form as possible. One of the biggest reforms on that needs to be the willingness of people to work together.

Q62 Mike Kane: My final question is about leadership—I can ask this only of you, because you are the only one here of the two main parties. It is a really difficult situation. We heard from Matthew O'Toole and Mr Tennyson about the political Parcheesi—about the blocking and the stopping rather than the creating and the common good. To what extent is that influenced by the two main parties' radical wings on either side, and the fact that they cannot run to the centre so they have to run to their base?

Gavin Robinson: When I sat on Belfast city council, it used to be that 95% of everything we did was agreed, unseen and unheard, and the 5% that anyone talked about was the disagreements. That is sometimes true of the Executive as well. We stood on a manifesto pledge of delivering £1 billion for health, and we did it in the first two years. We stood on a manifesto pledge of delivering free childcare for people, and we are delivering it, every day of the week, for families right across Northern Ireland, irrespective of their background. We are delivering it. We are doing it. Those are but two examples, and there are many more throughout Government.

Yes, there are challenges but, as I mentioned, if you approach them through the prism of block and veto, you will get nowhere. If you approach them from the basis that people have those protections, but they need not use them, and if we can reach agreement beforehand, they will not be used, that is a much better place to be.

Mike Kane: My observation of Northern Ireland politics while I have been on the Committee is that there is huge co-operation in private between all politicians. I am glad to know that things were in a better place when you were a special adviser there, Mr Robinson.

Gavin Robinson: That is not what I said—it was a good illustrative example.

Chair: Well, yes. I will hand over to Robin.

- Q63 **Robin Swann:** Thank you, Mr Robinson, for attending. I am sorry, but I think, Gavin, you have taken the wrong attitude towards what this session is about. It is about teasing out how reforms could come about and could actually be supportive; it is not to denigrate and say that if we change the titles for First Minister, everything will be solved in the morning. I do not think that is what the Committee is looking at; it is looking at the greater reforms. The Joint First Minister title is something that your party used when Emma Little-Pengelly took the post in February this year. The then leader said that she would be a very good First Minister, not a Deputy First Minister, so there are occasions in the past when your party has used those lines.

I also take exception to some of your examples of reform. You talked about the reduction of MLAs; that was to the detriment of Unionism at that stage because Unionists lost most of those seats. You mentioned the reviews on special advisers that I think were TUV private Member's Bills.

Gavin Robinson: We supported them; I did not say we came up with them. We supported John McCallister's opposition Bill, too.

- Q64 **Robin Swann:** That is what I wanted to be clear about. I do not want to portray that they were DUP changes, because the changes of designation at St Andrews that Claire mentioned, to appoint the First Minister and Deputy First Minister rather than have them elected by the Assembly, were actually a detriment, from a personal view and from a party view. On reforms, I think you are the only one of the four people who have given evidence who seems to put some trust or some cognisance on the work of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Do you think it can bring about meaningful change and reform to the structures?

Gavin Robinson: There are a couple of things I want to respond to. It is not the wrong attitude when I suggest, for example, that a change to titles will not make a fundamental impact on delivery. I do that because you will hear people continually point to frustrations with delivery of Government, and then suggest that that is the catalyst for reform. That is why I am responding in that way. I could take you out to the streets of London here and they will tell you about something that is not working. It does not necessarily mean that it is the institution itself; the structural issues are the problem. That is why I mentioned willingness.

I am not of the view that reform can be achieved only through the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, but I am of the view that it is a core part of the institution and that it is engaged in work. It should conclude that work, and then parties can consider the conclusion.

- Q65 **Robin Swann:** In what timeline do you think that that should be done? Before the next election, or after? That is why I asked you at the start about the synchronisation of Programme for Government and budget



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before d'Hondt. A review could be put in, but—I say this as someone who was also involved in earlier conversations: the Stormont House new deal, the fresh start, Haas-O'Sullivan—we have had many of those, and all that they seem to do is to delay work.

Gavin Robinson: I am not sure how beneficial continuing this conversation would be in the run-up to an election. I get a sense, as I mentioned this earlier, that there are people clearly engaged in this discussion because they think it electorally useful for them. There has been an insatiable desire on the part of a number of parties to play one-upmanship on who is the best for reform, who has the greatest legacy on reform, who has the greatest history on reform—who can shine their badge the greatest?

New entrants to this discussion are now suggesting that they are willing to talk about reform, but not in any serious or sensible way. We will work through that, but would it be beneficial in the run-up to the election? I don't think so. Will it make a material difference after the election? No. Do I believe the first individual to give evidence was right when they started talking about the intention to join an Executive of other parties? Absolutely not. That is why I think this is becoming very party political with electoral appeal in the next number of months, and that is not helpful to anyone.

Q66 **Robin Swann:** The Secretary of State has said that the UK Government are “open to conversations about ideas which can command a consensus” on reform; are you saying that you will not engage?

Gavin Robinson: He has asked me that question already, so I have engaged in that discussion with him. I repeated what I said to you: we can happily engage in those discussions, but that the AERC is engaged in that work currently, that we do not believe there should be any à la carte or fundamental change to the consensus aspiration mechanisms that we have already in play, and that we certainly will not countenance the notion that it is okay to suppress a minority whenever it is the other side. That really is how people feel about this within my community, that all of this was required whenever nationalism was in the minority, but now their tail is up, they believe that it is okay to get rid of the very things that they would never countenance getting rid of when the shoe was on the other foot.

Chair: I thank you for your time, and I appreciate the way in which you have engaged with the Committee, as a Member as well.