

The Platform for Change

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Summary

- Recap
- The policy discussions
- The current political context
- The platform
- Next steps

The story so far

- January 2009: published report of JRRT-funded research, exploring desire for realignment and renewal
- March: initial meeting decided to form association and have policy debates
- June, September, October: debates, encapsulated in one-page summaries, on:
 - Education (inc 11+)
 - ‘Green new deal’
 - Intercultural dialogue
- Now: draft of overall platform (incorporating latter)

Inertia at Stormont

- Debates reflected frustration at inertia of devolved government
- Education: lack of vision of what education is for led into sectarian trap over selection at 11
- Economy: failure to grasp potential of 'green revolution' to upgrade performance, provide jobs and tackle fuel poverty
- Intercultural dialogue: commitment to sectarian clientelism meant unable or unwilling to challenge culture of intolerance

Evidence of public mood

- Our concerns chimed with wider mood:
 - joint article by Empey and Ritchie on 11+ etc in Belfast Telegraph
 - alignment of social partners with Green New Deal
 - protest by Orde about impasse on ‘A Shared Future’ successor
- Ed Curran in BT (‘Politics is paralysed, with both sides now further apart than ever’, 21/9/09)—

These are worrying times for democracy and politics. Confidence is ebbing away that the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly are worth the expensive candle lit so strongly two years ago and now flickering weakly in the wind.

We can talk up the peace process for all we wish. The reality is starkly evident. Politics is not working at Stormont and something has to give.

Nature of difficulty

- Derek Birrell, Direct Rule and the Governance of Northern Ireland:

Devolution provides less cohesive government, not based on collective responsibility. It has brought a lack of decision-making or generalised statements with no agreed underpinning ideology and decisions made on a lowest common denominator basis or by ministerial bargaining.

There is also limited evidence of efficient government. The Executive's complex and rigid decision-making procedures and blocking mechanism has led to much slower decision-making than under direct rule and hold-ups have been frustrating for civil servants, the media and the public.

- Our discussions showed however that it is possible to elaborate alternatives, in context of devolution, based on evidence and reason that can attract broad support

Impasse at Stormont

- Deadlock between DUP and SF on devolution of policing and justice
- Other deadlocks, on selection and:
 - ‘community relations’, Irish language
 - parades, police reserve and personal weapons
 - reform of political institutions
- ... ie on nature of NI state
- And so growing threat of violence from wings
- In October *Newsnight* revealed had been 11 attempts to kill PSNI officers since fatal attack in Craigavon in March
- 38 officers forced to move over previous two years, during which time had been 750 bomb alerts

Nightmare scenario

- European election fought by DUP on stop SF ticket; failed due to Allister challenge
- DUP secured at St Andrews that first minister and deputy first minister not elected as team from assembly but appointed separately by parties, from largest and next-largest 'designations' respectively
- DUP later secured change so largest party appoints FM
- Private threats by SF to collapse institutions again
- Risk of fresh assembly elections amid recriminations
- Specifically, risk next election, whenever held, fought on campaign to stop/secure Martin McGuinness as FM
- Allister would campaign on basis would not take seats in executive, thus nationalist-dominated, so further collapse

A message of hope

- Platform has been drafted to offer a combination of hope and vision against this backdrop. So begins:

The citizens of Northern Ireland have endured much since the outbreak of the 'troubles' in 1969. There is a deep yearning to put behind us not just the violence of the past but also the deep sectarian divisions, intolerance and introversion which still bedevil this society. These prevent us moving forward to a future marked by reconciliation, greater social comfort and the dynamism which our young people expect.

Evidence-based critique

- It taps sense of inactivity and job not being done, rather than presenting ideological criticism:

Objectively, the devolved government has been under-performing. The 2008 Programme for Government initiated no significant new policies. Indeed, strategic policies inherited from direct rule were abandoned amid ideological resistance (sustainable development), shelved without any capacity to generate a replacement (*A Shared Future*) or quietly adopted for lack of an alternative (the anti-poverty strategy). Nor has the programme been annually revised as envisaged in the Belfast agreement, despite the dramatic change in external conditions manifested in the global economic crisis.

Diagnosis

- It explains why aspiration has been frustrated and highlights practical effects on real households:

While the Belfast agreement raised deeply felt hopes that a new future lay ahead, disillusionment has grown in subsequent years, with the post-agreement institutions as often in abeyance as in operation. Commitment to the common good has repeatedly been trumped by a communalist political agenda, frustrating widely shared aspirations for the focus to shift to day-to-day economic and social concerns. Most pressing among these, the political impasse over academic selection has displayed a cavalier attitude to the concerns of parents, teachers and children.

Disengagement

- It links this to the way the wider public has 'tuned out' of politics:

Most assembly business has been coming from members themselves, rather than bills proposed by the executive, giving Stormont the air of a debating society. In the absence of significant outcomes on the ground, public engagement and electoral participation, critical to a democratic society, have been falling.

Aspiration for normality

- It implicitly criticises argument that citizens should be grateful for peace (most of time), rather than expecting to live in normal society:

It is time for a step change in the politics of Northern Ireland. It is fundamentally demeaning to suggest that an absence of politically-motivated violence—and, amid political polarisation, violence has been showing a worrying re-emergence—should be the summit of its citizens' aspirations for a good life.

Real coalition government

- It begins to develop broad-brush vision, again linked to practical results of failure:

Political power must be genuinely shared, not shared out. This requires collective responsibility in government and a commitment to working in a collaborative way to resolving problems which for ordinary citizens cut across the departmental silos. It was intolerable, for example, that there was no single emergency line for distressed householders to ring during the floods of August 2008.

Power-sharing without jargon

- The need for more flexible arrangements, in line with democratic norms, is set out in simple terms:

There must be a serious debate about how to make the institutions of governance more flexible, so that they are less fragile. Deadlocking vetoes must be replaced by incentives to conciliation: it was simply unacceptable that the executive should fail to meet for five months in 2008 as rising unemployment and spiralling fuel prices cried out for an effective, collective response. And electors deserve the right to choice between alternative, cross-communal coalition options.

Unity, not division

- It stresses that such flexibility offers route to unity and equality rather than division and domination:

In such a context, the debate on a bill of rights, which lacks any current definition, can focus as it should on providing safeguards against majoritarian abuse of power, without requiring MLAs to 'designate' in Orange or Green terms. Otherwise the long-term future will be the entrenchment of sectarian division, against the backdrop of a Europe which for two decades has been removing its dividing lines.

Tackling culture of intolerance

- Platform does not, however, blame structures for all ills, also addressing culture:

Political parties must not only renounce violence—now or in terms of the past. More broadly, a culture of tolerance must replace the intolerance of cultural defence. The stand-off over a successor to *A Shared Future* and the Racial Equality Strategy must be swiftly ended—so that ministers have more than mere words of condemnation in the face of incidents like the sectarian murder in Derry in May 2009 and the expulsions of Poles and Roma from south Belfast during the year.

One election, not two

- It warns of nightmare scenario and tries to present compelling alternative:

The next assembly election in 2011 can not be allowed to become, like the European Parliament poll in 2009, a political arms race as to which 'community' will be represented by the first minister. It should be about what kind of government we want, and those who would be first minister should demonstrate their capacity and desire to exercise civic leadership on behalf of *all* citizens, not merely their own 'community'.

Practical policy consequences

- Real potential for policy agreement on most challenging issues is demonstrated:

Parties which are no longer able to rely on exploiting communal insecurities will be forced to develop, and to compete on the basis of, serious policies which can re-engage the public in genuine debate. Platform for Change has itself shown what this could mean in practical terms for three demanding issues: the future of education, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue. These policy briefs are attached as appendices.

An end to navel-gazing

- There is a pitch to those averse to sectarian introversion and anxious for 'normal', left-right politics:

Over time, the hope has to be to move towards a more conventional political argument, between the advocates of greater, or lesser, regulation of markets. But this means we must also lift our heads and adopt a more outward-looking political perspective.

What about 'national question'?

- To get retaliation in first on critics, it argues for positive, 'both-and' view of wider context:

Devolved power should be used as a foundation to reach out across Ireland, the UK and beyond, developing allies and collaborative projects and absorbing best practice from wherever it can be found—not simply endlessly lobbying for money, at risk of expending the huge international goodwill Northern Ireland has enjoyed. Co-operation must be pursued without ideological restriction with other jurisdictions throughout these islands. This holds out the prize of reconciliation in Ireland as a whole and genuine policy exchange within a devolved UK.

'Bread and butter' issues

- It links this, again, to ability as result to tackle practical problems faced on ground:

Upgrading the economic, social, environmental and cultural performance of Northern Ireland will require learning from other, more successful, European regions. To do so, the assembly, like the Scottish Parliament, must join the network of European regions with legislative powers. In this context, the 'Green New Deal' which the social partners are supporting is essential not only to address the global challenge of climate change but also to turn the aspirational economic priority in the Programme for Government into a practical project for competitive regional industrial modernisation.

How do we have a say?

- This is linked in turn to potential for civic engagement to be meaningful:

It is an excellent example of what can be achieved if we look to find solutions to concrete problems by drawing on the experience of civil-society organisations: business, the trade unions and the voluntary sector are used to running things and dealing with these challenges day to day. And so, last but not least, the Civic Forum needs to be reactivated, but on a streamlined basis organised around the social partners.

Call to (non-violent) arms

- And draft concludes with rallying call which offers realisable alternative to despair:

All in all, this is an ambitious agenda. But a critical mass of individuals and organisations, within civil society and the political arena, can begin to translate it into the reality of a better life for all. A step change can be achieved—as long as we step up together.

Way ahead

- Need to agree a platform, of which draft provides starting point
- Key that final version remains organised around public interest and common good
- Need then to mobilise widest possible list of signatories from all walks of life, including via internet
- Launch when have critical mass of 'great and good' and 'honest Joes/Josephines'
- Expectation of positive response from more accommodating parties

Outcomes

- These steps can begin to realise original aims:
 - Realignment of politics, from polarisation to conciliation
 - Renewal of politics, with new avenues for engagement
- Must avoid nightmare scenario by presenting alternative agenda for assembly election in 2011
- Goal to have (d'Hondt) executive magnetised towards centre ground rather than dominated by polar opposites
- Could then move towards policy focus and re-engagement, and debate on reforms to make power-sharing more flexible
- In such context, paramilitarism would atrophy

Conclusion

- Has been concern to move from talk to action
- But have achieved a lot within one year
- Can achieve much more between now and assembly election
- Will need to raise serious money
- But what we seek goes with grain of wider public concerns
- Opinion now coalesces very quickly with capacity of internet to add to face-to-face campaigning
- Down to each of us to stimulate emergence of that critical mass for change