

Bureau Shuffling?
The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

The Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement 1998 resulted in the return of devolved government to Northern Ireland and, with it, a decision by the Executive and Assembly to conduct a radical review of public administration. As the review reaches its final stages this paper considers the likely outcomes. It argues that the parameters of the review will limit its impact and describes the reform proposals as structural changes or administrative rationalisation, devoid of a wider modernising approach to improving public services. The on/off nature of devolution could result in ‘one of the major tasks for devolved government’ (according to the Northern Ireland Executive) being implemented by Direct Rule ministers.

Introduction

The onset of the ‘troubles’ in the late 1960s and prorogation of Stormont (1972) heralded the last major administrative reforms in Northern Ireland which stripped local government of key functions and vested responsibilities in a central executive of six government departments. It was apposite that the momentous return of devolved government to Northern Ireland in 1999, following the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, became a harbinger for radical reform. The (then) First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly announced that one of the major tasks facing the devolved Executive was public administration reform which he saw as central to the way in which public services are structured, organised and delivered in the future. This is the opportunity, he argued ‘to put in place a modern, accountable, effective system of public administration that can deliver a high quality set of public services to our citizens’ (Trimble, 2002:5). Devolution impelled an examination of the overall architecture of government. The creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly and a regional tier of government added to an already congested political landscape which now features: 3 MEPs, 18 MPs, 108 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and 582 local councillors for a population of 1.7 million people. In addition, a complex mosaic of government departments, agencies, local authorities, non-departmental public bodies, boards, trusts and quangos, prompted the criticism that Northern Ireland was both ‘over-governed’ and ‘over-administered’.

This paper attempts to do three things. First, we will describe the existing and fragmented system of public administration in Northern Ireland and proposals for its reform. Second, we will critically evaluate what is emerging as the most likely outcomes from the review of public administration. Finally, we will suggest the key factors influencing the current proposals for reform. We will argue that because the reform of public administration in Northern Ireland was conceived as part of a wider programme of political change, this has delimited its scope and, through the influence of elite actors, circumscribed its potential outcomes. We will also suggest that the key emphasis in the reforms is traditional restructuring or what Pollitt (1984) described as ‘bureau-shuffling’ where attempts are being made to ‘tidy up’ a hugely disparate and fragmented public sector whose current architecture owes more to incremental political tinkering than the rational distribution of powers and functions.

Background

Wright (1994: 108) argued that since the early 1980s Western Europe appears to be ‘caught in a frenzy of administrative reform activity’ as a result of convergent pressures to reshape the state. These included, reducing the size, resources and scope of the public sector; budgetary, planning and evaluation reforms; the need to improve public management; dismantling the traditions of the civil service (permanence, tenure); democratising the public sector (greater public consultation); more user-friendly public services; reorganising administrative structures; and, transforming the culture of the public sector. He observed that significant differences remained in the nature, intensity, timing and pace of reforms which could be explained ‘in terms of the opportunities afforded by the politico-institutional and cultural environment in which they are pursued’ (Wright, 1994: 101). Wright categorised the various types of reform programmes as those introduced: as part of an ongoing process of internally induced modernisation; a reaction to specific political pressures; piecemeal, pragmatic and instrumental in nature; necessitated by the management of the above reform programmes; or, as part of a wider programme of political change. Since the origins of the review of public administration in Northern Ireland were rooted in the *Programme for Government* in which the Executive pledged from the outset ‘to lead the most accountable form of government in Northern Ireland’ (OFMDFM, 2002: 7),

this would suggest a reform programme linked directly to the outworkings of the Belfast Agreement in the form of devolved government. In short, the Belfast Agreement resulted in a devolved power-sharing Executive and regional Assembly which, in turn, prompted the need for a radical overhaul of governance arrangements.

Rhodes (1997: 44) stressed that ‘administrative reform is always political’ and described how the Conservatives from 1979 onwards acted to cut back government spending and control the administrative machine. He noted six broad elements in their reform programme – introducing the minimalist state, reasserting political authority, extending regulation and audit, reforming the structure, reforming public management, and transforming the culture. The reform agenda has continued with Labour under the flag of ‘modernisation’. As Massey and Pyper (2005: 59) report, the Labour Government ‘has attempted to differentiate its approach from that of the previous Conservative governments, and effectively give its managerialism a softer, friendlier and more accommodating image’. Hence, they argue, there is a greater emphasis on constitutional and political reforms rather than mere market reforms.

Toonen suggests that the empirical study of administrative reform as a process is best conceived of as somewhere on a continuum between ‘planned change’ on the one hand and ‘emerging strategy’ on the other. In many cases, he claims, reform is ‘often presented as the outcome of planned effort, politicised to some degree, and in intent and presentation certainly not incremental in nature’ (Toonen, 2003: 472). In reality, however, Toonen concludes that reform is often long term, less rationally designed, piecemeal and a cyclical process. The process is ‘full of inconsistencies, self-induced consequences and unexpected serendipities, which in the long run, may actually generate some decent results, next to the misses inherent to any experimental and learning process’ (Toonen, 2003: 473). What constitutes ‘decent results’ or even ‘misses’ however, add to the idiosyncratic nature of administrative reform outcomes.

In considering why the actuality of administrative reforms is so distinctive across states, Pollitt and Summa (1997) offer four possible factors. First, the economy is always likely to be a background factor of some importance – the need to restrain the rate of growth of public spending. Second, the nature of the political system offers a powerful explanation for differences in reforms. Centralised states with strong single

party governments could force through changes in administrative reforms. Third, the nature of the administrative system which often reflects the political system in which it is located is an important determinant of reform. A strong core executive can impose reform throughout the whole of the public administration system. Finally, party political doctrine is offered as having some influence, although a less neat explanation of the nature of administrative reforms. Pollitt and Summa conclude that the most convincing explanations of reform trajectories in their empirical observations of four countries (Finland, New Zealand, Sweden and the UK) were not economic performance or party doctrines but, rather, the characteristics of the political and administrative systems already in place. 'It was these system characteristics which most significantly influence what was possible in terms of scope, process and speed of reform' (Pollitt and Summa, 1997: 15).

Pollitt and Bouckaert (2000: 24-25) refine this explanatory approach further by devising a conceptual map 'depicting the broad forces which have been at work in driving and restraining change' – it synthesises the process of reform in many countries. Therein they suggest that interactions between background socio-economic influences, political pressures, and characteristics of the existing political and administrative systems are shaping influences in the reform process. At the centre of their model is the process of elite decision making where change is conceived and executed 'top-down' by executive politicians and/or senior civil servants. Whilst sympathetic to Pollitt and Bouckaert's institutional approach, Bevir *et al* criticise the model on two grounds: 'it does not unpack the idea of path dependency by describing how and why the system got to where it is today' and does not fully explore 'the role of individual agency as a cause of change – there is little of the beliefs and actions of elite actors' (Bevir, Rhodes and Weller, 2003: 3). They argue for an 'interpretive approach' as a way of understanding public sector reform. This requires historical narratives of elite constructions of reforms or the reconstruction of 'the beliefs of elites to unpack the ideas that inform the changing actions and practices of governance' (Bevir *et al*, 2003: 15). Using this approach, Bevir *et al* (2003) analyse public sector reform and draw out a number of implications, two of which (at least) speak directly to administrative changes about to take place in Northern Ireland. First, 'there is no tool kit applicable within or across countries. Governance is constructed differently and continuously reconstructed so that there can be no one set of tools'

(Bevir *et al*, 2003: 203). This is already evident in the Northern Ireland context where attempts to modernise local government, in line with reforms in Great Britain, have met with problems. Second, ‘reform is a continuous, political process in which the meaning of change is contested’ (Bevir *et al*, 2003: 204). Hence, politicians in Northern Ireland are already fixated with which reformed council areas they are likely to control and how a stronger local government tier will relate to a devolved Assembly, as opposed to whether these offer the ‘best’ mechanisms for delivering high quality public services.

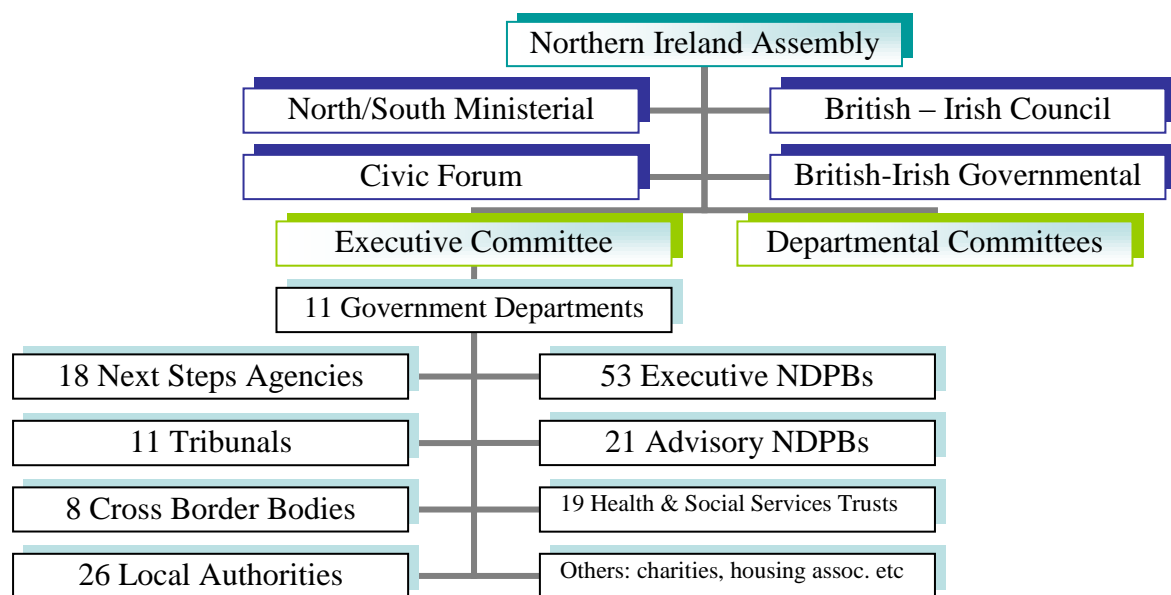
As Great Britain experienced wide ranging administrative reforms, Northern Ireland was pre-occupied with reaching a political settlement. Although the Northern Ireland Civil Service claims to have played its part in reform initiatives such as the *Financial Management Initiative* (1982), *Improving Management in Government: the Next Steps* (1988), *Continuity and Change* (1994), and *Modernising Government* (1999), it did so within the confines of Direct Rule from Westminster where administrative reform assumed a low priority and policies were simply ‘read-across’. The Belfast Agreement and devolution changed all of that.

Public Administration in Northern Ireland

The current system of public administration in Northern Ireland is anachronistic and, aside from repackaging six civil service departments into ten to accommodate devolution in 1999, has remained largely unchanged since 1973. At that time the civil rights movement demanded major reforms in local government to address unionist hegemony consolidated through gerrymandered electoral wards, restricted franchise and discriminatory housing practices (O’Dowd, Rolston and Tomlinson, 1980). Reforms came in the shape of the Macrory Report (1970) which divided services into regional (requiring large administrative units) and district (suitable for small areas) services. The Stormont Parliament was to take responsibility for regional services and district councils would administer district services. Macrory recommended the establishment of 26 borough or district councils and the setting up of appointed boards to decentralise the administration of centrally provided health and education services. The recommendations were subsequently passed into law under the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972. Macrory’s proposals were however

overtaken by the abolition of Stormont in 1972 and the imposition of ‘direct rule’ from Westminster in the absence of a regional tier. What has emerged since then is an emasculated form of local government with limited functional responsibilities, a plethora of boards, trusts, and non-departmental public bodies superimposed with civil service departments which have responsibility for public services ordinarily delivered by councils in the rest of the United Kingdom (see figure 1). Public administration in Northern Ireland has been described by its Comptroller and Auditor General as ‘disastrously fragmented’. Almost every body in Great Britain that carries out any function of government, he argued, ‘is duplicated on a tiny scale within Northern Ireland and that is an impediment to clarity and an enormous inefficiency’ (Dowdall, 2004).

Figure 1: Public Administration in Northern Ireland



The structure of public administration and efforts to reform its institutions are inextricably linked to the various political and constitutional initiatives which emerged in Northern Ireland including, since 1999, the on/off attempts at devolved government (Knox & Carmichael, 2005). The public sector remained largely insulated from the wider UK modernising agenda but for the odd read-across reform such as ‘Next Steps’ Agencies where, as an after-thought, the Northern Ireland Civil Service

was encouraged to follow the Home Civil Service (Knox & McHugh, 1990). To ensure public services remained outside the political (and the possibility of sectarian) sphere, more key functional responsibilities were vested in non-departmental public bodies (quangos) resulting in a patchwork of unaccountable organisations with responsibility for a large proportion of the public budget² (see table 1 & figure 2).

Table 1: Public Expenditure by Sector 2004-05³

	Staffing Costs	Non Staffing Costs	Total (£million)
Agencies	326.2	638.6	964.9
Non-Departmental Public Bodies	121.6	222.1	343.7
North-South Implementation Bodies	2.9	19.2	22.0
Education and Library Boards	979.5	335.1	1314.5
Tribunals	2.4	1.0	3.3
Health Trusts	1,292.1	804.6	2,096.8
Core Departments	567.3	2,576.5	3,143.8
Local Government	Not available	Not available	363.8
Total Public Expenditure	3,288.1	4,600.9	8,252.7

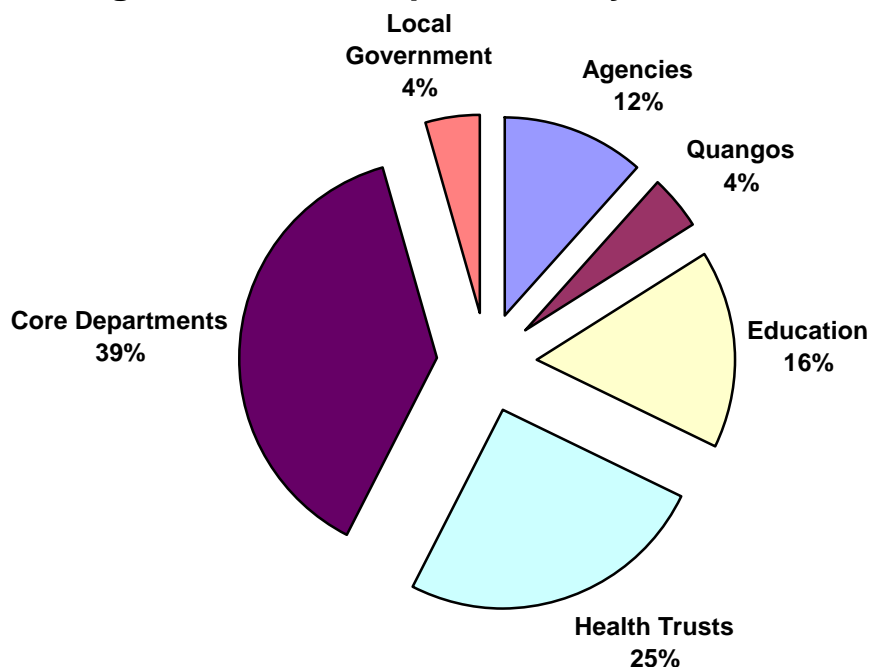
A series of direct rule ministers buttressed and expanded these structures piecemeal. Ministers could dispense largesse by placing benign appointees least likely to cause controversy (‘yes [wo]men’) on quangos. Add to this an active and engaged voluntary and community sector which had service delivery capacity and confidence as a key stakeholder, and we have the administrative landscape that is Northern Ireland. Not only is the system overtly complex, but it also suffers from a significant lack of public accountability. Health trusts, education and library boards, and quangos, for example, consume some 45% of the public budget. There is no political representation on health trusts, education and library boards have up to 40% of their membership local councillors, and quango appointees are in the gift of ministers. The most democratic

² The expenditure shown relates to ‘transferred’ public services under devolved government arrangements. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland remains responsible for ‘excepted’ and ‘reserved’ matters. Excepted matters are those matters of concern to the United Kingdom as a whole where no local variation is possible, such as defence, foreign policy and taxation. Reserved matters are powers that have not been transferred to the devolved Assembly but which could be at a later stage, such as policing and criminal justice.

³ Source of figures: Parliamentary Question from Jeffrey Donaldson MP to Ian Pearson: PQ3149/04 26th October 2004. These statistics, however, must be treated with caution. For example, the total non-departmental public spending shown here is £343.7. Yet the budget for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, a key quango, is £545m. Moreover, what are described here as education and library boards and health trusts can also be categorised as non-departmental public bodies.

forum, local government, is responsible for a meagre 4% of the public budget. With devolution came the opportunity for wholesale reform of a public administration system which, over time, had become ineffective and unaccountable. As Lord Glentoran (2004: 65) argued in a debate in the House of Lords: ‘I believe that the Government is now guilty to a considerable extent of maladministration in terms of waste of public money in many different areas. Northern Ireland is grossly over-administered’.

Figure 2: Public Expenditure by Sector 2004-05



Specific value-for-money concerns have been raised by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland who concluded that seven of the seventeen Northern Ireland accounts could not be given a clear audit opinion, but had to be qualified in some way (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2004). As one MP noted ‘the quality of government services in Northern Ireland too often lets down the people who are using them and who are paying for them through their taxes’ (Lidington, 2004: 9). This paints the picture of a public administration system ripe for reform which has now become a government priority. Under budget policies and priorities in Northern

Ireland for the period 2005-08 'better public services' is highlighted as a target area (Department of Finance and Personnel, 2004a). The key priorities are health, education and transport, and continuing investment in public service infrastructure. The focus of activity in these areas includes reducing hospital waiting lists, reform of post-primary education, and the enhancement of water, roads and transport infrastructure. The review of public administration and civil service reform is seen as a key mechanism for attaining 'better public services'. The latter will involve a reduction in the number of civil servants by some 2,300 (from 32,000 staff), a more professional, better-trained service, and one which is more representative of wider society (Carmichael, 2002; Carmichael and Osborne, 2003; Department of Finance and Personnel, 2004b). It is, however, to the detail of the review of public administration that we turn our attention.

The Review of Public Administration

The review of public administration commenced in June 2002 and published its first consultation document in October 2003. A team of civil servants in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister is leading the review supported by a panel of independent experts. The original timetable envisaged an interim report in Spring 2003 and final recommendations by the end of that year. With the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly (for the fourth time) in October 2002 and reintroduction of direct rule for Westminster, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and his ministers have taken over responsibility for the review.

Although attracting widespread political support and seen as a necessary component in delivering the benefits of devolution, two aspects of the review attracted criticism at the outset. In the first instance the 11 civil service departments were excluded from remit of the review on the grounds that this could be used to renegotiate the Belfast Agreement 'by the back door' since the power sharing executive was predicated on the four main political parties holding ministerial portfolios (Wilson, 2001). Any proposals by opponents of the Agreement to dismantle government departments under the review of public administration could therefore have wider political consequences for a power sharing executive. The second criticism was on the review mechanisms. The fact that civil servants were to lead the review did not satisfy the need for independence. As one MLA put it in a debate in the Assembly:

Members (MLAs) know that in-house officials and the Executive's sub-committee will drive the review. The Executive will get advice and direction on some issues from the independent persons who, of course, will not attend full-time. However, the officials have a vested interest in keeping their administrative empires going, because who has ever heard of a civil servant who was anxious to reduce the number beneath him [*sic*] in the pyramid? (McCartney, 2002: 75).

He predicted, perhaps prophetically, that cutbacks would be made in both the number and functions of the 26 district councils and this would divert attention away from the Assembly where 108 members would continue to exist alongside 11 government departments and the 'huge burden of administrative costs' involved.

The review covers over 140 organisations within the public sector: 18 government agencies; 26 district councils; and 99 public bodies on which 2,065 public appointees sit (OFMDFM, 2004a). The focus of the work is 'on the major public services which have most impact on citizens, and the organisations which deliver them' (OFMDFM, 2003: 8). This seems at odds with the exclusion of 11 core civil service departments with responsibility for some 40% of public spending. In seeking to 'establish the optimum arrangements for public administration in Northern Ireland' the terms of reference of the review required any proposals to satisfy the following characteristics: democratic accountability; community responsiveness and partnership working; cross-community concerns; equality and human rights; subsidiary; quality of service; co-ordination and integration of services; scope of the public sector; efficiency and effectiveness; and innovation and business organisation (OFMDFM, 2003: 13).

The first consultation document set out 5 'high level' models of public administration:

1. *Status Quo*: No change to the current overall structure of public administration.
2. *Centralised*: All major public services would be delivered directly by government departments.
3. *Regional and sub-regional public bodies*: Public services would be delivered by a range of public bodies operating either regionally or sub regionally.
4. *Reformed status quo with enhanced local government*: The retention of the main features of the existing system but with local government given new responsibilities.
5. *Strong local government*: Major public services would be the responsibility of a smaller number of new councils.

(Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2003: 25-29)

The consultation period closed in February 2004 and 174 responses were received.

The key messages from respondents were:

- There was almost unanimous support for the need for change and a widespread demand for early action.
- Quality of public services was seen as the most important characteristic against which any new system should be measured.
- There was widespread consensus on the need for fewer public bodies, with more collaboration and less fragmentation.
- Of the five high-level models, there was a preference for either enhanced or strong local government, with fewer quangos (Pearson, 2004a).

The review team used the feedback from the first consultation paper to engage with local political parties in the absence of a return to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Northern Ireland Office Minister, Ian Pearson, pre-empted the launch of a second consultation paper by announcing his own views on the final reform model:

I envisage the Assembly with departments sitting at regional level with responsibility for policy, strategic planning, setting standards and monitoring performance. At local level, larger more powerful councils could have responsibilities for an increased range of functions... I will also be examining the scope for significant reductions in the number of public bodies, in particular, the administrative structures around health and education (Pearson, 2004b: 1).

Minister Pearson called for the formation of between 5 to 8 local councils to replace the existing 26 local authorities. The political backlash came swiftly. Local councillors viewed this proposal as an attack on local democracy and a portent that further consultation would be a facade. Minister Pearson sought a compromise and assured local politicians that his mind was not yet made up.

The review team published a final consultation document *The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland* in March 2005 (OFMDFM, 2005a) in which the Direct Rule Minister heralds the proposals as a ‘further important step in creating a modern, citizen-centred, high quality system of public administration’ where ‘improving the quality of public services lies at the heart of any new model’ (Pearson, 2005a: 1). The final consultation based reforms on a two tier model of public administration. The first tier would be a regional tier encompassing the Assembly, government departments, and regional authorities, the focus of which would be policy

development, setting standards and delivering regional services. The second tier, a sub-regional tier, would encompass organisations that ideally operate within common boundaries to include councils, health bodies, sub-regional bodies and delivery units of regional bodies. The model assumed delivery at the sub-regional tier unless economies of scale (or other factors) dictated delivery on a regional basis (see figure 3).

In terms of specific sectors, three options were proposed for local government based on configurations of 7, 11 and 15 councils. These options were as a direct result of political compromise between the minister and political parties. The minister and the review team favour seven councils as ‘optimal for service delivery purposes’. This would result in local councils with populations of between 165, 000 and 390,000. The seven council ‘solution’ would allow for common boundaries with regional/sub-regional services. The 15 council option originated from local politicians as a reaction to what they perceived as the minister’s attempt to radically cut the number of district councils. This option was based on the current 18 Westminster constituencies (with Belfast reduced from 4 constituencies to 1).

In the health sector, the review team recommends the replacement of the four existing health and social services boards and 18 of the 19 Trusts (the Ambulance Trust would remain) with either five or seven sub-regional health agencies. The reviewers favour five agencies which would allow for a full range of health services (including acute hospital services), but to benefit from co-terminous boundaries, if seven councils were agreed, they would move to seven health agencies. In addition, the existing six regional health bodies⁴ would be reduced to four, and a regional forum established to advise on the development of regional services and the work of agencies. The current four health and social services councils that represent the views of consumers would be replaced by one regional body.

⁴ The main regional service delivery bodies include: the Central Services Agency; the Health Promotion Agency; the Blood Transfusion Agency; the Medical Physics Agency; the Guardian Ad Litem Agency; and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service.

TWO-TIER MODEL OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

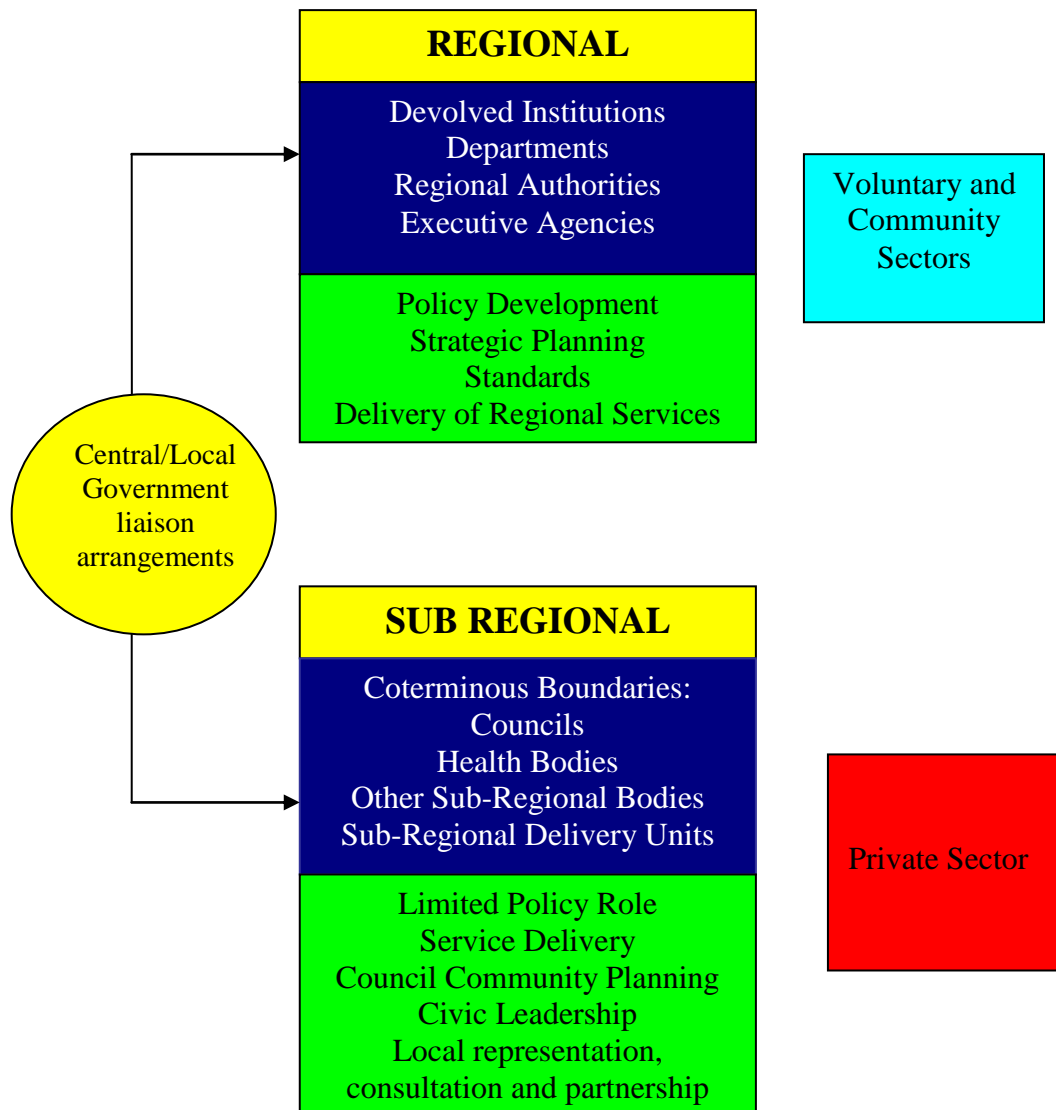


Figure 3: Source Review of Public Administration
(OFMDFM, 2005a: 22)

In education, the Department of Education would continue to be responsible for the development and implementation of education policy and strategy, monitoring standards and allocation of resources. The functions in support of education (recruitment, employment and payment of teachers, school library service, transport, admissions, raising standards) would be brought together in a new education services

body replacing the five existing education and library boards, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (Irish medium schools body), Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and the Education Staff Commission. A second new education body would be formed to bring together existing professional support services (curriculum development, examinations and assessment, in-service training, procurement of support services).

The review team also considered quangos and executive agencies. In terms of quangos, two options are on offer. The first is that non-departmental public bodies should be abolished and their functions transferred to central or local government, the voluntary and community sectors or the private sector. The second option, favoured by the reviewers, is that public bodies should continue to exist but every effort should be made to improve their accountability. This would involve a review of all quangos, a reduction in their number and increased accountability arrangements. In terms of executive agencies, the reviewers concluded that in the absence of strong views expressed on their future, decisions should be left to a returning Executive and Assembly.

Evaluating the Review

A number of observations are possible on the review of public administration thus far. It is clear that the approach adopted by the reviewers, despite claims that improvements to service quality remain central to its outcome, is fundamentally structural. It is also clear that the civil servant reviewers are highly sensitive to local political reactions to their proposals, hence the major backtracking on initial plans for reducing councils to a optimal model of 7 local authorities. Assertions that the reviewers 'envisage local government as the bedrock of a reformed and streamlined system of public administration' ring hollow when their proposals for new councils amount to little more than tinkering at the margins in the form of limited additional/enhanced powers. The key thrust of their work so far is to reduce the number of public organisations to agreed common boundaries, not in itself a guarantee of service improvement, but for them a quantifiable measure of 'success'.

This can be seen most clearly in their efforts to resist the replacement of a unitary (but relatively powerless) system of local government with a two-tier alternative. Local politicians vehemently objected to the loss of local identity in the move to a 7 council model. The response from the reviewers came in the form of a sop - ‘civic councils’ whose role would be ‘to consult locally, feed views into the main councils, and undertake assigned responsibilities on their behalf’ (OFMDFM, 2005a: 40). These smack of talking shops without even a budget for service delivery. Civil servants on the review team underestimated the affinity with, or involvement in, local government by political parties with whom they have consulted (in the absence of the Assembly). The reviewers’ argument that what local government lacks in additional functional responsibilities will somehow be compensated by a proposed role for councils in community planning, is equally unconvincing. If, as suggested, councils sit at the heart of a community planning model with health, policing, housing, and education providers, their functional insignificance vis-à-vis other public sector stakeholders must make their role of leading local service planning problematic, if not impossible. Local politicians are, however, pressing for legislative powers to hold partners accountable for commitments they sign up to in the community plan.

Consideration of the options for 7, 11 or 15 councils was informed by the rather crude, if easily determined, political profile of existing parliamentary boundaries read-across to a reorganised local government. The territorial political calculus has, it seems, been a much more significant determinant than public service considerations. This could serve to reinforce existing voting habits in local government which currently reflect tribal politics and ignore councils’ performance in the delivery of public services. Although in opting for certainty in the number of reorganised councils which political parties could control, there were consequences for the future functions of local government. The consultation document pointed out:

In their discussions with the review team, the political parties acknowledged the need to strike a balance between maintaining strong local identity and councils operating at a size and scale enough to facilitate the efficient and effective delivery of an enhanced range of services (OFMDFM, 2005a: 25).

In short, the larger the number of councils, the less likelihood of them securing major functions. What is on offer by the review team is hailed as ‘strong local government’. In reality, it is still a rather emasculated tier whose expenditure in delivering the

proposed new functions (see table 2) will amount to no more than 10% of the public purse⁵.

Table 2: Proposed New Local Government Functions

(Source: OFMDFM, 2005a: 30)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Planning ▪ Conservation of natural and built heritage ▪ Local economic development ▪ Tourism ▪ Urban and rural regeneration ▪ Rural development ▪ Future European programmes ▪ Environmental services ▪ Applications of building regulations ▪ Community planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Environmental health ▪ Leisure and recreation ▪ Arts and culture ▪ Community development ▪ Community relations ▪ Emergency planning ▪ Other services carried out in partnership with or on behalf of other bodies ▪ Maintenance of the public realm⁶
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What is also disappointing are the review’s suggestions on quangos and government agencies. Having waited some 3 years for the outcomes of the consultation processes, it seems inadequate to suggest that there should be yet another review of quangos. If one considers the emphasis placed on local government reorganisation in the review of public administration and the almost cursory examination of quangos, and even less attention to executive agencies, this reinforces the view (compounded by media reporting) that it has become a review of **local government**. Considering also that one such quango, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, has an annual budget of £545m (about one and half times the budget of all 26 local councils), the case is conclusive. The review excludes central government departments (by design), and is skewed towards local government and away from government agencies, an exercise in producer capture by civil servant reviewers. The fact that no government department or executive agency even responded to the first consultation document supports the notion that they did not see the review as relevant to their *raison d’être*. This is all the more surprising when their record of delivering public services is examined. If

⁵ The Chief Operating Officer (or most senior civil servant) of the Review Team, Greg McConnell, claims that local government expenditure under the new councils could equate to £800m, approximately twice the size of the existing budget and around 10% of the public purse.

⁶ The RPA consultation document refers to ‘public realm’ aspects of roads as functions which include: the provision and maintenance of street lighting, management of off-street car parks, grass cutting and weed spraying, maintenance of amenity areas, gully emptying, pedestrian zone permits, permitting local events to be held on roads and salting of footways.

improving quality of public services lies at the heart of the review, those outside its remit, and those within which are receiving least attention, have a clear case to answer on these grounds alone.

Evidence on the performance of quangos and executive agencies is far from impressive. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (the largest quango outside of health and education boards and trusts) and its parent department (Department for Social Development) were severely criticised by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) for their failure to get to grips over a long period with the homelessness problem. The PAC report noted that planning for the provision of homelessness was inadequate and the Housing Executive took 14 years to develop its first formal homelessness strategy. This, the PAC concluded, ‘shows a disturbing degree of complacency about meeting its statutory duty towards some of the most vulnerable members of society’ (PAC, 2004a: 1). Two of the largest education quangos, the Belfast and South Eastern Education and Library Boards, were the subject of a statutory inquiry set up by NIO Minister Barry Gardiner as a result of a substantial overspend in 2003-04 (£11.4m and £21.4m respectively). The report uncovered serious failings in the execution of responsibilities within both boards. Their chief executives were found to be in ‘very serious breach’ of their responsibilities and, as a result, their accounting officer status was put on probationary basis until June 2006 (Department of Education: Jack Report, 2005). One political party’s education spokesperson said of the report: ‘it is so damning that the public will rightly question why more money should be made available to quangos (a reference to education boards’ calls for increased resources) which can’t manage the money they already have’ (Wilson, 2005: 1).

A similar picture emerges in considering executive agencies. The two largest agencies, the Roads Service and the Water Service, both in the Department for Regional Development were lambasted by the Public Accounts Committee for ‘disgracefully high’ levels of sickness absence costing over £2m per year in direct costs. The Accounting Officer could give no explanation for the widespread failure to apply procedures and had not considered the possibility of a wider systemic malaise in other areas of management. The report was stinging in its conclusions:

We find it totally unacceptable that taxpayers should be expected to fund the disgraceful level of absence which has allowed to build up in the Roads and Water Services. We are also very critical of management who failed to implement their own procedures and did little or nothing to address the problem until it became the subject of a report to Parliament (PAC, 2004b: 41)

The two executive agencies in the Department for Social Development, the Social Security and Child Support Agency, were similarly indicted. The Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland (C&AG) was unable to form an opinion on the financial statement of the department for two consecutive years (2001 - 03). The Social Security Agency had estimated losses of £121 million in Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance, Disability Living Allowance and Housing Benefit as a result of errors by officials and customers, and fraudulent benefits claims. These services have been qualified by auditors and reported on for a number of years. The C&AG similarly qualified his opinion on the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency for the ninth consecutive year due to overpayments of maintenance by non-resident parents, and inaccurate assessments of maintenance which led to significant errors in amounts owed to non-resident parents (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2004).

What these examples highlight is that the organisations which the review of public administration has paid least attention to, have been those most severely criticised for the management and stewardship of public funds. As one member of the Public Accounts Committee put it: 'every time we examine anything in Northern Ireland, it always seems to be shockingly lax' (Davidson, 2004: Q35). The review of public administration may well be seen as part of a wider policy agenda in Northern Ireland for 'better public services' as outlined in the Government's priorities and budget 2005-08, but a structural reconfiguration of institutions with a partial focus will not, of itself, improve services to the public, its professed aim. In a debate in the Northern Ireland Grand Committee, one MP made this point more succinctly: 'it is not only the review of public administration that is relevant when we are talking about the quality of services. The way in which government in Northern Ireland is supervised and managed can affect the quality that the end-user receives' (Lidington: 2004: 10). Northern Ireland also appears to have eschewed the modernising public services agenda in the rest of the United Kingdom (*Modernising Government*, 1999; *Principles into Practice*, 2002; *Leading from the Front*, 2003; *Putting People at the Heart of Public Services*, 2004). The Northern Ireland Civil Service instead argues for 'a

reform agenda appropriate to the Northern Ireland context' comprising: specific sectoral reforms (on acute hospitals, post-primary education, public transport); joined-up delivery (in welfare reform, neighbourhood renewal, investing in health); responsive government; structural changes (review of public administration); funding and financing public services (water and rating reform); and improving public sector capability (civil service training/reform) (Department of Finance and Personnel, 2004b). Yet none of these initiatives appear to be integrated. The review of public administration is a structural reform being conducted in isolation from ongoing sectoral reforms.

All the Northern Ireland political parties broadly welcomed the review (the United Kingdom Unionist Party, notwithstanding), albeit perhaps for different motives. Whilst all accepted the need to streamline cumbersome administrative arrangements, create more accountable structures and remove the democratic deficit, the DUP, in particular, saw it as an opportunity to reduce the number of government departments and hence the size of the power-sharing Executive. With devolution in cold storage, political parties engage in bilaterals with Lord Rooker (RPA Minister of State) on the outcomes of the review. These meetings have tended to focus on the likely number of local councils to emerge. So far there has been little agreement on this as individual councillors exert pressure on their parties to back (different) options which will preserve their local authorities. Pressure is building however across political parties against decisions on such wholesale reforms being taken by an 'outsider' (Direct Rule Minister). Thus far, this has created no greater momentum towards the restoration of devolution. IRA evidence that violence has ended and guns have been destroyed easily eclipse administrative reform priorities.

Bureau-Shuffling?

What are the likely outcomes of the ongoing review of public administration, how are these being shaped, and will they result in higher quality public services? Returning to the work of Pollitt & Bouckaert (2000) and Bevir *at al* (2003) proves useful in structuring our response to this question. The three key influences on the outcomes of the review could be described as: socio-economic context; existing political and

administrative systems; and the role of elite decision makers. We consider each in turn.

(a) Socio-economic context

The recent performance of the Northern Ireland economy has been favourable. It has grown at the same rate as the UK economy in 2004 (real GDP growth of 3%) and is predicted to grow faster than the rest of the UK in 2005 (3% and 2.6% respectively). The Northern Ireland labour market is performing well even though manufacturing employment has continued a downward trend. The unemployment rate (at April 2005) is 4.8% (equal to the UK) although its economic activity rate was the lowest of all UK regions (72.1% in NI, and 78.8% in the UK) (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, 2005a). One of the problems however is that the public sector is much more important compared to the rest of the United Kingdom. The Northern Ireland public sector accounts for almost a third of employee jobs compared to 20% in the UK. One of the key challenges for Northern Ireland therefore is to reform the public sector and, at the same time, to grow the private sector. The Government's aim is to achieve this in two ways: a reformed public sector in better proportion to the size of the private sector by allocating resources that are central to creating the conditions for economic success; and, greater public private partnerships (PPPs) for the delivery of high quality public services and facilities (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, 2005b). The scale of this task cannot be underestimated both economically and politically. The public/private sector pay differentials are significant, attracting higher skilled employees into the former (Barnett and Hutchinson, 1998). As a result, cutting public sector jobs would prove politically unpopular. Despite problems with comparisons, research shows that Northern Ireland per capita public expenditure is 'well above' the UK average but equally, based on regional GDP per capita, is one of its poorest regions (Heald, 2003: 23 & 86). The devolved administration, in the absence of tax-varying powers has two main sources of income: a block grant from Westminster (determined by the Barnett formula) and proceeds from the regional rate. This means that the devolved Assembly is 'operating in the context of zero-sum budgetary politics – making decisions about how a fixed budget is allocated between competing policy priorities' (Barnett, 2001: 150).

'Squaring the circle' of a block grant and the need to improve public services has led direct rule ministers to introduce controversial proposals for water charges and a review of the domestic rating system. In terms of the former, the Water Service (Executive Agency) is to become a government owned company from April 2006. This, according to the Direct Rule Minister, will ensure an increased and sustainable level of investment in water and sewerage infrastructure without compromising other vital public services. Household water charges will be introduced based on a standard charge to contribute to the cost of maintaining connections to the water and sewerage systems, and a variable charge based on the property's capital value. The rating system is also being reformed from one based on current rental value to an assessment based on the discrete (rather than banded) capital value of every residential property. This will be introduced from April 2007. Local politicians attacked the plans as a stealth tax designed to pave the way for a huge increase in local taxation. One of them described it as householders facing a 'triple whammy' of water charges, rates rises, and a requirement to pay for private finance projects (Weir, 2004: 1). The Minister, on the other hand, argued:

The upside is that water charges will release resources for services such as health and education. The downside is that unless water charges are brought in, the Northern Ireland budget will, within a few years, be around £500 million less per year than would otherwise be the case. That would have profoundly negative impacts on public services in the region. And that is the real choice that has to be made, by Government, the political parties and the people of Northern Ireland (Pearson, 2005b: 2).

The demand for public expenditure and improvement in services is more acute because of the high levels of segregation in Northern Ireland. Statistics from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, for example, show that 70% of housing estates are more than 90% Catholic or Protestant; around 95% of children still attend separated schools; and, violence at interface communities continues to affect lives, property, business and public services (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2005b). This highly segregated society is costly in both social terms and public sector resources with duplication of facilities needed (schools, leisure centres, youth provision), all additional costs in a range of public programmes. At the same time there is a higher level of consensual poverty (defined as households lacking three or more basic necessities) in Northern Ireland compared to Great Britain and households in the bottom 30% of income distribution are made up of lone parents and

people with disabilities (Department of Finance and Personnel, 2004a). This places a greater burden on public services.

Given this socio-economic context, a key priority for Northern Ireland is to secure better value for money from devolved expenditure. As Heald argued:

An urgent priority must be rationalisation of the machinery of government, the complexity of which suggests a use of quangos to legitimise Direct Rule... With devolved government restored, there would seem to be potential savings to be secured from simplification and delayering. This is rendered more urgent by the additional number of ministerial departments created when the Executive was established. A systematic effort to streamline and simplify will be required (Heald, 2003: 87).

This becomes more pressing as the generous levels of structural funding from Europe reduces significantly, notwithstanding an extension to the Peace II programme for Northern Ireland and the border regions of Ireland aimed at reinforcing progress towards a peaceful and stable society and the promotion of reconciliation.

(b) Existing political and administrative systems

The political context within which any of the proposed reforms will take place remains highly unstable. The central assumption of the review is that ‘the new model of public administration will operate within the context of a return to devolution’ (OFMDFM, 2005a: 27). The results of both the local government elections and Westminster elections of 2005 make this prospect unlikely in the short-term⁷. With significant gains in representation for the DUP and Sinn Féin, the formation of a power-sharing Executive, a core component of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, seems a distant prospect. Direct rule ministers, on the other hand, have shown a willingness to push ahead with policy reforms, some controversial, on their watch. The abolition of the transfer test (or the 11+), introduction of variable fees in higher education, reconfiguration of acute primary and community care services across Northern Ireland, reform of the current planning system, and a comprehensive

⁷ In the 2005 Westminster elections Sinn Féin secured 5 seats, an additional MP on the previous term, with 24.3% of the vote, an increase of 2.6%. The Democratic Unionist Party won 9 seats, four additional MPs on their previous representation in Parliament, with 33.7% of the vote, an increase of 11.2%.

In the 2005 local government elections Sinn Féin now has 126 council seats (out of 582 councillors Northern Ireland wide) and the DUP has 182 seats. This represents 23.2% and 29.6% of the votes respectively.

neighbourhood renewal strategy, are but a few of the major policy issues which British ministers are taking forward. Whether the proposals coming out the review of public administration, given its importance for any future devolved government, will follow suit is unclear. Direct rule ministers have been keeping local parties informed of developments but equally have appeared to afford their views little weight, dismissing claims that proposals for large councils would adversely impact on local identity. The fact that 69 of the 108 MLAs are also local councillors (with a dual mandate) means that any outcomes of the review which are seen to negatively affect local government could unravel, should its recommendations need Assembly approval.

Within the existing political and administrative context, devolution matters, in terms of how people in Northern Ireland perceive the delivery of public services. A public attitudes (probability) survey of 1,800 people⁸ posed two questions by way of comparison:

- With devolution, many areas of government in Northern Ireland came under the control of the Assembly. Can you tell us whether you think education, health and the economy, respectively, got better under the last Assembly, got worse, or stayed the same?
- After the suspension of the last Assembly, can you tell us whether you think education, health and the economy, respectively, got better, worse, or stayed the same?

The results (see appendix 1) show a significant improvement in education and the economy and no change in health provision under devolved government. The fact that Northern Ireland has the longest waiting lists in the UK even though it enjoys a higher per capita spend on health than England, may well explain the latter. But the public perceive services improving under devolved arrangements. This can be understood in part by their access to local ministers as opposed to absentee direct rule ministers some of whom spend less than one-third of their time in Northern Ireland, direct political accountability of MLAs for local decisions, and more media prominence given to debates within the Assembly. In short, public administration reforms approved by a devolved administration and implemented under the stewardship of

⁸ The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (2003) involved 1,800 face-to-face interviews from randomly selected respondents throughout Northern Ireland.

MLAs are likely to impact more positively on public services than an arms-length programme signed-off by a British Minister.

(c) The role of elite decision makers

The role played by senior civil servants is critical to the outcomes of the reform process. The reviewers are a multi-disciplinary team of civil servants assisted by a team of selected independent experts, although the former has primacy. From 1972 – 99 senior civil servants in Northern Ireland enjoyed a privileged status with limited oversight from direct rule ministers. So pre-occupied were ministers with constitutional and security matters that senior civil servants had unfettered power, large public budgets and limited democratic accountability – appearance before the Westminster PAC was fraught but infrequent. Devolution changed this. In a report compiled from interviews with senior civil servants on how they should respond to devolution, the authors noted:

Devolution has created a very different political arena. Local ministers are much more accessible to their own constituents and the NI public in general. It is therefore crucial that they are fully informed about the day-to-day business of their departments. Civil servants need to be sensitive to this and understand the importance of engaging with ministers on potential issues of public interest at an early stage... The public profile of civil servants is also more prominent particularly as the degree of scrutiny from Assembly committees, and in particular the Public Accounts Committee, is now more intense (Northern Ireland Civil Service: 2001, 24-25).

The on-off nature of devolution⁹ has not however allowed this change of culture to become embedded. Hence, senior civil servants have both by the design – government departments excluded from the review of public administration, and by default – lack of response to the consultation document, distanced themselves from any possible changes or have regulated the process. It is, for example, an open secret that the Department of Education wrote the content of the education proposals contained in the review of public administration final consultation document. Despite the inclusion of independent experts as a consultation forum for civil servants reviewers, they appear to regard their senior peers (permanent secretaries of departments) as more important to mollify than external stakeholders. Or as one MLA put it in a debate in

⁹ Devolved government in Northern Ireland is currently suspended (at the time of writing, May 2005) since October 2002. There have been four periods of devolution since the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement: 2nd December 1999 – 11th February 2000; 30th May 2000 – 10th August 2001; 12th August 2001 – 21st September 2001; and, 23rd September 2001 – 14th October 2002.

the Assembly on establishing the review: ‘if we allow the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to conduct this review, we will not get the result that people who sent us here demand and deserve’ (Close, 2002: 15). Prophetic words perhaps.

Conclusions

The professed aim of the review of public administration is, according to the Minister, improving the quality of public services. Northern Ireland, however, has adopted what Pollitt and Summa (1997) refer to as traditional restructuring or bureau shuffling. Of itself, this will not lead to an improvement in the quality of public services. The aim of the review team appears to be a significant reduction in the number of public bodies and creating common boundaries – a kind of selective administrative rationalisation which excludes core elements of the executive such as government departments, executive agencies and quangos (at least at present). Undoubtedly, there is a wider public service reform agenda to include a fundamental review of the civil service aimed at a reduction in 15% of officials by 2007/08 and several sectoral reform initiatives in health, planning, agriculture, education and economic development (OFMDFM, 2004b). These, however, are disjointed reforms with little, if any, similarity to the modernising public services agenda in the rest of the United Kingdom. This comparison, in itself, may not be important since as Pollitt and Bouckaert (2000: 18) remind us ‘reforms in any particular country will almost certainly be shaped by the local preoccupations and priorities of the politicians and private actors most concerned’ and that these local frames of reference are likely to vary considerably. The socio-economic, political and administrative context of Northern Ireland and the role played by elite actors undoubtedly influence what is currently emerging within the reform agenda.

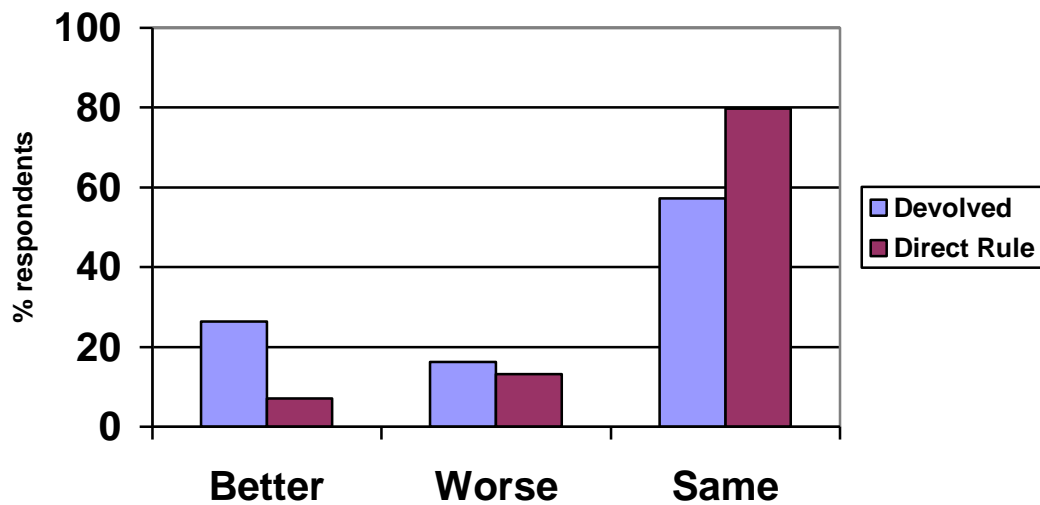
The expectations of the review of public administration are enormous. Without question the structure of public administration in Northern Ireland will benefit from this rationalisation process, if only in helping the public to manoeuvre their way around the public sector maze. The review of public administration estimates potential savings of between £150 - £235m resulting from the changes and argues that these resources will be redirected into front-line services (OFMDFM, 2005a: 119). Conveniently, this allows for limited transparency in the outcomes of the review

(savings are absorbed) and hence the most obvious expression of its 'success' is reducing the number of public bodies. Given the high visibility of local authorities, they have become an easy 'target' and one which the media latch on to as an example of radical reform in language such as 'axing councils'. What is on offer, however, under the guise of comprehensive reform and strong local government, amounts to little more than tinkering at the margins – bureau shuffling writ large.

APPENDIX 1

Public Services: Direct Rule and Devolution

Education Provision



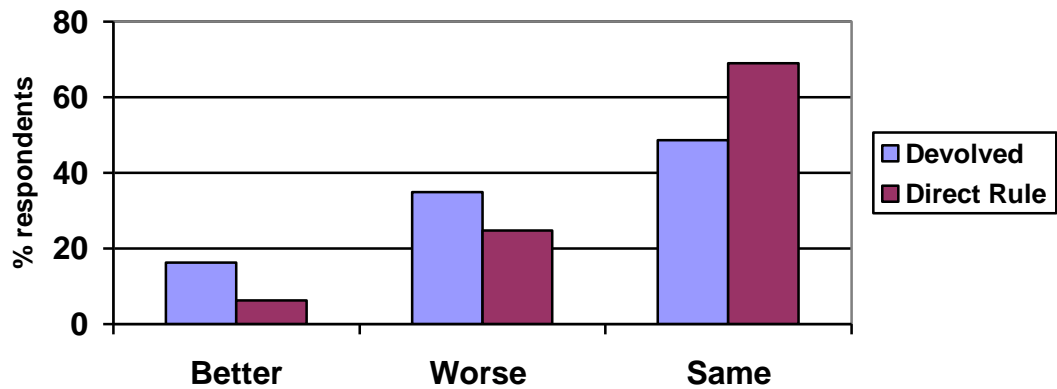
Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Signed Test¹⁰: Education

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Test Stats ^d	Direct Rule Education – Devolved Education
Direct Rule Education – Devolved Education	Negative ranks	386 ^a	294.34	113616.00	Z	-7.860 ^e
	Positive Ranks	194 ^b	282.86	54874.00	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	Ties	893 ^c				
	Total	1473				

- a. Direct rule education < devolved education
- b. Direct rule education > devolved education
- c. Devolved education = direct rule education
- d. Wilcoxon signed ranks test
- e. Based on negative ranks

¹⁰ This test takes account of the size of the differences between two sets of related scores by ranking them and then summing those with the same sign. If there are no differences between the two samples, then the number of positive signs should be similar to that of the negative ones. The tables present the mean rank and sum of ranks for the negative and positive ranks, the number of cases on which these are based, together with number of tied ranks, the test statistic Z, and its significance level.

Health Provision

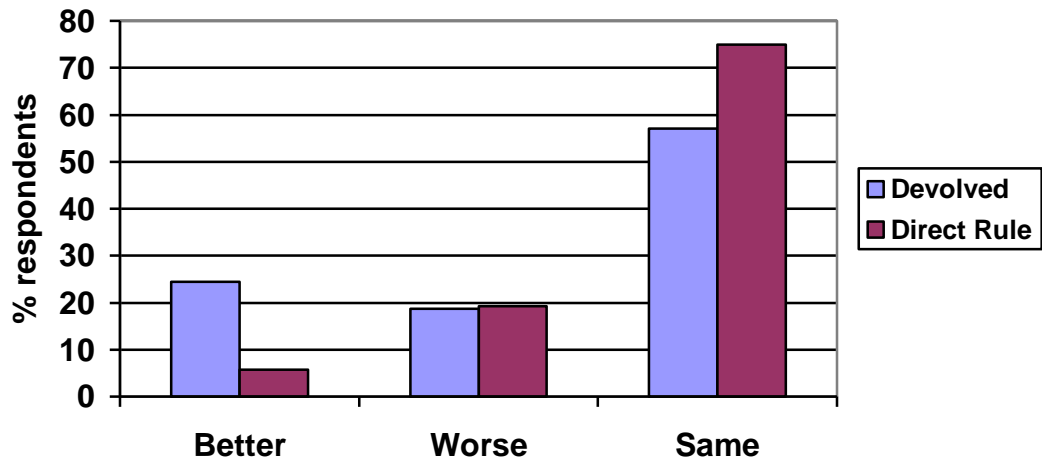


Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Signed Test: Health

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Test Stats ^d	Direct Rule Health – Devolved Health
Direct Rule Health – Devolved Health	Negative ranks	283 ^a	304.41	86148.00	Z	-.114 ^e
	Positive Ranks	305 ^b	285.30	87018.00	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.910
	Ties	986 ^c				
	Total	1574				

- a. Direct rule health < devolved health
- b. Direct rule health > devolved health
- c. Devolved health = direct rule health
- d. Wilcoxon signed ranks test
- e. Based on negative ranks

The Economy



Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Signed Test: The Economy

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Test Stats ^d	Direct Rule Economy – Devolved Economy
Direct Rule Economy – Devolved Economy	Negative ranks	370 ^a	279.24	103317.00	Z	-9.764 ^e
	Positive Ranks	162 ^b	237.41	38461.00	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	Ties	998 ^c				
	Total	1530				

- a. Direct rule economy < devolved economy
- b. Direct rule economy > devolved economy
- c. Devolved economy = direct rule economy
- d. Wilcoxon signed ranks test
- e. Based on negative ranks

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