At a recent evidence session because of a shortage of time the chair had asked me to send a response to Question 3.

Additional response is as follows.

Northern Ireland’s union with the rest of the UK

Q 3. Does the existence of a separate Northern Ireland Civil Service affect its relationship with the UK Government and other devolved administrations?

The Northern Ireland Civil Service has operated as a distinct and independent legal entity from the UK Civil Service. There are some 27,000 NI civil servants compared to some 3,000 UK Home civil servants working in Northern Ireland. The departmental structure in Northern Ireland has continued to be based on the Whitehall model of separate ministerial departments. Whereas Scotland and Wales have adopted a structure they see as more suited to devolved circumstances. With some 32 directorates in Scotland and a more integrated central administration in Wales. Apart from the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister each department has a single minister as head, but representing different parties in the power-sharing executive and senior civil servants loyalty is to the minister, not the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Department’s relationships with Whitehall departments differs according to the subject matter and ministerial influence. The relationship between the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Treasury is important. Other departments may communicate closely at times, for example on welfare reform or agriculture or some health matters. In the case of other departments there is normally little contact, for example, education, local government, environment, or employment. The other factor influencing contact is party political, in that Sinn Fein ministers may have little contact with UK ministers. The Head of the NICS attends the UK Home Civil Service Management Board with the Scottish and Welsh Heads but all have reported at times being treated as a junior partner or as separate and that devolution is not fully understood. The NICS has a tradition of pursuing a policy of parity with the Home Civil Service on issues of pay, grades, diversity, management, e-government and can share in training activities. Northern Ireland has its own Civil Service Commissioners who tend to follow UK practices. Difference in operations can emerge, on policy capacity, performance management, and public scrutiny. A key point is that the NICS does not owe any loyalty or accountability to the UK Home Civil Service and as a Select Committee on the Constitution report on Devolution in 2002 expressed it there was a sense of detachment or semi-detachment in the NICS. In practice the NICS has not acted to realise the full potential of its independent status.

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