Currently as I write there is no government within Northern Ireland. The government at Westminster keeps its distance in order to ensure that the displeasure of Irish Nationalist and Republicans does not manifest itself in violence. Government is left to bureaucrats and technocrats who in the recent past have exhibited a degree of incompetence that would not be acceptable within mainland GB. In effect within the next few months, unless NI politicians can cobble up a political deal to restore short-term devolved government within Northern Ireland, NI will be under a direct rule regime. Any such deal however will only be short term and any future failings at Stormont will increase political instability and pose a threat to the Union.

The previous and current political impasse between Nationalist and Unionists is one that will not be resolved. Any temporary sticking plaster will, in the future come unstuck as irreconcilable differences around; policing, parades, cultural identities, language, the historical past, legacy issues and a secure future will manifest themselves once again. Recent studies of NI electoral results show a greater polarisation between Nationalist and Unionists, the only saving grace is that increasingly well educated, middle-class Catholics are coming to the conclusion that they have a safer, more financially secure future within the United Kingdom. More Protestant and Catholic school children are being educated in integrated schools but the two communities (especially the Protestant community) prefer to live in segregated housing neighbourhoods for fear of any diminution of their cultural heritage.

I have recently brought to the attention of the NI Select committee failings within NI’s University System. I have demonstrated that S.75 screening and monitoring failings by government agencies (the Equality Commission and the (DfE) and elite institutions since 1999 have resulted in large amounts of tax-payer’s money being spend without any equality accountability measures in place. NI universities have been handing out state funds for PhD scholarships to students who have no research background, hence the high level of PhD ‘failures’. The RHI scandal illustrates the inefficiency of NI government departments and political decision making taken at the local level. Recent disclosures about overpayments to NI farmers between 2007 and 2013 illustrates the incompetence of the Department of Agriculture. The list of local government departmental incompetence is staggering.

The theory and logic behind New Labours 1998 devolutionary experiment was sound. Devolution has worked well within Scotland and Wales and should work well within the English regions. However, NI is seriously over-governed at all levels of government. The local administration at Stormont is a failed entity, MLAs are of limited ability and their decision making on major policy areas is questionable. With the UK removing itself from the EU, the opportunity exists to increase good
governance within NI by removing the devolved Parliament and Executive at Stormont and resorting powers back to central government and thereby ensuring a more workable and permanent form of Union.

This submission suggests that both Nationalist and Unionist communities are frustrated by the incompetence of local government departments and local politicians. Moreover, NI is an entirely different state to that of 1972 when Direct Rule was first imposed. The Catholic / Nationalist community are an empowered community and have in many sectors gained equality with Protestants / Unionists. In the education and university sector Catholics / Nationalists have surpassed Protestants / unionists in numbers and achievements. Catholics have access to employment opportunities that surpasses Protestants because of their superior academic achievements. Within the legal profession, Catholic lawyers are dominating civil and criminal law and within government departments and health sectors Catholics have parity with Protestants. Direct Rule holds not threat to Catholics such as West Belfast man Stephen McCarthy who now is a UUP councillor and a firm supported of the Union.

With the end of local Ministers controlling local government departments, opportunities exist for NI’s MPs at Westminster to be appointed as Ministers, Under-Secretaries and ‘Advisers’ to a smaller number of NI government departments. It should be a legal requirement that any NI Government department has within it at least one NI MP sitting on the Ministerial team. Any reconfiguration of the NI government departments should also devolve down increased powers to NI’s local authorities. This localism would mirror some of the devolved powers historically provided to English local authorities. Expertise should populate NI’s local authorities and these authorities (and their expertise) should be held increasingly to account by the electorate, perhaps in the way American state officials are periodically held to account. In effect an extension of Cameron’s Localism Act could be envisaged working within NI and working within a Westminster (rather than a Stormont) model of government. Any such imagining would I suggest, increase stability within Northern Ireland, resolve issues of departmental incompetence and importantly from a Unionist perspective, help secure the Union of GB and NI.

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