

Towards greater accountability

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It is often easier in life to identify and agree that a problem exists than to provide a solution.

During the past year politicians and the business community have been meeting, which has resulted in a growing awareness of each other's problems. It is agreed that political stability and greater accountability are required.

There have been some improvements in accountability, via parliament. A Select Committee for Northern Ireland enables MPs to examine and report on aspects of government in Northern Ireland.

This accountability will be improved further by strengthening the powers of the already existing Northern Ireland Grand Committee. The latter committee, comprising all Northern Ireland's MPs plus up to 25 other MPs, will be able to scrutinise both proposed legislation and the workings of government.

This scrutiny function is important. Recently, Baroness Denton stated that she was pleased that her officials had reassured the Forum "concerning the action that is being taken to protect essential training and employment services." The Forum was not at all reassured as to the Government's action.

The minister declined an invitation to discuss the matter further: a well -functioning Grand Committee could ensure this greater accountability.

It is not enough, however, to scrutinise decisions after they have been taken; an input to the decision-making process is also urgently required.

To this end, there should be an informed but structured relationship between the Government and local politicians. On economic matters, this process should include the main business organisations - a partnership between local politicians and business in contributing to policy formulation.

Given active facilitation by Government, this could provide a valued input to the decision-making process in such areas as strategic planning and prioritising of spending.

These proposals are not designed to replace the talks process aimed at finding a lasting solution. Rather they are aimed at making some progress, where it is possible, towards stable government. They are not a form of integration and away from devolution, but are simply aimed at improving the level of accountability and the decision-making process.

Nor do these proposals exclude the North/South dimension. I welcome North/South economic co-operation on grounds of commercial viability and practicability.

However, it does not seem possible at present to find a widely acceptable solution to the problems of our divided society.

Until such time as principles can be agreed which balances majority rights and secure borders with minority rights and democratic inclusion there will be little progress in the talks.

In the meantime progress in improving the governing of Northern Ireland can and must be made.

I ask the business community to urge Government to facilitate an improvement in accountability and the decision-making process. This would be both politically inclusive and also encourage a normalising of a full co- operative relationship within this island. It would meet some of the immediate needs of the business community, provide a fair deal for both communities and give a basis upon which to build lasting stability.

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