

POLITICS FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Beyond constant crisis

November 2026

SDLP

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Executive Summary

Our democracy is facing significant challenges.

Almost three decades after the Good Friday Agreement, our political institutions remain fragile, public trust in government is weak, and our politics continues to struggle to move beyond the divisions of the past.

The institutions may be standing, but that should not be confused with a healthy or functioning democracy.

More than two and a half years after restoration, the Executive has so far failed to agree a Budget, despite the enormous pressures facing our public services. The current mandate has also been characterised by repeated attempts to remove Ministers from office, with Executive parties increasingly directing their energies towards disputes with one another rather than the collective responsibilities of government.

Meanwhile, Northern Ireland is experiencing a major crisis of democratic confidence. Research by Carnegie UK has found that democratic wellbeing here is the lowest of any UK jurisdiction, with almost half of respondents reporting low trust in the Executive.

The events at Garvaghy Road have exposed another dimension to our politics. Almost thirty years after the Good Friday Agreement, its re-emergence has demonstrated how much hurt and mistrust remain beneath the surface of our society. How quickly old divisions can re-emerge, and how easily our politics can become consumed by the conflicts of the past.

These crises may appear distinct, but they are related. We have established institutions capable of accommodating our divisions, but have struggled to develop the political culture and collective purpose needed to move beyond them. Invariably, parties enter government without agreement on what they intend to achieve together. Weak delivery then erodes confidence in politics, while elections continue to revolve around communal representation rather than competing programmes for government.

The Good Friday Agreement established the foundations for peace, partnership, equality and democratic government. But peace was always only meant to be the beginning. The original political settlement was necessarily focused on ending conflict, protecting competing identities and ensuring that power could be shared.

The next stage of our politics requires a new social contract based on prioritising not simply partisan interest: one built on true partnership, but capable of rebuilding public trust, democratic accountability and a shared programme of progress.

For the SDLP, this is an essential part of building the case for a New Ireland.

An ambition to build a New Ireland will be best enabled by a willingness to demonstrate that a different kind of politics is possible today. If we cannot transform failing public services, resolve our infrastructure challenges or improve the institutions we already have, it becomes harder to convince people that we have the capacity to manage the much greater challenge of building a new state.

Reforming Northern Ireland's institutions is not an alternative to preparing for constitutional change. It is part of demonstrating the political leadership, capacity for cooperation and commitment to effective government upon which a new constitutional future would depend.

That requires us to change the lens through which we look at the process of reform. It should not be an isolated moment in time, negotiated in response to the latest political crisis or institutional collapse. It should be a continuous process of improving government, strengthening democratic accountability and allowing our institutions to evolve alongside the society they serve.

That ambition cannot be confined to Stormont. Rebuilding trust in democracy also requires us to examine how power is shared more widely across society, giving people and communities greater influence over the decisions, resources and services which shape their futures.

The SDLP proposes three connected stages of reform: immediate legislative changes; a structured examination of further reforms during the next mandate; and an open, longer-term debate about the evolution of power-sharing.

These should not be viewed as three separate exercises, nor a fixed blueprint for the future. They represent different stages in a continuing process of democratic development.

The British and Irish Governments both have an important role in supporting that process. Their engagement should not be confined to periods of institutional collapse and restoration.

Our immediate task is to make the institutions work better. Our longer-term ambition must be to build a politics capable of earning the trust of the people it serves.



The SDLP believes we can build better politics:

- **In the short term**, with four modest, targeted changes to reinforce partnership at the top of government, protect the Assembly from one-party obstruction and remove additional Executive veto mechanisms.
- **In the medium term**, through a wider examination of how our institutions could operate more effectively, including stronger democratic accountability, an enhanced role for the Official Opposition, a greater focus on Programme for Government outcomes at Executive formation and greater local democratic power. We also propose the relocation of the Northern Ireland Assembly from Stormont to a modern, accessible location in central Belfast, bringing democratic decision-making closer to the people it serves.
- **In the long term**, through consideration of how Northern Ireland can move towards a more normalised democracy, where political competition is increasingly shaped by competing programmes for government.

A growing democratic deficit

The Good Friday Agreement transformed Northern Ireland. It brought an end to decades of conflict and established a democratic framework based on power-sharing, consent, equality and mutual respect.

It was intended to create the conditions in which political stability could support economic progress, stronger public services, greater opportunity and deeper reconciliation. Almost three decades later, too much of that potential remains unrealised.

We have experienced repeated periods without functioning devolved government. Following the 2022 Assembly election, political disagreement prevented the Assembly itself from carrying out its basic democratic functions. Since restoration in February 2024, the problem has increasingly been one of a lack of delivery.

The Executive has been unable to agree a Budget, major decisions have been delayed and collective government has remained almost non-existent. This is taking place while our health service faces enormous pressures, wastewater infrastructure constrains economic development and housebuilding, and our education system struggles to respond to the needs of children and young people.

These are not challenges which can be resolved by any one party. They require a functioning Executive capable of establishing shared priorities, taking difficult decisions and accepting collective responsibility for delivering them.

For those of us who believe in a New Ireland, the failure to deliver in the here and now raises difficult questions. Particularly, how can we inspire confidence in our ability to undertake a project as complex as constitutional change when our politics struggles to secure progress on some of the biggest challenges facing society today?

The argument that constitutional change will automatically resolve the weaknesses of our political culture or the difficulties faced by power sharing carries little weight. There is need to demonstrate, through the decisions we take now, that a more effective form of politics is possible – in doing so making the case for constitutional change.

And yet, the current mandate has been characterised by repeated no-confidence and exclusion motions directed at Executive Ministers. The ability to challenge Ministers is an essential feature of democratic accountability.

Beyond this, there is a deeper problem for our democracy. Mandatory coalition can make it difficult for voters to distinguish between the parties responsible for government decisions and those offering an alternative. Political parties can exercise the responsibilities of government while distancing themselves from its collective failures.

Responsibility becomes blurred, accountability is weakened and elections too often become contests over communal representation rather than competing programmes for government. The result is a growing disconnect between the institutions and the people they are supposed to serve.



The undone work of reconciliation

The events at Garvaghy Road have exposed another weakness in our political settlement.

The re-emergence of the dispute has demonstrated the persistence of hurt, mistrust and division almost three decades after the Good Friday Agreement. It has shown how quickly old disputes can return to the centre of political life, and how fragile relationships remain in communities where the legacy of conflict has not been adequately addressed.

The immediate issues surrounding Garvaghy Road have their own history and require their own resolution. But they point to a wider, uncomfortable truth. The institutions established under the Agreement were designed to accommodate competing identities and manage political division. They were also intended to provide the foundations upon which a more reconciled society could develop.

That wider process has not advanced anywhere near as much as was hoped.

The inability of our political institutions to consistently build agreement around shared priorities sits alongside a continuing failure to develop the relationships and trust necessary to move beyond the conflicts of the past. These are distinct challenges, but they are connected.

A political system which repeatedly returns to communal stand-off, struggles to deliver collective government and fails to inspire public confidence is poorly equipped to drive a genuine process of reconciliation.

Institutional reform cannot deliver reconciliation on its own, and the SDLP believes that the process of building a new Ireland can be a vehicle to deliver the truest and deepest reconciliation of the traditions on this island. But that analysis does not mean we should not be prepared to examine how our current institutions can better support that wider objective.

A new social contract based on the common good

What we have now was never meant to represent the end of Northern Ireland's political progress. The Good Friday Agreement established the foundations for a new era of partnership, democratic accountability and reconciliation. The political settlement was necessarily focused on securing peace, accommodating differing identities and creating the institutions in which power could be shared.

But the promise of this was meant to extend beyond the absence of conflict. It envisaged a society in which peace would create the conditions for a politics based on working together for the common good.

The next stage of our politics should be about delivering on that objective. A new social contract must build upon peace and power-sharing, while recognising that their continued existence is not enough. It should establish clearer expectations of government: the capacity to agree priorities, make decisions, deliver public services and account for results.

At its heart should be a renewed relationship between government and the people it serves.

People should expect institutions capable of planning for the future, publishing measurable commitments and being held accountable when they fall short.

But a new social contract should also recognise that democracy cannot be something which is done to people. It must give them a more meaningful role in shaping the decisions which affect their lives, their communities and their futures.

That requires a different understanding of how power is exercised. It also requires political parties to demonstrate that cooperation around shared interests is possible.

A new social contract cannot be delivered through institutional reform alone.

It will require a shared commitment to improving public services, widening economic opportunity, strengthening reconciliation and rebuilding democratic participation. But institutional reform is an essential part of creating the conditions in which that progress can be achieved.



A continual process of reform

Institutional reform in Northern Ireland has too often been considered at moments of political crisis.

When institutions collapse, the immediate priority becomes securing their restoration. Changes to the structures of government are then negotiated as part of the process of bringing parties back into office, frequently in response to the circumstances which caused the latest breakdown.

This has contributed to an institutional framework which has evolved through successive agreements and political negotiations, rather than through a sustained process of considering how government could operate more effectively.

We need to break this cycle. Protecting power sharing does not mean freezing the institutions in time. It means ensuring they remain capable of delivering stable, accountable and effective government.

Reform should not be an isolated moment in time. It should be an ongoing responsibility of democratic government. That means regularly examining whether the institutions are delivering for the public, whether their structures encourage effective decision-making and whether the mechanisms established to protect political stability continue to operate as intended. It also means recognising that different reforms will require different approaches and take place on different timeframes.

Some changes are relatively modest and can be delivered within the current architecture. Others raise broader questions about the future of power-sharing, the relationship between government and the Opposition, and the structures which entrench tribalism within our political system.

These deserve serious consideration and their perceived complexity should not become an excuse for delaying achievable reforms. Equally, delivering immediate improvements should not be regarded as the completion of the reform agenda.

This responsibility rests first and foremost with the political parties elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly. But it also requires the active and sustained engagement of the British and Irish Governments.

Both governments played a central role in negotiating the Good Friday Agreement and have continuing responsibilities under its framework. Working together, they should help facilitate a process of reform which is sustained, inclusive and focused on improving democratic outcomes in the long term. The SDLP is proposing a phased approach, combining specific reforms which can be delivered now with a wider programme of examination, engagement and institutional development over the years ahead.



Short Term:
Strengthening the institutions

The immediate priority should be to secure agreement on three targeted reforms before the end of the current Assembly mandate.

These proposals do not require a fundamental redesign of power-sharing or a renegotiation of the Good Friday Agreement.

They represent keyhole surgery: modest changes capable of delivering significant improvements to the operation and resilience of the institutions.

Protecting the Assembly from collapse

Reversing the St Andrews veto

Equalising the title of First Minister

Preventing abuse of office

Delivering the immediate reforms

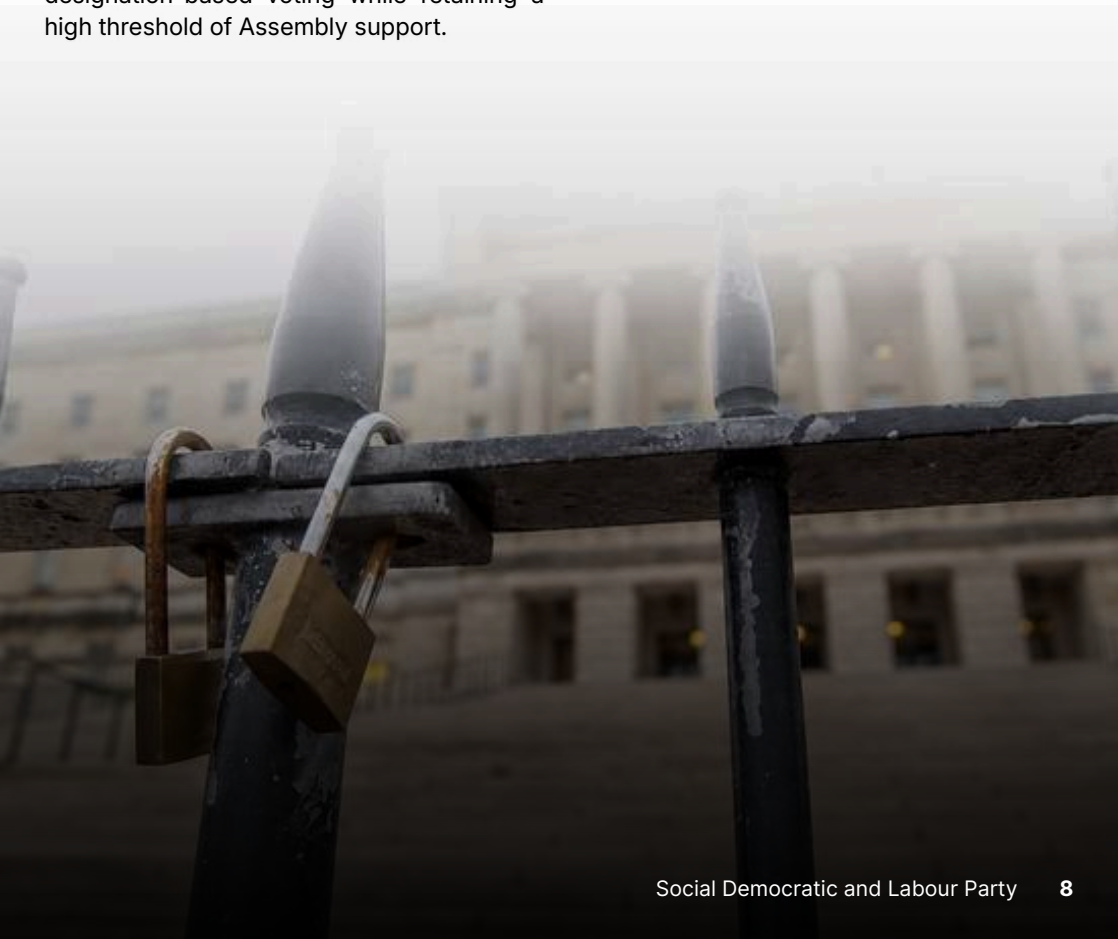
Protecting the Assembly from collapse

Whatever happens within the Executive, Northern Ireland should retain a functioning democratic legislature. Following the 2022 election, MLAs had been elected by the public but could not legislate, scrutinise government or properly represent their constituents because one party could prevent the election of a Speaker. That should never be allowed to happen again.

The SDLP proposes replacing the existing cross-community requirement for electing the Speaker with a two-thirds majority of MLAs. This would reduce the ability of a single party to block the election through designation-based voting while retaining a high threshold of Assembly support.

A two-thirds threshold would not, on its own, eliminate the possibility of deadlock. The reform process should therefore also examine a carefully designed fallback procedure, with appropriate safeguards, to ensure that the Assembly can elect a Speaker and discharge its democratic functions.

The Assembly should be capable of performing its democratic functions even where parties cannot agree on the formation or operation of an Executive.





Reversing the St Andrews veto

The St Andrews changes introduced additional requirements affecting Executive consideration and decision-making, including arrangements for significant or controversial matters and the capacity of three Ministers to require a cross-community vote. These provisions should be reviewed separately from the underlying protections for partnership and equality.

There remains a need to maintain safeguards governing how the Executive decides a matter and procedures governing whether an issue can reach the Executive agenda at all. The overriding objective should be to prevent unnecessary obstruction of collective consideration without removing legitimate protections around major decisions.

The SDLP proposes reversing additional veto mechanisms introduced at St Andrews, alongside reform of Executive agenda-setting arrangements, subject to detailed legal examination of the provisions to be amended and the protections that would remain. The purpose is to encourage negotiation, decisions and collective responsibility rather than procedural stalemate.





Equalising the title of First Minister

The offices of First Minister and deputy First Minister are already legally co-equal and exercise their functions jointly. Their titles should reflect that.

The current hierarchy of titles has increasingly distorted Assembly elections. The position of First Minister is presented as the political prize awarded to whichever community or party finishes first, despite the office carrying no greater power than that of deputy First Minister.

That creates precisely the wrong political incentive. It encourages elections to be framed around who wins and who loses, rather than which parties have the strongest programme for government or the best proposals for improving people's lives.

Renaming the offices Joint First Ministers is a modest change, but one with potentially significant consequences. It reinforces the reality that neither tradition can govern over the other and that the institutions depend upon partnership.

The titles of the offices should reflect the genuinely joint nature of their responsibilities and the principle of equality at the heart of power-sharing.

Preventing abuse of office

The ability of political parties to collapse an Executive through the resignation of a First Minister or deputy First Minister, or prevent its formation by refusing to nominate to either office, remains a significant weakness in our institutional arrangements.

The SDLP believes that no single party should have the power to collapse devolved government or prevent its continued operation through the withdrawal of its participation in these positions.

Where a party entitled to nominate to either office declines to do so, whether following an election or the resignation of a First Minister or deputy First Minister, the opportunity to nominate should pass to the next eligible party.



Delivering the immediate reforms

The British Government, working closely with the Irish Government as co-guarantors of the Agreement, should facilitate a focused and time-bound political process involving the Northern Ireland parties.

The objective should be to secure agreement on these three reforms and progress the necessary legislative changes before the end of the current Assembly mandate. There has already been extensive discussion about the weaknesses of the institutions. The immediate priority should be delivery rather than another open-ended process of diagnosis. At a time when so much debate is focused on the next collapse this is crucially important.

Medium Term:
The next stage of power sharing

These immediate reforms would address important weaknesses in the existing institutions. But they should not represent the limit of our ambition.

Over the course of the next Assembly mandate, there should be a structured process of political and civic engagement to examine how Northern Ireland's institutions could evolve towards more effective, accountable and cohesive government.

Areas for examination should include:

Executive formation agreements with clear priorities

Strengthening the Official Opposition

Ministerial accountability and collective responsibility

Appointing the Justice Minister

A statutory duty to cooperate

Bringing democracy into the heart of Belfast, and beyond

Empowering local communities



Executive formation agreements with clear priorities

The d'Hondt coalition model was developed to ensure inclusive government and provide confidence across a deeply divided society. It has played an important role in establishing and maintaining power-sharing. However, it also raises questions about collective responsibility, the coherence of government and the ability of voters to hold parties accountable for their decisions.

Too often, Executive formation has been treated as an end in itself, with parties entering government without first establishing a meaningful agreement on what they intend to achieve together.

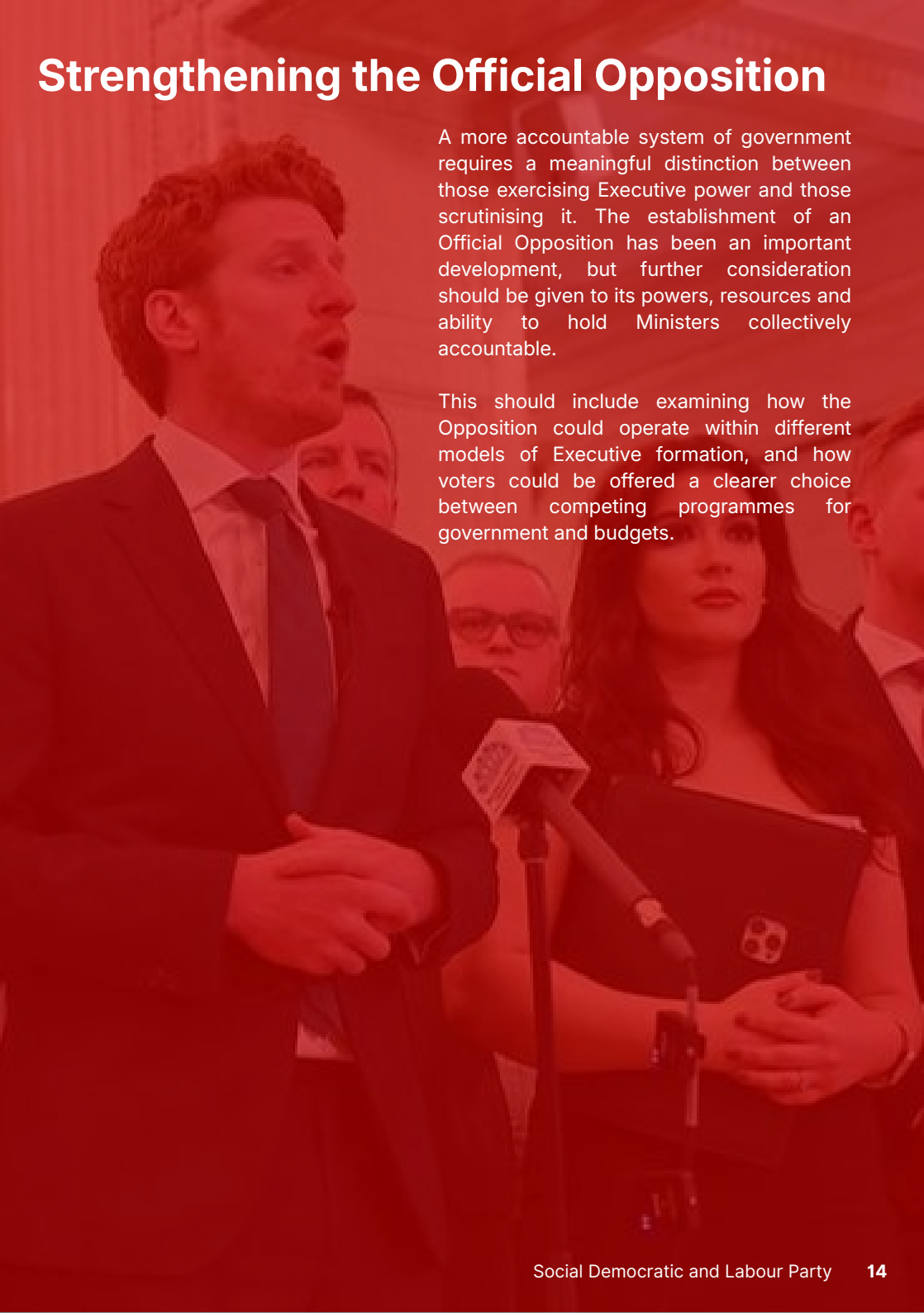
Future reforms should examine how Executive formation could be linked more closely to the negotiation of an agreed Programme for Government. This should include consideration of a defined timetable, measurable outcomes, realistic financial commitments and a clear relationship between the Programme, Budget and legislative priorities.

The objective should be to move from a system focused primarily on ensuring that parties share power, towards one which also requires them to establish a shared purpose for exercising it.

This should consider mechanisms for resolving disagreements, reporting publicly on delivery and establishing stronger commitments to collective responsibility from the outset of each mandate. Agreement on priorities must lead to coordinated action across departments, not become another procedural exercise.

The potential for alternative models of Executive formation should form part of that wider examination, rather than being its starting point. Any reform must preserve the principles of inclusive government, cross-community confidence and the protection of minority rights.

Strengthening the Official Opposition



A more accountable system of government requires a meaningful distinction between those exercising Executive power and those scrutinising it. The establishment of an Official Opposition has been an important development, but further consideration should be given to its powers, resources and ability to hold Ministers collectively accountable.

This should include examining how the Opposition could operate within different models of Executive formation, and how voters could be offered a clearer choice between competing programmes for government and budgets.



Ministerial accountability and collective responsibility

The experience of successive Executives has demonstrated the difficulties of maintaining collective responsibility within a D''Hondt coalition.

A wider review should examine how changes to the Ministerial Code, Executive procedures and accountability mechanisms could encourage more coherent government and strengthen public confidence in ministerial standards.

This should include a mechanism through which a Minister found, following an independent and fair investigative process, to have committed a serious breach of the Ministerial Code could be removed from office by a vote supported by two-thirds of Assembly Members.

Clear standards for investigation, findings, procedural fairness and the threshold for removal would be essential. A two-thirds vote would provide a meaningful sanction while requiring substantial Assembly support and reducing the risk of removal by a narrow political majority.

Appointing the Justice Minister

The appointment of the Justice Minister remains an exception to the normal arrangements for allocating ministerial offices within the Executive.

Unlike other departments, the Justice Ministry is not allocated through the d'Hondt process, but requires a separate cross-community vote in the Assembly.
While these arrangements reflected the particular sensitivities surrounding the devolution of policing and justice powers, their continued operation raises questions about whether they remain necessary.

A wider process of institutional reform should seek to normalise the operation of government, reducing exceptional arrangements where they are no longer justified. The SDLP believes that the Justice Ministry should be allocated through the same d'Hondt process as other Executive departments.

This would represent a further step towards the normalisation of devolved government, ensuring that responsibility for justice is treated on the same basis as other areas of public policy, while maintaining the wider safeguards and accountability mechanisms underpinning power-sharing.



A statutory duty to cooperate

One of the key weaknesses of the Stormont model of coalition is that Ministers can exercise significant departmental autonomy without a corresponding obligation to cooperate in delivering shared Executive priorities.

The SDLP believes that consideration should be given to introducing a statutory duty to cooperate as an amendment to the 1999 Departments Order requiring Ministers and departments to work collectively on matters which cut across departmental responsibilities.





This should include a clear obligation to cooperate in the development and delivery of an agreed Programme for Government, the preparation of a multi-year Budget and the implementation of major cross-cutting reforms.

Such a duty should be accompanied by appropriate accountability and enforcement mechanisms, ensuring that cooperation is a meaningful responsibility rather than simply an aspiration.



Bringing democracy into the heart of Belfast, and beyond

A new social contract must move beyond considerations around how power is exercised at Stormont. It must also reconsider how power is distributed across our society, and whether people have meaningful opportunities to influence the decisions which shape their communities and their futures.

For almost a century, Parliament Buildings has stood on the Stormont Estate, physically removed from the centre of Belfast and the everyday life of the city.

Stormont has become synonymous with Northern Ireland's political institutions, but also with decades of political division, institutional collapse and dysfunction. Its location, set apart from the city within an extensive estate, reinforces a sense of distance between our elected representatives and the people they serve. Even the word Stormont has become a symbol of dysfunction and a source of contempt. It is in short, both an anachronism and a source of ridicule.

Across these islands, legislatures in Dublin, London, Edinburgh and Cardiff occupy prominent central locations, closely connected to the cities around them and accessible by public transport. This place should be no different.

The SDLP believes that the Northern Ireland Assembly should be relocated from Stormont to a modern, accessible building in the centre of Belfast by the end of the next Assembly mandate. We do not believe that a new structure should be commissioned or designed, but rather propose the Assembly make use of an existing, repurposed space at modest cost, including the provision of rooms for committees and office space for Assembly and member staff. We would therefore propose to undertake a review of available publicly owned buildings.

A more accessible Assembly could make it easier for citizens, community organisations, schools and civic groups to engage directly with the democratic process. It would provide an opportunity to create a modern legislature with accessible public galleries, spaces for civic engagement, improved facilities for Assembly scrutiny and a stronger connection to the life of the city.

It would also represent a symbolic break with a political culture too often associated with institutional paralysis and division, reflecting an ambition to build a more open, confident and outward looking democracy. The SDLP believes that the Stormont Estates Order 2006 could be amended with a view to allowing increased commercial use of Parliament Buildings, either through lease of part-disposal, with proceeds directed towards the development of a new, centrally located home for the Assembly.

Safeguards would be put in place to ensure any disposal would protect the architectural and historic significance of Parliament Buildings, secure an appropriate future use and comply with the necessary legal and financial requirements. A relocation programme should be established during the first year of the next mandate, identifying a suitable city-centre site, assessing the costs and benefits of relocation and developing a fully funded delivery plan.

It is also clear that despite the small size of this region, communities outside Belfast feel distant from devolved Government. During the next mandate, we would seek to bring proceedings of the Northern Ireland Assembly, both plenary and committee, not just out of Stormont and into Belfast city centre - but into cities and towns across the region.





Empowering local communities

One of Northern Ireland's greatest strengths is the resilience of its communities. Across our towns, villages and neighbourhoods, people give their time, energy and resources to improve the places they call home.

Community organisations, schools, voluntary groups and local partnerships frequently demonstrate the cooperation and shared purpose which can be so difficult to achieve within our formal political institutions.

Yet too often, we treat that resilience as a substitute for effective government rather than an opportunity to rethink how government works. Communities are expected to respond to problems, sustain local services and fill gaps in public provision, while having limited influence over the decisions and resources which shape their futures.

People should have greater power to shape the places they call home, a meaningful stake in the resources and wealth generated around them, and greater opportunities to realise their ambitions.

This is not about retreating into local interests or weakening the responsibilities of central government. It recognises that strong communities depend upon wider cooperation, shared standards and effective public institutions.

It is about combining the benefits of collective government with greater local democratic agency. We can already see elements of this approach in practice.

The THRiVE Programme in Rathcoole and Monkstown brings together schools, parents, community organisations and public services around a shared ambition to improve opportunities for children and young people.

Rather than expecting individual organisations to address complex problems in isolation, it draws upon local knowledge, relationships and resources to pursue common objectives.
The wider question is how we can make this approach a more normal feature of government.

A new social contract should be built around both better government and more widely shared democratic power. If people are to regain confidence in politics, they need to see that government can improve their lives. But they should also have greater opportunities to influence how those improvements are achieved.

Over the next Assembly mandate, consideration should be given to:

- Greater local influence over public investment, including participatory budgeting and mechanisms through which communities can help determine local priorities and the allocation of resources.
- Strengthening community planning, examining whether councils and local partnerships have sufficient powers, resources and accountability to shape regeneration, infrastructure and service delivery.
- Community wealth and ownership, exploring opportunities for communities to benefit more directly from local economic development, including cooperative ownership models and meaningful community stakes in renewable energy projects.
- Locally shaped public services, giving communities greater influence over how regional priorities are delivered in their areas, including health transformation, regeneration and preventative services.
- Long-term local funding, examining how secure, predictable resources could support local decision-making rather than relying upon short-term funding competitions.

Long Term:
Towards a more functional democracy

The longer-term ambition should extend beyond improving the mechanics of government. It should consider how Northern Ireland's political institutions can continue to evolve alongside a society which has changed considerably since the Good Friday Agreement.

The Agreement established structures designed to accommodate deeply held constitutional differences, protect political identities and ensure that government could only operate on the basis of partnership.
Those principles remain critical - but the institutions should also be capable of supporting a society in which political cooperation increasingly develops around shared interests and competing visions for the future.

The goal should be a more normalised form of politics, where elections are increasingly contested on the basis of policy and programmes for government, where voters can hold governing parties accountable for their decisions, and where the distinction between government and Opposition is meaningful.

This also raises a longer-term question about the future of mandatory coalition. While the current model has been essential in securing power sharing and in building confidence across political traditions, frequent years of impasse raise legitimate questions of whether it is fit for purpose.

Any transition would have to preserve the fundamental principles of power-sharing, protect rights and command confidence across political traditions.

A distinction must be maintained between preventing exclusion on the basis of identity and requiring every tradition to participate in government.

Options for examination could include qualified voluntary coalition, in which government is negotiated around shared priorities but must satisfy agreed cross-community safeguards. These questions are closely connected to the longer-term role of designation within our politics.

The designation system reflects the particular circumstances in which power-sharing was established. Any consideration of its future must recognise the continuing importance of protecting identities, ensuring equality and maintaining confidence across different political traditions.

But it is legitimate to ask whether the institutions could eventually operate with less reliance on communal designation as the organising principle of political decision-making. It is equally important to examine how rights, equality and minority protections could be secured through durable democratic safeguards.

These questions must be interrogated openly through sustained political engagement and wider public discussion. The current arrangements should not be assumed to be the final stage in the development of our democracy.

Building better politics based on the common good

Northern Ireland does not need to wait for another collapse before improving its institutions. The experience of repeated interruption, weak collective decision-making and the current difficulty in agreeing a Budget demonstrates why a sustained programme of reform is needed.

The restoration of devolved government matters, but institutional survival cannot be the limit of our ambition. The test is whether government can agree priorities, deliver public services and infrastructure, exercise collective responsibility and earn public confidence.

These four targeted reforms should be pursued before the end of this mandate: equalising the titles of the First and deputy First Ministers, reforming the election of the Speaker, and addressing additional Executive veto mechanisms. Their precise legislative design must preserve partnership and appropriate safeguards. The British Government, working closely with the Irish Government, should facilitate a focused process with the Northern Ireland parties to agree and progress those changes. Reform cannot begin and end with these measures.

The next mandate should examine how an agreed Programme for Government can shape Executive formation, how Ministers can be held accountable, how the Opposition can exercise meaningful scrutiny, and whether alternative models of coalition could strengthen collective government.

Democratic renewal must also extend beyond Stormont, giving communities a greater voice in public investment and locally shaped services, with robust protections against inequality, patronage and segregation. In the longer term, Northern Ireland should be prepared to debate voluntary coalition, communal designation and the safeguards necessary for a more normalised, stable and confident democracy.

The process of building better politics is not an end in itself; it is part of building the political capacity, democratic confidence and culture of cooperation necessary to deliver meaningful change today and to make a credible case for a New Ireland.

The Good Friday Agreement gave Northern Ireland the foundations for peace and partnership. Almost thirty years later, the responsibility is to build on those foundations: to make government more effective, political accountability clearer and democratic power more widely shared.

Our ambition should not simply be to make the institutions harder to bring down. It should be to make them work better, command greater public confidence and evolve alongside the society they serve. Building better politics must be a continuing responsibility, not another negotiation undertaken only when the institutions fail.



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