

Institution: Queen's University Belfast
Unit of Assessment: 21 – Politics and International Studies
Title of case study: Shaping Institutional Reform: Northern Ireland's Assembly and Executive
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Wilford's research-based evidence to a Standing Committee of the NI Assembly (NIA) tasked to review options for the reform of both the Assembly and the NI Executive has exerted impact on several of its recommendations, including a holistic review of the NIA's committee system; the strategic redesign of the Executive, including a reduction in the number of Executive Departments; provisions for an Official Opposition; and the 'hollowing-out' of the Office of First and Deputy First Minister.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The research arose from Wilford's co-leadership of the NI devolution monitoring team established in partnership with the Constitution Unit, UCL, and funded by Leverhulme, the ESRC and several UK Government Departments from 1999 to 2009.</p> <p>This body of research was brought to bear on the NI Assembly and Executive Review Committee's (AERC) 2012/13 inquiry into:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) the effects of a reduction in the number of Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) on its operation, especially its committees; and (ii) the options for the reduction in the number of Executive Departments (Report NIA 52/11-15). <p>In addition, research-based evidence on the option of establishing a formal Opposition in the Assembly was also made available to the Committee during the second stage of its inquiry, together with research relating to community designation and the d'Hondt method of Executive formation.</p> <p>Re (i): The recommendations made to the AERC arose directly from the research which disclosed structural and operational obstacles to the efficiency with which the Committees subjected the Executive Departments to effective scrutiny (see refs 3, 4 and 5 in Section 3). Interviews conducted by Wilford with MLAs, including Committee Chairs, had also underscored their desire for behavioural change among members: i.e. their need to internalise more fully their roles as parliamentarians. The research argues that the initial design of the institutions, especially that of the Assembly, enhances the strength of party discipline, not least within and among Committees, whereas structural <i>and</i> behavioural reform would enable MLAs to act as more fully-developed parliamentarians.</p> <p>The absence of provision for an Official Opposition in the Assembly underscores the need for both individual Assembly Members, and Statutory Committees, to assert their independent-mindedness <i>vis-à-vis</i> the Executive. Engineering such behavioural change is inextricably linked to the need for structural reform of both the Assembly and the Executive in ways designed to loosen the constraints created by the 1998 model of consociationalism (see references 3, 4 and 5 in Section 3).</p> <p>Re (ii): The research also addressed the constraints associated with both the design and practice of the Executive, not least the absence of joined-up government which hampers the formulation and delivery of public policy. It identified both structural and behavioural obstacles to effective government and argued for the holistic redesign of the Executive, including the reduction in the total number of Departments, and the identification of a more strategic role for the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM).</p> <p>In sum the research led to the evidence-based view that Assembly and Executive reform should be guided by a more flexible understanding of consociationalism than that embedded in the 1998 Belfast Agreement. The implementation of the latter has produced a set of structures and behaviours that constrain the effectiveness and efficiency of the devolved institutions, both internally and in terms of their interaction. Wilford's research identifies reforms that are designed to improve institutional (and individual) performance in ways that are consistent with a more liberal form of consociational practice.</p>
3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. Entries on the Assembly and the Executive, by R Wilford in 'NI Devolution Monitoring Reports: 1999-2009', Constitution Unit, UCL (www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/research-archive/archive-projects/devolution-monitoring06-09).
2. The related near-annual series *The State of the Nations* (2000-2009), edited by Alan Trench and Robert Hazell and published by Imprint Academic.
3. R Wilford, 'NI: The Politics of Constraint', *Parliamentary Affairs* (2010) 63:1, 134-155.
4. R Wilford, 'Consociational Government: Inside the NI Executive' in R Taylor (ed.), *Consociational Theory: McGarry and O'Leary and the Northern Ireland Conflict* (2009), Routledge, 180-195.
5. R. Wilford, 'Inside Stormont: The Assembly and the Executive' in P Carmichael et al, *Devolution and Constitutional Change in Northern Ireland* (2007), Routledge, 167-185.
6. R. Wilford & R. Wilson, *A Democratic Design? The political style of the Northern Ireland Assembly* (2001), The Constitution Unit, UCL, ISBN 1903903017.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The case-study reflects one aspect of the significance of Wilford's extended research programme (see reference 1 in Section 3) on NI devolution throughout the REF cycle, most recently in relation to reform of the Assembly and the Executive which is the explicit focus of this case-study.

Re (i) in Section 2: In relation to the Assembly, Wilford proposed: the decoupling of Assembly constituencies from Westminster constituencies, as in Scotland and Wales; a reduction in its membership to, preferably, 80 MLAs (from 108 members); a full-scale review of the Assembly's Committees, including their number, size, the avoidance of both multiple committee memberships and high rates of membership turnover, and their *modus operandi*; and the designation of a number of 'Committee days' in the chamber. What linked the recommendations is Wilford's research pointing to the need to improve the efficiency of the Committees in ways that enhance their capacity to subject the Departments to more effective scrutiny.

The AERC's response to the recommendations singled out their influence in the first of its reports. Regarding the reform of the committee system, it noted:

'In particular, the Committee would highlight the written and oral evidence provided by Professor Wilford as being particularly useful in considering improvements to the effectiveness of the Assembly's Committee System'.

It continued:

Following its consideration on this area, the Committee agreed that it would be useful to share the views with the Chairpersons Liaison Group of all Assembly Chairpersons...including the need for a fundamental review of the Committee System'.

The Report was subsequently debated in the Assembly on 26 June 2012, during which former Committee Member Conall McDevitt (SDLP) stated: *'I commend his evidence in the Report to colleagues in the House'* (<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/Official-Reports/Plenary/2012/20120626.pdf>, p. 145).

A particular aspect of Wilford's impact, namely the proposed holistic review of the Assembly's committees, was also endorsed by the Assembly's two Clerk Assistants, Damien Martin and Nuala Dunwoody. As Martin states:

'Your evidence to the Committee on the operation of the Committee system helped to persuade the Committee to recommend a fundamental review of the Committee system', while Dunwoody noted, *'in the final Report the Committee linked your evidence to its recommendation that there should be a fundamental review of the committee system. We are now taking this forward under the stewardship of the Chairperson's Liaison Group'.* (Sources 1 and 2)

Dunwoody added, in respect of the proposed reduction in the number of MLAs:

'Obviously, your [research-based] evidence in relation to numbers and your considered analysis of the impact of boundary changes was important in that it provided evidence that the Committee needed for its report: however, it was your challenge as a "critical friend" that had most impact from my perspective in that it influenced members to turn

Impact case study (REF3b)

their minds to effectiveness'. (Source 1)

Relatedly, Martin observes:

'The [research-based] evidence that you provided significantly informed the development of options for reducing the number of Assembly Members and decoupling of Assembly constituencies from Westminster constituencies' (Source 2)

while Dr Gareth McGrath, Director of Clerking and Reporting observed:

'Your evidence to the Committee informed and helped shape the development of options for reducing the number of Assembly Members.' (Source 3)

John Stewart, the Director of Information and Outreach at the Assembly, echoed these testimonies:

'Your evidence helped to persuade the Committee to recommend a review of the committee system...the way you challenged Committee Members to consider how they manage committee business and conduct themselves during committee proceedings was particularly helpful. Your thoughtful analysis of the issues and role in the evidence session as a "critical friend" was well-received by the Committee.' (Source 4)

McGrath endorsed this judgement:

'Your evidence..challenged the Committee to think about recommendations which considered the effectiveness of committees. As a result of this, the Committee's report recommended that there should be a fundamental review of the committee system which I am currently overseeing in conjunction with the Chairpersons' Liaison Group.' (Source 3)

Re (ii) in Section 2: in respect of the Executive, Wilford's research stressed the need to redesign the devolved Departments in a more strategic and holistic manner. (The input on this aspect of the review is acknowledged in the Assembly Research Paper, NIAR 592-12, 4 September 2012, p. 26).

The Executive-related aspects of the AERC's inquiry were included in a second report (NIA 34/11-15, 20 November 2012) that identified 'areas of commonality' among the parties. These included agreement in principle on the restructuring and reduction in the number of Executive Departments, including the creation of a single Department of the Economy—which Wilford had proposed—and the need to reform OFMDFM, one of his key recommendations. The Committee also agreed with Wilford's recommendation to adopt a holistic approach to Executive redesign, rather than a piecemeal/incremental one.

In early 2013, the Committee began the second-leg of its review, addressing the use of d'Hondt, community designation and the enabling of an Official Opposition in the Assembly. Wilford furnished both written and oral research-based evidence to the Committee in January and February 2013. The full impact of Wilford's research-based evidence to this phase of the review is yet to be determined: for instance, the referral to the Liaison Group (comprising Committee Chairs) of Wilford's recommendation that an holistic review of Assembly committees be undertaken is underway and the report is scheduled to appear in late 2013. In the interim, Simon Hamilton MLA (now Finance Minister) acknowledged one other aspect of the research:

'I have found your own contributions and submissions to the Committee immensely useful and informative. I found the point you made in your submissions that we should carefully consider the possible need to have a threshold of a minimum number of MLAs below which they would be denied a formal Opposition role, very useful. Your evidence brought this potential issue out into the open and has been consistently debated and discussed by the Committee in subsequent presentations' (Source 5)

This matter will be debated in the context of a Private Members Bill due to be tabled in the Autumn of 2013, which includes the proposal to form an Official Opposition in the Assembly.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references).

Written evidence:

Source: 1 Letter A from Clerk Assistant, Northern Ireland Assembly

Source: 2 Letter B from Clerk Assistant, Northern Ireland Assembly

Impact case study (REF3b)

Source: 3	Letter from Director of Clerking and Reporting, Northern Ireland Assembly
Source: 4	Letter from Director of Information and Outreach, Northern Ireland Assembly
Source: 5	Letter from Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly