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Discussion paper

John Power

Head of Research and Library Services
Northern Ireland Assembly

Without apology, I'll start by saying that I'm not going to speak of the theoretical issues that may have global significance that this motion could query. Instead, I'll speak of what I do know something about – and that is the Northern Ireland experience.

What an international gathering such as this clearly communicates is that, "one size does not fit all". Nonetheless, in speaking of Northern Ireland, there may be parts of what I say that have a general relevance – if not, provide some food for thought.

The title of this motion is highly loaded and one is tempted to commit that dreadful sin of a parliamentary servant to offer a political opinion.

This motion and the question it poses tempts one to ask, "what do our politicians deserve?"

Answering such a question IS to risk expressing a political opinion – something traditional and wise public servants are loath to do. The question however is fundamentally political and to avoid the politics avoids the question that deserves an answer.

In any event – I'm not a parliamentary servant long enough to entitle myself the description of being "traditional" – and – I'm far too young to describe myself as "wise". So – I'll be foolhardy and express my "opinion" on this matter.

The media image of Northern Irish politics presents a fertile ground to describe our politicians as:

Sectarian

Bigoted

Ignorant

Locked in some bitter historic hatred

I could go on – but – I won't; because it's wrong and wrong for several reasons:

Wrong in that the media reporting of the Northern Ireland Assembly or its politics has typically been superficial, often inaccurate and lazy – reaching for stereotypes of their own creation.

Little in depth investigative professional journalism has been evident in some media reporting of the work of the Assembly. In part, that is our own fault as a new organisation struggles to exist and meet the modern expectations of open government.

But, still, four years after the Good Friday Agreement and three years after the establishment of the Assembly, the media can persist in failing to understand or report the difference between the Assembly and the Executive.

Let me give you an example:

Only a few months ago our Public Accounts Committee identified and exposed less than effective management in specific areas of public expenditure. The problem had existed through the long period when Northern Ireland was governed under what has been called "Direct Rule" – where ministers from Westminster flew in – and out – and the civil service appeared the most obvious instrument of governance. So – the Public Accounts Committee's findings brought real evidence of the benefits of devolution to the fore. Such evidence is what the politicians (whether in favour of all aspects of the Agreement or not) had taken the risk to invest in.

I returned home that evening, turned on the television to watch the news and saw the major news item being described under the heading of "the Assembly found guilty of wasting x-million pounds of public money"!

Politicians' disappointment – is easily understood.

However, blaming the media can appear like a cheap shot. The Assembly does not have a Press Officer charged with taking a leading proactive role with the press.

The Information Office of the Assembly is embryonic and – though in the process of development – it is envisaged to develop information about the Assembly and to compile educational material.

Whether the majority of politicians in favour of the Agreement have received the information service they deserve is a moot point. Erroneous and/or negative reporting of the Assembly can result in destabilising the institution established by the Good Friday Agreement.

But – is this the Parliamentary Democracy?

At this point I should halt for a moment to explain the political context that suggests so-called professional claims of political impartiality or possessing outstanding professional expertise can appear pejorative and an expression to politicians of "I know better than you".

1997 saw political change in Northern Ireland that few predicted. At that time the everyday coping with the impacts of terrorism seemed a long-term political reality of life in Northern Ireland. None of my academic colleagues at that time predicted the progress politicians made through the Agreement reached on Good Friday in 1998.

If nothing else – it presented hard evidence of the need for some sense of humility on the part of professional, scientific "experts". It's a lesson not lost on me – though one I need remind myself of.

The Agreement was not universally endorsed – but achieved the support of the majority of both communities. For all it was a massive compromise. The very principles and understandings of "right" and "wrong" were severely challenged through the release of "political prisoners" that others thought "terrorists". For others, their hopes and visions for the future appeared compromised.

These anxieties have not gone away. To put the personal felt tragedies in context it would take an American to think how likely that they themselves, a close relative or friend of theirs could be on plane over Lockerbie that came down once a fortnight over a period of 30 years.

This context is crucially relevant to the quality of information services the political institution and its politicians deserve. The private sadness of many, the relief of not worrying about your family is quietly expressed – since these do not describe something special. It is commonly felt.

In a political context it finds clearest expression. It needs expression. There is distrust, there is hatred and there are visions for successful democratic governance for Northern Ireland.

It was the politicians' own decision to establish a professional non-partisan research and library service available to all. We in that service are charged with the duty of delivering that service.

As head of that service I didn't arrive with tablets of stone to describe how this can be achieved. We have made mistakes – and it's important that we learn from them – AND listen to our customers.

We have also had successes and are a much valued service – valued by politicians across the political spectrum. Understanding their needs is a constant process of learning – and this should always be the case.

What we try do not do is offend our politicians' intelligence – or worse – their vision – by providing a steered or partisan service. If there is unanimity at all among Northern Irish politicians it is that they understand that the Research and Library Service will maintain their confidentiality while providing a non-partisan service.

The staff of the Research and Library Service are also important to service delivery. Again – here the political context is unavoidable. Janet will remember her role in helping appoint the first 16 researchers to the Assembly some two years ago. In comparable services we could have expected an annual 30% turnover in staff. In an Assembly that has faced a very uncertain future one could expect still higher turnover.

Of those 16 first appointed, 15 remain. A similar pattern exists among library staff. Recently more staff have been recruited and it is important to acknowledge that the Assembly has been sympathetic to supporting the staffing requirements of the service.

The retention of staff has helped improve service quality.

So too – it is important to acknowledge that the commitment of staff to deliver is palpable – it is more than a job. It is political.

The provision of a non-partisan service is a crucial component to building the bridge between two deeply opposed views that is required to achieve the good devolved governance of Northern Ireland.

Since I left the Assembly on Saturday morning to come here the political soundings appeared ominous. Opinion polls of Northern Ireland's electorate measure an increased polarisation that may bode ill for an imminent election.

The coming year, perhaps the coming weeks could move us in to a more uncertain future than we have yet faced. I can't say that we will be here next year. Yet – researchers and librarians are aware of this uncertainty but remain focussed on delivering that impartial professional service that our politicians asked us to deliver.

On once asking a researcher how she coped with such career uncertainty I received a simple reply. She told me, "I think things will work out – it'd be crazy to go back, but if that happens and I'm asked 'what did you do?' I can say I was here."

The Research and Library Service is not perfect, but is customer focussed and open-minded enough to learn – both attributes are central to our impartial delivery.

So – yes – I can answer the question that this motion poses – I believe the Assembly does receive the information service it deserves.

In that the Research & Library Service and the Assembly's Information Service are in a state of development – and are informed by errors in the past – so too is our Parliamentary Democracy.