

IN FULL: Peter Robinson's Queen's University lecture on restoring government in Northern Ireland



Former first minister Peter Robinson

By

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Former first minister Peter Robinson tonight delivered his first lecture in his new role as an honorary professor at Queen's University, Belfast.

The ex-DUP leader's professorial lecture was on the subject of restoring government in Northern Ireland.

Below we run 'Negotiating the Way Forward – Restoring Government in Northern Ireland' in full

I want to thank the Pro-Vice-Chancellor and all those at the Senator George Mitchell Institute for the great honour and privilege of becoming an Honorary Professor at this prestigious University. I am genuinely deeply moved and grateful.

Queen's University plays a key role in our society - one that goes well beyond educational excellence. I recall the many times I heard investors speak of what was for them a key selling point in their decision to invest in Northern Ireland. It was the close link between business, government and academia. And I'm not just talking about the fantastic research that goes on here and the start-ups that flow from that work.

I am talking about the collaboration with companies that are intending to invest here, making sure we have sufficient graduates with qualifications in the required subjects for the jobs that are being created and also providing ongoing practical cutting-edge support and advanced research. This university is a regular attraction on the visitors' schedule government prepares for prospective investors who we want to show the very best of what Northern Ireland has to offer.

So my thanks goes to everyone at the university for the assistance they have been - in a way that never hits the

headlines but which has helped to improve the lives of everyone who lives here.

Those who have been close to me over the past fifty years in politics will know that lecturing people is something that doesn't come naturally to me – so I thought it wise, to seek guidance from colleagues here at the university on the issues I might be expected to cover in my remarks. It was suggested I could touch on topics like -

The art of leadership;

The need for compromise;

The absence of an Executive; and,

The way forward.

Given that I have, with great care and restraint, desisted – in as far as was possible - from commentary on matters that might give rise to contention, you can imagine my unbounded relief to find that the suggested topics were unlikely to stimulate media interest or excite controversy.

I am no friend of sarcasm in the discussion of grave subjects, but I am inclined to think that if Thoreau had been right to argue that, the government which governs least, governs best, then we would have been splendidly governed over these past few years.

The matter is, as I say, too awful for irony, for we all know, to the cost of our public services and the consternation of our people, that the outcome has been otherwise. We have barely been governed at all with the absence of the Stormont institutions, and the reluctance of Westminster to step-in during their absence. Successive Secretaries of State have chosen instead to embalm the structures, in the hope that some munificent – others might say miraculous - event would occur to allow the switch to be flicked to restart the Assembly in any lasting or meaningful form.

I am not offering a counsel of despair, far from it, I am simply following that rational dictum - if you want to chart a course to your desired destination it is necessary to know from where you start. In this case it

requires more than that - it requires an honest appraisal not just of where we are but of the consequences of remaining here.

Progress has been immured in a political impasse. A legion of decisions awaits Ministerial sign-off. These include matters vital to the public health, wellbeing and prosperity. Inescapably, it is the poor, the needy, the meek and humble who suffer most.

The deadlock impacts upon our economic offering. I ask you, what serious investor could afford to ignore the lack of political stability in a potential investment location?

Moreover, I am not alone in believing that community division is accelerating, and we are at risk of awaking the slumbering hostilities that we had all hoped would never again be aroused.

While I still feel – for none of us can be sure – that the public do wish the Assembly and Executive to return, we cannot ignore the truth that there is a growing, pained and despairing reservation in the community about the Assembly ever usefully functioning again and a guarded but questioning apprehension about whether it's worth the effort.

Such a conclusion would be very wrong, but that such views exist impacts on the body politic.

I fear the inability to work it out locally, will eventually lead to the parcel being passed to Direct Rulers to take decisions for us.

I say these things now because I judge we are close to passing the point where endeavour, and vision can provide the thrust to resolve our differences in this present generation.

I pause, only to reflect on how far we have come as a community. For the relentless focus on our problems and failings obscures the exceptional progress that has been made. I know because I lived through those decades of darkness - the endless murders and injuries, the bombing and shooting, the division and conflict – I survived, but sadly thousands did not. We owe them

more than accepting the drift back to division.

The cheerful truth is that today's Northern Ireland is unrecognisable from how it looked and felt in those troubled years.

Clearly, we have not yet arrived at the desired destination and I accept that there is an impatience to make progress. But remember, while we have a right to expect politicians to give leadership and labour until agreement is reached, it is we, the public, who are responsible for providing them with the flexibility, support and encouragement to move forward.

I have never found battering and bludgeoning a productive technique when trying to encourage someone to stretch and reach higher ground. What I have found is that often the people who are most critical of politicians for not getting a deal done are those who have never struggled to reconcile people and ideas representing very different, if not conflicting positions - and if those critics did try I suspect they would unquestionably fail.

So, what I say, is not accompanied by any negative attribution and is without imputation upon any of the leading participants in the political process. I am mindful of how difficult it is to get the needs and expectations of diverse parties to coalesce. My remarks are intended only to be helpful.

As I see it, simply applying a sticking plaster, or attempting to patch-up the existing process, will not provide a durable result. I am not for a moment suggesting that we start afresh or ignore the unfinished work that has been done but I firmly believe that seeking to find agreement based on the issues contained in the published working draft alone will just not work.

When, as is here and now the case, progress is gridlocked, and parties have taken and publicly cemented themselves into fixed positions, the likelihood of a deal within the confines of that existing agenda would be virtually impossible.

During discussions on the occasion of the twentieth

anniversary of the Belfast Agreement I made a comment that raised the interviewer's eyebrows in that I suggested that when a problem cannot be solved, it needs to be enlarged. I spoke, of course, about the need to broaden the agenda and open up more scope for trade-offs and hopefully the inclusion of other issues upon which common ground might be found.

While I avoided then, identifying the components of that wider agenda I can tell you now, that I was not just thinking about evenly balancing concessions – though that must always be an imperative.

I believe there are strong reasons to go beyond balancing the party wish lists and confront more fundamental issues. I will mention a few, but essentially, I would want to place on the agenda any crucial items discarded from past discussions because they were thought to be too difficult or because there was a fear that introducing the subject would upset the level of agreement that had already been reached.

There is, of course, an argument that such a broad agenda will take considerable time to resolve. That's true, but I sense that there are some in the parties who are keen to see, at least, the shape of the Brexit negotiations before tying the knot on a local deal. But even if I judge them wrongly I would still contend that a more wide-ranging agenda is needed.

I add – but only in passing – that negotiations on a more extensive deal would not remove the benefits that could be derived from operating a less contentious model, with a more limited role, in parallel with the more comprehensive talks that I am suggesting.

But, as I return to the subject of negotiating a broader deal, I can almost hear the deep intake of breath in some quarters. If agreement cannot be reached on the present agenda or even by carefully adding some balance to it, surely, some will say, it will never be achieved if it is stuffed with unresolved issues from past talks.

Let me make something clear. I am not talking about every party pushing its own agenda, obsession, or

hobby-horse. I am talking about those matters that impact upon the smooth operation, permanence, continuity and stability of the institutions.

I say this because I feel sure a new Assembly tripping over the debris of unresolved, critical problems will collapse and because I believe another collapse would be fatal for devolution and harmful to the future of Northern Ireland.

Each collapse drains public confidence and I am not convinced the Assembly could survive a further one. People need to be persuaded that a new Assembly is imbued with an aura of stability and durability.

Some of the existing arrangements almost invite disruption. The facility for a leading party to terminate the Assembly's term duration either for electoral advantage, or at the height of a political storm, inevitably upsets the existence of arrangements that have been slowly and painfully built up and which cannot be easily replaced.

That such a "weapon of dissolution" exists, and can be unilaterally deployed, places pressure on parties that will surge at a time of agitation if their support base - which often takes a more short-term stance on political matters - is baying for blood and vengeance. A fixed term Assembly, with sensible mechanisms in place, to allow a party - even one of the largest ones - to opt out of the Executive (if they choose) or to be put out if circumstances warrant it, could easily be put in place (in a manner that would work) and would give greater hope of maintaining stable working institutions.

Just take a look at our local councils, in this respect. Over a period of forty years, including some of the most agonising ones, local government continued to function. All I am arguing is that Stormont's continuation needs to be similarly certain and sound. If projectiles are flying around the political airspace, Stormont's survival should not be thrown up as chaff or become part of the bargaining process. Whatever future problems may arise, the parties, in agreeing a new deal, should, at the very minimum, sign a solemn declaration to work on any problem that surfaces while

still operating the agreed institutions.

Furthermore, embracing “a process” was necessary to allow devolution to function by banking such progress as could be achieved. Other complex issues were pushed down the line while awaiting more favourable circumstances or new thinking before moving to the next stage. As Martin Luther King put it – “You don’t have to see the full staircase just take the first step.”

The arrangements, which were upgraded at St Andrews and beyond, provided a long interval of stability but were still never truly infused with a sense of permanence.

The “politics of process” has served us well in the past. Yet, we now find ourselves faced with the downside of being in a process. The feeling that everything is temporary – that the arrangements are in flux – that the functioning of the Assembly will be repeatedly interrupted for negotiating pitstops.

Being processed brings with it that unsettled feeling that produces uncertainty and, at times, fear. That’s why I counsel against a nip and tuck solution and favour major re-constructive surgery.

The outcome of the next set of negotiations must have the feel of the parties having reached a settlement rather than the continuation of a process.

Some say that republicans want a process towards a United Ireland and would therefore resist any move to provide stable political structures here. I don’t accept that. I do accept that the life of our Union with Great Britain is subject to the principle of consent and therefore it will be argued by some that we can only talk about a generational settlement. However, the vehicle for moving Northern Ireland from being part of the United Kingdom to being part of a United Ireland was never to be a step by step process or through incremental changes to Northern Ireland’s institutions and its characteristics.

The mechanism for constitutional change was and is the principle of consent as exercised through a Border Poll.

I realise that even discussing this issue can cause some people to start clutching their chests. But perhaps it is time to consider the Border Poll instrument more closely and replace the existing deficient arrangements with provisions that make sense and are less threatening.

It is because I am very confident about the likely outcome of a Border Poll that I feel now is the time to examine and reflect on the issue, particularly in light of the experience of the Brexit Referendum and its aftermath.

If ending our membership of a common market or economic union requires years of negotiations - and a transition period - and has raised demands for a second referendum because voters had only determined to exit but had not given approval to the terms of exit, then how much greater would the argument be if there was a vote to change national sovereignty.

The outcome of the Brexit referendum should also have taught us another lesson – one clearly not learned by everyone – that if a single choice “yes” or “no” answer to a simple question on ending an economic partnership can stir such passion, division and disruption then those who see a Northern Ireland plebiscite as an aid to peace and stability understand little about human behaviour.

The existing simplistic – majority of one - mechanism to deal with colossal constitutional change would be a recipe for chaos if it were ever to be activated.

It is better to deal with the process that would be involved, when there is no reason to anticipate an outcome that obliges change, rather than having to tackle the issue on the fly if it was ever to be triggered in the future.

In this I am not, of course, talking about the nature and shape of the new state that would emerge if there ever was a vote to exit the UK. I am alluding to the need to agree a process for negotiations, timescales and not only the means of reaching agreement on all the

particulars but also who would be involved in negotiating such an agreement.

With those details settled, my own view, for what it's worth, is that fixed generational Border Polls would be less divisive and disruptive of our local political process.

So, having pulled the pin out of that grenade, let me move swiftly on.

When I was First Minister our mantra in Office was "solve or manage". Problems and differences were and always will be part of the life of any government.

In a coalition, with the main parties each holding a veto, it is necessary to either solve the problem or find a way to manage it. At times the absence of agreement from both of the two main parties will mean delaying or discarding a proposal. The downside is obvious. But community designations, mutual vetoes and petitions of concern are not the only ways of taking decisions in a divided society while still protecting the interests of our two main traditions.

I contend it is entirely possible to design community protective devices that will still ensure timely decisions can be taken thereby enhancing the democratic control of decision making. Rather than filling Stormont's pending tray or trash can with issues that under our existing system have been vetoed, or have not attracted mutual agreement, we must establish processes that ensure decisions can be taken.

Each of the existing devices has had its value (and some have even, at times, been used as originally intended) but when enshrined in law and in the standing orders that govern procedure they invite use. What party would not operate within the rules of the House to deliver its own agenda?

I hope a more studied consideration of the merits of making the institutions more lasting and stable will ensue. I do not claim to have identified the only – or even the best means to achieve the desired goal and I have no emotional capital tied up in any particular approach. I do, however, believe that it is imperative to

address this matter.

Perhaps just a few words on the practice of negotiating. All the main party leaders have been engaged in negotiations in the past as part of their respective party delegations. After the recent Talks, they will have realised there is a significant difference when at the same time you hold the responsibility of leadership. It can be a daunting experience.

I say to each of them, while you will still want to achieve your objectives you know that there is a heavy burden upon you to get a result and more importantly to get it right. The eyes, not just of your party, but of the world are upon your every move and utterance. When you are at the top there will be foes waiting for you to slip up, and it may be, that they will not always be found in the ranks of opposition parties.

After a short time in discussion with your opposite numbers you will have a reasonable picture of the parameters within which a deal may be achievable. You should have ascertained the priorities of other parties, and gauged the level of importance – or bluff and posturing - there has been on each of the issues.

If, even after extensive exploration of all the items on the agenda, and following discussions with your negotiating team as well as close confidants, you feel a deal cannot be consummated then, at best, it will be about jointly, with the other participants, creating a soft landing; or, less satisfactorily, it may be about each party justifying their own position and explaining why they think the negotiations did not end positively but still committing to review, regroup and return at a later stage.

However, you have just experienced the worst set of circumstances. A train crash - where the blame game reached fever-pitch, angry words were exchanged, documents leaked, confidences broken, and trust shattered.

The passage of time will not easily or alone repair the damage that has been done to relationships. Nonetheless, the stakes are much too high to give up.

Serious efforts have to be undertaken to create a workable climate that will allow further meaningful engagement.

If, as one of the party leaders, you have judged that what you have just gone through was rough and bruising then let me prepare you for what would have happened if you had reached the next stage and, more positively, what I hope will happen if, through a new set of negotiations, a deal seems possible.

You will have worked through the Talks agenda satisfying yourself that you have crossed the acceptability threshold, leaving you with sufficient positives to carry your own support base and ensuring you can justify each of the concessions you have had to make to get there.

You will then face a harder task – that of bringing your party on-board. You must be confident that the package you are bringing forward is a good deal and you must exhibit that confidence.

Your party colleagues will not have enjoyed (or endured) the face to face contact you have had which alone brings the insight and realisation of what is possible and what is not. They have not been able to test what is needed to reach agreement.

They will not be aware of how hard it has been to get to this stage and they will have little appreciation of why you have not been able to deliver everything that they desire - because, of course, every party believes its own demands are entirely reasonable, completely valid, totally justified, utterly compelling and absolutely necessary.

Let's be clear, not all of your colleagues, will want to make the necessary concessions. That's where leadership comes in. There can never be a "here's what's possible what do you think?" approach. You are the leader. You are the one who has been there. You've seen the whites of your opponents' eyes. You have had more time to consider the balance of the deal than your colleagues have. You know its detail best. You will get little credit if it works, but you can be sure you will

take the blame if it doesn't. If you want support, you must not show any uncertainty. You must take ownership of the deal. Nobody can sell it better than you can.

It will be a career defining moment. Make no mistake about it, your leadership will be on the line. If they reject your recommendation they are rejecting your leadership. So, fight tooth and nail for it.

Of course, the wise leader will already have sold the deal to a range of key colleagues in and beyond the negotiation team to be sure of significant support from respected figures.

But, even after surviving this test you need to convince your wider support base and the public. My own experience is that if you can successfully navigate your party machine the wider public will be no less positive. However, you and your colleagues must become evangelists. There will always be opponents accentuating anything they can construe as a negative, there will be scare-mongering and attempts to spread alarm and fear. They will be looking to capitalise on any hint of division in your ranks. Discipline is essential. You and your team must be out there positively selling the benefits of the deal. No matter how good the deal may be, it will not sell itself.

Anyone who has been involved in successful negotiations knows there cannot be a lasting deal without two-way compromise. It will never work if one side defines compromise in terms of: - "We'll get everything we want, and you'll just have to suck it up". Unless both sides of a deal can sell it to their respective bases it will soon become unstuck.

I have on a number of occasions had to make uncomfortable compromises in order to reach an agreement, but I knew the pain of compromising was being shared by those with whom I was negotiating.

Believe me, after the deal is done and you survey the harvest that flows from it, it really won't feel like a compromise any more.

Over the past decade, the Assembly has on occasions

shown its weaknesses and the media feature them and, at times, even embellish them.

The fact that the Assembly and Executive have had many successes and has shown real value is denied by many without being examined and the Assembly has been reviled by some without being properly understood.

I know from practical experience, when the late Martin McGuinness and I travelled around the globe, the presence of the leaders of two previously opposing traditions working together to promote tourism, jobs and investment, struck a chord that brought considerable success.

Bringing together the talents and abilities of our two traditions did work. Mother Teresa once said – “I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot; together we can do great things”.

That same vision can still be real and achievable here. It will require compromise, risk and determination but it can lead to community cohesion, economic reward and give hope and reason for our young people to stay and make their future here at home.

Conflict reconciliation is a step beyond conflict resolution and two steps beyond conflict avoidance. But it is reconciliation we must strive to achieve.

It ought to be the design and policy of all leaders to cultivate better understanding and seek to bring people together to work towards the common end of fashioning a shared and cohesive society.

The wounds of the past are deep and understandably, at times of tension, tend to drag us back to the enmities of the past. Even dealing with the legacy of these matters is bound to reawaken many of the troubling emotions that the events themselves occasioned.

We must acknowledge that pain and sorrow, and we must also take responsibility for working together to create real change.

That, is the stamp of leadership. Even though many in the ranks will have reservations about aspects of what

an agreement may contain; even when it means challenging ourselves and the way things have been done in the past; even though we may face criticism - even abuse.

For, if, instead of head-butting each other, we join to put our shoulders to the wheel, committing ourselves to serve the whole community and establish shared goals we can build a better and brighter future for our children and grandchildren, without regard to identity, culture, religion or party politics.

I am not on the side of the sceptics, the doubters and the pessimists. I have hope and confidence in the future. Our politics, with all its imperfections, is the best tool to help reconcile and build a shared society.

No matter what background we hail from, if we combine our energies, the prophets of doom can be confounded.

I know what the cynics say. They say –

“It’s impossible, given how deeply engrained each generation is with the legacy of the past!”

“It’s impossible, there’s no common ground, they’re as different as honey and vinegar!”

“Look at the chasm between the parties!”

“Look at the deadlock!”

“Look at the alphabet of paramilitaries that still exist!”

“Look at our politicians they can’t agree on anything!”

“Look at Brexit, an Irish Language Act, the Military Covenant and the myriad of other problems. It’s just impossible.”

Let me say this to the cynics - it always seems impossible until its done.

What will make it possible now, as in the past, will be persistence, focus, courage and leadership.

The persistence to work through disappointments and set-backs; the ability to focus on the objective rather than being overcome by the problems getting there; the

courage to take people where you know they need to be though they may fear the journey; the leadership that sets your face towards the glow of a shared future and leaves the dark shadows to fall behind.

And through it all, maintain the resolve to just keep on trying until finally success, makes its unhurried but historic entry.

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