FUTURE POLITICS:
Delivering Effective Government

A platform for ambitious new political ideas, policies and solutions

Post-Conference Report

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Tribute to Dr Robert (Bob) Mauro

It was with great sadness that we learned of the passing of our dear friend and conference sponsor, Dr Robert (Bob) Mauro on Monday 31 October at the age of 46.

As the Executive Director of the Irish Institute and founding Director of the Global Leadership Institute in Boston College, Dr Mauro has been a long-time friend of this part of the world, playing an important role in bringing people together through the many programmes he ran over the years.

The first sponsor to come on board for the Future Politics conference, Bob's support was central in the delivery of the event and his kindness, commitment and pragmatism shone through over the past year in our work with him.

We were looking forward to working with Bob on future events, and his counsel and guidance will be missed by all who had the pleasure to know him and work with him.

Conference Review

The inaugural *Future Politics: Delivering Effective Government* conference took place on Friday 16 September 2022 in Riddel Hall, Queen's University, to an audience of over 100 people, drawn from the political, public, private and policy sectors.

Chaired by Freya McClements and Mark Devenport, the event featured six panels which incorporated experts putting forward ideas and proposals that seek to progress some key challenges facing our political and policy structures.

A common theme emerging was the need to consider some of the underlying processes and policy which form the basis of our politics and government in Northern Ireland.

It was agreed this shouldn't be just at a time of crisis, but instead as be part of the evolving political landscape, and include voices from outside of the political parties and the civil service.

The challenge for those of us on the fringes of political processes is to better understand how we can help deliver effective politics and government, and not just on the specific issues or interests that we may have individually.

The ideas and discussions represented the start of a conversation, and we believe that here is an opportunity to harness the collective expertise and understanding to help inject new ideas into solving some old problems.

This paper is a summary of the proposals put forward by participants, and will form the basis of the a work programme that we will be undertaking with stakeholders and other voices in the months ahead.

The aim of this will be to provide a solutions-focused and practical approach to the problems that have pervaded our political and policy structures in recent years.

We hope that the work being taken forward over the months ahead will help support those discharged with the difficult task of leadership, and contribute towards the development of more sustainable politics.

The comments captured in this paper do not reflect all participants but instead represent the key ideas raised. The event took place in September 2022 at a point which no Executive had been formed following the May election, and this context informed some of the issues raised.

Panel 1: Almost 25 years since devolution: what does good government look like and how do we achieve it?

Structures

- Veto agreed at St Andrews which was aimed at preventing "solo runs" by Executive Ministers should be reviewed and/or removed was supported by some panellists.
- Some support for move to "voluntary coalition" rather than "mandatory coalition".
- On power sharing, an observation was made that this approach should make difficult decisions easier as there is less opposition outside of the Executive.
- Other voices and experts should be included to support the public policy process. Suggestions on means to achieve this included:
  - Pre-legislative scrutiny
  - Making committees more agile, rather than "jack of all trades" approach which prevents necessary scrutiny and focus required on detailed legislation
  - Dedicated public bill committees to scrutinise legislation similar to Westminster
  - Small upper house
  - Civic Forum/Citizens Assembly
- Role of civil service needs to be reflected on and there was some support for reform. Gap between public understanding of policy constraints, and how objectives can be distorted by defaulting to parish pump politics.
- Public appointments system needs reviewed.
- Time-limited tenures proposed for Ministers, SpAds, MLAs and key civil service posts (eg. Private Office).This is particularly important in a small divided society.

Pictured: Jarlath Kearney, Mark Durkan, David Ford and Richard Bullick

Politics and Politicians

- Whilst some panellists suggested that changes were needed to the structures created by the Northern Ireland Act (1998), it was also acknowledged that behavioural changed was required by some of those operating the institutions.
- There was conversation about the ethos of the initial agreement and the value of using that as a north star for reform. Different opinions were expressed as to the degree of reform required – is it a recalibration or deconstruction and reconstruction?
- Discussion about integrity in politics, and the need for public interest to prevail over party interest.
- The competing demands on MLAs' time and the behaviours that our electoral system rewards were discussed. The question was put – is it worth reflecting that legally the Assembly is the prime source of authority, rather than the Executive? Is this reflected in practice?
- Elected representatives needs to be supported through a range of interventions - better structures, systems and continuous training.

Panel 2: Cutting through the noise: creating a more reflective political discourse

Political Discourse

- It was agreed by all panellists of the need for more civility and inclusion in political debate.
- Advocate for politics as a force for good; negative narrative around politics but this shouldn't be conflated with a lack of interest.
- Lack of spaces for reflective discussion; social media engagement shows the interest (even if much of it is negative).
- Populism and constitutional issues attract attention to the detriment of conversations around long term policy solutions.
- Do we have leaders across society who are trauma triggered rather than trauma informed, resulting in negative politics?
- Need for more representation in political discourse; dominated by a limited number of voices, amplified by all aspects of the media but particularly social media.

Pictured: Sara Canning, Dr Kezia Dugdale, Dr Olga Jurasz, Clare Bailey, Brendan Hughes

Media and Social Media

- Agreed need for free, fair and funded media.
- Journalists competing with instant nature of social media therefore not having time and space to reflect on broader issues.
- More trust between media and politicians required.
- Social media as an effective tool for campaigning and advocating, but not as a forum for discussion; we need to recognise this distinction and create a new space for debate.
- Challenge of regulation of social media; certain voices amplified and "news" unchecked; distorting reality but influencing many.

Panel 3: Delivering better outcomes for people: the architecture and culture of policy making

Policy Infrastructure

- Need for proper implementation of wellbeing as key policy objective, supported by ambition and authenticity in policy design.
- Fragmentation and silos of government are problematic.
- Duty to collaborate could support delivery on an outcomes basis and incentivise collaboration.
- Also need mechanism to pool resources.
- How does NICS become a model that helps political leaders overcome policy challenges?
- Lots of conversation around money and prioritisation; missing piece is outcomes, and this is critical.
- Review of Public Administration as unfinished business.

People and Culture

- Importance of the relationship between voters, politicians and officials; the latter two cannot go too far ahead of the public.
- Can we impose "circuit breakers" for challenging identity issues?
- More conversations with MLAs about the priorities and challenges they face.
- Role Citizens Assemblies can play in broadening conversations, identifying solutions beyond the parameters of electoral politics and reflecting rather than interpretating public opinion.

Pictured: Jill Rutter, Dr Denis McMahon, Gráinne Walsh, Alison Allen, Dr Duncan Morrow

Panel 4: Whose culture is it anyway? Moving away from a binary state

- Evidence that there are moves away from PUL and CNR terms and descriptions, which is more reflective of current society.
- Institutions reinforce binary definitions; post agreement society as rejectionist and negative, reflecting and reproducing themselves through binary. Need to move away from the cultural engineers that produce these outcomes.
- In terms of public policy, culture needs to be at the heart of dialogue rather than as an add on or second thought.
- On the disconnect between polling and political reality, it was suggested that this is about leadership to accommodate peoples' culture; culture that transforms society gets no support, it is culture that shouts the loudest that gets most traction.
- Challenge of culture often being conflated with identity; the aspects of culture which are non-sectarian need to force their way in; however, they will not find their way in if there is no recognition of them.
- Need for promotion of shared values, education, understanding and engagement to convert anger associated with identity, and conflated with culture, to a more positive discourse.
- Much work done on this area but little is implemented; need to focus on learning from evidence and use it to inform future work; culture needs a policy basis, not just an emotional one.

Pictured: Freya McClements, Labhras Ó Murchú, Colin Davidson, Professor Pete Shirlow, Terry Wright, Ryan Shaw

Panel 5: Our place in the world: resetting our Transatlantic relationships

- Northern Ireland has unparalleled access to US government, but we need to maintain this relationship, stay relevant and ambitious; we can move beyond traditional ties created and consolidated by US interest and involvement in the peace process.
- The Northern Ireland story in the United States is not current; there is a new story to tell, one that reflects the changed interests of business, consumers and citizens; demographic shifts, including millennials' interest in environmental and social impact now have a place in a contemporary narrative.
- From our local politicians to the UK, RoI and EU, the lack of consistency and shared vision means there is a lack of coherence in the message about NI's place in the world. Compounded by COVID-19 disruption, there is a fundamental disagreement about how post Brexit NI is presented to the world.
- At a business level, there is a need for organisations to develop engagement strategies in the US; role of mentoring and support from those businesses who have been successful in doing this.
- Stepping back, it is important to note that the world feels unstable and unsettled. The US itself has had its own problems, and so our challenges aren't necessarily unique or extreme.
- While political stability is important, so too is talent, labour market, transport, infrastructure and the quality of life. Indeed we have a lot to offer.
- Looking at success stories locally, cybersecurity is doing well because of the talent and experience here. It is important to build on other areas of expertise.
- Another message that will be welcomed is the opportunity for US companies to become "big fish" here rather than much smaller players in Dublin or London.

Ian Hunter, Jackie King, Gráinne Walsh, Dr Bob Mauro, Ryan Feeney, Dr Sean Farren

Panel 6: Making the three strands work for prosperity: North-South, East-West in a post-Brexit world

- Need for long-term thinking to develop the NI we want in 25 years, and the relationships across north/south/east/west.
- Ambition is key: "ask for revolution, get reform; ask for reform, get crumbs; ask for crumbs, get nothing."
- Is this compatible with the complex relationships across these islands and further afield and the need for consensus?
- Suggestion that goodwill is key to making the three strands work; practicalities are important, but goodwill, even more so.
- Importance of political stability in delivering prosperity and investment; we need an Executive and policy that meets the needs of people.
- Where there is a fracture in UK/RoI relationship, it is felt in NI.
- NI Protocol needs a solution urgently that addresses the three strands.
- Important reflection on the last few years is consideration of who has inputted into decision-making and what is decided; important role of business in relation to leadership in the absence of politicians during political impasse of 2017-2020.
- Acknowledgement of the damage of the absence of NI political voice during this time; there remained part of the puzzle that can only be unlocked by politicians (as opposed to business).

Kirsty McManus, Dr Andrew McCormick, Lee Reynolds, Professor Katy Hayward

Workstreams

We have identified four key workstreams to take forward through a series of engagements over the next year which will build on the conversations that took place at the conference.

The key areas are as follows:

Institutions

- With thinking ranging from the fact that the institutions are sound but require behavioural change in how they are operated, to the need for a fundamental overhaul of the legislation, can we deploy the review mechanism contained within the Northern Ireland Act (1998)?
- Parliamentary processes: options for reform to optimise output
- Other voices: should they be brought into the institutional framework?

Public Policy

- How do we better align our public policy process to deal with and reflect political ambition, balanced with the need to address long-term challenges?
- Civil Service reform: what changes can improve policy development and service delivery?
- Delivering a statutory Duty to Cooperate and embedding wellbeing in legislation

- Consultation and representation

Politicians

- Capacity building for a new generation of MLAs and Councillors
- Political and policy leadership programme for Special Advisors, Ministers and senior officials
- Relationship building across parties

Strands 2, 3 and the Wider World

- Where do we want relationships with UK and Republic of Ireland in the long-term? Optimising the potential of our unique position
- Engagement with UK and Irish governments to build understanding of support needed in NI; investment in development, not just in crisis
- Supporting a positive narrative with investing in the skills and environmental credentials that will make it an attractive place to do business

Action Plan

To progress the key areas identified, we hope to deliver the following outputs:

THEME	ACTIONS	OBJECTIVE
Institutions	• Establish political reference group to consider options on institutions • Review of evidence on reform • Options paper developed • Citizen engagement to inform options paper	Develop options on improving the sustainability of the institutions to be presented to political parties
Public Policy	• Brief developed on challenges/remedies that civil service can unlock • Engagement with NICS on training for civil servants • Seminar on joining up government; from local to central	To improve the function of NICS and develop capacity and policy awareness of wider operating environment; to develop the case for more joined up working
Politicians	• Capacity and relationship building programme to support new generation of MLAs and Cllrs • Targeting specific groups that need support	To build relationships and capacity as leaders and legislators between politicians
Strands 2,3 and rest of the world	• Brief developed that reflects the challenges and opportunities • Roundtable events with officials and politicians in Westminster and Dublin	To build capacity and awareness of specific challenges at policy and institutional level

Next Steps

We are inviting papers on the identified themes to be discussed and debated at a series of events across the year. The purpose is to stimulate and gauge support for different ideas and provide options for consideration to politicians and key officials.

This project, although facilitated by Stratagem and the John and Pat Hume Foundation, relies on support and input of organisations and voices across society. We want to make the conversation as inclusive as possible, so we welcome input from all organisations and individuals, with our ask that contributions are forward looking, pragmatic and solution focused.

Details on events and how to submit will be communicated over the months ahead, however, should you wish to discuss in the meantime, please contact futurepolitics@stratagem-ni.com.

Pictured: Ajendance

Appendix: Participant Feedback

The following feedback is presented verbatim and is reflective of both the feedback received on Mentimeter and via hard copy.

Panel 1 Reflections

- Agree that structures haven't caused the periods of collapse - we need the problematic issues to be addressed and resolved.
- Civil service advice should be to Ministers collectively not just the individual Minister.
- PfG and Budget should be firmly interdependent.
- Honest panel.
- Good debate and reflections.
- Excellent, lots of food for thought.
- Clear there are still differences in political positions, which does not instil hope for the future.
- Civic input into government.
- Remove the veto to FM DFM and allow proposals from across the floor. This will ensure government can continue.
- Two thirds majority to move any legislation.
- Remove the veto.
- Consider permanent politics by removing the veto on collapsing the Executive...allow those that want to govern to govern.
- Assembly is the prime source of power in the GFA.
- "Elective inclusion" needs to be reintroduced to replace mandatory coalition.
- Misapplication of Petition of Concern.
- Relationships between electoral system, local interests and responsibilities as legislators, MLAs and Ministers.
- Culture change matters more than structural change but structural change can enable and develop culture.
- Can we agree the culture focused on "people and society" not "NI/Political culture", and discuss what would drive that culture.

Action you would prioritise:

- Committees.
- Use of experts.
- Citizens assemblies not civic forums.
- Developing a civic forum which truly brings in diverse selection – random selection and expertise; term limits, supportive structures (translation, childcare, day rate pay). This can offer an example of

mature engagement which holds MLAs to a standard and develop mature culture.

- "Idea slightly in jest" – nominate to Boards those without merit
- Civil service needs reformed. Officials in departments shouldn't be stand alone only accountable to their Minister. There needs to be accountability to the leadership through the head of the civil service for the conduct of officials

Panel 2

- Good balance of panellists.
- Not much time for audience Qs.
- Panel was good food for thought, particularly effect of existing trauma in society playing out in media and social media.
- Corporate responsibility for social media outlets.
- Politicians to consider coming off social media - great idea as it's not the platform for debate.
- Mute is my friend; people need to come off social media
- The discussion on media focused on deficits rather than balancing with the positive contribution of social media to peace and participation. We need a more youth-driven, forward-looking discussion on the role technology on policy.
- Why are we disempowered about what we can do about those aspects of social media which are unacceptable – regulation, incentives, protest and activism. Could NI lead? What's the hashtag?
- It strikes me that people have run to social media at the same time as our access to public space has been eroded. We are craving connection and space for discussion and we don't have these spaces in real life.
- What is the role of fact checking and building greater capacity for citizen journalism (e.g. developing tools and avenues for ordinary people to be the 'eyes and ears' on public services) in creating a healthier democratic discourse?
- The difficulty will be to get effective legislation to legalise against trolls and those who abuse online.

Action you would prioritise:

- Create public spaces for discussion and connection which allow people to get off places like Twitter. Libraries, civic centres, youth centres, collective kitchens, community gardens.

Panel 3

- A more creative, participatory, forward-looking and youth driven approach to policy is needed that focuses on the role of technology and social media in participation. Rather than seeing it as a threat or through a moral panic.
- Identity issues should be referred back to a civic forum and enable the main chamber to get on with delivering for the people.
- We need to change the voices that are heard in politics
- We understand the problem silo working, a lack of cross dep working and lack of focus on mission. But what are we (politicians, civil servants, civic society) going to do about it?
- Circuit breakers - citizens' assemblies; juries and panels.
- Planning reform essential - linked to regeneration powers and the relationship between local and assembly; community planning needs to be resourced and pooling of resources.
- Community planning needs to be resourced and pooling of resources.
- Opportunities have emerged from covid - how do we ensure that those innovative practices are baked in the system beyond emergency.
- What you resource reflects your values and what you value - if we are serious about delivering better outcomes for people then we have to resource innovation and risk taking.
- We need an audit system that is tracking and auditing the right thing.
- How do we improve the relationship between the home civil service and NICS?
- People are experts in their lives and can and will make decisions - if given the information - people able to make trade-offs.
- Improve impact of committee system - legislative scrutiny committees; pre legislative scrutiny etc.
- Committees to be organised according to PFG outcomes ? Cross departmental scrutiny.
- Keep focus on delivery and not "long, long strategy processes" – "plan, do, reflect, change, plan."
- A very worthwhile debate. Could have lasted longer.
- Process really matters – but I wonder if we could expand our understanding of process to view it as an ecosystem rather than machinery – understanding how each small part affects the whole rather than things happening sequentially.
- Open debate highlighting constraints—perhaps through risk aversion.

Action you would prioritise:

- Take Duncan's example and say how it could be sorted in short-term.
- The role of community planning is paramount. While Councils are struggling with its implementation. This was the 'people's manifesto'. It was heartfelt and taken very seriously.
- As a Councillor I must stress the role of local government is the way forward. We are the public face of the method of delivery of outcomes!
- "Move beyond consultation" stood out to me. Could we make anyone that is devoted entirely to using or creating innovative forms of engagement. Radical problem solving.
- Reform of NICS leadership - can't have departments as standalone entities.
- Resource deliberative processes and forums to enable conversations to take place about policy to support elected representatives make decisions.

Panel 4

- The transitional work that is going on within culture is not getting the attention it deserves or requires.
- Culture changes even if our interpretation or articulation by political elites doesn't change.
- We need to stop avoiding culture and keep it at the heart of policy making and political thinking.
- We cannot push pluralist cultural activity to the detriment of our native cultures. We need to celebrate our culture and work to detoxify it.
- How do we integrate new communities/culture into our conversations about culture?
- What impact will new communities have on our politics and political parties?
- When you are comfortable/secure in your culture then you can embrace other cultures and see the commonalities.
- Wide ranging discussion that emphasised the breadth of culture as well as the importance.
- What is the future for PUL culture - how do you talk about the benefits/positives of the union. It isn't enough that your grandfather was a unionist, your father was a unionist and you are a unionist.
- One question not answered is what would incentivise politicians, parties and activists to show leadership in valuing and not denigrating less familiar expressions of cultures.

- Priorities: race relations legislation; integration strategy; manage integration of new communities in a fair way - we need to prepare for a multicultural society.
- Addiction to outrage in NI – what is a shared culture in NI.
- "Both communities" – exclusionary term.
- Political decisions dictated by culture – but not an indivisible one – fund a binary culture.
- Culture as something that enhances and enriches life – not causing division.
- Culture as an antidote.
- Putting culture at the centre – what would a conference with culture at the centre look like? Inside v outside? Poetry before discussion? Mythology and storytelling. Initiation and closing ceremony. No suits?

Action you would prioritise:

- Culture as an antidote is a powerful image.
- Could this space experiment with using culture to address very complex issues. Radical cultural inclusion.

Panel 5

- We badly need to learn to tell better stories about NI.
- Need to talk more about the level of access NI has in US political and business system … and plan to exploit it.
- We shouldn't forget about Canada.
- Need to acknowledge faults but not be beaten by them when elsewhere - other places are flawed (January 6 in USA); how do we change/own the narrative?
- Put our political instability into context.
- Why did NI Executive not massively expand the number of IT undergrad places over the last decade knowing the demand for workers … too little was done too slowly.
- "Reframing the narratives/ positives".
- Issue of stability as a barrier to transatlantic relationships.
- All of this focuses so much on upper middle class communities – highly skilled jobs in STEM. What is our transatlantic relationship doing with the working class?
- How attractive NI can be to foreign investors not just for the candidate talent pool but because of all the other diverse work we contribute to the work with others.

Action you would prioritise:

- Be more vivid in what we want to achieve in the absence of an Executive.

Panel 6

- NI has parochialism on steroids, we need to ask for better, face up to Kardashian standoffs, cakeism, and the hierarchy of logjams facing NI.
- Few people suggest actual fixes to the Protocol, just the notion that it could be improved.
- "It'll do" – not good enough.
- Importance of good will.
- People are in solution mode—but needs to be flexible on all sides.

Action you would prioritise:

- Rebuilding N/S and E/W relationships again. Not just focus on specifics.
- Do we really understand the importance of good will and how to create it? Do we prioritise that? Could we create tangible actions to create good will in these scenarios?
- There seems to be goodwill but until some solution on the protocol is delivered — even if this means a 'soft landing' for all sides—there is little hope on a breakthrough or the political impasse.