

NOTE OF A WORKING DINNER HELD IN PARLIAMENT  
BUILDINGS ON 4 JUNE 1998

Present: Mr John Semple  
Sir Kenneth Stowe  
Sir Kenneth Bloomfield  
Mr Tony Colman  
Dr Maurice Hayes  
Professor Paul Bew  
Professor Des Rea  
Professor Paul Corrigan  
Mr Jim Dougal  
Dr Sean Rowland

Mr Gerry Loughran  
Mr Ronnie Spence  
Mr Peter Small  
Mr John Hunter  
Mr Nigel Carson  
Mr Gerry Cosgrave  
Mr David Crabbe

Planning for a Transition Programme

Introduction

1. Following opening introductions and welcomes, Mr Semple gave a background to the concept of a transition programme involving newly elected Assembly members and senior civil servants. Outlining the broad structure of the programme as envisaged thus far, Mr Semple said that for it to be a success the programme needed to be both attractive to participants and relevant. Thus the help and advice of those present would be greatly appreciated.
2. Before opening up to a general discussion Mr Semple invited each of the guests present to speak briefly on the subject.
3. *Sir Kenneth Stowe:* Sir Kenneth outlined his experience with CAPAM in which he closely examined many transitions of government, including Namibia, South Africa, Bulgaria and Mongolia. A common theme in all transitions was opposing dynamics of two kinds - the quest to preserve something valuable; and, the quest to change (ie revolutionary). These brought with them two agendas in which the former espoused a holding on agenda whilst the latter took on an overthrowing agenda. But within

each of these, tensions existed at lower levels. A third agenda had an overriding important significance, that of the economy (what President Clinton referred to as 'the economy stupid'). Drawing on his relevant experience, Sir Kenneth outlined three common themes to transition:

- (i) Each situation was unique in itself and had to be placed in its own context, thus it was not possible nor was it practical to read across the solution of one to another.
  - (ii) The preparation for transition in itself is of limited value - it is not what is learnt that is important but the process which is gone through to achieve that learning which matters most.
  - (iii) It is important throughout all of the process to recognise that governing and government is difficult.
4. Whatever process is undertaken, it is vital that participants are brought as close to real issues as possible and in so doing the "government" is joined with the 'administration'.
  5. In Northern Ireland terms, an international dimension will be helpful because those who have been involved elsewhere have the unique value as facilitators, not least because they have no axe to grind. CAPAM was formed on this basis. However, caution must be exercised in looking at international aid programmes which tend to be ruthlessly self-serving and have their own agendas.
  6. Although an international dimension is useful, local ownership is, however, vital. The 'political commonwealth of Northern Ireland' needs to be bound into the process in a way that they feel they own it. This must be on the basis that they are there to find their own solutions to their own problems. Any 'outsiders' involved must adopt a low profile.
  7. Finally, Sir Kenneth stressed that there should be no time lost in getting the process up and running. This should be seen as confidence building

and generating a belief that the process will work.

8. *Professor Des Rea:* Professor Rea opened by stating that some of the new politicians will be pragmatic, others will not. He agreed that ownership was very important and thus in engaging politicians with the process it was necessary to ask questions such as 'what do you believe you need?' or 'what is it that you want?' The parties must be to the forefront in helping to formulate the agenda with civil service development work feeding into this.
9. Experience has shown that the best form of learning is 'experiential learning'. The experience of actually doing is better than any form of simulation. Thus any training undertaken must be as relevant and as real as possible.
10. It is important for the civil service to recognise what politicians would be going through to get to the new Assembly and thus considerable humility was required on the part of the civil service.
11. *Professor Paul Corrigan:* Professor Corrigan picked up on the ownership theme, stating that formal ownership also meant giving the politicians the opportunity to say no, even though it was likely that very few would actually say no to learning. The situation in Northern Ireland is undoubtedly unique and there was a need to build on the newness and novelty of it.
12. There were however, some problems to be overcome. Firstly, there was a problem in getting people to actually participate. To do so, it might be necessary to have people who had something special to talk about, or to offer (ie 'stars'). Getting any adults to learn can present difficulties, as it can be perceived as threatening. This underlined the need for local

teachers and deliverers.

13. Different ways of learning were required. There can be no question of classroom-type lecturing. It is also important to deal with realism and not to hide from the truth (eg that difficulties and conflicts still lay ahead). Closing, Professor Corrigan said that whilst it was important to get the process up and running quickly, there might also be a need to look at continuation after a period of time to bed the process in more fully.
14. *Sir Kenneth Bloomfield:* Sir Kenneth opened by stressing that this is a very sensitive operation and that the tone would play an important part. If success was to be achieved, it was vital that the programme should not be in any way perceived as a conditioning process.
15. The make-up of the Assembly itself brought with it its own problems. There were many difficulties in dealing with a multi-faceted coalition.
16. The economy is a crucial issue. There is a need to ensure that wider economic realities are dealt with. Equally, it must be recognised that the public sector in NI has undergone somewhat of a metamorphosis in recent years and was now multi-layered. The new politicians must be made to recognise that NI is but a region and thus global stately issues would not be a feature, rather the new administration would be dealing with the management of services only. The relationship with new Ministers and Next Steps agencies would have to be examined closely as this was a significant change from 1973/74.
17. *Professor Paul Bew:* Professor Bew opened by referring to the process as community psychotherapy. A necessary choice had been made between good and practical government and political settlement. With

some of the practicalities being lost, the new Assembly would not have to face the harsh realities of 'the economy stupid'. The new administration would be elaborate and very complex and not lend itself easily to good government.

18. It is essential to build in questions into the process about what North/South arrangements would actually mean and how East/West relationships will work in practice. Such discussions should be actively encouraged as these were real issues which would have to be faced.
19. Professor Bew doubted that the membership of the new Assembly would have a firm and realistic idea of economic policy as they had been used to the politics of identity for some considerable time. There was a strong need to move on from this and deal with the very practical issues such as the management of the economy.
20. *Dr Maurice Hayes:* Dr Hayes opened by saying that the qualities of the membership of the new Assembly should not be underestimated. The previous Assembly in 1973/74 also had quality, but the system was such that not everyone knew what was going on. There would be a real problem in getting the Executive to work together and to realise that it was a shared enterprise.
21. Undoubtedly some would be hostile towards the civil service and thus the interface between Assembly members and civil servants would be a crucial matter. An induction programme for Assembly members could to some way to alleviating this.
22. The Belfast Agreement parks constitutional issues and thus the sooner the new Assembly gets on to deal with real issues the better. To facilitate this, consideration should be given to bridging the shadow period and

actually give the new Executive some real issues and real problems to deal with before devolution actually takes place.

23. *Dr Sean Rowland:* Dr Rowland referred to the international component stating that it was key in bringing added value to the process. Referring to the experience of Boston College, he stated that it was necessary to adopt a not purely academic process, but rather to look at theory in practice. Boston College tries to tailor their programmes where appropriate and thus make them of more value to participants. This also enables long term networks to be built up.
24. Administrators need to run the programmes and academic experts need to be heavily involved. However, administrators and academic experts are not interchangeable. Care would need to be taken in selection as the most expensive is not necessarily the best. Indeed the best would want to play their part and would probably come looking to do so.
25. There is a need to involve the senior civil service as part of the process but care needs to be taken with civil service involvement. The programme itself must stand alone and must not be seen as civil service driven. To this end, programming needs to be established in its own neutral venue.
26. *Jim Dougal:* Mr Dougal underscored the point about not underestimating the participants and ensuring that local politicians felt the full ownership of the process.
27. All NI politicians had in effect been in opposition for some 30 years. It was thus vital that they get as close as possible to real issues.
28. Recent approaches to Mr Dougal's offices have shown that all parties are

keen to see the new Assembly working and wanted further information on such issues as interaction with the European Union.

29. He agreed there was a need to include Ministers and officials together. It would also be valuable to bring the participants to Brussels and indeed bring Brussels to the participants.
30. A programme could have great value in bonding and this aspect of it should not be underestimated.
31. Within the bounds of accountability budgetary considerations should not become constraints to the success of the programme.

### Discussion

32. Subsequent discussion built on the themes which had been presented and the following points were made:
  - ◆ It is necessary to look at any restraints to progress laterally to see if they are in fact escapable (eg agentisation; Peach).
  - ◆ Close attention needs to be paid to the techniques which will be applied to a learning process.
  - ◆ Account needs to be taken of the fact that a close relationship already exists between politicians in NI and the NI Civil Service.
  - ◆ Suspicions need to be recognised and addressed - this applies equally to suspicions of the civil service and of 'outsiders' who may be used to deliver the programme.
  - ◆ Care needs to be taken at the outset, as to push too hard would put participants off. Confidence needs to be built on an individual level.
  - ◆ Ownership needs to stretch over a period of time and efforts made to ensure that it is sustained.

- ◆ The quality of the experience gained by participants will depend on what they hear from the most important people there (ie themselves).
- ◆ Individuals need to feel important within the process.
- ◆ Saleability of the programme is an important fact and the politicians need to want to do it. In essence, they must walk in, not be dragged in.
- ◆ If a modular system is to be adopted, an appetising menu needs to be drawn up.
- ◆ It will be necessary to address the fact that there is much ignorance between North and South mutually and new understandings need to be built up to dispel perceived threats.
- ◆ A game plan is needed to ensure that the process is carried out in an unthreatening way.
- ◆ Partnership between officials and politicians is key - the process should not just be seen as an encounter. Partnerships encouraged by European Union are a useful model on which to build.
- ◆ It would be useful to have the parties engage an 'outside' facilitator.

### Summary

33. Sir Kenneth Stowe summarised his view of the discussion by stating that bonding was important as good government is about that which is accrued between elected and appointed officials, in essence a team effort. The relationship between elected and appointed officials should not be underestimated as it is crucial to success. This will work in NI if it is taken forward with humility. The international experience is useful to draw from and this has shown that investment and confidence building is beyond price. Whilst 'outsiders' will undoubtedly play an important role, they should do so quietly and at a distance.

34. Mr Semple summarised by thanking everyone for a frank and useful



discussion. He said there was evidently a need to tread carefully while still advancing steadily. Ownership by participants was undoubtedly a vital feature but this would need to be subtly achieved. Finally, politicians must not be underestimated in either their skills or indeed their courage in coming forward to take up positions in the Assembly. To this end, civil servants would need to adopt an approach with humility but also with pro-activity.

35. Thanking everyone for their contribution, Mr Semple said that the planning team would undoubtedly be in touch with everyone present for future help and advice. In the meantime, they would absorb what had been said during the discussion.

DAVID CRABBE

☎ 28146