

Policy making in Northern Ireland: ignoring the evidence

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The public policy-making process in Northern Ireland during the period of direct rule from Westminster (1972–99) was dominated by senior civil servants working for busy British ministers preoccupied with wider constitutional and security issues. The recent return to devolved government after its fitful start has ushered in a new era of policy making informed to a much greater extent by evidence gathering. This article considers a significant policy issue – the Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland – as a means of examining how policy making is influenced by macro political factors aimed at stabilising the power-sharing Executive.

Introduction

The current system of public administration in Northern Ireland is both cumbersome and piecemeal. Its current format dates back only to December 1999 at which point power was devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and its Executive Committee as a result of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. Prior to devolution, six government departments were responsible to direct rule/Westminster ministers whose major preoccupation was security and constitutional issues, leaving senior civil servants to administer key public services in a largely unaccountable way. These circumstances resulted directly from wider political developments that led to the prorogation of the local Parliament (Stormont) in March 1972 – the so-called ‘Northern Ireland troubles’. One of the underlying factors behind the protests that characterised the early period of the troubles was discontent with public services among the nationalist population. The early 1970s, for example, witnessed the civil rights movement demand major reforms in local government in order to address unionist hegemony asserted through gerrymandered electoral wards, restricted franchise and discriminatory housing practices (Birrell and Murie, 1980; O’Dowd et al, 1980). Reforms came in the shape of the Macrory Report (1970), which divided services into regional (Stormont) and district administrative units (local authorities). Macrory’s proposals were, however, overtaken by political events and the implementation of direct rule from Westminster. In the absence of a regional tier at Stormont, what emerged was an emasculated form of local government and key public services delivered through a highly centralised system of public administration (Knox, 1999). Direct rule witnessed ad hoc reforms to public sector structures and a hugely bureaucratic response to the delivery of basic public services. When devolution came in 1999, local ministers launched the Review of Public Administration (RPA) in which the Executive pledged from the outset ‘to lead the most effective and accountable form of government in Northern Ireland’ (Northern Ireland Executive, 2002: 6).

Key words: evidence-based policy • Review of Public Administration • Northern Ireland • public sector reforms

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At the start of the review, 11 government departments were responsible for the bulk of 'transferred' public services;¹ 18 executive agencies operated within the remit of departments; and around 100 non-departmental public bodies carried out functions normally within the purview of elected bodies in other parts of the UK (eg education and libraries, health and social services, and housing). Local government (26 district councils) assumed a minor public service delivery role, responsible for less than 5% of the public purse. With the advent of a new devolved political dispensation in 1999, the (then) First Minister in the Assembly described it as 'an opportunity to put in place a modern, accountable, effective system of public administration that can deliver a high quality set of public services to our citizens' (Trimble, 2002: 15).

The terms of reference for the RPA were:

To review the existing arrangements for the accountability, administration and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland, and to bring forward options for reform which are consistent with the arrangements and principles of the Belfast Agreement, within an appropriate framework of political and financial accountability. (RPA, 2003: 39)

The suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly in October 2002 led to British ministers assuming control of the review process, but at that point with the understanding that a returning Executive would take 'more detailed decisions which will be necessary following agreement on the broad scope and characteristics of any new system' (Pearson, 2003: 3). In the absence of a wider political agreement to re-establish devolution, the (then) Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Peter Hain) announced the outcomes of the review process in the document *Better government for Northern Ireland: Final decisions of the Review of Public Administration* in March 2006 (Northern Ireland Office, 2006).

This article will examine three issues. First, it will outline the considerable body of evidence amassed by the review team to support the proposed changes in public administration in Northern Ireland. Second, it will highlight examples of where the review appears to be unravelling and a new set of decisions put in place. Third, it will reflect on what this case study tells us about the influence of political factors in the face of strong empirical evidence on public sector reform.

The selection of the RPA as a case study for examining evidenced-based policy making seemed appropriate for two key reasons. First, the sheer volume of empirical research undertaken to inform the decision-making process was such that 'testing' the extent to which this happened could be easily monitored and therefore offered the limiting case. If policy was not informed by the weight of evidence in this case, how likely would this be in other policy areas? Second, the scale, importance and potential impact of this public policy warranted independent scrutiny given the vested interests of those involved (civil servants, politicians [Members of the Legislative Assembly or MLAs] and councillors). The author was directly involved in conducting research commissioned by the review team but remained independent of the review process. Hence, the case study examined here is based primarily on secondary data of which there is a wealth. Primary data were gathered through

facilitation sessions held with local government chief executives, councillors and interaction with MLAs in giving evidence to a Stormont committee.

The process

Before considering the evidence that underpinned the RPA, it is important to note three process factors that impinged on both the conduct of the review and its early implementation. First, the review was conducted by a group of civil servants based in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), supported by a panel of independent experts 'in the fields of governance and organisational change' (RPA, 2005: 9, 145). These arrangements attracted criticism at the outset and during its conclusions from some MLAs. Dr Ian Paisley (Democratic Unionist Party) said in the original Assembly debate on the issue that 'this review is not open, above board and transparent – it will be under the control of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister', perhaps with a hint of retrospective irony, given that he is now First Minister (Paisley, 2002: 63).

Second, the parameters of the review were drawn to exclude the 11 government departments. The (then) Deputy First Minister (Mark Durkan) defended this decision on the basis that the review was not a means by which 'to renegotiate the Belfast Agreement by the back door', since the power-sharing Executive was predicated on the four main political parties holding ministerial portfolios (Wilson, 2001). Any proposals by opponents of the Agreement to dismantle government departments under the RPA could therefore have wider political consequences for a power-sharing Executive. Durkan (2002: 67) argued that to examine 'the distribution of functions between the 11 departments would detract from the main focus of the review. Energy would be channelled into turf wars rather than better services'. Democratic Unionist Party MLA Sammy Wilson expressed his disappointment that government departments would not be included, describing this decision as an indefensible situation' (Wilson, 2002: 69).

Third, the influence of the civil service on the review process also attracted criticism. Civil servants were seen as somehow complicit in their role of pushing through reforms under direct rule arrangements. William Hay (the current speaker in the Northern Ireland Assembly) argued during a transitional Assembly debate:

Civil servants and (direct rule) Ministers are not listening. I have no quarrel with civil servants; however, they appear to be driving the Review of Public Administration through as quickly as possible in the interests of the Secretary of State and the direct rule Ministers, so that when the House is up and running, there will be very little that anyone can do about it. That is the great worry. (Hay, 2006: 47)

Civil servants will argue, in defence, that it is their duty to serve the ministers of the day, whether these are direct rule or local ministers.

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The evidence

The evidence base for the public sector reforms agenda included a comprehensive programme of research. The work undertaken by the review team is set out below in summary form.²

Attitudinal surveys

Six separate Northern Ireland-wide attitudinal probability surveys were conducted between September 2002 and July 2005 with around 1,200 respondents in each survey. The aim of the surveys was to gather the views of the general public on their experiences of public services across a range of issues including:

- satisfaction with public services;
- knowledge of who is responsible for public services;
- complaints;
- quality of service;
- service improvement;
- accountability;
- local councils;
- public bodies;
- equality;
- information on public services;
- local identity; and
- public consultation.

Listening to people's views

The RPA team and panel of independent experts listened (as part of a pre-consultation exercise) to the views of over 70 organisations including all 26 district councils, the five education and library boards, and all the health and personal social services organisations. In addition, they commissioned several research consultations. Almost 100 structured interviews were completed with senior staff involved in the provision of public services, and with key voluntary organisations that access and advise on public services. Some 46 structured interviews were conducted with elected representatives. Four major focus group studies were carried out to elicit people's experiences of public services as follows:

- 24 focus groups reflecting the make-up of the general population;
- 30 focus groups reflecting the make-up of specific sectors in Northern Ireland (minority ethnic groups, older people, younger people, those of different sexual orientation and people with disabilities);
- 16 focus groups reflecting the general population who were consulted on specific issues of community planning, local roads, libraries, youth services, service delivery, governance and equality; and
- 31 focus groups with public sector staff, spanning the range of public sector bodies, which drew on their experience of services delivery.

Study visits

The RPA team undertook a series of study visits to other jurisdictions (Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, Sweden and the US) to consider how public services were organised elsewhere. They examined a range of issues including:

- constitutional measures and structures of government;
- size of regional and local authorities;
- governance and financial arrangements;
- drivers of reform and change;
- service delivery; and
- human resources issues.

Mapping the public sector

The complex structure of the pre-existing Northern Ireland public sector was mapped in two ways. First, maps were drawn showing the organisational structure of the system of public administration to include staffing levels, budgets and detailed functional responsibilities. The maps also depicted financial and accountability arrangements between parent departments, agencies, boards, trusts and non-departmental public bodies. Second, 'service to citizen' maps were drawn, which grouped services in a way that indicated how citizens accessed them and their location within the Northern Ireland Executive's priorities in *Draft programme for government* (Northern Ireland Executive, 2002).

Briefing papers on key issues

The review commissioned a number of academics to provide a briefing on the following key issues in public administration:

- checks and balances;
- civic leadership;
- funding local government;
- leadership;
- local government representation;
- 'joined-up' government;
- quality of service;
- partnership;
- e-government;
- accountability;
- semi-state bodies;
- subsidiarity;
- multi-level governance; and
- public sector reform.

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These papers provided the conceptual context for the work of the review team and located the practical details of the RPA reform agenda within a wider research framework.

Research reports

Several specific research reports dealt with a range of issues that evolved as the review progressed. These included work on a Northern Ireland–Scotland comparison, which examined the relative size, structure and funding arrangements of the public sector in Northern Ireland compared to Scotland. In addition, research was conducted on the distribution of the property wealth base across Northern Ireland aimed at assessing how a reconfiguration of local government areas would affect income from district and regional rates (Northern Ireland has a property-based rates system based on capital value). Work was also completed on aggregating existing local government districts to meet a set of criteria around population size, compactness and balance in terms of numbers of councils. A financial exercise was conducted to estimate the efficiency savings resulting from the implementation of the RPA's recommendations.

Major public consultations

Two Northern Ireland-wide public consultation exercises were held. The first took place between October 2003 and February 2004 and sought public reaction to how/by whom public services might be provided within a range of five models outlined in the consultation document (status quo; centralised services; regional and sub-regional public bodies; enhanced local government; and strong local government). The first consultation resulted in 170 written submissions from a wide range of stakeholders, including the political parties, public sector organisations and a number of individuals. The second consultation ran from March to September 2005 and sought views on the future shape of local government, the administration of health and social services, the administrative support for education, the future of non-departmental public bodies, and the development of leadership and capacity within the public sector. A total of 1,032 responses were received from organisations in the public, private, voluntary and community sectors, and private individuals. The majority of the responses (62%) came from the education sector and addressed two campaign issues (the future of the youth service and the Council for Catholic-maintained Schools). Non-campaign responses amounted to 443 replies (RPA, 2005b).

Clearly, this is an impressive body of empirical evidence on which to base policy proposals. Research of this order does not come cheap. Under a Freedom of Information request, the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) established that the review process cost more than £3.5 million over its four-year life. Critics will now question its value for money. The figure does not include the costs associated with the work of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner who has made recommendations to reconfigure the structure of 26 district councils to seven larger local authorities.

The reforms

The final decisions of the RPA made clear reference to the use of evidence in determining the final outcomes. The Secretary of State, in announcing the first wave of reforms, commented:

By any standards this has been a thorough review. It has been underpinned by a significant body of research, two wide-ranging consultations and has been supported by a panel of independent experts appointed by the Executive. It is a review which has been open and transparent in every way. (Hain, 2005: 2)

The final decisions contained in the document *Better government for Northern Ireland* (Northern Ireland Office, 2006: 5) refer readers to ‘copies of all the evidence that helped to inform’ the final outcomes of the review. Lord Rooker, in setting out his specific reforms for the local government sector, argued ‘that all the evidence – and I stress evidence – not opinion or speculation, pointed to seven councils as the optimum model for local government in Northern Ireland’ (Rooker, 2005: 21). In short, the RPA was hailed as a reform package that has been comprehensively underpinned by a strong empirical base – a good example of evidence-based policy making in practice.

The final decisions emerging from the RPA can be summarised as follows.

Local government reforms

- Local councils will be reduced from 26 to seven by Spring 2009.
- The Local Government Boundaries Commissioner submitted his final recommendations on the proposed seven local government districts and their constituent wards (seven councils x 60 wards) to the Department of the Environment in May 2007.
- The new councils will have an increased range of powers including local roads, planning, rural development, planning local bus services, fire and rescue, future European programmes and some housing-related functions. The councils will also have a statutory duty to lead a community planning process, and all other agencies must work with the councils. Councils will be given the power of well-being.

Education restructuring

- A new education and skills authority will be established (April 2008) to focus on the operational delivery of education services. It will also be involved in the strategic planning of the schools’ estate and ensuring delivery of the years 14–19 curriculum. The authority will bring together all the direct support functions currently undertaken by the education and library boards, Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the Regional Training Unit. It will also have responsibility for frontline and related functions currently undertaken by the Council for Catholic-maintained Schools (CCMS),

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Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG), the Irish language school sector.

- The Department of Education will continue to be responsible for education policy and strategy. Some of the operational functions currently performed by the Department of Education will transfer to the new authority.
- A new education advisory forum will be established (April 2008), which will provide a direct link between education sectors and the Department of Education.

Health and social services restructuring

- A single health and social services authority, replacing the existing four health and social services boards, will be established to promote the health and well-being of the community, implement government policies for health and social services, and manage the overall performance of the system (from April 2008).
- Seven local commissioning groups (LCGs) will be set up within the health and social services authority (fully operational from April 2008); these will map onto the new district councils, be demand-led by patients, and driven by general practitioners and primary care professionals.
- One patient and client council will replace the existing four health and social services councils.
- 18 health and social services trusts will be reduced to five and have been fully operational since April 2007 (the Ambulance Service remains as a separate trust).

Quangos

- The remaining 81 public bodies will be reduced to 54. This will be achieved, in the main, by merging bodies or transferring complete functions to local government or central government. Those quangos that are not transferred or merged will have reduced responsibilities through some of their functions moving to local government.

The seven council model

The decision to move to the seven council model was critical to the format of the reform package, not just for the local government sector itself but also because other key functions such as health and policing adopted the new council boundaries. One independent expert on the RPA team put this emphatically: 'we have a complete expectation that all public services will now have to organise themselves around the geographies of the new seven councils. It will not be that they can opt out of that model' (Frawley, 2005: 10). The review team stressed the empirical basis of arriving at the seven council decision. The civil servant leading the review, in evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, argued:

We looked at everything we could measure and *all of that research* came together showing that seven was the optimum number of councils.... We were aware

of the feelings of the political parties and others in local government from the consultation responses and from elsewhere. We were also aware of other views expressed in the consultation where 63% of those who responded on the number of councils favoured seven, as against 18% who favoured 15 councils, accepting of course that it (the 18%) was the political parties and the local government sector. (McConnell, 2005: 4; emphasis added)

This seems a strange admission that confirms that the review team and direct rule ministers chose to ignore the views of two key stakeholder groups with whom they had consulted – the political parties and the local government sector. That said, the response of the local government sector had been timid at best and equivocal at worst. The review team argued that during the consultation process with the 26 local authorities they had offered councillors a zero-based approach to the reforms but received mixed views on the range of services that might be delivered by local government in the future. Local councillors argued that they should have greater legislative powers to act in ways that would benefit the local community but were vague on substance. They also suggested that the roles of the Assembly and local government should be clearly delineated but failed to elaborate on the details of central–local relations (RPA, 2004). In short, when offered the opportunity to be ambitious on the future prospects for local government, councillors proved ultra-conservative in their thinking. They seemed more preoccupied with saving their own councils from demise rather than engaging in a strategic debate about the sector. As time has past, however, and with the reality that ‘strong local government’ promised in the review is a hollow claim, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), an umbrella group of all councils, has mobilised effectively against the modest concessions available to the sector (NILGA, 2007).

The RPA team leader failed to mention in his evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee that a probability Omnibus Survey of over 1,000 people was conducted by the government’s own statistics unit (the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency), which arrived at very different conclusions to those announced by the Secretary of State in his final decisions policy paper. The results are shown in Table 1, which compares data from the Northern Ireland-wide probability survey with those of the self-selected public consultation responses.

The data show that the critical decision to move to a seven council model was based on 70 self-selected consultees who responded to the RPA’s public consultation, while the views of a random sample of people throughout Northern Ireland were ignored (data that can be extrapolated to the overall population within confidence intervals). The RPA team’s defence of this position was that the respondents to the public consultation represented significant organisations such as the Confederation of

Table 1: How many councils?

Preference expressed	Omnibus Survey	Public consultation
7 councils	26% (n=150)	62% (n=70)
11 councils	21% (n=126)	20% (n=23)
15 councils	53% (n=310)	18% (n=20)
Total	100% (n=586)	100% (n=113)

British Industry (CBI), the Institute of Directors (IoD) and a number of community and voluntary organisations. The RPA team argued that these organisations carried 'more weight' than survey consultees. By way of rebuttal, the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (Sir Patrick Cormack) pressed the leader of the review team to quantify the number of votes cast (at the local government elections) for councillors disagreeing with the seven-council option. The RPA team leader responded:

I cannot tell you that. We did not make a recommendation to ministers. We as a review team conducted this review in a very open and consultative manner ... our analysis points to seven as the optimum for service delivery and we always emphasise that it was service delivery. We accepted totally that there were political factors; there were softer issues that could only be dealt with politically. (McConnell, 2005: 5)

No explanation was provided as to the nature of the 'softer political issues'.

Unravelling the review?

The restoration of devolution and the establishment of a power-sharing Executive on 8 May 2007 witnessed local political parties revisiting the outcomes of the review, in particular the proposals for local government. This is hardly surprising given that, during the consultations, four of the five main political parties were in favour of 15 councils and expressed concerns about the loss of local identity and the potential for 'balkanisation' of Northern Ireland with a significant East/West split in religious segregation. Since then, there have been several significant developments.

Health Minister Michael McGimpsey announced (6 July 2007) that he needed more time to consider the establishment of the proposed health and social services authority, which was intended to replace Northern Ireland's existing four health and social services boards. The Minister claimed in a memo to his staff that 'the Review of Public Administration is not my plan, as I was not involved in the decisions taken under Direct Rule' (McGimpsey, 2007: 1). A delay in this key structural reform in health has been announced despite the fact that many of the senior management appointments to the new authority have already been made.

Education Minister Cairíona Ruane announced (19 July 2007) that 'the review of public administration project in education is too big and complex' to try to implement by April 2008 (Ruane, 2007: 2). She therefore agreed, with the endorsement of the Northern Ireland Executive, to postpone the setting up of the new education and skills authority by up to one year. The Minister pointed out that in drawing up her plans for change in the education sector 'there is adequate time for scrutiny of legislation by the Education Committee and the Assembly' (Ruane, 2007: 2). A strong suggestion that things could change as a consequence of such scrutiny.

Finally, Environment Minister Arlene Foster announced (6 July 2007) a new review of local government, which will consider three elements:

- developing a shared vision for local government;
- the number of councils; and
- the functions to transfer to local government.

In terms of the number of councils, the review will consider the three options (7, 11 or 15 council models) previously set out in the *Review of Public Administration: Further consultation* document (RPA, 2005). In short, a range of structural and functional reforms for local government were re-examined – a ‘review of the review’, if you will. The new review resulted in a compromise outcome announced by the Minister of the Environment in March 2008: there will be 11 new councils from 2011 with limited additional functions.

So why is the review unravelling, given the strong empirical basis for its original recommendations? The return of devolved government in May 2007 was a significant factor. During a debate in the transitional Assembly, serious concerns were expressed ‘about the potential of a seven council model to centralise services, remove jobs and resources from many areas and to underpin sectarianism and community division’ (Hay, 2006). Members of the transitional Assembly called on the Secretary of State to shelve plans for the so-called seven ‘super councils’ and allow the decision on future local government arrangements to be taken by a restored Northern Ireland Assembly.

The likely move away from the seven council model under the current Department of Environment review will have a major impact on the fundamentals of the original reform package in a number of ways. The reforms were predicated on the four principles of subsidiarity, equality and good relations, common boundaries, and strong local government. Coterminosity will now be much more difficult to achieve and almost certainly not on a 1:1 basis between local government and other public services such as health, planning and roads. The two-tier regional/sub-regional model of public administration that informed the original thinking of the review is now in some doubt. The model envisaged the role of the regional tier (Assembly, Executive and central government departments) to develop and shape policy and legislation, and set strategic objectives for services. The sub-regional tier would have, at its core, strong local government based on council areas sharing common boundaries with other service providers. The sub-regional tier would be responsible for service delivery coordinated by councils through new statutory powers in community planning. With likely moves towards a larger number of councils, the balance will shift towards more centralised service provision, undermining the original two-tier model.

The reporting structures of the new review process confirm its highly centralised nature in which senior civil servants dominate. Up until the restoration of devolution in May 2007 an RPA Steering Group chaired by the head of the civil service and comprising *some* permanent secretaries, the chair of the Public Service Commission and chief executive of the Strategic Investment Board, oversaw the implementation of the review. Since devolution a revised structure is now in place. A new RPA Strategic Review Group chaired by the head of the civil service and comprising *only* permanent secretaries has been established – a clear indication of the tightening central grip on the levers of change. The Strategic Review Group reports directly to the Northern Ireland Executive.

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The current chair of the Northern Ireland Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) described the position thus:

The RPA proposals for strong local government were suitably vague.... Subsequent discussions between senior civil servants and senior local government officials have demonstrated that there is, at best, a lack of appetite amongst civil servants to transfer responsibilities and resources, and in various departments, senior officials have displayed total resistance to the idea of functions moving to local government control. (McGrillen, 2007: 52)

These centripetal tendencies could receive further impetus if proposals to remove the dual mandate (MLAs who are also local councillors) are implemented by the Assembly. Politicians in the new power-sharing Executive may well feel reluctant to promote the principle of subsidiarity and devolve functions to local government.

There has also been a political backlash against the proposed reconfiguration of local government under the seven council model because of the resulting 'balkanisation' along sectarian lines. Councils in the west of the Province – South, West and North West Local Government Districts – will have 55%, 62% and 69% Catholic populations, respectively; those in the east of the Province – Inner East, East and North East Local Government Districts – will have 73%, 75% and 72% Protestant populations, respectively.³ The Belfast Local Government District would remain fairly evenly balanced. As equality and good relations were one of the guiding principles of the RPA process, such a configuration seems at odds with the government's own policy outlined in *A shared future: Policy and strategic framework for good relations in Northern Ireland* (OFMDFM, 2005). The central message of this policy is to promote 'sharing over separation' through building 'strong cohesive communities' (OFMDFM, 2005: 13). Somewhat surprisingly, considerations of exacerbating sectarianism did not feature in the thinking of the review team. When asked by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee whether they had taken into account such an outcome, the head of the review team responded:

No. Against the background of the analytical work that we have done, ministers asked us to give some consideration to the implications of the different scenarios – seven, 11 and 15 – in terms of political outcomes, electoral outcomes and so on. What I would say on that is that self-evidently the larger the councils, the more even the distribution is across, in the sense that minorities are bigger within larger councils. (McConnell, 2005: 6)

If doubts have now been raised around the four core principles underpinning the RPA (subsidiarity, equality and good relations, common boundaries, and strong local government), what are the reforms intended to achieve? In other words, how will the outcomes of the RPA be judged? Two recurring themes to which ministers made reference were efficiency savings and an improvement in the quality of public services. In the case of the former, the (then) Secretary of State in his foreword to *Better Government for Northern Ireland* (Northern Ireland Office, 2006: 3) noted: 'taxpayers will get better value for their money through the savings made in reducing bureaucracy being redirected to front-line services'. He estimated these savings to

be in the order of £200 million per annum. His civil servants were, however, more circumspect, pointing out that:

[T]here are substantial savings that could be made although it is not an area where any one would put our hand up and say 'this will be the level of savings'. That will depend on the ingenuity and innovation of the managers who design these new structures. (McConnell, 2005: 7)

Officials being cautious in the face of a complex restructuring of the public sector or an exercise in obfuscation? What is clear about these claims of significant savings and their reinvestment in frontline services is that they will be difficult (or impossible) to track.

The RPA offered the prospect of improved public services. One former minister with direct responsibility for the review described it this way: 'improving the quality of public services should be the *prime* consideration for reform' (Pearson, 2004: 1; author's emphasis). This was also the original intent expressed by the Northern Ireland devolved Executive, which stated that 'ultimately the review of public administration must demonstrate it results in measurably better services for the public that deliver real value for money' (OFMDFM, 2004: 89). Yet the 'prime considerations' of improved quality and measurably better public services seem to have disappeared from any of the final statements on the review. The Secretary of State's announcement on the outcome of the review process (Hain, 2005) and the *Better government for Northern Ireland* paper (Northern Ireland Office, 2006) makes no reference to improving the quality of public services, much less how this will be measured as a consequence of the review's implementation. This is despite the fact that data were gathered⁴ for the review that baselined people's satisfaction levels with services in advance of implementing the reforms (Knox and Carmichael, 2005).

Conclusion

The RPA benefited from an extensive body of empirical work, which informed officials' advice to ministers. The certainty with which the seven council model was promoted as the 'right' foundation for all other public sector reforms has led to some important questions now being asked, as the key outcomes of the review begin to unravel. Was the original empirical evidence wrong? Why is the 'review of the review', now being undertaken by the Department of the Environment, limiting itself to the options previously rejected by the RPA team? Clearly, political factors had an important part to play in the turn of events. Two general issues are raised in a recent publication by the UK government's Social Research Unit that help to explain the circumstances described in Northern Ireland. First, political commitments often lead you in directions that the evidence does not necessarily strongly support. Second, a change of government could also mean adjustments to policy priorities and policy direction: longer-term policy strategies do not always survive a change of administration (Campbell et al, 2007: 13). Devolved government ushered in a group of MLAs who, in part, felt goaded by direct rule ministers into power-sharing arrangements. One aspect of that provocation by British ministers was to oppose

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the wishes of all but one of the political parties and the local government sector on public sector reform.

When locally elected ministers took over the reins of power they felt little or no ownership of direct rule decisions, however well conceived and empirically grounded. Faced with a reforms implementation timetable that was already under way, ministers opted to decelerate and rethink the *fait accompli* with which they had been presented. This has played into the hands of some civil servants who, from the start, openly resisted delegating new powers to councils. MLAs, in turn, will not want to see a much strengthened local government sector, particularly if the dual mandate is removed. Electoral popularity is not well served by divesting functional responsibilities.

There is also a wider political agenda at work. Young et al (2002), for example, describe one model of research–policy relations in which policy is the outcome of a political process. The evidence base is politically driven, with studies used to support the position of the government of the day, the relevant minister or perhaps civil servants most closely involved. This model is at odds with the ‘assumed relatively unproblematic rational and linear, relationships between research, evidence, policy and practice’ referred to by Nutley and colleagues (Nutley, 2007: 6; Nutley et al, 2007). This rational approach does not reflect the realities of policy making in practice. Walker (2007: 235), for example, argues that empiricists ‘have a problem with the sheer messiness of politics and, by extension, with the interface between political will and bureaucratic outcome’. He cites Dunn (2000) who claims that would-be suppliers of evidence for policy ‘mistake the rhetoric of coherence and steadiness of purpose for the reality of improvisation, trade-offs, confusion, discomfiture and sheer fatigue’ – the political context of decision making. Walker concludes that there can be politics without evidence but probably not the converse’ and ‘if evidence comes first’ then it may be bad for democracy. Bulmer et al (2007) also highlight the importance of politics in decision making. They describe various obstacles to the implementation of evidence-based policy, one of which is the political direction and ultimately political control synonymous with the system of government in the UK. They contest the extent to which policy making is evidence driven or even evidence based, describing the situation as better characterised by ‘evidence-informed’ rather than ‘evidence-based’ policy making.

The political context in which the RPA was/is being conducted is hugely important in understanding the relationship between its empirical findings and their (lack of) influence on policy making. The overriding political concern in Northern Ireland is to support and embed the hard-fought power-sharing Executive. The Democratic Unionist Party/Sinn Féin ‘partnership’ has shown early signs of success. This success is, in part, predicated on having ministers with significant departmental functions who can promote themselves as mature politicians capable of moving out of the sectarian bear pit and, importantly, in the case of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Ulster Unionist Party, advancing their political parties in the future. None of this is possible if government departments over which these ministers preside lose functions. If, for example, the existing Department of Regional Development (DRD), which has already seen the transfer of the water service to a government-owned company outside the remit of the civil service, hands over its roads functions to local government, the DRD minister will in effect be without

portfolio. In short, the retention of public services at the centre operating through civil service departments is critical to shoring-up and stabilising the power-sharing Executive.

In analysing whether and how research gets used, Nutley et al (2007) cite four key factors: the nature of the research to be applied; the personal characteristics of both researchers and potential research users; the links between research and its users; and the context for the use of the research. Above all, they conclude it is the last of these – context – that seems to be the key to whether and how research gets used. The rational, linear model referred to above, which ‘views evidence from research as relatively straightforward facts to be weighed in making policy decisions ... fails to fully capture the complexity of the research/policy nexus, the political context or the contested nature of research evidence’ (Nutley et al, 2007: 268). So it is in Northern Ireland. The new political dispensation in the form of devolution (December 1999) hastened a review of the structures of public administration; the Secretary of State baited local politicians with the threat of an imposed ‘solution’ in the form of the policy document *Better government for Northern Ireland* (Northern Ireland Office, 2006) to further wider political goals; and, most recently, the internal struggle between Stormont and local government, all testify to the highly political context in which the RPA is taking place.

The ‘review of the review’ has led to a reconsideration of the structures of public bodies: a postponement in setting up the education and skills authority; a reconsideration of how many councils to have; and whether to proceed with the health and social services authority. ‘Back to the drawing board’ has been to the detriment of a parallel reform track aimed at modernising public services, now being considered only on what civil servants describe as ‘a care and maintenance basis’. The OFMDFM’s Policy Innovation Unit promotes the development of an evidence base in order to achieve effective policy making, arguing that ‘good quality policy making depends on high quality information’ (OFMDFM, 2007: 7). The RPA as a case study in evidence-based policy making has demonstrated that an extensive empirical base cannot, in itself, guarantee particular policy outcomes. It also rather ironically illustrates that the comprehensive information gathered to help formulate policies on reform has not been replicated on policy outcomes. The RPA appears not only to be unravelling but its central purposes, defined in measurable policy outputs and outcomes, are far from clear and have shifted over time. If it is not about achieving efficiency savings and an improvement in the quality of public services (its original goals), what is the RPA trying to achieve?

Notes

¹ The Northern Ireland Assembly governs Northern Ireland in respect of ‘transferred matters’, and also ‘reserved matters’ with the Secretary of State’s consent. ‘Excepted matters’ remain the responsibility of the UK Parliament. Examples of transferred matters are education, health and agriculture. Reserved matters include policing and criminal law, which will be transferred to the Assembly at a later date. Excepted matters are those of national importance, such as defence, taxation and foreign policy.

² The detail of the research evidence referred to in this section can be accessed at www.archive.rpani.gov.uk/researchguide.htm

³ These figures are based on aggregating the 2001 population Census data for the amalgam of existing local authorities proposed under the seven council model. They do not take account of some changes outlined by the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner.

⁴ Two probability survey datasets, the Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey 2002 ($n=1,203$) and the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2003 ($n=1,800$) asked respondents how satisfied they were with public services.

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