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The European model of service delivery: a partnership approach in Northern Ireland

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SUMMARY

The volatile political and security environment of Northern Ireland has for 26 years focused attention on tackling the, so far, intractable constitutional question of its position within the United Kingdom and the island of Ireland. The collapse of the IRA ceasefire in February 1996 and fears of a possible return to violence by Protestant paramilitaries have heightened tensions. This protracted period of violence has deflected attention away from a system of public service administration in Northern Ireland characterized by serious problems of accountability. Essential public services operate under the aegis of appointed boards, and the major repository of power, under a system of Direct Rule from Westminster, is the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, a British Cabinet Minister. Under a recent European initiative (the EC Peace and Reconciliation Programme, 1995) an alternative model of service delivery provides a major opportunity for administrative reform in Northern Ireland. This model is based on a partnership approach in which councillors, the private and voluntary sectors collaborate to deliver services. Although still in its early stages, this approach could sever the link between political progress and administrative change which has contributed for too long to the 'democratic deficit' in Northern Ireland. © 1998 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

The changing and volatile political milieu in Northern Ireland deflects attention from a system of public service administration characterized by serious problems of accountability. Pending the outcome of the constitutional proposals under discussion at the time of writing, essential public services operate under the aegis of appointed boards, and the major repository of power, under a system of Direct Rule from Westminster, is the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, a British Cabinet Minister. One commentator described the system thus:

Apart from what are little more than parish councils, Northern Ireland's all-embracing public sector is ruled either personally by British Ministers or boards appointed by them. For 20 years no ruler of Northern Ireland has been elected by its people. In no reputable sense of the term is Northern Ireland a democracy. It is a colony. Its people react as colonial people normally react, by turning to the political extremes (Jenkins, 1993).

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It is perhaps ironic that the Northern Ireland civil rights campaign of 1968,¹ designed to address some of the inequities in public administration, contributed, in part, to a system of Direct Rule which has exacerbated, in a different form, problems of local accountable governance (Buckland, 1981; Whyte, 1990). Throughout the period of Direct Rule, citizens of Northern Ireland have acquiesced in a system of public service provision euphemistically described as having a 'democratic deficit'. Whilst the abuse of powers by erstwhile public bodies (particularly local authorities) in service delivery played a major part in the creation of the present system of administration in Northern Ireland, this has been compounded by government policies in Great Britain, adopted in the Province, which have eroded local democracy and contributed to the growth of quangos and other non-elected public bodies.

This article begins by describing the current system of public administration in Northern Ireland and highlights the inherent weaknesses in accountability. It then considers public service provision by local government, as the only remaining democratic forum, and the potential for enhancing its role in the absence of devolved powers. The European model of service provision, exemplified by the EC Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation launched in July 1995, is used to illustrate a partnership approach within local government. Finally, the article considers the potential of this EC service provision model as a means of enhancing local accountability and creating a sense of community ownership, where apathy and impotence are the norm, in the face of improved governance inextricably linked to an overall political settlement.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The current system of public administration in Northern Ireland is a product of the political turmoil from the late 1960s onwards and its consequences for the machinery of government. The imposition of Direct Rule under the Northern Ireland (Temporary Provisions) Act 1972, following the resignation of the Northern Ireland Government, led the United Kingdom Government to assume full and direct responsibility for its administration under the newly created post of Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Ditch, 1977; Birrell, 1978). Direct Rule, despite the passage of time, remains a temporary phenomenon renewable annually by the United Kingdom Parliament. As a consequence, it has incrementally embedded a system of unaccountable public administration in Northern Ireland, conceived initially as short-term, and inextricably linked the future developments of service delivery to progress on the

¹The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was established in February 1967 to spearhead a campaign for civil rights for Catholics. Its basic aims were: one man (sic), one vote in council elections; the ending of gerrymandered electoral boundaries; machinery to prevent discrimination by public authorities and to deal with complaints; the fair allocation of public housing; the repeal of the Special Powers Act; and the disbandment of the 'B' Specials. The Cameron Commission (1969), appointed by the Northern Ireland Government to investigate the causes and circumstances of the violence, found seven general causes of the disorder. Six of these were Catholic grievances about housing, discrimination, gerrymandering, the 'B' Specials, the Special Powers Act and the failure to get any redress of complaints—and one was Protestant fear of the threat posed by an increase in Catholic populations and powers.

constitutional/security fronts. A senior civil servant in the Northern Ireland Office, describing the durability of administrative structures, noted:

As long as Direct Rule continues, then the organization (of government administration) is less likely to be fundamentally modified, although previous experience suggests that there will continue to be changes at the margin (Bell, 1987, p. 225).

The Secretary of State, the Westminster cabinet minister responsible for Northern Ireland, has direction and control of Northern Ireland departments, for which she is accountable to Parliament, and introduces Northern Ireland legislation at Westminster, generally through Orders in Council. Orders in Council are a type of delegated legislation introduced under a procedure which allows limited parliamentary time for debate and permits no amendments. They must be accepted or rejected in their entirety (Hadfield, 1990).² Working through the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), the Secretary of State therefore has overall responsibility for the government of Northern Ireland. She is directly involved with political and constitutional matters, security policy and broad economic questions. The major functional areas of government, law and order, economic development, education, health and social services and the environment are shared amongst the other ministers. The ministerial team has a constituency base in England and none has electoral accountability to the citizens of Northern Ireland. The situation has been summarized as follows:

With the exception of the short-lived Executive³ interlude in 1974, the ability of local politicians to influence the government and administration of Northern Ireland has been extremely limited. The diminished role of local government, the heavy reliance on a range of intermediate bodies to provide a wide range of public goods and services and the bluntness of the Order in Council procedure adopted at Westminster to deal with legislation affecting the Province, all combined to give the regime of Direct Rule an impermeable character (O'Leary *et al.*, 1988, p. 86).

The establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1982, as a mechanism for 'rolling devolution' in which local politicians were gradually to assume executive powers, offered some prospect for local accountability. The Assembly scrutinized the work of Northern Ireland government departments and, like Select Committees in Westminster, could call for papers, persons and records to assist their enquiries. Observers of the Assembly concluded that its potential for executive scrutiny was governed by the commitment of the Secretary of State to provide the means to undertake this role. The impression was that the Secretary of State could delimit its capacity to act. This gained plausibility when ministers called before the Assembly

²In a debate in the House of Commons on ministerial accountability in Northern Ireland, a Minister described the Order in Council procedure as the 'least bad way of legislating for the Province' (Hanley, 1991, p. 663). Whilst conceding that it was unsatisfactory and did not provide the degree of accountability afforded to Bills presented to Parliament, he defended the process which allowed prior consultation on proposed draft orders.

³This is a reference to the first attempt to secure constitutional reform following the introduction of Direct Rule when a Northern Ireland Assembly was elected by proportional representation and a power-sharing Executive formed from its members. Grassroots Protestants made it clear, through a general strike, that they would accept no dealings with the Republic in a Council of Ireland, nor would they share power with Catholics. The power-sharing Executive collapsed in 1974.

treated their appearance as no more than a public relations exercise, in the knowledge that they were not accountable to this forum (O'Leary *et al.*, 1988).

With the demise of the Assembly in 1986, scrutiny of central government functions reverted to Select Committees in Westminster. Their coverage of Northern Ireland matters, however, was either fragmentary or non-existent and this remained the case until December 1993, when, 24 hours after the Downing Street Declaration⁴ was announced, the government flagged its intention to set up a Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee. Opponents of the UK Government saw this as the price paid to Unionists for their support over the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, 'to save the Government's bacon over Maastricht and ... a sop to get Unionists to acquiesce in the Downing Street Declaration' (McGrady, 1994, pp. 359–360). The Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee⁵ was set up in 1994 to scrutinize the work in Northern Ireland government departments and their associated bodies, the same remit as Select Committees in Great Britain and their respective departments. Early indications are that the efforts of the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee are 'positively sluggish' and, according to one Northern Ireland member, 'intent on dealing with non-controversial matters as they don't want it turning into a boxing ring, and I suspect that part of it is protection of Northern Ireland Office ministers' (quoted in Wilford and Elliott, 1995, p. 220).

The lack-lustre performance of the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee has done little to address the 'democratic deficit' charge and the perception that major services of government are presided over by absentee English ministers who neither fully understand nor care, electorally, about local governance in Northern Ireland. As one Northern Ireland MP quipped, drawing from third-party comments made to a commission considering devolution:

Government officers and ministers should be located in relation to the individual citizen in such a way that an angry farmer could take a bus, visit the relevant minister, horsewhip him and get back home before nightfall (Trimble, 1991, pp. 660–661).

Apart from the general arguments of accountability, the plethora of bodies which constitute the structure of public administration in Northern Ireland—central government departments, government agencies, boards, quangos and local government—create confusion in the minds of the public as to which tier of government is specifically responsible for service provision. This administrative amalgam and attendant problems of accountability are considered in more detail.

⁴The Anglo–Irish Joint (Downing Street) Declaration was agreed between the then Republic of Ireland Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds, and the then British Prime Minister, John Major. It set out an agreed framework devised by both governments and committed them to promote co-operation at all levels on the basis of fundamental principles, undertakings, obligations under international agreements and guarantees that each government had given and reaffirmed, including Northern Ireland's statutory constitutional guarantee. It was described as the starting point of a peace process designed to culminate in a political settlement.

⁵The Select Committee comprised at its formation: six Conservatives, two Labour, two Ulster Unionists, one DUP, one Popular Unionist and one SDLP—a row erupted about its representativeness.

UNACCOUNTABLE LOCAL GOVERNANCE

The United Kingdom Government's policies for Northern Ireland prioritize strengthening the economy and targeting social need,⁶ whilst simultaneously achieving peace and stability (Department of Finance and Personnel and HM Treasury, 1995; Osborne, 1996). These policies are enacted through six government departments (Agriculture, Economic Development, Environment, Education, Health and Social Services, Finance and Personnel) and the Northern Ireland Office (see the Appendix). The planned expenditure for 1995–1996 was approximately £7.7b and was allocated into the main programme areas as shown in Figure 1.

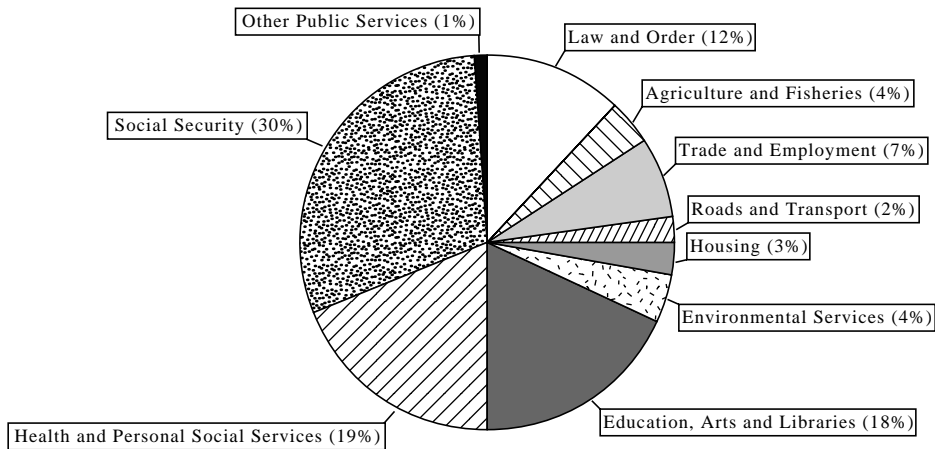


Figure 1. 1995–1996 NI public expenditure.

If one considers, as an example, the largest element of resource allocation, health and personal social services and social security (Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS)), accounting for 49% of public expenditure, the scale of the accountability problem is obvious. In Northern Ireland, integrated health and social services are supplied by four health and social services boards, health trusts, general practitioner fund-holders and the Central Services Agency.⁷ The present administrative structure follows a review of the National Health Service (UK) in a White Paper entitled *Working for Patients* (1989). This made proposals designed to raise standards, improve the quality and effectiveness of the services available, make them

⁶Targeting Social Need is a government initiative that tackles areas of social and economic differences by targeting government policies and programmes more directly at those areas or sections of the community suffering the highest levels of disadvantage and deprivation. Underpinning this approach is the assertion that community differentials, or greater levels of disadvantage among Catholics (unemployment, education, skills), contribute to divisions in the population. These differential experiences sustain feelings of disadvantage, discrimination and alienation, which in turn influence Catholic attitudes to political and security issues. Under this initiative, £174m has been allocated to Making Belfast Work, £21m to the Londonderry Initiative and £10–11m per year to the improvement of community relations.

⁷The Central Services Agency administers, on behalf of the Health and Social Services Boards, the Family Health Services which comprise the general medical, dental, ophthalmic and pharmaceutical services provided by independent practitioners.

more responsive to patients' and clients' needs and make the best use of available resources. The government aimed to achieve this by the maximum devolution of operational decision-taking to those involved in the management of services at local level, and by the separation of the functions of commissioning and provision of services. Central to this was a new contractual system whereby the commissioners and providers of services agree on the precise quality and cost of services to be secured to meet the needs of patients and clients. Under the reforms, hospitals and other units were given greater responsibility and freedom of action and were able to apply for trust status within the health service.⁸ In April 1991 the Health and Social Services Boards were reconstituted as four smaller management-oriented bodies comprising executive and non-executive members.

This internal market, designed to separate the assessment of need and purchasing of services from the delivery of these services, came into operation in April 1992. The four health and social services boards, as agents of the DHSS,⁹ commission and purchase health and social care for their resident populations from a range of providers—health and social services trusts, the voluntary and private sectors. General practitioners' practices can also opt to be fund-holder units with their own budgets to purchase a defined range of hospital and community services from providers. A total of 14 health and social services trusts were fully operational in Northern Ireland from April 1995, accounting for approximately 70% of health and personal social services revenue (Department of Finance and Personnel and HM Treasury, 1995).

Advocates of the new internal market system in health care argue that its whole rationale is driven by responding to consumers through needs assessment, contract specification and competition to provide services (Waldegrave, 1993). This is reinforced by a consumer safeguard in the form of the Citizen's Charter (Charter for Patients and Clients), which sets out how services will be expected to respond to individuals' needs, and the standards of care and treatment patients and clients can reasonably expect to receive. Yet health provision does not operate in perfect market conditions when there is an asymmetric relationship between professionals and clients on health expertise and information. As Wall argues:

The present arrangements only reinforce the view that an oligarchy is managing public affairs in the interests of professionals and managers rather than the general public (Wall, 1996, p. 76).

Hence there are general problems of accountability which are not addressed by moves towards a greater market orientation. In Northern Ireland this situation is exacerbated by the administrative structure within which health care is delivered.

⁸A health service trust is a corporate body with a chairman and board of executive and non-executive directors. Once established, each trust assumes responsibility within a defined area for the ownership and management of hospitals or other establishments or facilities previously managed or provided by health and social services boards.

⁹Part of the reform process involved a review of the DHSS with the aim of separating its policy and management roles. It is now divided into three sections: (1) HPSS Policy and Strategy Command which develops policies and legislation and funds a number of centrally financed services; (2) HPSS Management Executive which is responsible for the allocation of resources and develops, at regional level, a strategic management agenda for the delivery of effective, efficient and high-quality care and treatment; and (3) Professional Groups which provide informed medical, nursing, dental, pharmaceutical and social services advice to the policy and executive arms of the DHSS.

Three key problems of accountability arise from this system of service delivery in Northern Ireland. First, in the reorganization of the four health and social services boards, local elected councillor representation disappeared¹⁰ and 16 district health and social services committees, representative of public and consumer interests, were replaced by an advisory structure of four area health and social services councils, bodies with a consultative role and limited clout. All non-executive board appointments, their chairmen and members of advisory councils are by government appointment or in the gift of the minister. Early research on the newly constituted boards suggests that non-executive directors are more likely to engage in rubber-stamping decisions as their future appointment is dependent upon ministerial (or her advisors') approval. Not only do board members seek external political/official approbation, but their relations with executive members (General Manager, Director of Public Health, Director of Finance, etc.) are too close and interdependent. As a result, there is a perception that they are ineffective lobbyists for the consumer (Connolly and Russell, 1993).

The second problem of accountability arises from appointments to the health and social services trusts. Here too the chairman and members are government appointees, although the system provides the somewhat dubious concession that any member of the public can make his or her interest known to the DHSS or health trust to be considered for appointment. The official position is that all appointments are made on the basis of merit and there are no formal criteria for appointment. Those appointed, according to the Minister, are likely to have some or all of the following attributes:

- an understanding of top management in a large organization;
- a relevant specialist skill or knowledge;
- experience of the voluntary sector, preferably at senior management or committee level;
- living or working in the area to be served by the health trust;
- willingness to give the necessary time commitment (Moss, 1995).

In practice, however, research on the appointment system to boards in Northern Ireland has concluded that there are

no stringent guidelines concerning who can be appointed and how they must be approached. There are no stipulated criteria for selection and no formal interviewing process. Ministers and senior civil servants therefore have considerable freedom in the selection process ... An examination of the membership list of public bodies highlights the fact that each department in the civil service has its own 'players' and these people are consistently reappointed to sit on public bodies (Gray and Heenan, 1995, pp. 66–67).

This position differs, however, in comparison with non-executive appointments in the rest of the United Kingdom, where certain procedures such as advertisement, the maintenance of a register of likely candidates and some form of interviewing are required. This more robust, by comparison, system of accountability in Great Britain

¹⁰Prior to 1991, boards consisted of between 24 and 33 members, with up to 30% local councillors, 30% professionals and the remainder drawn from industry, trade unions, universities and voluntary bodies.

has itself been the subject of proposals for change under the Nolan Committee (1995), set up to review 'standards of public life'.¹¹ The Nolan report recommended that all appointments to non-departmental public bodies and NHS bodies should be made after advice from a panel or committee that includes an independent element, comprising at least one-third of its membership. For the first time the appointments procedure within departments should be monitored, regulated and approved by a new independent Commissioner for Public Appointments.

The final accountability problem stems from the relationship between the DHSS and the four health and social services boards, agents of the department. The diffuse nature of accountability procedures came in for severe criticism from the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee over the control of administrative manpower in the Boards. The Committee took evidence from the Chief Executive of the Health and Personal Social Services Management Executive on the rising cost of administrative and clerical staff in the Boards and lack of manpower planning. The Management Executive, whose Chief Executive is the parliamentary accounting officer, provides the link between the DHSS and its agent Boards. In defence of his position, the Chief Executive tried to delineate the Boards' responsibilities for operational decisions affecting the delivery of services at the operational level, including the employment of administrative and clerical staff, from his role in monitoring how Boards use their staff. The Public Accounts Committee lambasted the Chief Executive for this distinction:

It seemed to us that he (the Chief Executive) was trying to suggest that the delegation to the Boards absolved him from being answerable to us on his full accounting responsibilities, although he accepted that he is responsible for ensuring that the services are provided in an efficient and cost-effective way and provide good value for money. In referring to the wishes of Ministers to leave more day-to-day decisions to Boards, he appeared to interpret this as removing certain accounting responsibilities from him and that we were assuming centralized control of the HISS, which was not the case ... Delegation to others in any large organization, regardless of management structure or style, or whether the delegated authority is to an agent, in no way removes the requirement for ultimate accounting responsibility to be accepted (Committee of Public Accounts Thirty-Second Report, 1991, p. ix).

The significance of this event is to highlight the accountability shortfalls which exist over and above those built into the structural mechanisms for delivering public services. It is inevitable that where multiple tiers of local governance exist, precise responsibilities become difficult to define, further compounding accountability problems in a system already described as government by appointment.

¹¹ Lord Nolan set out seven principles by which politicians and all those who service the public should be bound. All public bodies should draw up codes of conduct based on selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. All public bodies should also have systems of independent scrutiny supporting their internal schemes for maintaining standards. It is perhaps ironic that the Nolan inquiry into standards in public life was set up as a result, in part, of the activities of a former Northern Ireland Junior Minister (Tim Smith) who resigned over accusations that he had accepted cash to ask questions in the House of Commons.

Social security is provided through a Next Steps Agency,¹² the largest such agency in Northern Ireland (employing around 4200 staff). The agency is subject to the overall direction and control of the Secretary of State and the minister responsible, to whom oversight of health and social services as a function is delegated. Ministers determine the policy and financial framework within which the agency operates under the direction of a chief executive, but do not normally become involved in its day-to-day management. Members of Parliament and the general public are encouraged by the minister to deal directly with the chief executive or appropriate agency manager on matters and, if they remain dissatisfied with a reply, they may raise the issue with the minister. It is for the minister to decide who should represent him or her at Parliamentary Select Committees when the affairs of the agency are being discussed—in practice this is normally the chief executive (Department of Health and Social Services (NI), 1991).

Like government agencies throughout the United Kingdom, however, important questions have been raised over the respective roles of ministers and chief executives, creating opportunities to scapegoat responsibility for policy failures and abdicate control of the agencies (Jordan, 1994). This has been described as the 'bureaucratic Bermuda Triangle' in which accountability disappears (Treasury and Civil Service Committee, 1994, para. 166; quoted in Butcher, 1995). A recent example (October 1995) in Great Britain where the Director General of the Prison Service (Derek Lewis) was dismissed by the Home Secretary illustrates the point. A damning report (Learmont) on the management of prisons, following the escape of three dangerous prisoners from Parkhurst gaol, led the minister to call for the director's resignation. The director refused on the grounds that there had been policy U-turns and ministerial interference in the day-to-day running of the service. As one commentator noted:

This distinction between policy and operations sounds neat but is unconvincing. Executive agencies were supposed to produce clearer, more open lines of responsibility, but it is impossible to separate the policy decisions of ministers from the operational decisions of chief executives ... Chief Executives can be sure that their ministerial masters will ultimately be willing to sacrifice them in the overriding cause of political self-preservation (Riddell, 1995, p. 6).

Once again, adopting a British model of public administration, with its inherent problems of accountability in the Northern Ireland context, serves to accentuate the worst features of the 'democratic deficit'.

Aside from the central machinery of government, and to add to its administrative mosaic, Northern Ireland has its share of quangos or quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations.¹³ The most recent figures suggest that there are

¹²The Next Steps Initiative aimed to improve management in the Civil Service through greater efficiency, effectiveness and a better quality of service for the public. The Prime Minister (Mrs Thatcher) launched the initiative in February 1988 following an Efficiency Unit review carried out by Sir Robin Ibbs. Executive or service delivery functions of government were separated from policy functions and located within self-contained executive agencies. Each agency has a framework document agreed by the minister responsible. The framework sets out the organization's aims and objectives, governs the relationship of the agency with ministers and parliament and lays down the financial and personnel arrangements within which it will operate (Goldsworthy, 1991).

¹³There are major definitional problems in describing quangos. Hogwood (1995, p. 210), for example, suggests that an 'agreed, workable, inclusive and exclusive definition of type of body may not be possible to

161 appointed executive quangos (Weir, 1994) set alongside 19 'Next Steps' agencies, 38 advisory bodies and 15 tribunals, all for a population of 1.5 million. Quangos are not a Northern Ireland-specific phenomenon and their increase UK-wide has been the subject of a comprehensive review (Democratic Audit, 1994) which exposed the extent of their growth and criticized their lack of accountability:

In area after area of public life, elected government is being replaced by appointive government. Those who are elected count for ever less; those who are appointed count for ever more. This hastily erected apparatus of appointive government lacks the essential democratic underpinnings of scrutiny, openness and accountability, but is now responsible for nearly a third of central government spending (Weir, 1995, pp. 320–321).

Northern Ireland is the worst-case scenario in which quangos continue to evolve on the back of an administrative system dogged by problems of electoral accountability. Research carried out by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action on quangos of most relevance to community and voluntary groups revealed a stark absence of mechanisms for access or accountability. They concluded that in Northern Ireland, where traditional accountability for service provision was largely absent, 'this context could be seen by quangocrats as a challenge to devise new processes' ... instead it 'has offered an excuse, at best, for avoiding the issue of accountability' (Bradley, 1994, p. 26). Up until then the growth of quangos had received little attention. The editor of a local newspaper (*Ulster Newsletter*) described their lack of scrutiny as a result of press preoccupation with coverage of 'the troubles':

The Direct Rule government of Northern Ireland involves unelected quangos running everything from health to education and the police. They are not used to a probing press. There will be a lot of squealing pigs as vested interests are investigated. While everyone has been talking about turning swords into ploughshares, we in the press need to be turning ploughshares into swords (Halon, 1995).

This overview of the public administration system in Northern Ireland would suggest that the political problems which led to Direct Rule from Westminster have implanted an unaccountable framework within which major public services are delivered. Set alongside this, the UK Government's programme of public service reform, which included privatization, competitive tendering, agentization and the creation of internal markets, has compounded the 'democratic deficit' and conspired to produce a system of public administration in Northern Ireland which has simply adopted major reform initiatives without reference to the political context. The result of both these factors is complacency and inertia among senior civil servants who do not foresee any major changes in local governance without accompanying constitutional progress at the political level. Whilst this may be true of the existing system of Direct Rule, opportunities have emerged to improve public service delivery drawing on the experiences of the most recent EC programme in Northern Ireland. We now review the possibility of adopting or adapting the EC model of service delivery more

achieve'. Originally quangos were organizations which were not officially part of government but were used by government to deliver public policy. This changed and referred to bodies to which government made public appointments. The government's own preferred term is Non-Departmental Public Body (NDBP), a term which includes selected executive bodies, advisory committees and tribunals.

comprehensively within the existing system of public administration in Northern Ireland.

EUROPEAN MODEL OF SERVICE DELIVERY—THE EC PEACE AND RECONCILIATION INITIATIVE

In autumn 1994, following the cease-fires of the Irish Republic Army (IRA) and the Combined Loyalist Military Command in Northern Ireland, a special European Commission task force was set up to find ways to assist Northern Ireland and the border counties towards maintaining the momentum for peace and reconciliation. The task force concluded that the European Union had a clear interest in supporting the peace process, not simply for the benefit of Northern Ireland as a region, but for the European Union as a whole. As a result, the Commission adopted a proposal, the Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties, to be implemented in the form of a Community Initiative¹⁴ under the Structural Funds¹⁵ (Department of Finance and Personnel, 1995).

On 26 July 1995 the European Commission approved, following extensive consultations,¹⁶ the details of the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland 1995–1999. The overall aim of the initiative is to

reinforce progress towards a peaceful and stable society and to promote reconciliation by increasing economic development and employment, promoting urban and rural regeneration, developing cross-border co-operation and extending social inclusion (Commission of the European Communities Office in Northern Ireland, 1995).

Total expenditure under the programme for the first three years (1995–1997) will amount to 416 MECU (£351m), of which 300 MECU is provided by the EU Structural Funds¹⁷ (see Table 1 for allocation). Further financing for the final two

¹⁴The Community Initiatives are the special financial instruments of structural policy which the Commission proposes to the Member States on its own initiative, to support measures which will help solve problems having a particular impact at European level. The Community Initiatives have three features which give added value as compared with other measures financed by the Structural Funds: (1) support for the development of transnational, cross-border and interregional co-operation; (2) a 'bottom-up' method of implementation; and (3) the high profile on-the-spot which they give to Community measures (European Commission, 1994).

¹⁵The Community's Structural Funds are the ERDF (European Regional Development Fund), whose aim is to reduce differences in levels of development between regions in the Community, the ESF (European Social Fund), which is responsible for improving employment prospects in the Community, and the EAGGF Guidance Section (European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund), which part-finances national aid schemes for agriculture and helps develop and diversify rural areas of the Community. There is also the FIG (Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance), which assists in the restructuring of the fisheries sector.

¹⁶The final document setting out details of the 'peace package' incorporates the outputs from consultation exercises undertaken in Newcastle, Co Down (29 March 1995), Cavan (20 April 1995) and the European Parliament's consultation conference in Belfast (11 April 1995).

¹⁷The five priority objectives of the structural policies for the period 1994–1999 are: Objective 1—economic adjustment of regions whose development is lagging behind; Objective 2—economic conversion of declining industrial areas; Objective 3—combating long-term unemployment and facilitating the integration into working life of young people and of persons exposed to exclusion from the labour market; Objective 4—facilitating the adaptation of workers to industrial changes and to changes in production

Table 1. EC allocation of subprogrammes.

Subprogramme	Northern Ireland (MECU)	Border counties (MECU)
Employment	37.392	4.375
Urban and rural regeneration	37.894	12.000
Cross-border development	22.500	22.500
Social inclusion	57.340	13.125
Investment and development	37.880	7.063
Partnerships	44.220	—
Technical assistance	3.790	0.937
Total	241.006	60.000

years is subject to a review based on a Commission report. Up to 80% of EU funding will be for activities in Northern Ireland, not less than 20% for activities in the border counties of Ireland, and a minimum of 15% of the entire package will be for activities in a cross-border context. The EU will assist successful projects with up to 75% of the cost, and matching funds for the remainder will come from a variety of sources, including the private sector, community/voluntary groups, local authorities and central government. All matching funds provided by central government will be fully additional (Department of Finance and Personnel, 1995).

The programme has two strategic objectives:

- to promote the social inclusion of those at the margins of economic and social life;
- to exploit the opportunities and address the needs arising from the peace process in order to boost economic growth and stimulate social and economic regeneration.

To attain these objectives, the programme has five priorities or subprogrammes.

Employment. To promote peace and reconciliation and respond to the opportunities and challenges of peace by boosting growth and employment and supporting the redirection of redundant skills, as well as reinforcing efforts for the long-term unemployed, those most affected by the conflict, and the young, and by encouraging greater participation by women in the labour force.

Urban and rural regeneration. To promote peace and reconciliation by renewing urban areas affected by multiple deprivation, especially by resourcing local residents to tackle the social and environment needs within their communities; to promote reconciliation in rural areas by encouraging activities which will help to bring the communities in those areas together and by helping to develop the rural economy.

Cross-border development. To promote cross-border reconciliation and to exploit the opportunities for increased cross-border development arising from the new situation.

Social inclusion. To promote pathways to reconciliation by encouraging grass-roots and cross-community co-operation, as well as action to address the specific difficulties faced by vulnerable groups and others at a disadvantage, such as victims, children,

systems; Objective 5(a)—adjustment of the processing and marketing structures for agricultural and fisheries products; and Objective 5(b)—economic diversification of rural areas (European Commission, 1994). The European Social Fund will make a valuable contribution to the Social Inclusion and Employment measures, but overall the European Regional Development Fund has been predominant in the Peace and Reconciliation Programme.

young people and those previously caught up with violence, including prisoners and ex-prisoners.

Productive investment and industrial development. To promote reconciliation by stimulating private sector investment, leading to sustainable employment and development, especially in disadvantaged areas.

There are several innovative aspects to the programme.

- In all, over half the monies involved will be channelled through intermediate or decentralized agencies and partnerships (see Figure 2).
- A special district partnership measure (details), applicable only to Northern Ireland, will allow for partnerships in each District Council area which will bid for monies relevant to *all* priorities (except cross-border development).
- Intermediary bodies, outside of government, in both Northern Ireland and the border counties will be responsible for delivering several measures in the programme.

Specifically within Northern Ireland (Figure 2 shows Northern Ireland and the border counties), it is envisaged that more than half of the financial assistance can be disbursed through intermediary bodies and just over 44 MECU will be delivered through local partnerships. The aim is to ensure that, for the rest, no less than 50 MECU will be delivered by bodies independent of government, reflecting the spirit of the initiative as a truly 'bottom-up' programme.

In addition to the subprogrammes listed above, there are two further subprogrammes which straddle the five priority areas.

Partnerships (applicable only in Northern Ireland). The model adopted by the programme recognizes that partnerships are a means of harnessing the energies and talents of local groups in pursuit of common goals. Partnerships, reflecting the interests of their areas, must therefore comprise, one-third each: local councillors; community/voluntary representatives; business and trade union interests, as well as statutory organizations. Each district council area can only be represented by one partnership and the resources will be notionally allocated on the basis of population weighted by an index of deprivation. Each district partnership will be invited to bid

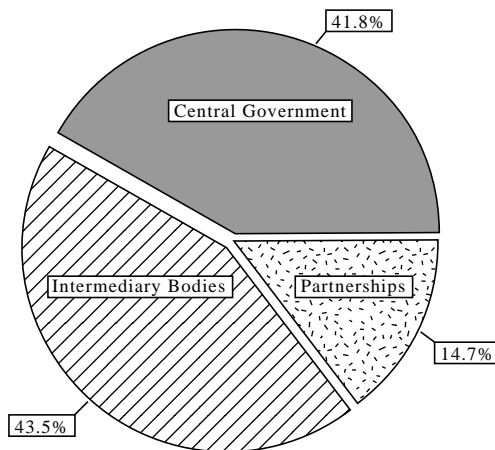


Figure 2. Allocation of EC peace money.

against the allocation for its area through a plan of action. This plan will detail the actions/projects which, in the opinion of the partnership, are best calculated to advance the aim and objectives of the initiative in its area. The actions may endorse *some or all* of the measures across the various priorities in the initiative. District partnerships submit their agreed plan of action to a central board (the Northern Ireland Partnership Board) established to administer the subprogramme. This is an executive body (also comprising representatives, one-third each, from local authorities; voluntary/community sectors; business, trade unions, rural and farming) which has full responsibility to agree plans within the resources available for each district partnership.

Technical assistance. This subprogramme allows technical assistance to be used to assist the development of proposals to promote the aims of the programme, to strengthen and enhance its management, co-ordination and implementation and to provide information and publicity.

THE WAY FORWARD

The single most important early lesson from this European initiative is the value of partnerships in delivering public sector services in Northern Ireland. The three equally represented public (local authorities), private and voluntary sector partnership members have the opportunity, collectively, to deliver accountable, community-driven programmes and, at the same time, act as a model for change in the current system of public administration. Up until recently, local authorities, stripped of major functional responsibilities in 1972, were responsible for a limited range of environmental and leisure functions representing only 3% of public spending (Department of Finance and Personnel and HM Treasury, 1995). The UK Government, given the historical problems of discrimination and political wrangling within councils, had been unwilling to trust the only remaining democratic forum in Northern Ireland with major services. Things are changing, however. Local authorities have actively embraced a community relations initiative, part-funded by government, in which councils provide programmes to encourage cross-community contact, respect for different cultural traditions and mutual understanding (Knox and Hughes, 1996). They have, incrementally, expanded their very limited economic development role, in co-operation with the major government agencies charged with job creation (LEDU and IDB), through a proactive strategy of marketing their strengths to prospective investors. Moreover, they have exhibited a degree of political responsibility through power-sharing arrangements between the main parties and, in so doing, demonstrated their capacity to work collectively for the good of each council area (Knox, 1996).

This is not to suggest that the formation of partnerships, central to the EC initiative, is without problems. There has been some frustration over the pace of progress in selecting representatives from the voluntary and business sectors; councillors presented fewer difficulties in this regard. Equally, suspicions of the voluntary and business sectors usurping the role of elected representatives had to be confronted. In a system characterized so completely by government appointees, doubts have gradually disappeared and each sector now recognizes the respective valuable contributions made to the programme. It was perhaps inevitable that a new model of public

administration would demand certain cultural adjustments, but its benefits as a future mechanism for major service delivery in Northern Ireland are clear:

- improved local accountability through democratic input to service delivery, combined with a bottom-up community emphasis reflected through voluntary and private sector contributions;
- ownership of public policy decisions at the local level where, hitherto, apathy and helplessness, conditioned by Direct Rule, were the norm;
- breaking of the assumed link between macro-political progress and potential changes to the undemocratic system of public administration in Northern Ireland;
- prospects for expanding the partnership model to encompass areas currently administered by quangos;
- subjecting public sector officials implementing policy to a degree of scrutiny entirely consistent with the large public budgets over which they have responsibility, but for which they have grown accustomed to autonomy.

CONCLUSIONS

The current system of public administration in Northern Ireland is patently unsatisfactory. Direct Rule from Westminster since 1972 has become an excuse for administrative intransigence. This has resulted in a subjugated population acquiescing in a system which is seriously lacking in both political and administrative accountability. The assumption that no changes can be made to public service delivery in the absence of progress on the constitutional front has created and embedded a plethora of boards, trusts, quangos and Civil Service departments characterized by administrative indifference. The faltering nature of political progress makes imminent structural reorganization unlikely. Yet within the existing system of local governance, a model imposed by the European Community as a mechanism for delivering public services provides an alternative. A partnership approach, in which councillors, the private and voluntary sectors collaborate, offers the opportunity to mobilize a system of service delivery where these sectoral interests had hitherto ceded power to government appointees. It is of course ironic that local authorities are the locus for this experiment in administrative change, given their erstwhile history of abuse in public service delivery and democratic power. An opportunity now exists to build upon the record of improved local government performance and embrace the more confident voluntary and business sectors in a collective venture to shape and deliver 'bottom-up' public services.

Critics and scaremongers may well draw attention to current (but isolated) excesses of some councils (Belfast in particular) and the opportunity for paramilitaries to manipulate the private sector within this tripartite collective. Whilst undoubtedly true, a momentum of self-help, euphoria and 'no going back' is now evident in Northern Ireland. To exercise some leverage in shaping public services would assist in breaking the cycle of helplessness endemic to a political system in stagnation for 26 years. For too long a concentration on the political and security problems of Northern Ireland has diverted attention away from major administrative deficiencies. Severing the link that binds political progress to administrative change offers the opportunity to improve the system of public administration. Mobilizing councillors,

the voluntary and private sectors could precipitate a groundswell of collaborative community energy which forces the pace of compromise at the macro-political level.

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APPENDIX: NORTHERN IRELAND DEPARTMENTS

The *Northern Ireland Office* (NIO) is directly responsible for political and constitutional issues, security policy, prisons, criminal justice and police matters.

The *Department of Agriculture* (DANI) is responsible for the development of agriculture, forestry and fishing in Northern Ireland. It is the agent of the (UK) Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) in the administration of schemes in Northern Ireland affecting the whole of the United Kingdom and is involved with the application of EC agricultural policy.

The *Department of Economic Development* (DED) is responsible for providing the appropriate framework for strengthening economic development in Northern Ireland. It promotes inward investment and the development of larger home industry, enterprise and small businesses, tourism, training and employment, industrial research and development and technology transfer.

The *Department of Education* (DENI) has central responsibility for policy and planning for education and related services (arts, museums and libraries; youth, sport, recreation and community services). Executive responsibility for the delivery of these services rests almost entirely in the hands of the education and library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, district councils, higher education institutions and other grant-aid bodies.

The *Department of the Environment* (DoE) has direct responsibility for, or exercises certain controls over, a wide range of functions. These include planning, housing, roads, transport, water and sewerage services, rates, ordnance survey, pollution control, conservation and urban renewal.

The *Department of Health and Social Services* (DHSS) is responsible for three main programmes: health and personal social services, social security and child support. It also has responsibility for certain aspects of social legislation and administration

(betting, gaming and lotteries, liquor licensing, club registration, shops and hare-coursing).

The *Department of Finance and Personnel* (DFP) is responsible for the control of expenditure of Northern Ireland departments, liaison with HM Treasury and the NI Office on financial matters, economic and social research and analysis, the Citizen's Charter Unit, the Government purchasing service, the Census Office for NI and the General Register Office. It is also responsible for developing, formulating, co-ordinating and monitoring the equal opportunities for the NI Civil Service and for formulating policy and co-ordinating arrangements for personnel management. The department provides a central office efficiency and information technology service.

(Civil Service Year Book, 1996)