

Why Devolution is Better than Direct Rule

In the face of crisis after crisis, the siren voices of despair often assert, usually on radio phone-ins, that “we would be better off under direct rule.”

The trade unions believe that this is not the case. In fact, the worst thing that could happen for workers and their families would be a collapse in the Stormont institutions and the imposition of Direct Rule from a non-descript office block in Westminster.

The people overwhelmingly voted for devolved governments in referendums in 1998.

The Agreement is the property of every citizen. It is not the plaything of any political party nor is it some inconvenience to ‘efficient rule’ by technocrats, overseen by a Tory minister elected by nobody here, and answerable to no-one here.

The powers vested in Stormont are quite significant and are more far-reaching than in Wales or Scotland. Those devolved governments loudly envy the powers we have under local control.

You may not agree with some of the policies carried out by the Assembly – but the point is that you have a say in those policies by voting in Assembly elections for (or against) MLAs and their parties. That is how democracy operates all over the world – but it would not operate under direct rule.

The Tories in Westminster have very few voters here, and this is worse – they have nothing to lose by imposing the worst of their unfair policies which are unsuitable for NI.

This is especially relevant considering what the Westminster government has done and is planning to do with rules and laws which affect millions of people. For example:

- University & College fees of more than £9,000 each year
- Privatisation of Health services to Tory donors
- Drastic and cruel cuts in the Welfare State, including the Bedroom Tax
- Undercutting the BBC for the benefit of Tory press barons like Rupert Murdoch
- Attacking basic protections for workers
- Deserting the European Union to rip up consumer and employment rights
- Removing Northern Ireland’s direct access to EU funding, for farmers, rural communities and peace building, as well as major infrastructure projects on roads, railways and broadband.
- Repressive legislation, such as the Snoopers Charter
- Abandoning the European Convention on Human Rights

On the other hand, Stormont has delivered:

- No extra water charges for a privatised water service
- Better rights for workers – No Trade Union Bill
- Better human rights and equality protections
- Ensuring that victims and survivors of the conflict are heeded and supported, on their own terms.
- More publicly owned NIHE social housing and support for Housing Associations
- Policing with the support of all communities

- Positive action legislation supporting a more diverse workforce
- Larger proportion of inward investment per capita
- Promoting NI as an international film and TV location
- Improving our international image by hosting major international sporting and cultural events, such as the 2013 World Police & Fire Games, the Open Golf championships, the Giro d'Italia and the 2011 European MTV Awards, as well as LegenDerry – the UK's first City of Culture.
- Flexibility on some local taxes and rates, including a 20% discount on their rates to every person over 70 living alone.
- A fairer deal for our farmers through CAP reform
- Free prescription charges for all citizens
- Free transport for everybody over 60
- Supporting local manufacturers, such as Wrightbus, with public procurement for businesses we own. Devolved ministries use public procurement to buy over £3 Billion in goods and services from Northern Ireland's private sector, supporting large and small employers.
- Completing essential upgrades of our infrastructure, from motorways to water pipes, which were neglected for decades under Direct Rule.

Locally elected ministers being held to account – for example:

- Commitment made by local Ministers to keep all local libraries open, in direct comparison to significant closures in England and Wales;
- Traffic Attendant dispute resolved due to positive engagement with Local Minister who encouraged constructive negotiations with the private company resulting in sacked workers getting their jobs back;
- Agreement reached to protect support staff in Education Sector in school reorganisations;
- Resolution of NI Water pay dispute - only possible because of local Ministerial input;
- Agreement reached in Translink to protect routes and jobs;
- Ameliorating the worst impacts of NHS cuts
- Also, you can add either the abolition of the 11+, or, the preservation of the Grammar Schools – *the point is that it is up to the voters to decide what happens.*
- Under Direct Rule, the People of Northern Ireland will have *no say at all*.

On top of all that, devolution has created a secure sense of identity for those who see themselves as British, or Irish or Northern Irish.

Of course, we believe there is much more that could and can be done by our Assembly, but the progressive policies we support would have no chance of ever being implemented under Direct Rule.

We need to Support Stormont in order to Change Stormont for the better.