



NI EXECUTIVE VS CORONAVIRUS



We can use the Coronavirus outbreak of the last few months to analyse the Northern Ireland Executive and assess how they have handled this crisis. It is a mixed picture which can be very useful for any exam content

SUCCESSSES



TOGETHER AT THE TOP?

Initially the response to the crisis in March was refreshingly joined up. It wasn't long after the Executive had limped back together with the New Decade New Approach agreement. This was after so long in suspension following RHI and other disagreements. Therefore to see Arlene Foster and Michelle O'Neill both face the crisis head on and in a relatively mutual way seemed a step forward in the face of a crisis which was faced by all. They held regular press conferences together. They even joked that they saw each other so much they were almost part of the same family bubble. The initial response was a joined up approach. If anything Robin Swann (UUP) the Health Minister was the person to get most of the blame at the beginning due to what was perceived at the time as ill preparedness and lack of PPE.



MINISTERIAL MARVELS?

If any assessment was carried out into the response to the crisis, there would be those who could be regarded as having impressed. **Robin Swann (UUP)** after initially facing so much pressure and criticism has impressed with his work ethic and devotion to the job – which must be the worst in the Executive bar none over the past 6 months. He has managed to steer the ship through the crisis so far and the department dealt with the twists and turns it has faced so far. The other person to rise to the challenge was SF communities minister **Deirdre Hargey**. She was quick to realise the issues facing deprived families and her department had quickly set up a service to deliver food to local communities.

A DECISION REACHED

While many critics point out that the Executive seems to ponder, argue and divide over issues with little collective responsibility evident, supporters will point out that they do make decisions. Having 5 parties in the Executive is something that few governments across the world have to deal with, especially with diametrically opposed parties like Sinn Fein and the DUP. Therefore, to cobble together compromises – even at the last minute can be regarded as a success – of sorts.

WEAKNESSES



TROUBLE AT THE TOP?



While the initial response to the crisis seemed good, this has not lasted. One of the biggest crisis points was the funeral of Bobby Storey, a high ranking republican with a colourful past. At a time when funeral arrangements were highly restricted due to Covid, many members of Sinn Fein, including Michelle O'Neill were seen to be in attendance. This caused another bitter breach between the DUP and SF with calls for Michelle O'Neill to stand down. The joint press conferences stopped and another few weeks of old rivalry returned. It is only recently that they have managed to come together again in the face of the renewed Covid crisis.

LACK OF COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

The clear divisions in the Northern Ireland Executive have been made all too clear. While there was a joined up approach in the initial response to the crisis, this has evolved into an acrimonious and very public division over how to address the new crisis of rising infections before the Winter. Sinn Fein clearly want a more prolonged lockdown involving schools and hospitality. The DUP have been talking for weeks about how schools should be the last to close and should remain open. They have also been much more questioning about the effect on the business community of general lockdowns. The smaller parties meanwhile felt as if they were kept in the dark until the last minute in regards to another lockdown complaining of having only been presented with the facts within hours of having to make the crucial decision. The notion of having Five parties in One Executive and how this affects decision making has faced criticism over dealing with such momentous decisions



MINISTERIAL QUESTION MARKS

While there have been those who have boosted their reputations in the crisis there have been those whose conduct has been questioned. Most notably Education Minister **Peter Weir**. The awarding of exam grades in the midst of the crisis was a ticking time bomb evident since the start of the crisis. Yet, despite this, the awarding of exam results was a debacle. They were initially to be based on teachers judgements, then a mathematical algorithm was applied. This seemed to produce very questionable results. In the end, after a lot of anger from parents, teachers and students, the Minister was forced to do a U Turn on the issue and award teachers assessment scored – but not before many had already been affected by the decisions with university places. There was a clear move to try to oust the Minister following this but this did not materialise- perhaps a sign of the ineffectiveness of the Executive system and limited accountability in Northern Ireland.

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