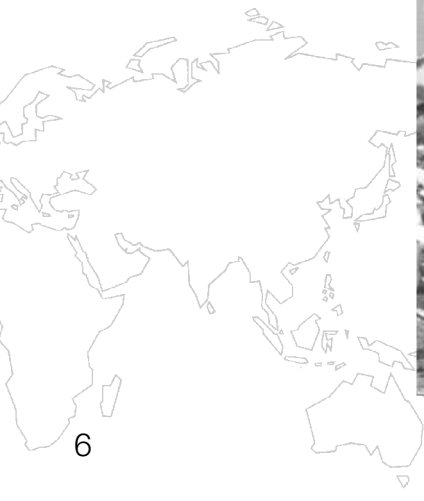


Northern Ireland: an environment on the edge

Professor Sharon Turner

October 2007



Speaking to you this evening it is not entirely clear whether Northern Ireland's environment is at the edge of an abyss, looking into a very black hole, or whether it is standing at the beginning of a bright new future as an era of more stable devolution begins. We are a society in a state of transition, with the new government just recently installed and yet to give us an indication of the likely direction of travel for regional environmental policy. But rather than focus on the individual details of that policy, I shall simply tell you the story of where Northern Ireland and its environment have come from and where I think they are heading.

It goes without saying that for many years the environment in Northern Ireland was essentially a non-issue, with human rights, equality, victimhood and security dominating politics and policy. However, as the peace process has consolidated and the economy has begun to stabilize, the environment has come dramatically and somewhat unexpectedly to the fore. There is now a sense that, whereas once we were seemingly determined to destroy our environment, both the government and people of Northern Ireland are beginning to recognize this very unmet challenge.

Before we get much further it is worth pointing out that the pressure for reform has come in waves – and not always from within Northern Ireland. But it has undoubtedly culminated in a number of very important changes, most recently the launch of a thorough-going Review of Northern Ireland's arrangements for environmental governance, commissioned by the Secretary of State, Peter Hain, in which I have taken part as a panel member.

Although the Review was commissioned by the direct rule government, it was nevertheless viewed by many as a policy signal that those in power were now ready to embrace an ambitious programme of reform in the sphere of the environment. Towards the end of the Review period, devolution was restored and so we presented our final report, *Foundations for the Future*, in June 2007 to Arlene Foster, the Democratic Unionist Party's Minister for the Environment in a devolved administration. Its response to the Review will undoubtedly be a litmus test of where Northern Ireland and its environment are likely to go over the next few years.

Northern Ireland and its environment are at a crucial juncture. The region's economy has been crippled through years of conflict and there is enormous pressure for recovery and regeneration. The



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Troubles have left a legacy of severe social deprivation and a wide range of unmet policy needs. Although the environment is undoubtedly a key economic, social and cultural asset, its importance has yet to be grasped by the new government and there is little shared civic sense of it being a public-interest issue. We have the heaviest ecological footprint in the United Kingdom, and reorienting our society to take account of the environmental challenges of the present – not to mention the future – is going to be an enormous task for its people, its government and its NGO community.

To a considerable extent the scale of official neglect of Northern Ireland's environment can be viewed or understood through its failure to engage with the evolution of European Union law and policy on the environment. Whereas the European Community started to take a lead role in driving environmental policy in the 1970s, Northern Ireland started its steady decline into the Troubles. In effect, while the rest of the United Kingdom and Europe were beginning to turn their attention to addressing the environment, policy making in Northern Ireland was consumed by issues of security, human rights and a collapsing economy.

Twenty years later, by the early 1990s, the House of Commons Select Committee on the Environment came to Northern Ireland and carried out the first independent analysis of the state of its environment. One of the major findings to emerge was government's endemic neglect of environmental EU law. Although Northern Ireland was bound by EU environmental directives as part of the United Kingdom, it had simply ignored the vast majority of them. At that time, of course, the EC was about to amend the EC Treaty to give the Court of Justice the power to fine Member States for non-compliance with Community law, and so Northern Ireland represented a significant financial liability for the UK. Although government in Northern Ireland undertook to clear the EU backlog, a decade later it was obvious that the pace of legislative change was insufficient to remain abreast of EU developments in this field – much less to clear the backlog of unimplemented EU environmental directives.

By 2000 it became obvious that the European Commission had run out of patience and was no longer prepared to allow Northern Ireland – or indeed the United Kingdom – to let the situation continue. More importantly, full legislative powers had been devolved to the Assembly in the previous year, but with devolution came the transfer of liability for the payment of fines incurred as a result of failure to comply with European legislation. EU litigation for non-compliance, combined with the

transfer of liability for payment of EU fines to the devolved administration, generated the first effective stimulus for major modernization.

In the autumn of 2001 I was sitting in my office at Queen's University when I received a phone call from the new Head of Environmental Policy in the Northern Ireland Department of Environment (DOE), asking me if I would like to help resolve (rather than continually highlight) the crisis that was by then facing the department. There began a fascinating two years in which I took a secondment to the Northern Ireland DOE, and assisted them in handling a vast range of litigation from the European Commission and in driving the single largest legislative programme brought before the new Assembly by any Northern Ireland department at that time. Practically every single area of environmental policy was subject to EU litigation, with the threat of very large-scale EU fines looming – large enough to make a major dent in Northern Ireland's budget.

At the time that I joined the DOE I had been studying the Northern Ireland situation quite closely for some years. As an informed observer I knew that the DOE was facing an environmental policy crisis; however, I did not realize just how difficult the situation was until I actually started to open the files. In effect, I began to observe at close quarters the culture of government forged during 30 years of direct rule and 30 years of policy vacuum. First of all, we had a whole generation of civil servants with virtually no track record of complex policy making, much less policy making on the environment. We were also dealing with a civil service that had never been used to policy making in the context of democratic accountability.

Legislation in Northern Ireland during the entire duration of the Troubles was made in Westminster by English politicians who spent very little time in Northern Ireland and who were not directly accountable to the citizens of the region. With the exception of controversial criminal justice or human rights legislation, proposed provisions for Northern Ireland often went before the House of Commons late at night with little meaningful debate. Given that civil servants in Northern Ireland had little experience of dealing with close parliamentary scrutiny or the need to justify new legislation, you can imagine the shock of having to bring forward proposals for 45 complex pieces of legislation, including primary legislation with far-reaching economic consequences, to a locally accountable Assembly – almost all of which had to be rushed through in response to EU litigation.



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Not surprisingly, the Members of the new Northern Ireland Assembly, having been kept out of government for many years, were very keen indeed to use their new legislative powers and to become actively involved in the process of law making through scrutiny committees and Assembly debate. Unfortunately, 30 years of direct rule had created an atmosphere of distrust between the two sides. Officials, on the one hand, were frustrated with local politicians who knew very little about policy making or their portfolios, while local politicians distrusted civil servants because they felt they had kept them at bay for decades. So when I found myself as a lawyer trying to explain to the local Members of the Legislative Assembly that the new legislation would have to be rushed through the scrutiny process to avoid the imposition of large-scale EU fines, it caused tremendous tension. But out of that tension came constructive change, a process of learning and far-reaching modernization of the legal framework governing the environment in Northern Ireland.

Official and political recognition of the neglected state of environmental policy making and the consequent EU liabilities resulted in the DOE's Environmental Policy Division receiving the single largest financial allocation in the first programme for government for Northern Ireland – effectively pushing the environment right up the political agenda. Having come from absolutely nowhere, it was suddenly a major policy issue. This may have occurred for the wrong reasons, but at least politicians and senior civil servants were now being forced to look hard at how they had got themselves into this mess and what they were going to do to get out of it. The Assembly Environment Committee agreed to a shortened period of scrutiny for major pieces of environmental legislation which signalled an acceptance of the infraction crisis. However, the Assembly's Committee of the Centre also made clear that the DOE needed to radically alter its internal culture and ensure proactive management of Northern Ireland's obligation to implement EU directives on the environment to avoid a repetition of this compromise of the democratic process.

The media also became fascinated with this tale of environmental neglect and responsibility, and continued to report this story. There was also a significant cultural or psychological realignment within the civil service in this context. Senior civil servants and local politicians were forced to accept that Northern Ireland was no longer a 'special case' in the throes of a civil war, to be let off lightly by the European Commission. The time for endless procrastination was over and action was expected. Over some rather bracing meetings during this period with officials from the European Commission, the UK

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Treasury, it was made abundantly clear that Northern Ireland would be expected to comply with EU law as part of the United Kingdom.

The other major realization at that time was the cost and inefficiency of devolution. Northern Ireland has almost fully devolved powers on the environment – essentially equivalent to those transferred in Scotland. So even though our population is only (approximately) 1.5 million, we have the cost of a full apparatus of environmental policy making and liabilities. In addition, as Scottish devolution became more robust, it became clear that Defra would focus more heavily on England and Wales and thereby do less of the thinking for Northern Ireland than it had in the past. If Northern Ireland's economic, social and environmental conditions were to be adequately represented in the development of EU policy on the environment, its civil service and Assembly began to realize that Northern Ireland could not simply duplicate or 'piggy-back' on policy development in Scotland, England and Wales. Northern Ireland needed to develop the capacity to think independently and engage proactively in the complex and fast-moving policy debates surrounding the development of the United Kingdom's negotiating position in Europe.

Devolution was suspended in 2002 – to an audible sigh of relief across the Northern Ireland civil service. Because of the suspension of the Assembly, the DOE was able to rush through the remaining parts of the legislative framework necessary to avoid EU fines. But even though the DOE was ultimately successful in averting the imposition of fines, that period left a (hopefully) lasting impression on Northern Ireland's political and policy communities.

During the period of suspension (2002 to 2007), everybody expected the environmental agenda to go back into the political vacuum from which it had emerged, but in fact it remained high on the radar. I think there were three major reasons for that. First of all, we were fortunate in having Peter Hain as Secretary of State. Whereas previous secretaries of state had been willing to let policy just tick over, Peter Hain was not only interested in the environment itself, he was also determined to bring a conclusion to the constitutional deadlock and force through some major policy initiatives. The environmental NGO community played an important role in keeping the debate alive (I will explain that in more detail in a few moments), and the UK Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) also played a significant role in maintaining the momentum of reform. For many years the SDC had remained a Britain-focused organization, touring London, Scotland and Wales for its plenary sessions, commenting on government



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action in Great Britain while largely ignoring Northern Ireland. By this time, the SDC had become much more focused on policy making on sustainable development issues in Northern Ireland, making regular visits, asking difficult questions, and keeping pressure on local politicians and the civil service, and on Peter Hain's direct rule administration.

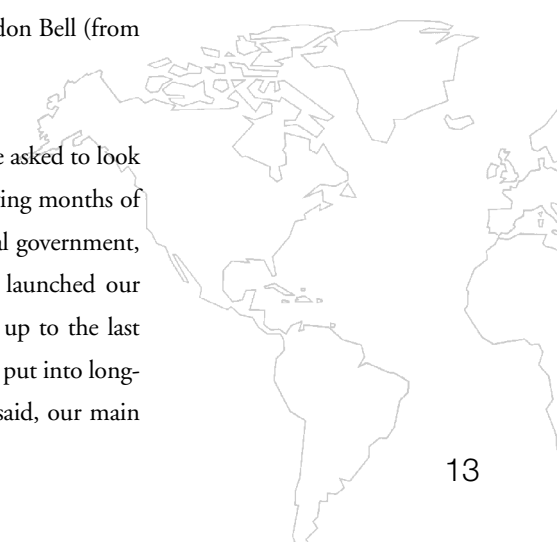
To give you a flavour of what Peter Hain managed to achieve during that period it is important to remember that many local politicians had been effectively absolved from the consequences of suspended devolution because direct rule governments had typically made no major policy changes – always waiting for the outcome of constitutional negotiation and the restoration of power to locally accountable politicians. Peter Hain broke from this 'circling pattern' by proposing a range of far-reaching environmental and social policy changes. He suggested abolishing the 11+ exam for school children, which caused enormous public outcry; he introduced the first and long-overdue Sustainable Development Strategy; and introduced a policy to dramatically reduce rural development in the region. Northern Ireland's Planning Service gives planning permission for more single dwellings in the countryside each year than is granted for the rest of the United Kingdom put together. Rampant rural development is almost a part of Irish culture, both north and south of the border, so this new policy statement caused outrage amongst the local population. Hain also brought forward legislation introducing water charges for the first time as well as dramatically increasing domestic rates to contribute to the cost of upgrading Northern Ireland's very out-of-date sewage treatment infrastructure.

For the first time, local people began to see policy decision making that was going to affect them at a financial, educational and personal level. They started to view the endless constitutional negotiations much more critically, which created local pressure for the restoration of devolution to halt Hain's policy march. In 2007 we had the first election in Northern Ireland in which the constitution was not the only issue under discussion. Development control, water quality, water charging and environmental issues became major electoral questions.

In terms of the NGOs' role, 30 years of direct rule and the absence of devolved or democratic politics had given rise to a vibrant NGO sector in the field of human rights – and equality in particular – but a somewhat timid environmental sector. Rather than leading public campaigns on the environment, Northern Ireland's environmental NGOs had traditionally fostered almost private

relationships with officials, with negotiations taking place behind closed doors. This was partly the outcome of having no levers for exerting democratic pressure but also led to the silencing of this part of the region's voluntary community. But with the restoration of devolution in the late 1990s, key elements of the United Kingdom's national environmental NGO community significantly increased funding to their offices in Northern Ireland, leading to an important rise in capacity. Nine of the region's environmental groups then formed a coalition in 2004 and launched a sophisticated campaign to pressure for regulatory reform. While the period from 1999 to 2004 had witnessed a focus on modernizing the legislative framework governing the environment, attention now turned to the fact that none of it was being enforced, leading to a major loss of public confidence. In addition, because Northern Ireland's environmental regulator (the Environment and Heritage Service) was an executive agency within the DOE, regulatory decision making occurred largely behind closed doors and thereby lacked transparency. The coalition called for the creation of an independent environmental protection agency (which Britain has had for many years). They asked Professor Richard Macrory to produce an initial consultation paper setting out the pros and cons of such an independent agency, and then used this document to lead the debate, highlighting the fact that the government itself was neither driving the issues nor generating public interest. In 2005, the direct rule Minister for the Environment indicated his willingness to agree to structural reform. However, the environmental NGO coalition was meanwhile becoming more ambitious in its demands. Mindful of the fact that any new agency would be operating within a wider landscape of environmental governance distorted by decades of direct rule, they asked for an independent review of the arrangements for environmental governance so that any programme of change would take full account of the wider legacy of direct rule and the need for holistic reform. The Review began in 2006 and was chaired by Tom Burke, with myself and Gordon Bell (from industry) serving as panel members.

Our remit was incredibly wide. Going well beyond the question of regulation, we were asked to look at all publicly funded aspects of the environment and adopt a transparent process. Following months of public deliberation with a very wide cross-section of representatives from central and local government, the private sector, the voluntary and community sectors, agriculture and industry, we launched our report, *Foundations for the Future*, in June 2007. During its preparation – in fact, right up to the last minute – we did not know if devolution would be restored in the short term or perhaps be put into long-term cold storage, making it very difficult for us to design our recommendations. That said, our main



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finding was that the system of governance was not up to the job of meeting current environmental challenges, or the more complex challenges of climate change to be faced for the future.

We acknowledged that government would be overstretched for many years as it turned its attention to leading a post-conflict society forward and addressing a wide range of unmet policy needs. But our underlying message was that the environment is central to both social and economic well-being and could not be side-lined indefinitely. We emphasized that urgent reform was essential if Northern Ireland was to have any chance of a sustainable future.

We have set out a suite of some 40 recommendations designed not to create a state-of-the-art system of environmental governance, but to focus on the most pressing issues demanding reform. It would be impossible here to go into the details, but I'll give you a flavour of the sorts of changes we recommended.

First of all, we agreed with the environmental coalition and with Professor Macrory's report that government should create an independent environment agency in Northern Ireland. Almost to the point of repetition, the people who communicated with us reflected a serious loss of public confidence in the quality of environmental protection. The DOE or government as regulator was simply an unacceptable way forward, not least because of a tremendous sense of lack of public confidence and transparency. Power is hugely centralized in a direct rule context, with little in the way of democratically accountable politics and many decisions being taken behind closed doors. Environmental regulation was a part of that closed system because the DOE itself was a regulator. In addition, this centralized arrangement for environmental regulation meant that Northern Ireland had no environmental champion capable of leading informed public debate on the environment. The governments and people of Great Britain are well used to having vocal environment agencies, but because the Environment and Heritage Service was part of the DOE, which is ultimately comprised of civil servants, it could not be seen to openly disagree with the Minister. In effect, not only was the environmental NGO sector labouring to throw off a legacy of silence, the environmental regulator – as perhaps the most important official voice on the environment – had also been silenced by the structure of governance.

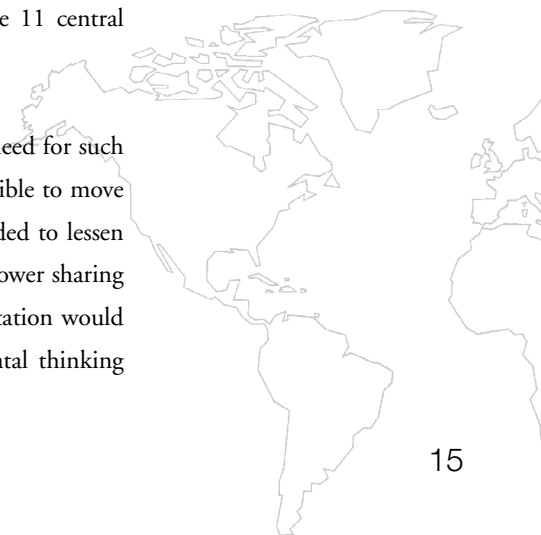
However, we have also recommended an innovative structure for the independent agency. Rather than suggest the creation of separate agencies for pollution control, nature conservation and built heritage

– and partly due to Northern Ireland’s scale – we suggested a single holistic environmental regulator spanning all these areas. There are many ongoing considerations of how it might work, but on balance we were persuaded that there are considerable advantages to a holistic approach.

We also emphasized the need to restore regard for the rule of planning and environmental law, which had been significantly undermined during the years of direct rule, while acknowledging the particular challenges faced by the regulator in Northern Ireland. The environment agency, if established, will face the prospect of regulating an international border – the only regulator in the United Kingdom to have to do so – where the illegal smuggling of waste has intensified the problem of controlling serious environmental crime. In particular, the regulator faced the problem of highly armed ex-paramilitaries moving from traditional violence into waste crime, causing many of the most serious incidences of environmental infringement. Regulating such entities poses huge challenges regarding both resources and personnel.

We strongly recommended that the new agency embrace a proactive role in leading and informing public debate and reform. We had given some attention to the barriers to environmental policy making generated by the particular form of government in Northern Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement had created a form of power sharing between the two major parties – the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin – rather than a majority government, with almost all legislative powers on the environment transferred to the Assembly. But in order to create the space for power sharing, 11 separate government departments had to be created, making our small population enormously overgoverned, but also fragmenting responsibility for environmental policy making across nine of the 11 central government departments.

The point we made to government was that while the Review panel understood the need for such a complex central government structure in a power-sharing context, it was almost impossible to move policy making forward without a properly integrated policy system. A framework is needed to lessen some of the worst excesses of that fragmentation. It was clear that the arrangements for power sharing would hamper decision making in any event, but the added effect of structural fragmentation would make it very hard indeed for Northern Ireland to keep pace with modern environmental thinking and reform.



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We also made extensive recommendations about the need to modernize the environmental policy community itself. In particular, we pointed out that Northern Ireland had no strategic vision for the environment. Nobody seemed to know what environmental policy actually was, or even if there was any, and the political parties had little or no environmental policy knowledge. While most of the parties were very enthusiastic, they clearly had no background in this complex area. Government in Northern Ireland had been restored with almost no preparation for government. In Scotland they had spent two years training their prospective politicians in the major policy areas and for the process of policy making. In Northern Ireland the ongoing constitutional poker game had eclipsed all preparation for devolution. We made strenuous recommendations for the independent training of the political parties and also that the Minister for the Environment have a special advisor in this field.

Another major issue for us – and I suppose a defining feature for Northern Ireland – is the island itself. The island context shapes definitively the way in which environmental governance will be played out in future. We are the only part of the United Kingdom sharing an international border and we have our own self-contained island environment. There are powerful legal, political, environmental and economic drivers stimulating the need for proactive collaboration between the North and the South of Ireland. The environment is one of the very few areas identified explicitly by the Good Friday Agreement as a focus for collaboration for the two governments, and we actively encourage them to use the mechanism of the North South Ministerial Council, the Cross Border Bodies and the British Irish Council to come together around this key issue. In our opinion this would serve to develop negotiating alliances for European purposes but also to coordinate policy and regulatory solutions for managing the island's environment.

The importance of enhanced accountability was also a major question for the Review panel and remains a significant issue generally. Needless to say, the democratic deficit of direct rule has always been a problem and, thankfully, as the Review drew to a close devolution was restored, thereby resolving the core underlying lack of accountability. We made two significant recommendations to the government in this regard. First, we recommended that it establish a cross-Assembly environmental audit committee. As in England, we have a suite of scrutiny committees that follow each government department, but what was absent from the system was a cross-Assembly committee which could look at how the whole of government was performing on the environment. We also discovered that it was almost impossible to establish how much was being spent on the environment and whether it represented any kind of value

for money. So our second point was that an annual audit should be published explaining a) how much money was being spent on the Northern Ireland environment and b) what value for money and what environmental value that generated.

We were also struck by the absence of transparency surrounding the entire environmental management process. There is no state of the environment report in Northern Ireland. No-one seems to know whether the quality of the environment is good, bad or indifferent, so one of our central recommendations was to start the process of publishing a thorough state of the environment report on a regular statutory basis. We also recommended that that report be aligned with the Irish state of the environment report so that the people of the island and its governments would see at a holistic level whether the environment was improving or worsening and whether policy initiatives were having the appropriate impact.

Our last major area of focus was the question of environmental justice. This is becoming a major issue in the national and international environmental debate, and has a particularly powerful resonance for Northern Ireland. As a post-conflict society with severe levels of deprivation, we are experiencing a stampede for economic recovery and regeneration, while at the same time ever-tougher environmental decisions have to be taken. In this context of economic and social malaise, the justice implications of environmental governance decisions will be more and more acute, thus we particularly emphasized the need for government to focus on how it would anticipate and respond to these implications.

One of the most important aspects of the justice context was the judiciary itself. In Northern Ireland the culture of the judiciary has been forged through 30 years of responding to and handling serious violence, so it was difficult for them to see environmental crime as a pressing problem. In England, Scotland and Wales it has been an issue for some years, but in Northern Ireland, attitudes to environmental crime are as yet unformed and penalties are considerably lower than in Britain. The temptation for the regulator is to focus on soft targets, be they individual farmers or smaller essentially compliant industries, to increase prosecution and enforcement rates, meaning that serious criminals have often been overlooked. The suite of new powers we recommended would force the regulator and government to enhance respect for the rule of law. We also suggested that the environmental policy cycle begin with an environmental justice impact assessment.



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Northern Ireland has some experience of impact assessments. As a result of our particular political history, we have statutory obligations requiring mandatory equality impact assessments for any new policy proposals. We suggested that the judiciary build on that expertise and apply it to the environmental justice context, strongly recommending that the regulator be called to account annually to show how problems were being dealt with. We recommended a new land and environmental tribunal that would enable the judges to specialize in this complex and growing area of law to assist in counteracting the established judicial culture.

Another major focus for us was the problem of getting the public and government working together more proactively. Environmental justice and good environmental decision making depend on effective public participation. One of the features of the governance relationship that we observed in the course of our investigation was a mutual disaffection between the public and the government. On the one hand, government officials complained that the public was simply not interested; on the other, the public complained that it had been excluded for years, that its views did not count and that there was no point in trying to get involved.

When Peter Hain's government was introducing the water charge proposals the public consultation exercise was truncated by several weeks in order to rush through the new legislation. This led to successful judicial review proceedings being taken by the Consumer Council in Northern Ireland and a period of markedly antagonistic relations between the Council and the Department for Regional Development on this very controversial policy process. We thought this was a good moment to point out the importance of government investment in, and support for, public participation in the whole process of environmental governance.

By way of conclusion it is difficult at this point to say what the future holds for Northern Ireland and the environment. Even though there was perpetual grumbling about direct rule and the need for devolution, our recent experience of direct rule was actually very positive with regard to the environment. Peter Hain introduced several significant improvements, not least a Sustainable Development Strategy that showed a real appetite for change. But there is a definite sense that the newly restored devolved government is at best ambivalent about the issue of the environment. As I said, our report was commissioned by Peter Hain's administration, and then presented to Arlene Foster as new DUP Minister for

the Environment. Several months have now passed since the launch and Arlene Foster's department has as yet made no commitment concerning any aspect of the report one way or the other.

The DUP is first and foremost a Unionist party, and therefore unlikely to be receptive to a cross-border agenda. At the same time, however, we have been witnessing unprecedented levels of cordiality between the principal northern and southern politicians, so anything is possible. The DUP is also a party with a largely rural constituency, and farmers are vehemently against an independent environment agency and many of the changes that have been suggested. They see the environmental agenda as 'anti-progress' and are suspicious that it might even be designed to hold them back. So the DUP as holder of the environment portfolio and dominant political party in Northern Ireland was not a particularly promising backdrop to the launch of our report.

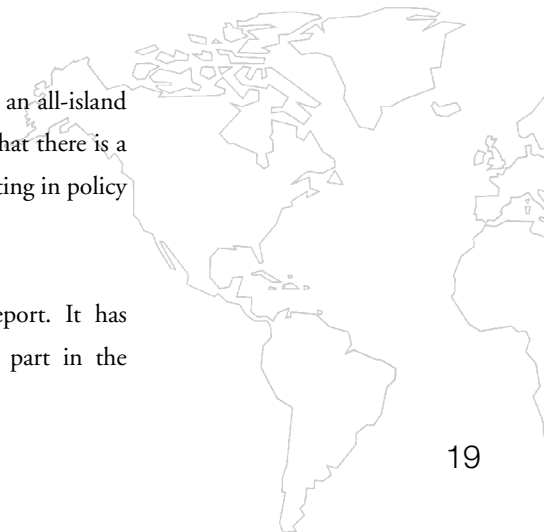
On a brighter note, all the other key players have received the report positively and manifested a tremendous appetite for reform.

The Assembly Environment Committee invited us to meet it shortly after the report was published and has committed to making the report's implementation one of its priorities for the coming term.

The North South Ministerial Council, one of the major organs created under the Good Friday Agreement intended to harmonize relations between the Irish and Northern Ireland governments, has signalled a positive response and shown particular interest in how the environment might be a focus for all-island governance in a particular range of fields.

Sinn Féin is extremely keen to have not only an environmental protection agency but an all-island one – which is probably premature given the current political climate, but it does show that there is a good deal of support for an all-island expert body reporting to both governments and assisting in policy development.

The Northern Ireland judiciary has also come out strongly in favour of our report. It has commissioned a series of training exercises for the judiciary and is keen to play its part in the government process.



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The Northern Ireland Strategic Investment Board, a non-departmental public body tasked with spending public money on major infrastructure and public services, has also signalled a positive response and it too wishes to be involved in the debate. It is about to publish the new investment plan for the region and wishes to align it with many of our recommendations.

Northern Ireland's Criminal Justice Inspectorate also supports a number of our key recommendations. Shortly after the publication of our report the Inspectorate published its own serious indictment of the lack of enforcement of planning and environmental controls, expressing deep concern, in particular, about the loss to our economy resulting from ex-paramilitary involvement in environmental crime, and called trenchantly for immediate reform.

At the same time, politics in the Republic of Ireland is changing. For the first time ever, the Green Party in Ireland now has two Irish ministers: one in the Department of the Environment and one in Energy. So where Ian Paisley and many northern politicians once looked enviously across the Irish border at its tiger economy, they now see an economy that, while undoubtedly facing a slow down, has two Green ministers raising difficult questions about the endemic neglect of the Irish environment. Northern politicians are starting to hear a different voice from south of the border, and this may help to temper DUP's apparent wish to catch up as quickly as possible regardless of environmental issues. Sinn Féin, for its part, is very focused on a social justice agenda.

In many ways the job for people like myself, the NGOs, and all who are concerned with our progress, is to persuade local politicians that social justice, economic viability and environmental quality are all part of the same debate; and while environmental protection will require some hard decisions to be made, failure to face these challenges will seriously threaten Northern Ireland's ability to embrace a sustainable future.

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