

## **Towards Smaller Smarter Government**

### ***Part one Its importance and what stands in its way***

We can no longer afford the size and form of government that has served us over the past generation or more during the years of plenty when departmental budgets were able to grow remorselessly year on year.

True, cuts have been made, some reorganisation has been carried out and the operating account has been balanced but what faces us in the years ahead will be much more difficult to deal with than what has gone before.

What has been achieved so far has been done whilst still retaining government more or less as it was before. It is still in silos, it is still incredibly bureaucratic and still administratively clumsy.

It's now almost as if government is preoccupied with protecting itself rather than making its service to the people its primary aim and it is sometimes difficult to believe that this great monolith serves but eighty five thousand people. There must be a better way.

The Chief Minister was absolutely right both to call for a single legal government entity and to promote digital inclusion as key tools in the creation of a fit for future purpose government but these key initiatives face some formidable obstacles.

The problem is that Government is too comfortable and change is too unwelcome at the senior levels.

For their part the current cadre of Departmental Chief Executive Officers have made their way up through the service in easier times. In the main they have never experienced really tough challenges and are not inclined to want to dismantle an establishment that they have worked so hard to become a senior part of.

Ministers have also striven to achieve that level of responsibility and quite understandably become preoccupied with 'their department' and may be reluctant to countenance change when their political reputation is so intrinsically linked to their own individual performance.

Under the present system there is no single coherent strategy but rather seven independent departmental directions of travel that can contradict each other thus confusing and negating the efforts of others. It is not unusual to see a change of

Minister which then results in a complete change of direction within the same administration.

The Council of Ministers was an improvement on what went before but now wholly inadequate for the task ahead. In my experience it is dysfunction with new departmental policies appearing at the table like unexpected pregnancies.

In other words for both chief officers and ministers it is about personal standing rather than overall government outcomes and performance. Fortunately below the level of Chief Officers there are many committed public service staff who would welcome change and are exasperated it is coming so slowly. I know this to be the case as many have made their views known to me.

A single legal government entity (we currently have almost seven mini governments in the form of semi autonomous departments) would enable strategy and policy to coalesce around three key hubs – people, place and the economy - allowing the progressive reform of the current archaic departmental structure. Applying the opportunities inherent in a single legal entity would ensure that the current top heavy system of government could be significantly streamlined.

Digital inclusion, over time, would profoundly simplify the administrative and bureaucratic processes putting the citizen very much in charge of their own data and allowing service to be personalised. Personal data belongs to the individual – not the state.

Funds saved from both these initiatives could then be redirected to health, social care and education. As Baroness Martha Lane Fox puts it in her 2015 Dimpleby Lecture on the subject of digital inclusion *'taking the money from the cold hands of the administration and placing it into the warm hands of teachers and nurses'*. In other words moving resources from a top heavy structure and bureaucracy to front line services where it is needed most.

To act decisively on the key initiatives of digital inclusion and the single legal entity would ensure that we really did get a government that served its people not itself.

Constituency issues and the performance of individual MHK's both matter hugely but so does ensuring we create a national government fit for future purpose and that requires a national discussion. Exactly how do we achieve an outcome that provides high levels of service whilst remaining tax competitive? Not an easy task.

To that end, and in the hope of stimulating discussion, this piece is the first in a four part series which looks at a number of aspects of smaller smarter government. Subjects covered will include: how a single legal entity government and digital inclusion would work, how they could impact on local government and the parliamentary process, how they would work for you and some of the challenges a fit for future purpose government will face.