

# End of term report

## Years ending May 2016

Mr James Orr



*This end of term report into the performance of the Northern Ireland Executive over the past 5 years is addressed to the Northern Ireland electorate. It is the electorate who can demand higher standards from our politicians. The report is broken down into 6 key areas, plus recommendations for ways in which the Executive can improve over the next 5 years.*

### English

*The Executive seems to struggle with some basic concepts and manages to twist the meanings of words beyond commonly accepted definitions.*

*'Sustainable Development' does not mean prioritising the economy over everything else. I know they really want it to, but it doesn't. I've tried explaining this many times. It looks like I'll have to go over that lesson yet again.*

*A golf course near the Giant's Causeway is not 'a good example of rewilding.' It is baffling how anyone could interpret 'rewilding' as manicured greens and bungalows. Someone obviously didn't do their homework. Rewilding may be confusing now but they need to get to grips with it as they will be hearing a lot more about it in the next few years.*

*We know it's easy to get confused by complicated graphs and simplistic claims, but burning waste does not produce 'renewable energy.' The wind keeps blowing, the sun keeps shining, the waves keep rolling, but once you've burnt waste you can't use it again. That's what 'renewable' means.*

*The destruction of the landscape that inspired and nurtured Northern Ireland's greatest poet, Séamus Heaney, is nothing less than cultural vandalism. How they think it is a good idea to build a dual carriageway through the middle of such an iconic literary landscape is incomprehensible when there are much better alternatives.*

Grade: **F**

### Science

*Despite being told by the Assembly, and civic society, to take strong action on climate change, the Executive has so far failed to introduce a Climate Change Act. It seems they have problems understanding evidence-based arguments.*

While I'm dealing with climate change, issuing licences for oil and gas exploration suggests a profound failure to understand basic principles of cause and effect. And whose bright idea was it to allow fossil fuel drilling in the middle of a water catchment area? Very poor. Repeat 100 times the word Woodburn and they will understand there is both a wood and a burn in this water catchment. It is also very strange how NI Water provides our drinking water yet has become our biggest single polluter.

It's hard to know where to begin discussing the record on environmental regulation. Performance has been poor on so many levels across the board. Must try harder next term. The Assembly demanded of the Executive an Inquiry into waste crime and it has not been delivered. And whose madcap idea was it to abolish the DoE and hand over environmental regulation to the Department of Agriculture after the election?

The Lough Neagh case is a prime example of shoddy environmental protection. Suction dredging for sand in a lake with multiple international designations, without planning permission, is just not on. It is quite a basic principle that they should understand environmental impacts BEFORE they allow this type of work to go ahead. Lough Neagh is just the most prominent example of regulatory failure with multiple problems. The Executive must do better than this. Lough Neagh should be the jewel in the crown of Northern Ireland, abundant with jobs and wildlife.

It's not all bad news though. The presumption against fracking, the ban on GM crops, and the major solar farm approval have all been good decisions.

Grade: **E**

## **Economics**

The Executive likes to think it is pretty savvy when it comes to the economy, but its decisions suggest otherwise. Take the Green New Deal as an example. They could have created thousands of new jobs, tackled fuel poverty, and cut greenhouse gas emissions. What did we get instead? A handful of new boilers for those who could afford to pay for them. This is a squandered opportunity that displays a worrying economic illiteracy. And don't think I didn't notice the underhand way energy efficiency schemes were scrapped, and money was siphoned out of the DOE budget.

The Corporation Tax cut is another example of the Executive's economic illiteracy. It is crazy to think that subsidising a few big corporations, who will in turn drain their profits out of Northern Ireland, will be good for the economy. When even those who support a corporation tax cut admit it will be at least 15 years before the economy recovers from the revenue dip

as a result of the lower tax take, you know it's probably not a good idea. Once again, ideology trumps evidence with this Executive.

They seem to think economic development at all costs will solve all Northern Ireland's problems. They have failed to grasp the reality that all economic activity happens within human societies, and all societies rely on a healthy environment to function. Placing economic considerations above environmental and social considerations is counter-productive. Good jobs and a healthy planet are not only achievable, they go hand and hand. The costs of clean-up and tax evasion at just one illegal dump, at Mobuoy, is now £400 million. Do the maths. Poor water quality is holding back the aquaculture industry, over fishing ruins the fishing industry and tourism needs healthy landscapes. Managing and protecting the sand resources at Lough Neagh is the Executive's responsibility. This is how you help industry in the longer term. They often fail to see the difference between wealth creation and wealth extraction

Grade: **F**

## **Citizenship**

The Executive's record on transparency is woeful. Most but not all of them refuse to publish the names of their donors, and some actively block attempts to improve transparency. How are people meant to know if they are acting in the public interest or in the interests of their donors?

I warned them that handing planning powers over to local councils before they were prepared for the responsibility would not be a good idea. They did it anyway.

The Petition of Concern is still routinely being used to frustrate the democratic will of the Assembly. It was introduced as a mechanism to prevent tyranny, not as a means for thwarting democracy. They must stop misusing it. As leaders they have a duty to lead us away from identity politics.

Several members of the Executive have been promising a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights for quite some time. They have yet to deliver on that promise. Nature has rights too and I will be repeating this a lot more in the future.

Overall, the Executive has a lot to learn about citizenship. Bickering and bullying by the bigger players seem to be its modus operandi. They have many good Ministers, if they are allowed to do their job.

They are proposing to limit even further access to justice in the courts. Please ensure they read the Aarhus Convention. Do they realise that it is easier to take an environmental judicial review in China than it is in Northern Ireland?

Grade: **F**

## **PE**

The importance of physical activity for health, wellbeing, and happiness needs more attention. They still insist however on building ever more roads resulting in more people living sedentary lifestyles while breathing in exhaust fumes. Air quality in some of our towns and villages is already dangerously poor. While there have been improvements to cycling infrastructure and public transport, I like the Connswater Greenway and other proposed cycle routes, they remain disjointed and the poor cousin to the car.

Rural planning policy exacerbates this sedentary, car dominated life-style. If policy encourages people to live scattered across the countryside with inadequate public transport services they will be forced to drive everywhere. This shouldn't be a difficult concept to grasp.

The Going for Growth farming strategy predicts a significant increase in output and profits, but a marginal increase in jobs. They have already delivered on many aspects of this Strategy. Just a pity it is the wrong model for agriculture. This makes us vulnerable to high external costs and increases food insecurity, and we didn't see any Strategic Environmental Assessment. More mechanised, automated food production separates us from the land. Reconnecting with the land would mean happier, healthier communities. We all need access to wilderness.

Grade: **E**

## **Drama**

It looks like this is an area in which the Executive excels. They have an astonishing ability to play friend or foe depending on the situation. Shakespeare would be proud.

During debates on the Planning Bill we saw quite a pantomime as members skipped across the floor to confer, then return to squabbling once the debate moved on.

One member did an impressive turn as a comedian. His climate change denial was hilarious and his ability to keep a straight face while scrapping energy efficiency schemes was something to behold.

*Publically supporting the Green New Deal while simultaneously plotting to undo it was a tour de force. Bravo.*

Grade: **A**

### **Areas for improvement**

*Overall, it has been a very poor performance. Nature, urban place-making and landscapes are in a sorry state. If it wasn't for the grade for drama this would be a fail. The Executive has a duty to pass on this place, this part of the Earth, in a better state than they found it.*

*The Executive needs to start taking environmental protection seriously. How do they expect to have a thriving economy, and a healthy society if the very thing they rely on for food, water, air, and well-being is treated like a disposable commodity? An independent regulator would be a decent first step. It may also help their thinking if they realise the environment is not a 'thing' separate from us but includes us.*

*The Executive makes much of its mandate to govern. When barely half the electorate turns out to vote, however, you can be sure democracy is not in a healthy state. Perhaps if the Executive ceased the practice of abusing the Petition of Concern, and came clean about where they get their money, people would be more inclined to engage with the democratic system. I hope to see considerable improvement next term. I will want to see the unfolding of a healthy, transparent, participative democracy because we all need that to help each other and the environment.*

*I know that they can do much better. Aim higher. Develop a vision. Make us proud.*

Overall grade: **E**