

Ministers Reflect Máirtín Ó Muilleoir



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Biographical details

2014–20: Sinn Féin member of the legislative assembly (MLA) for Belfast South

2016–17: Northern Ireland Minister of Finance

Máirtín Ó Muilleoir was interviewed by Akash Paun and Jess Sargeant on 10 September 2021 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project. The interview took place remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Máirtín Ó Muilleoir reflects on his time as minister of finance in the Northern Ireland executive, the implications of the EU referendum, the challenge of cross-party working and the events leading up to the collapse of the executive in 2017.

Akash Paun (AP): So first of all, just thinking back to when you were first appointed as minister, what was your first day in office like? What were your immediate impressions and feelings on walking into the department as a minister for the first time?

Máirtín Ó Muilleoir (MÓM): I was the finance minister for Northern Ireland for the Sinn Féin party from May 2016 until the government collapsed, really at the end of that year – it was wrapped up in January 2017. To put it in context, Sinn Féin hadn’t had a finance minister on the island of Ireland since Michael Collins, who met an even bleaker end than I met in the Irish Civil War.

So it was a huge step for Sinn Féin, for my party, to take the reins at [the Department of] Finance. I always believed that finance is the nexus of every government, the most important position after the position of first and deputy first ministers, co-equal ministers, leaders, and therefore it was quite an onerous position.

At the same time, as part of the context, Sinn Féin wanted the economy [department] and in the game of checkers we play here, once our partners in government/opponents, the DUP [Democratic Unionist Party], realised that Sinn Féin wanted economy – because it affects every area of economic development, job creation, training, cross-border bodies such as Tourism Ireland – once our partners/opponents in the DUP realised that, they blocked us by taking economy and relinquishing for the first time in over a decade the finance portfolio. So that was the background.

I found it exhilarating but was particularly privileged because I was asked to take up the job by Martin McGuinness, then the leader of Sinn Féin in the North of Ireland, the joint first minister, deputy first minister, and I wasn’t expecting that. But I remember saying:

“Martin, I don’t know much about this, but I know more than anyone else in any other party, so I think we’ll be okay.” So you bring all that weight of expectation with you.

But I think the thing that impressed me from the first step, was how generous, accommodating, facilitating, helpful the civil servants were. I’m an old hand at this. I first went into local government here in 1987 when Sinn Féin wasn’t allowed to speak at meetings, we were barred from committees, we were shouted down. I wasn’t allowed to attend any civic functions. I had to wear a flak jacket going into meetings, we had air freshener sprayed on us, orange juice poured over us, and we took a series of court cases to ensure we had the absolute equal right to represent our constituents. So there’s always, I think, among the Irish Republican constituency a belief that civil servants may perhaps drag their feet. I personally don’t subscribe to that school of thought, but I was really heartened on day one to see how much my colleagues, the civil service colleagues in the department of finance, were really wanting to make sure this was a success. You’re bringing me back to this because I haven’t really thought about this much since, but you’re bringing me back to those early emotions.

AP: As you said, you hadn’t been expecting to be given that particular role, but you felt you did know quite a bit about it. So that brings me to my next question: How prepared did you feel for the responsibility of that job? Did you walk in and feel like you knew what was expected of you, or was there a bit of a learning curve?

MÓM: Well, I was wholly unprepared for it. But it does give me some heart that Martin McGuinness’s last job was as a butcher’s assistant in a butcher shop; Gerry Adams’s last job was as a barman. So though I was wholly unprepared, I had served as an MLA [member of the legislative assembly] for almost three years; but really I don’t think that you need that much preparation. Being a minister, in my view, was about giving strong leadership, to promote reconciliation, to make sure that the peace process wouldn’t falter and to put social justice and issues of justice front and centre. So I didn’t expect to get any government position, any ministerial position. I didn’t lobby for any position. So it’s always a great honour to be asked to take up such a position. But for me it wouldn’t have mattered if it had been ‘dog-catcher’ or ‘communities’ or ‘in charge of sports’ or whatever, I think you bring the qualities of leadership which are needed.

Now, what I will say is I’m one of the few people who were in the parliament who also had a background in business. I have been involved in running businesses and setting up businesses both here and in the US, in America, since the end of the last century. And that, of course, does two things: it gives you some grounding; but better than that, it makes people think you know what you’re talking about. And of course, perception is nine-tenths of reality, so both those things helped. So I’d never been a minister before, I’d never been in the offices of the finance department before, I’d never really thought about what a minister would do, but despite that, being wholly unprepared, I think I was fully prepared as well.

AP: You mentioned already what you wanted to bring to the job. What were your priorities on taking on that role? What did you set out to achieve from the start and what were those priorities based on? Were they things that you identified yourself, were they things that your party leader asked you to focus on?

MÓM: I think there's always two aspects to this, certainly in this devolved set-up that we have. One was to take the ministry and to use it to the maximum benefit of all the people, but particularly to fulfil the party manifesto. Sinn Féin, being a party of the left, obviously wanted as much support for people who were at the bottom rung of the economic ladder. We wanted to introduce things such as the Social Value Act onto procurement, which I was responsible for, to £2 billion a year. We wanted to end zero-hour contracts. We wanted to make sure that we had a better gender balance in our central procurement directorate, which when I went in was, believe it or not, 14 men. So yes, you take all the Sinn Féin touchpoints, touchstones, I suppose, and say: "Look, we have to deliver on those, and the party expects that." For example, there was a very important project to build the first proper road from Belfast to Derry since partition. Martin McGuinness [deputy first minister] said: "I don't care what you do, but you need to make sure that I have the billion pounds to do that." So that has to win. So you took that.

But let me just say something else to you that I think maybe is different from other regions, or maybe it's different from other devolved set-ups. One of the key things for me as a Sinn Féin representative was to show that we were good stewards of the department, that we could be prudent in government, that we were not going to raid the kitty, be wasteful, be foolish with people's money. So in some ways, while you take your party's agenda and you wish to deliver on that, actually you spend a lot of the time trying to make sure that the bulk of the people who don't vote for Sinn Féin – we're obviously the biggest, or equal-biggest party, but still there isn't a plurality vote for Sinn Féin – you're trying to say to those people: "Look, I really respect where you're coming from, we want to listen to your opinions, we're not going to slash and burn here. When I am finished with this, you may not vote for Sinn Féin, but hopefully I can change your perception of what Sinn Féin was." And that of course is because, unlike any of the other governments you're speaking to, we had a 30-year war, the legacy of which you meet every day in terms of the bereaved and those who suffered. And we had a polarised society, so badly polarised that people were being killed. I think it was essential for me, and I'm sure other people thought this as well, to bring a sensibility of that very sensitive position that you have in society and for me I was trying to use it to make sure that I enhanced people's perception of a Sinn Féin minister.

AP: This relates to the point you made before that you were the first ever Sinn Féin finance minister in Northern Ireland and the first on the island of Ireland for a long time. As you say, you had some party manifesto policies that you were keen to ensure happened. But at the same time, would you say you felt some responsibility to

demonstrate that you were the finance minister for the whole of Northern Ireland and not just the communities that you represented?

MÓM: Well actually, if anything, I think you over-compensate. The first thing that I did on my first day was to visit... this is my first real day in office, you're at the parliament, the appointments are made, you get your briefing documents, which most people never ever read, and then you start. So my first day when I started, I visited a project in the heart of loyalist east Belfast, unionist east Belfast, to ensure a European programme which was in peril, to give my guarantee that I would ensure it was continued. That brought me into a community in which I have zero votes. But I was sending out a message that first day that we were going to be ministers, not just for all, but that we were going to make sure we are ministers for the Protestant or unionist people, because there was no question I was going to be a minister for the Republican people. So that was the first thing I did.

And on my last day in office, the last thing I did was I cleared support for a memorial at the Somme battlefield, which is hugely significant for Ulster and Protestant people. It's not as significant for me personally, but it's a huge bit of the Ulster Protestant legacy and it had a really rundown, decrepit interpretative facility. And my last deed in office was to clear the money to get that restored. So just those little bookends are interesting because I wanted to stress that we're going to look after the 'other' constituency. That became, I think, very, very important for me. And it wasn't, by the way, just window dressing. I lived through this war; I was at more funerals than I ever want to go to ever again in my life. I have stood over victims of assassination with their brains blown out. So when you've been through that, the number one priority for me was to build the peace and to encourage reconciliation and then to ensure that justice was delivered.

AP: You've talked a bit about your external-facing role as minister, going out into the community and so on. But as finance minister, a big part of your role is to negotiate with other departments, to set the budgets and spending limits and so on for departments across the executive, most of which, of course, would have been led by ministers of other parties than your own. What was your experience of that part of the job, negotiating with other ministers and trying to impose spending limits and so on?

MÓM: So let me maybe crack the perception. The first thing I did when I was finance minister was that I insisted I would go out and meet everyone who invited me to meet them. And this caused consternation among the other parties, because I would go out to sports clubs, I would go out to libraries, I would go out to women's groups, I would go out to faith groups, whatever. And messages would keep coming in from the other departments: "What's he doing visiting a training scheme in Fermanagh?", "What's he doing visiting Waterways Ireland?", which is, you know, [the responsibility of] other departments. But I actually just took it, and shook it up and said: "Why wouldn't I?" Because the finance minister is often perceived as being bookish, pouring over ledgers, and I thought to myself: "My God, who would want to do that job?" You know, it's a

privilege to be finance minister but we started very early in the morning and we were the last people out of the department, but in between times we had this busy, busy, busy agenda. So that's the first thing. And doing that probably didn't help me balance the books or deliver extra money for the people, but it entirely changed the perception of what the finance minister was doing, and how people regarded the finance minister, and the Sinn Féin finance minister, and that goes back to my original priorities.

Secondly, there's a little bit of a myth about this, you know, that we're sitting down dealing with, say, the minister from the SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party], the moderate nationalist party, as they would describe themselves, or the Ulster Unionist Party, the party that midwived austerity here, as they wouldn't describe themselves... But actually, you know, you've a £10 billion budget, you have to give £4 or £5 billion of that – actually more than that now – to health; wages are probably £7 billion of that. So actually, the money slots in. And yeah, you have some flexibility around, you know, the decision to build the road to Derry, but all the parties had agreed that. We [would decide we] are going to build a new stadium, say, for rugby or for soccer – but that all had been agreed. So to suggest that as finance minister you're sort of almost God-like, that you were saying: "We're going to starve the agriculture department." Your flexibility wasn't that much.

So in my view, I guess it's no secret that the two big parties, Sinn Féin and the DUP, who called the shots, that by and large they said: "This is where the money is going to go." But there was no great disagreement about that. All the parties – when I started all five parties were in the executive, but in 2016 two of the parties, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists, left – generally everybody agreed that the priorities are health and education.

So there wasn't an awful lot of disagreement from any other party when I stood up and said: "This is my first budget" – and actually I didn't do a budget but – "here's a spending round." There wasn't any other party that stood up and said: "No, spend less on health, spend less on education." So first of all, I wasn't negotiating with the smaller parties because they weren't in the government at that time, they were in opposition. And secondly, yes, other ministers would come to you looking for a million here, a million there, but by and large – maybe some people are too egotistical to say this – but, by and large, the decisions were taken above my head. The decisions were taken at the executive office level. They were taken where the first minister, Arlene Foster, and Martin McGuinness were meeting. And even then, one is a party of the right, one is a party of the left – despite that, you know, education, health, they were dominating the agenda.

AP: Did you feel that the department, the civil service that you've mentioned already, gave you the right kind of support to deliver those objectives that you'd set?

MÓM: I thought they were superb. I thought they were consummate professionals. They provided, I think, wisdom. I didn't always take their advice. I probably should have taken their advice a few times I didn't. I think their advice was fair. They come from a different political parish than me, if I can say that. I don't mean to say that some of them didn't vote for Sinn Féin but many of them would never have had the background I had, so never had the same cultural education as I had. The Irish language is very dear to me, part of my DNA. There wouldn't have been a lot of people in the department who would have really understood that. I'm not saying they were opposed to that at all, but they just were from a different milieu.

For example, I became the first minister to have a full-time Irish language officer who worked at putting out social media posts in Irish, putting out statements which were relevant, translated into Irish, working with Irish language groups. And they facilitated that, they just threw a few balls in the air. And all of a sudden, we had a DUP minister who had inherited education and didn't want anything to do with the Irish language. We managed somehow or other to shuffle across a very capable young lady who became the Irish language officer for the finance department, which has never happened before.

So, you know, one of the things, I think – again this is just my personal opinion – but this is also linked to the years of warfare, that the civil servants, regardless of their own political opinions, realised or believed that where we were was such a dismal, painful place, that the alternative was much better, and that they also were playing their role to make sure the government worked. I mean, I don't really use the term Northern Ireland, but I would consider them Northern Ireland patriots. I never actually discussed this with them, but I think they saw themselves as Northern Ireland patriots, and part of their patriotism was to make sure that government worked, that they showed that the peace worked, and that they acted fairly, without bias and with respect for their minister and for what their minister wanted to do. So that was something that I feel very strongly about.

I go to meetings occasionally, public meetings of Irish Republicans and, you know, someone will always get up and say: "But the civil service is so against us and there's ingrained bias and bigotry." And do you know, I honestly don't believe that. I'm not saying that there isn't a cultural myopia in certain cases, but actually I think that if you provide the leadership, and you are the minister, and of course people are not all from the same parish as you or background as you, but in my view, I certainly didn't see that.

AP: There weren't times where you ever felt behind the scenes there were people trying to frustrate your aims or anything like that?

MÓM: Only in the Northern Ireland Office in the British government, absolutely, but locally no. I think our political opponents did that, you know. That's their job. The DUP would try and prevent our agenda advancing, unless they'd agreed to it. Sometimes then they couldn't deliver on their other agreements. But I personally did not experience animus. I think, to my shame, I raised my voice once in the seven months I was at a meeting, to a civil servant who I do believe was guilty of animus towards Sinn Féin and the Sinn Féin project, and showed it, and couldn't hide it. But I met 6,000 civil servants and only once I met that clear, heart-on-your-sleeve bigotry. That's not bad.

AP: You mentioned having brought in, for example, the Irish language officer as a way that you changed the way that the department worked. Were there other ways in which you sought to reorganise, restructure or improve the way that the department worked?

MÓM: I think I was still an innocent abroad, but I used to be the Lord Mayor of Belfast. It was a clerical error, but they gave me it, so I held onto it. And I did a fairly big job at completely transforming the way the Lord Mayor did his or her business. And I tried that in the finance department, for good or ill.

I refused to use the ministerial office, which was this palatial corner office looking out over a bird sanctuary and out over the airport. I moved my desk to the team I worked with, the private secretary team. That of course got much busier because I was consistently taking up all these invites. And, you know, it was a completely different type of finance department because of just this huge engagement. So they found that perplexing, but we then abandoned it [the ministerial office]. And I think they refused to move anything into the big space, but I would never use it. And there was still a TV there so occasionally I had to stand and watch the news.

So I took that approach, which, I don't know if it's more humble or not, maybe it's actually more egotistical, insisting that: "Now, I'm going to stay here with all you guys." I don't want to use Iran as a template, but I think one of the presidents of Iran used to sleep in the office. That's not a good template, it's not a good example. I didn't go that far but I like the idea of saying: "Look, we're going to be here first." We were first in, we were there at seven in the morning and then, because we'd be out and about, some nights I needed to work late, and they said: "No, the building closes at 7:30[pm]." And I said: "This cannot work, because some nights this is fantastic, you've got quiet, you can just work ahead to nine o'clock." So they had to change the contracts for the security company, because it just threw them basically into meltdown. They said: "No, no, the office closes at 7:30." And I said: "It's not closing at 7:30 anymore, I can stay here by myself." They said: "No, we have to have a security staff on." So I think that the soul of

the office, the sensibility of the office, what we call in Irish the *'cur chuige'*, the approach. I'd like to think it was different.

But you know, don't fool yourselves, this is a big department, it had a lot of responsibilities, it collected all the rates, it was responsible for procurement, so in some ways the stuff that had maximum PR [public relations] effect, probably had no effect on how the department operated. I mean that's stuff where I enjoyed myself enormously, but did it bring in more rates? We actually tried to do that, and we tried to bring in a fairly progressive position to take higher property taxes from the better off. Boy, that was an experience because then you did see the opposition mobilising to stymie that, not within the department, but externally. I could easily do the stuff that was about optics and perception of the department and making friends and building bridges and delivering those three priorities of peace, reconciliation and justice, the latter of which was more difficult. But if you really wanted to change policy, well, then you're in the political dogfights, not with the civil servants but with your opponents.

Jess Sargeant (JS): That leads us quite nicely on to the next question. There are well-documented political crises during your time as minister. But in terms of your work and your department, were there crises that you had to deal with in your ministerial role and, if so, how did you deal with those?

MÓM: Well, of course the biggest crisis was the collapse of government. And the second major crisis, which led to the collapse of government, was the renewable heating scandal. I think I just follow the *Dad's Army* [catchphrase]: "Panic, panic, panic, don't panic." No, I jest. First of all, you know, the minister of finance is responsible for the civil service. There were 23,000 civil servants. So you can be sure there were different issues almost every day.

The two biggest issues were the RHI [Renewable Heating Initiative], which fairly quickly became politically a hot potato, because it was clear that all roads led to the first minister, Arlene Foster, who had been economy minister, who introduced the legislation, who didn't read the legislation, who removed the safeguards that would have prevented this £500 million runaway train from getting out of the station. And I was front and centre in that because if someone was going to solve the issue, they were looking to the finance department to do so. Because actually, you know, we were doing meetings where they would come and say you have £25 million less to spend because that's the overspend, which we hadn't budgeted for. Now, as it turned out, we actually put the mitigations in place just as I was leaving office, and it didn't end up being a £500 million overspend. But that was the potential and real money was lost.

So, there were positives and negatives. Positives, you know: this became a Sinn Féin project. It was threatening the peace process. The Renewable Heat Incentive was threatening the peace process because if government failed, that could lead to a negation of all the progress that had been made. So I had a fairly firm intervention from

Sinn Féin and lots of people saying: “Sinn Féin needs to meet about this as a party.” It certainly caused some consternation to the inquiry later, but that’s how Sinn Féin works. It’s a very centralised organisation and ministers are fine to go ahead and do their work, but if there’s going to be something threatening the peace process, they would expect the minister to keep them informed – whether it’s the done thing or not – to make sure that the party has no surprises and the party knows what’s happening. So fairly quickly the RHI became a daily Sinn Féin meeting, as well as meetings in the department. As one of the solutions we decided we would have an inquiry into it. I called that inquiry. So we had to understand the legislation relating to that, to make that happen.

But alongside that, the government was falling. And again, it was above my pay grade, above my head. I respected Martin McGuinness enormously, he’s very much a hero to me, but it was very clear from his demeanour and approach that it was crunch time. And when he tried to find a solution, unfortunately Arlene Foster said he was playing chicken and the government did fall.

So those were the twin crises, interlinked, and you know, I think that in some ways the Sinn Féin intervention was useful, but of course that becomes very difficult for civil servants because ministers do not serve parties, ministers serve the people. And it becomes difficult for civil servants to have to handle this party intervention, or influence. But of course, every minister has a special adviser, or more than one. Special advisers are appointed on the public payroll. But as the inquiry revealed, discovered or discussed at length, it’s very rare that a special adviser isn’t very well-attuned to the party thinking and maybe, I suppose, a ‘party appointee’. And that was one of the areas where the inquiry expressed some disquiet.

I think one of the negatives for me was that what does happen in a crisis, I think, is that departments become even more protective of themselves and their minister. So at a time we needed cross-departmental co-operation to resolve a problem which traversed all departments – in that all departments were losing money, and also because the economy department was responsible for the Renewable Heat Initiative but the finance department was paying for it, ultimately – you didn’t have that cross-pollination between two departments. Sometimes they were protecting their minister because they were saying: “No, we’re not going to concede any ground.” It was daggers drawn, not only between ourselves and the DUP, but in some ways, I think, daggers drawn between Department of Finance officials and Department [for the] Economy [officials]. That may be too hard on the civil servants – I don’t blame them for it, but on reflection I think that it probably brought out the worst in all of us, to be honest, ministers and civil servants.

JS: I wanted to speak briefly about the other major political events that happened while you were minister. There was the EU referendum whilst you were finance minister. I would be interested to know how much that featured in your work and the work of your department prior to the vote, and whether there was much preparation done for what might happen in the event of a vote to leave?

MÓM: I think the official answer would be: “Yes, they were preparing for the options.” I think the reality is that no one expected it, least of all the DUP who were the only party who supported it. No one expected Brexit to succeed. So it’s a bit like preparing to go 15 rounds with Muhammad Ali: you can prepare all you want, but when it happens it was a completely different world. So I think really the reaction to Brexit was afterwards.

I do remember that morning, that we gathered as a Sinn Féin team with Martin McGuinness and there was a real feeling that we had crossed a Rubicon, that this was a big blow to the peace process, that it would result in a hard border, the return of a hard border. It was certainly seen by nationalists as an attempt to humiliate nationalists, to break the concord of the Good Friday Agreement, which was that there would be no major change without everybody agreeing to it. So it was a very grave morning. I was out of office [soon] after that but there was a lot of preparation; it brought me to Europe on several occasions. But to suggest that we were ready for it, I think, would be untrue. That’s not to say work wasn’t going on. And afterwards it became, of course, a hugely divisive issue in the executive because the DUP, in their madness, thought this was some sort of victory, and this was shortly before their great new alliance with the Tories, you know. So it was deeply unhelpful to all the process, but in some ways it was disconnected as well, because we still had to pay for the universities and we still had to make sure agriculture was being funded and health and so on.

JS: Did you find at any point that the strain this put on relationships made your job as a minister more difficult, or did you feel like people were able to transcend those divides?

MÓM: I’m not sure. I’m not sure some people ever transcended any of those. So I’m fighting in my own corner here: I’m saying that I certainly tried [to do so]. I mean I knew what my priorities were, and I tried to not only have a respectful relationship with all the partners but to even go further than that, to try and stretch yourself, to try and make... what would be the word... partners, I suppose, rather than friends, partners of people with whom my community had been at war. So I’m not going to claim that I did that, but certainly I realised it was my obligation, to try and transcend those barriers to do that. But it would be a folly of me to say that everybody was trying to do that. And I think I’ll just leave that one there.

JS: Continuing on that theme, I want to ask you some questions about relationships with the executive and cross-party agreement. How did you find the experience of reaching agreement on some of the priorities that were agreed in the executive committee, and what role did the first minister and the deputy first minister play in that?

MÓM: Well, they played the ultimate role, again, above my pay grade. It would be incorrect of me, and it would be self-aggrandising to claim, that I was, you know, hammering out these new relationships with departments and so on. Martin McGuinness and Arlene Foster set the agenda and it was, you know, relayed to us.

I'm not sure what other executive or other governments are like, in Wales, with our dear friend Mark Drakeford [first minister of Wales] or with Nicola Sturgeon [first minister] in Scotland, but there was very little discussion at executive meetings. Everything had been agreed before anything made the agenda. In fact, some items were three, four, five years waiting to get on the agenda because they involved issues which would be sensitive to one party or the other. So, was that really part of my job? Not really. I made a conscious effort, if I had any request from any DUP ministers, to make sure that they were fulfilled with alacrity. The [DUP] agriculture minister, Michelle McIlveen, asked me would I get up at five o'clock in the morning and travel 40 miles to see badgers being caught and being tested for TB [tuberculosis]. And I made sure I did that with a light heart and made sure that, you know, this is what she wants me to do, this is what we're going to do. And any other requests, I did exactly the same. So I think that was part of our job, to make sure that there was no pettiness, but it was a poisonous atmosphere close to the end, and I don't want to paint myself as the Dalai Lama either.

JS: How regularly did you find yourself working closely with other ministers? Was that a regular feature of your job or was most of your work within your own department?

MÓM: Well, you were talking to other ministers, whether in your own party or the DUP, because we were the only two parties there, every day. Certainly, you had connections from their departments. Some of them maybe thought the finance minister had more power than he had, and they'd be making entreaties. So, we were in regular contact and, of course, you had question time, you'd be in the parliament, you'd meet the other parties, so you're regularly being lobbied by the other parties.

Again, you know, my view was: if anyone's good enough to invite you, you do it. So some of the unionists would ask you to visit schools, for example, that they thought were priorities for funding. I was going to have very little say over which schools were being funded. First of all, there was a legal process to determine the criteria, and second, the education minister would have a greater say. But I tried to make sure that any of those requests were delivered upon. But for our part, in that short period, until really the poison was injected with RHI, and the collapse started, you know, I thought we did a reasonably good job of saying that while we disagree on a thousand things,

we're going to try and emphasise the common ground. So everybody knew what the DUP and Sinn Féin disagreed on, but where we could show a common face, stand on common ground, that for me was very much a priority.

JS: I want to move on to talk about some of the relationships you had with those based outside of Northern Ireland. So firstly, did you work with any of your counterparts in the UK government and what was that experience like?

MÓM: It was demoralising, depressing. I suppose, not surprising. I don't consider myself any better than anyone else, but I do consider myself an equal of everybody else. Going to Westminster, dealing with the chancellor or his deputy, was enervating, wasteful of my time, brought you back two centuries to Afghanistan or to India, the way they dealt with you. So if you ask me what was the most distasteful and wasteful in terms of my time, of all the engagements, it was with the chancellor and the chancellor's department. But there you go, it's not all beer and skittles, you know.

JS: And when you were finance minister, I understand one of the things you did was negotiate with the UK government over the devolution of corporation tax. There was obviously a bit of a dispute there. How did you seek to try and resolve that issue?

MÓM: We didn't actually negotiate with that. That was a done deal before I came into government, that corporation tax would be reduced to a harmonious level in the island of Ireland, 12.5%, if it was affordable. And we never got that. So the negotiation around some of the key issues of that, for example that if VAT receipts increased as a result of increased employment, whether would we get some of those, which were key issues. We never got round to negotiation on that. So the main negotiations with the British government, the main interface with the London government, was in conjunction with our colleagues in Scotland and Wales.

Now, if you had asked me what was the most enjoyable part of my brief, it was working with the Scottish and Welsh governments. We made great mischief. We had great fun. It was wonderful to see us mongrel Celts banding together against the Big Brother. That, for me, was a really, really rewarding and enjoyable part of the job. I have great respect for Mark Drakeford, and I worked very closely with Derek Mackay [then Scottish cabinet secretary for finance and the constitution], who I have great respect for too, though he's had his own trouble since.

It was funny because, you know, I had to deal with the SNP [Scottish National Party], and of course our sympathies would be with the SNP, but I had to deal with Labour in Wales and, you know, Sinn Féin and Labour have had a very fractious relationship. But I found that really a great boon and enjoyed it and, of course, I brought the ministers here. We had a joint meeting, and rather vaingloriously we had emerged from the meeting to say we're speaking for 10 million people. And here's the rub. Of course, the British actually, the London government, had to listen to that, which surprised us more

than anyone else. But it was effective, standing together, speaking with one voice, focusing on some issues which were important to us. It did make a difference. It was less tenable for the British to face down different demands we had, but also really, really enjoyable and an important period.

You know, I really respect what Mark Drakeford has done, the thought he's given to super-federation or a more federal UK – which I want nothing to do with – but I really respect the fact that he was trying to see an alternative to the devolution settlement for Wales. And he saw what was happening with the UK and – I think he is some type of unionist, he's a great Welsh patriot of course, but some type of unionist – but I think even he saw the arrogance of the UK, that they were driving support for SNP and for Sinn Féin. You know, he had quite warm relations with us, but he also saw the dissembling, the dissolution of the UK. I got to Edinburgh a couple of times as well and was deeply impressed by the Scottish government, deeply impressed by their civil servants, deeply impressed by their ability to go and tackle stuff. I think they had a minority government then, maybe with the help of the Greens. So I really, really enjoyed that. I made it my business to reach out to the other ministers as soon as possible. I think I first met Mark [Drakeford] in Cardiff airport. I flew into Bristol, travelled to Cardiff airport, met him there and back, flew back the same day. I remember I flew on to Glasgow. It was difficult to make it work but I wanted to make it work. I wanted to make sure that we worked together. And of course, then he was finance, he was finance minister at that time, I think he became responsible for Brexit as well, for his troubles. I don't give advice to anyone else but if anyone was saying to me: "Well, where was the most fertile ground?" – certainly I think in that co-operation with the other two regions.

Just for the record, I also worked with the Basque government. I visited the Basque minister for finance, Mr [Ricardo] Gatzagaetxebarria in Vitoria-Gasteiz, Vitoria, and it was a really riveting and exhilarating visit as well, on a sunny day. When I was on holiday in San Sebastián, Donostia, he sent a car up and we went down and visited and spent the day with him. He sent his tax people over to attend a joint meeting of ourselves and the Welsh and Scottish finance ministers because, of course, in the Basque country they collect all the tax, then they give it to Madrid, whereas in our case, the majority of our taxes go to London, then we get something back. So that example, of course, is of interest to me because I believe the system we have here is a teenage sort of government, you know – it's devolution, but you're not really responsible for anything because you're not responsible for budgets and the Basques have a much more grown-up type of devolution, if we can call it that. And I was deeply interested in that and of course, you know, I would like to see more tax levers brought to us.

JS: I wanted to ask whether you had much experience working with your counterparts in the Republic of Ireland as well, as part of your role as finance minister, and what those relationships were like.

MÓM: I was impressed by, and remain deeply impressed by Paschal Donohoe, who is the sole finance minister now. They split finance into two different portfolios when I was minister, but my main contact was with Paschal Donohoe. I found him a man of great integrity, great warmth. He's in a really tough inner-city constituency and Sinn Féin are kicking his pan in every time, and they're really at daggers drawn with Paschal. But I found that he rose above party division. Sometimes it would cause a bit of friction in Sinn Féin because they'd be in the parliament, attacking him and attacking him and attacking him, and then I'd be pictured with him at an event, you know, welcoming him. But that's part of the difficulty of government.

It was the same in the Basque Country as well because the finance minister of the Basque Country was not our sister party, it was not Sortu. It was the more mainstream PNV [Partido Nacionalista Vasco, the Basque Nationalist Party]. And that created some difficulties in the Basque Country as well because they [Sortu] were saying: "We support Sinn Féin, why is the Sinn Féin minister coming over and meeting a representative of a party that's not ours?" So that's worth feeding that in, this balance.

But, you know, I was in Derry for a meeting around investment and Paschal Donohoe came up on a Friday, which is usually a constituency day for ministers. He drove from Dublin to Derry to be there in the morning to do our meeting and I thought: "Well, that's commendable." And I like to think that I learnt some things from him as well. All my mistakes are my own, but I thought I learnt something from the approach of Paschal Donohoe.

And partly I think that the Irish government's approach was: this is good for the peace process, you know. I think he saw it as: "Let's shore up the peace process, let's work positively with Sinn Féin." That then sort of collapsed as the government here started collapsing. The Fianna Fáil government was much more hostile. The Irish Republican Party, Fianna Fáil, which called itself the Republican Party, are much more hostile to Sinn Féin and you could see that they had much more difficulty treating Sinn Féin with respect as a government. In my view, there [were] two finance ministers and education ministers on the island, but the Fianna Fáil government really, I think, found that very difficult and continue to find that very difficult.

AP: So we started with day one. You already mentioned in passing one of the final things or maybe the final thing you did in office. What are your recollections of your final day as a minister? How was that, how did that feel and what did you do?

MÓM: You know, I can't remember. I know that the last thing I did in office was to sign the money for the Somme Centre. But I can't really remember because it wasn't a, you know, going out with a bang, it was a slow decline of government. I actually remained as minister until March [2017] but an election was called; we were sort of caretakers when the government fell. So it wasn't a [case of] rapturous applause as I left the building. Actually I can't remember anything about it even, to be honest. I'd like to think that I made sure that I thanked everybody. But it wasn't as if you left one day and in any case you had to be called back in and sign stuff and so on between then and the election being called.

But you always saw it as a great privilege. I enjoyed it enormously, tried to live in the moment. Just the other thing was that I made it my business to get really involved in the arts, which of course had nothing to do with me, until I discovered that the finance minister is responsible for the Northern Ireland government art collection, which had been neglected and had not been added to since 2004. Set up by a unionist minister, I think, in 1963. It was a wonderful thing to rediscover because no one could object because it was a unionist minister who set it up. We managed to restore it and I'm really proud that I managed to give the department £40,000 a year to spend on art and got it through after a little bit of manoeuvring, and if I did nothing else, I did that, so that made it all worthwhile.

AP: Well, maybe that's your answer to my next question, which was going to be specifically what are you proudest of having achieved from your time in office?

Well, you know, I think I was there just for a heartbeat, you know. You really realise that people have no idea who I was. People have no idea what position I held. You're generally insignificant in these matters. The important work that was going on in that time, the important clash was Martin McGuinness pulling down government. The deep, deep, deep disappointment realising that if this goes, it's going to go down for years. The waste of that, the danger of that, and yet it had to be done.

You know, Martin McGuinness had stretched himself again and again and again to try and make sure he met the obligation to make peace with unionism, and unfortunately they saw that outstretched hand as a sign of weakness, silly people, and he had to end the experiment, and we ended up in this useless vacuum for three years, which was just heartbreaking.

So having enjoyed myself enormously in this little talk, I remind myself that I am one very small cog in a very big wheel, that I had a great privilege to serve and that hopefully somebody somewhere will enjoy the work you're doing. And thank you for allowing me

to take part in this discussion. To tell you how much people are interested, you are the first people who have asked me what I did in that year. So look, it's all water long under the bridge, great to have served, you know, I'm not a great servant of anybody but I realised what an opportunity it was and enjoyed it enormously and hopefully I advanced my own political cause, and I advanced those three priorities I had: peace being bolstered, reconciliation being enhanced and social justice delivered.

AP: That is a good place to end. But the very final thing I was going to ask you, if you've got just 30 seconds, is what would be the single piece of advice you would give to someone taking office as a minister in Northern Ireland now or in future?

I always think it's a good idea not to give people advice, but I'll tell you a piece of advice that was given to me. John O'Dowd, who was the education minister of Sinn Féin, who I respect enormously, sent me a note on the first day, which says: "Don't take yourself seriously, but make sure everybody else does."

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