

# Ministers Reflect

## Dr Stephen Farry



14 September 2021

# Biographical details

## Northern Ireland assembly history

2007–19: Alliance Party member of the legislative assembly (MLA) for North Down

## Northern Ireland executive career

2011–16: minister for employment and learning

**Dr Stephen Farry was interviewed by Jess Sargeant and Alex Nice on 14 September 2021 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project. The interview took place remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic.**

[Dr Stephen Farry reflects on his time as minister for employment and learning in the Northern Ireland executive and the challenge of cross-party and cross-departmental working.](#)

**Alex Nice (AN):** To start, could you take us through your first days in office when you became minister for employment and learning? What was your experience coming into government and into the role that you took on?

**Stephen Farry (SF):** Well, it was a long time ago now, so that would have been May 2011. It was a time of, I suppose in Northern Ireland terms, relative stability, though it would mean something different in Northern Ireland than elsewhere. But it was probably the first time there was a smooth transfer from one executive to another without some sort of crisis happening in between.

We were in a bizarre position in that there hadn’t been really a working assumption that the Alliance Party would be qualifying for government through the d’Hondt mechanism [the system for allocating ministerial positions to political parties in Northern Ireland]. And prior to that, then, [David Ford](#) had become the justice minister in 2010, through the vote on the floor of the assembly – that’s a different mechanism. We don’t describe it as he was everyone’s preference for the job, but he was basically everyone’s second preference in a sense, or the one that all parties could basically tolerate, if it wasn’t going to be themselves. So it was almost by default that Alliance served that role.

We did have the bizarre situation in that, because the party then qualified for a seat in government in its own right, through the d’Hondt mechanism, albeit on almost like a tiebreaker with the Ulster Unionists. There was uncertainty in the days running up, as to

whether David McClarty, who was elected as an independent Unionist in East Londonderry, he used to be a member of the Ulster Unionist Party, whether he was going to rejoin the party and then that would be added to their totals in the d'Hondt mechanism. But in the end he decided not to. So it was on that basis, then, that we were going to qualify. And then also during the running of d'Hondt we were essentially the last choice in that order. So the d'Hondt mechanism was run unofficially on the Friday, prior to the assembly sitting on the Monday. So everyone knew what was going to happen; it was a very scripted situation rather than something that was going to be a surprise on the floor of the assembly. So the employment and learning portfolio was then left at the very end. Interestingly, the health department was the penultimate department, so the largest spending department was seen as a hot potato. It was left until the very end and the DUP [Democratic Unionist Party] took it and that left the Department of Employment and Learning to the very, very end.

It was also quite a large-scale department and I think the reason that it was left to the end was that there was a huge, immediate conundrum coming up around tuition fees for Northern Ireland, [on] which there wasn't a clear policy outcome. So that was seen as being incredibly thorny, because no one was particularly relishing taking [it on], which is why it was left until the end.

**Jess Sargeant (JS): In terms of your personal experience of becoming a minister, what was it like entering the department for the first day?**

**SF:** Well, they ran d'Hondt on the Monday, so we would have just spent the day in the assembly on the Monday. In the afternoon, you met your private secretary and then your permanent secretary and the senior officials, just to have a very brief discussion and maybe do a few media clips. Then the following day we went into the department headquarters for the first time and we did an enactment, with the media, of me coming in to the department with TV cameras in the private office and me sort of meeting and greeting staff. So that was framed in those terms.

And then it was pretty much straight into work, where there was just a lot of things to do, that had been sitting at least for four or five weeks of an election campaign. But also there was probably a fair broader backlog of work in the department that needed to be cleared in any event. So that was pretty much straight into that, and then also just the discussion with officials around sort of our own plans for the department and what we wanted to do in that regard, in terms of new schemes, new initiatives.

**AN: And with your colleague David Ford, did you find that it was a different experience now that you had two ministers in government? Did the dynamics change for your party?**

**SF:** Well, it did. So we were still the fifth-largest party in terms of [the] number of seats in the assembly, but we had two seats on the executive, compared with the Ulster Unionists and SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party] [who had one minister each]. So they had a certain sense of grievance in that particular regard, but it did reflect the unique circumstances around the Department of Justice.

There was always a certain cloud of uncertainty in that the justice arrangements needed to be renewed the following year in any event. And there was probably uncertainty as well as to what would then happen in terms of the Department for Employment and Learning at the same time. So there was always a certain degree of uncertainty around what you were doing.

We'll probably come onto that though in a moment anyway, but just to jump ahead, so a deal was done to preserve David Ford in the Department of Justice in January of 2012. But as part of that the DUP and Sinn Féin decided they were going to abolish my department in order to rectify the perceived imbalance of parties on the executive. So the theory was that they were going to split it in two: half would go to the Department of Enterprise as it then was, led by Arlene Foster – whatever happened to her?! – and [half to] the Department of Education, which was a Sinn Féin department.

So that was going to be sort of a carve-up of the department, which was planned. That was announced in January of 2012, but we managed to fight a rear-guard action against that and get a lot of stakeholders expressing their concern that that would be suboptimal in terms of service delivery and coherence of policy. So after many, many months of wrestling as to how they would actually carve up the department, they eventually gave up in July of 2012. So from that point onwards, there was a lot more stability and certainty in terms of what was going to be happening with the department and the ability to do longer-term planning in terms of new policy.

**AN: And given that the employment and learning brief was the last to be decided and it's not necessarily clear how the departments will be allocated until late in the process, how prepared did you feel for the job? Did you have any sort of handover conversation with your predecessor or others?**

**SF:** No. There's no handover discussions, as such. I mean, we had a very detailed manifesto. My adviser was someone who worked in the skills area previously anyway, and had done work and research there. So we had the capacity to start at a fairly strong pace, in terms of getting into issues, and so we probably actually did a lot in the first month, just in terms of hitting the ground running. A lot of it was clearing issues that were building up.

Then we were pretty much straight into the tuition fees issue, where a consultation and review had been done under the previous incumbent but without any decisions having been taken, so that was more or less inherited. But in the end, it was clear there wasn't going to be any political support for increasing tuition fees in Northern Ireland. So even if the logic of the process had suggested something like that, politically it was never going to get through the assembly. So, from my perspective, the issue wasn't really what we were going to do in tuition fees, it was how we were going to fund it. It was taken as a given that the policy outcome here was going to be frozen tuition fees or tuition fees rising in line with inflation. So what we then had to do was simply negotiate with the executive to get additional resources in to make up the resultant shortfall in university funding, which we did eventually in September that year.

Of course the other thing, you know this anyway, but the key thing as well is that every minister gets their first-day brief as they come in. So you get a large binder of: "Here's the current issues, here's the latest position on all of these things, here's what we think you should know from here on, all this stuff." I think they are all available through freedom of information requests, so you can get them.

**JS: How much were your priorities driven by the kind of issues that your party had already identified? Were there any other policy priorities that you personally, or the Alliance Party in particular, wanted to take forward as well as dealing with those things that were already on the agenda?**

**SF:** It's probably fair to say that the first six months [were] going to be tied up with clearing up the backlog and probably addressing tuition fees as being the most difficult issue and the most immediate issue there. But beyond that, we had a very strong agenda around investing in skills and broadening what we did around skills. I mean, I come from a strong family background in further education. So, the issue in terms of tone and emphasis was going to be less of an exclusive focus around universities in terms of the public narrative, but trying to widen it out towards further education, the professional practical skills, vocational skills, apprenticeships, traineeships.

Now, it was probably only after we really were able to establish the longer-term stability of the department that we could really get on with the bulk of that agenda – those major reviews of apprenticeships that were launched in 2013 and youth training in 2013, which was then confirmed in 2014 and 2015 respectively for those new programmes. Those are probably the more landmark issues that we were working on in terms of policy development.

**JS: How able did you feel to pursue those particular objectives? Did you come up against any resistance from other departments or the executive committee, or did you feel you had relative freedom to take on this particular project?**

**SF:** Well, there was relative freedom in the sense that, well, politically there wasn't much opposition to what we wanted to do, because skills and that narrative really cuts across the traditional political divide in Northern Ireland. So it's not something that was going to create hyper-polarisation on a Unionist/Nationalist basis. So there was never any hostility in that regard, there was always enthusiasm from people.

The difficulty was at the time, there were always other priorities. So two of the big things I inherited, that were signed off pretty much straight away in the early years, were first of all the skills strategy, which was largely developed under the previous regime, but introduced by myself, which was the covering document for skills in terms of targets around different skills levels. And then a higher education strategy as well, which was largely developed and just needed to be launched itself.

The difficulty becomes one of resources. In the initial years, up to about 2013/2014, we had either stable budgets or we had the ability to bid for new pockets of money that came available. So we had a rising tide, lifting us all to a certain extent. So that allowed a fair degree of innovation. The difficulty then came after 2014, and in that context when the Northern Ireland executive overall was in a fairly standstill situation, around the size of the block grant [from the UK government]. That was the time of UK austerity, particularly practised by the coalition government, but welfare reform was then cutting across all of this.

Northern Ireland technically runs its own welfare system as a matter of law, but it receives AME [annually managed expenditure] money from the Treasury to fund it, *de facto*, it runs on a parity basis and matches what happens in London on a like-for-like basis. Any diversions from that [have] to be self-funded in Northern Ireland, and that can very quickly become expensive. So there was a massive political reaction against welfare reform, what's happening in the rest of the UK and there was then a debate at the Northern Ireland executive as to how we were going to respond to that.

So we end up, first of all, having a major standoff, for about 18 months, with welfare policy. And then also after that we had various welfare mitigation [measures] that were agreed and part-paid by the UK government and part-paid for locally. So that just created havoc with local budgets. So in that context, the skills agenda was seen as probably a soft target against particularly health or primary/secondary education. The budget cuts were becoming quite drastic and the structural difficulty then was that skills were seen as being an issue for the department, rather than seen as an issue for the entire executive.

So in hindsight, the skills strategy should have been really something embedded right across all departments rather than being pigeonholed. That may well be a lesson that's learnt in terms of the 2021/2022 edition [of the education and skills agenda], whenever the department ends up publishing that. So that meant in the context of skills, we were in almost a freefalling situation. Out of a budget that would have started out about £900 million or so, in terms of the baseline, in my final two years in office, I probably ended up having to cut about £160 million out of budgets, and trying to minimise the impact of that. So it was a very brutal situation in terms of cutbacks. So that was difficult.

**AN: And speaking about the support you got for these difficult decisions, how effective did you find your private office and wider department in supporting you as a minister?**

**SF:** That was all fine and I suppose the issue probably is less the private office, which is more just your clearing house and your main support. [The difficulty] is how you create a culture in the department around delivery. So a couple of things we did: we did a weekly meeting with the senior directors as well, and then also did a monthly meeting with each division, at director level, with all the other senior and middle directing staff who also joined that. So you would have in addition to issue-by-issue meetings, you would have had those structures in place for wider review, both looking at immediate issues but also forward planning as to what was likely to be coming up. That provided an ability to talk through issues. We wanted to encourage a situation where people were bought in to your agenda as well, but also felt that it was as much their agenda too. So as many hands as possible being part of the process was useful.

I tried to avoid a hierarchical structure where basically it was the perm[anent] secretary or your senior directors that would have come and talked to you, but then in turn were basically bringing to you the work a lot of people were doing, slightly lower down the chain of command as such. And so you wanted just to have a slightly flatter structure, where people who were more directly, immediately involved with the work were in the room discussing their work and where things were going to go in terms of actual decisions on issues. So that was helpful in creating that type of culture.

The other two angles to say in this though were, when I came into the department, there was still a view that because it wasn't seen as being overly political in that sense, there was still somewhat of a 'direct-rule mindset' at times, that okay there is a devolved minister in place, but civil servants would just do the work and you would just basically just review it and sign off on it, but it wasn't really going to be terribly challenging and everything would keep ticking over. That wasn't really where we wanted to go with issues, we wanted to be more radical and a bit adventurous on issues. The second thing that struck me at times was that there was a bit of a silo mentality. So one directorate wasn't really talking to another directorate. So issues ended up being pigeonholed to a certain extent. So part of the process was trying to ensure that you were at least biannually or annually bringing everyone together, just to

talk through the overall plans for the department and try to find the integration between them all. So for someone who is dealing with employment law, they have to sit through what's happening in the higher education sector, and vice versa, rather than sort of go: "I just do employment law, so I'm off and give me a shout whenever you want to talk employment law." I felt it was important that everyone was understanding the full agenda and their place within it.

**AN: And did you find the civil servants amenable to the changes you tried to bring in? What was your relationship like with your permanent secretary?**

**SF:** That was all good. They were, I suppose, sceptical at first, but I think they grew into it over time, that that was the way things were going to be. It became a lot more of a collaborative process. So I think ultimately they embraced that.

**JS: You mentioned the tendency to have silos within the department. One thing I've often heard about the structure of the Northern Ireland executive is there's quite a lot of siloisation between departments as well. Did you have much experience working directly with other departments and how did you feel that went?**

**SF:** Yes. There is a huge silo problem within the Northern Ireland executive. But in practice all departments would intersect with others at times and I would have had a big interface with the Department of Enterprise around job creation and skills, with [the Department of] Education, about managing the interface between skills and colleges and universities around careers, with the Department for Communities around welfare reform and work programmes and things like that. So that would have been probably the three main departments we would have had the most interaction with.

The executive was a strange beast. It wasn't really cabinet-style government, because you had five parties there, so there was a lot of mutual suspicion. So I basically refer to the executive as being something like a transactional clearing house rather than a government that was really exercising any sense of strategic planning or sense of where they were taking Northern Ireland as a whole. Your relationships with other ministers, on an individual level, were also fairly transactional. There wasn't really much sense of: "here's a vision of where we want to take Northern Ireland," and the different elements that lie within that, that you work in a collegiate manner around. It was: "I do my bit, you do your bit and when we have to talk, we have to talk," rather than a sense of mutually collectively driving things. Now that is probably not just my experience, but probably across the board.

Our meetings of the executive would have been fairly brief at times. I mean, the longest item on the agenda was AOB [any other business], which was also the most dangerous item on the executive. The executive was pretty much carved up between the DUP and Sinn Féin. They set the agenda, they cleared whatever papers beforehand that were going to go onto the agenda. So if the paper wasn't cleared in advance, it wasn't going



to be discussed at the meeting. If something was cleared in advance, it was going to be approved at the executive, so there wasn't really much point in debating it, because it's more or less a done deal anyway. So everything that's around executive business was done by, essentially, negotiation.

But there were issues where there were misunderstandings about what you're trying to do, and things would end up being blocked for many months, or issues that were just too difficult and toxic, that were almost permanently parked, unless they needed to be addressed in some shape or form. So the executive did certain things well, but ducked a lot of other things at the same time.

There was a programme for government and the 2012 version of the programme for government was just a checklist of action points that wasn't particularly threaded in any logical way. There wasn't really many outputs or sense of how everything knitted together to create that. Now, they've tried to do that differently in the more recent drafting of the programme for government. The executive still hasn't got a programme for government signed off, so that may happen after the next election, if we ever get another executive. And so in theory, they have a whole different approach to doing it now, but even then I get the sense that's probably something that more happens on paper than in reality.

And the relations between the executive ministers are now even more difficult than was the case in my time. I mean, there was certain, almost collegiality between DUP and Sinn Féin, between about 2010 and 2012, where they just about were able to work together and have a joke and have a laugh. After 2012, things began to slide around the different identity, politics issues, legacy of the past, flags, parades. That's before you get the whole Brexit issue, which comes along later than that, and the RHI [Renewable Heat Initiative], Irish language stuff, which was more fatal. But we were on a slippery slope from about 2012 onwards in terms of the stability and sustainability of the executive.

**JS: You have mentioned various issues affecting the executive dynamic, and that at times there might be misunderstandings or issues that would be pushed to the back, if they were too politically difficult. How did you feel that that affected your work as employment minister? Are there any specific examples of where there were misunderstandings or things that were particularly hard to do because of that kind of political dynamic within the executive?**

**SF:** Yes. Well, there's probably two examples to throw out. The first one was around employment law reform, where they had a big bill that was stuck at executive because Sinn Féin were blocking it, because they felt it was something that the trade unions didn't want to see happen. But the bill had been brokered between the CBI [Confederation of British Industry] and trade unions in any event, in terms of a social partnership approach to legislation. But Sinn Féin were under the impression that trade unions were blocking this. We only discovered this whenever trade unions came in and

said: “What on earth’s going on with that employment bill?” And we said: “Well, you’re blocking it.” They went: “No we’re not.” And that was a misunderstanding. So once that was cleared, a phone call was made, within hours the bill was moving and introduced.

Probably the area where things became most toxic with me was around reform of teacher training institutions, which is segregated to a certain extent in Northern Ireland. I wanted to try to rationalise that and potentially find some savings from a load of budget that were given to them. But because they’re seen as part of the identity politics issue, this is where skills meets identity politics. So we ended up with that being blocked by all the other four parties on the executive. The monies involved, they were probably fairly minimal. I was trying to save about three or four million out of probably 10 to 12 million from the overall budget. So it wasn’t big in the wider scheme of things but it was a fairly symbolic issue and that’s where things became extremely political and difficult.

**JS: And how did you try and kind of reconcile those issues or did you feel that it was somewhat out of your hands?**

**SF:** Well, eventually it was out of my hands. But we were also in the context where things were falling apart with budgets at the same time. So it probably did cross my mind whether there was going to be a point where you were just maybe better off resigning and just making statements. But then ultimately you said: “Look, these budgets will be falling anyway.” So maybe you have a better understanding of how things work, so you could help to minimise the impact as far as you possibly can, as you know. So that was probably the ultimate decider in that regard, to keep going. Try to do as soft a landing as possible.

**JS: How did you feel being a minister from a cross-community party affected your perspective on government? Did you feel that your approach to your ministerial work was different to that of your colleagues?**

**SF:** Not massively, in the sense that there wasn’t really a huge number of identity-politics issues that came in. The one thing we did introduce was a thing called shared future proofing. Every submission that came through, we would ask the question: “How does this impact upon the divisions in Northern Ireland? Does it exacerbate the problems, or does it help to heal them?” And most of the time it was a nil return, just given the nature of the work, but that was just part of the discipline. So that was one of the innovations we tried to bring in. And then in the same way, there weren’t any hang-ups about engaging with any constituency, any interest group or area right across the political spectrum. So there was never really any difficulty there. But ultimately, every minister takes the ministerial pledge of office and is required to act with that degree of impartiality, across the board anywhere. Perhaps that just came more naturally to me than others.

**JS: And in terms of relationships within the executive committee, did you ever feel that being from a cross-community party meant that you might play a role as mediator or anything similar like that?**

**SF:** Rarely. Because there was very little actual brokering that happened at the executive table. So at times, around things like the programme for government, when there was genuine discussion, yes, you could have played that role. But nine times out of ten, decisions were taken by the DUP and Sinn Féin, in a closed room. And then once that was done, the thing was agreed. So that wasn't really how it worked in the end, to have a cross-community dynamic for brokering of issues.

**JS: I wanted to get on to your relationships with those outside of Northern Ireland. Did you work regularly with your counterparts in the UK government and, if so, what was that like?**

**SF:** It was probably fairly minimal at times, in the sense that most of the issues are fully devolved, so there wasn't really a huge need. There would have been more discussion and co-ordination with our Scottish and Welsh counterparts, than necessarily with Whitehall as such. You couldn't go direct to [the] Treasury and make a bid, it was only the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland that could talk to [the] Treasury.

There would have been just occasional interactions with people like [Vince Cable](#) [secretary of state for business, innovation and skills, 2010–15] and Matt Hancock [then minister for business and enterprise, 2014–15]. Remember him? Don't know what happened to him! He did a stint as skills minister for a while. And [David Willetts](#) [minister for universities and science, 2010–14] as well. We had to negotiate something with him around the devolution package for the Open University in Northern Ireland. So that was an interesting one. And I suppose where there was more tension was with the Department [for] Work and Pensions [DWP], who were pushing their welfare reform and work programme vision, which wasn't fitting in with our local desires in Northern Ireland, but we didn't have the resources. So that was an ongoing source of tension, that was particularly with Lord Freud running the employment programme in DWP at the time.

**JS: And when you had those disputes, how did you try and resolve them? Did you feel like there was the opportunity to try and resolve them or was it perhaps a slightly more kind of one-way relationship?**

**SF:** It was probably a fairly one-way relationship. But there weren't really any disputes as such that needed to be navigated, there weren't really any stand-offs at any stage, even on something like employment law, where they did things we didn't like. We just didn't do them in Northern Ireland, we just used devolution and did things differently and that was respected. So it wasn't quite the same power grab that we're getting today, from the current government, well not quite to the same scale.

**JS: You mentioned working with the Scottish and the Welsh governments. Can you elaborate a bit on that? What was that like? Was it through formal structures, or on a more informal basis, and were there any particular issues where you worked together?**

**SF:** No. It was largely just informal. So occasionally we would meet, just to talk through the issues and compare notes on what we were doing. But again, I mean, there wasn't any common planning around things. They were all just done, you just did your own thing on skills. But we were largely pushing in similar directions.

**JS: And how were the dynamics different, when you were working with other devolved administrations, versus the UK government?**

**SF:** I suppose there's almost a sense of comradeship with Scotland and Wales, against the centre. I suppose that was probably the way you would look at it. So the three of us would have taken a common position in terms of the issues against the centre. You see, part of the difficulty was that while things were notionally devolved, because England was such a big actor, the thing that takes the decision on policy, it almost then creates a template for what happens elsewhere. So there is a certain pressure that builds up with that to fall in behind, or the scope you have for doing innovation is limited to a certain extent by the fact that budgets are constrained and largely set by what [the] Treasury are doing and then the block grant that comes to Northern Ireland. So I mean, those were just some of the tramlines you had to operate within.

**AN: Do you feel that the fact that there was significant divergence from policy in tuition fees between Scotland and England made it easier for Northern Ireland to also take a different approach?**

**SF:** Yes. I mean, I think that obviously made it a lot easier. Because there were four different policies across the UK. I think if you were being an outlier on that one, it would have been much more difficult. Ultimately, we were able to argue that actually England was the outlier, especially in the wider European context. So while England sort of assumed it was setting the agenda for the UK, actually in the wider context, it was one of four decision makers, but also it was contrary to the wider European experience.

**JS: This point about England almost being a template for certain policy decisions – were there times when that was useful? To draw on the resources or the policy work that the UK government had done, considering its larger capacity for that work? Or did you feel that the fact that it wasn't tailored to the Northern Ireland context meant that it wasn't particularly helpful?**

**SF:** I suppose there's always a certain push and pull here, in that the default for many years has been, especially under direct rule, for the Northern Ireland decision makers, albeit technically autonomous, to simply cut and paste what England did, although sometimes with a six months delay. I think we were conscious of maybe just being a

little bit more challenging to that and trying to innovate or maybe just challenge. Also, the more governments in England were becoming very ideological, in terms of what they were doing, made the case easier for doing divergence. If you look at higher education, there's just a strong deregulation emphasis, more probably the case than in the past where you have a consensus around a certain pattern in terms of different aspects of policy. So the more they were being radical, then you had the opportunity to go a different way, rather than simply just accept their change of course. You would have seen that over welfare reform and higher education.

**JS: You mentioned that because of the history of direct rule, civil servants are perhaps a bit too accepting. Did you feel like that was a cultural thing, within the kind of civil service, which had previously been directed by UK ministers and did you take active steps to try and change that mindset?**

**SF:** Yes. Oh, absolutely. That was the mindset. There were efforts made to try and change that mindset. And of course you have to then make the comparison with what happened with RHI, which then became the sort of the classic example of Northern Ireland doing something different, not quite grasping what it was doing differently and making a complete mess of the situation. So this became a double-edged sword. So the lessons of the past few years may actually create a view that actually, yes, Northern Ireland is better off just doing what England does, rather than still have the capacity to do things differently, as it can actually lead to disaster. There might be a certain retrenchment in the civil service back to their original mindset.

**JS: Let's go to one of my favourite questions. What are you proudest of having achieved during your time as a minister?**

**SF:** Probably it's our new system of partnerships in Northern Ireland, that's probably the most radical, innovative stuff that we did.

**JS: And what advice would you give to a future minister, on how to be effective in office?**

**SF:** Just to have a clear agenda, what you want to do, but you also have to be flexible in terms of how you go about doing that. And obviously listen to your civil servants, but also challenge them too.

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