

Shoosmiths in conversation with... Peter Robinson

Shoosmiths partner and head of the firm's financial sector, Stephen Dawson, interviews the former MLA MP and first minister of Northern Ireland, Peter Robinson – reflecting on his life in politics, looking at modern challenges and assessing the economic impact and recovery of Northern Ireland.

PETER Robinson certainly has a story to tell – with a career spanning 45 years and as first minister for Northern Ireland until 2016, he is well-placed to comment on current events and the future of the economy. But, for Robinson, where did it all start?

“Politics wasn’t ever a deliberate choice on my part,” Robinson explains. The catalyst for the passion came when his school friend was killed in the Troubles, and his interest in politics was therefore piqued in politics, more so than in football or “chasing girls” in his formative years. “When your friend is killed in circumstances connected to political life, it’s hard to avoid that being a new interest for you, and that is how I got involved. That was a sharp reminder for me that there were things more important.”

A life in politics

Robinson is clear that politics was never a ‘career’ for him, but “more of a calling”, reflecting on how people who entered into politics in the 60s and 70s had a very significant passion for what they were doing. He thinks that people entering into politics now strongly believe in the policies and issues at stake, but he says that back then, “it was a matter of life and death”.

Regarding his own brand of politics, Robinson comments that his was to try to convince others there was a better way, and reflects on working with Ian Paisley former leader of the DUP and first minister: “If you look at those who were around me at the time – you had Ian Paisley, who had very clear leadership credentials, he had a particular style of politics... so I think I probably would have taken a very logical, methodical strategic view of political life and to that extent the two styles welded together very well.”

Robinson explains that his approach to politics had to change with every role he had undertaken. “It is one thing being a protester but when you become an elected representative you then have to shape yourself into that role. It’s very different being in opposition than being in control.



“You carry out a responsibility and you have to be able to carry out the functions you’ve been elected for, which does require you to change.” He explains that really having to adapt was when moving into coalition government, and there was a greater need to adapt again when entering into a mandatory coalition with political opponents: “In performing the role of being first minister – every day was a negotiation day, and everything had to go through the first minister’s office for agreement”.

Despite having very different political opinions, the DUP and Sinn Fein had to build working relationships. This really came to the fore for Robinson when he became first minister in 2008 succeeding Ian Paisley, working alongside Sinn Fein’s Martin McGuinness as deputy first minister. Reflecting on his relationship with McGuinness, he said: “I think looking afar, people wouldn’t have thought we would have a lot in common – but we soon found that we were both fanatical about sports. We could have talked all day about any sport... it meant that the only contact [we had] wasn’t just about ‘hammering it out’ over a policy decision, and from there you do develop a relationship... I think it helped us through difficult situations.”

On 19 November 2015, Robinson announced that he would be stepping down as first minister and as leader of the DUP. Robinson subsequently stepped down as first minister on 11 January 2016, citing family and health reasons. “Politics has always been part of my DNA – it is hard to get away from it even when you retire”, he said. “I had promised family that when I became 60 I would stand down... I tried on several occasions to exit but within the party it just wasn’t the right time to do it as it would have prejudiced where we were. It is desperately difficult for those in the highest offices to live normal lives – the hours were dreadful, you’re eating on the run and in the end I had a heart attack because of the pressures... at the stage when I retired I felt the party was ready to move on – if you don’t take those moments when they arrive then it can be difficult to extract yourself at a later stage.”

Robinson says he has no plans to return to politics and doesn’t want to interfere with day-to-day politics of the party: “I have literally stood back – I think it is important that your successor doesn’t have somebody sitting on their shoulder giving a critique of every action they take.”

Economic prospects

The Northern Irish economy along with the rest of the UK has been severely affected by COVID-19. It is expected that Northern Ireland will take longer to recover than the Republic of Ireland, with recovery to 2019 levels not expected until 2024. Accountants Ernst and Young predicts 38,000 jobs will be lost in Northern Ireland this year and Danske Bank predicts the NI economy will contract around 11% in 2020, and grow 7% in 2021 – also taking into account Brexit and the challenges that represents.

Does Robinson think Stormont's reaction so far has been sufficient? "Northern Ireland has been unfortunate in terms of timing in relation to the economy - there had been a massive hope that when eventually we reached an agreement to set up a devolved government in Northern Ireland after such a long period of absence there would be a very significant peace bonus for us, but unfortunately we were hardly into the saddle before the economic decline, which was global and impacted the UK and Northern Ireland. Then when we got the Assembly back up and running a short time ago there was the hope that would spur on some economic revival - then along comes COVID-19, Brexit and a lot of other things."

Robinson advises that although there are challenges, there are opportunities to be taken advantage of: "...the first being, the size of Northern Ireland; the second being the system of government we have. Being a small country should allow us to react quickly for things and find ourselves at the front of the queue". However, he explains that the way the system of government is working has slowed things down: "Because we have a mandatory coalition, elections don't change an awful lot in terms of the personnel in the executive, which would be an advantage to Northern Ireland... there is no reason why we shouldn't be planning for five, 10, 15 years ahead and putting in place those building blocks... so there are things we can do if there is political agreement."

On the economic impact of COVID-19 on all of Northern Ireland's key sectors, Robinson says: "Northern Ireland will be slower coming out of the Covid-19 recession, so there won't be the luxury of choosing what jobs we get. Agriculture will continue to be very important to us and there will be a greater requirement for support for business and that will need the executive go back to the budget books...".

Before COVID-19, Northern Ireland had also enjoyed a growing high-tech economy. With so many sectors to support, how does Robinson see the future? "I remember from the days when I was going out to China and other places to encourage people to come to Northern Ireland, we had an extraordinary package. When people were told they could start up a financial services business in Northern Ireland for half the cost of London and one third of the cost of Dublin – those were criteria that made people listen. When we told people we had graduates from universities grasping for jobs of this kind... we had a great package."

Speaking optimistically about the future, he says: "We shouldn't undersell ourselves, even without the stimulus of encouraging investors by giving them some financial support. Businesses are inclined to look more long term than what they're going to get

on day one – and if you have cheaper office space... and highly educated employees those are great attractions for business."

Robinson says the immediate problem Northern Ireland is facing is holding on to the jobs that exist already, and he advocates greater support for businesses following COVID-19 restrictions.

In terms of boosting the economy, he thinks a lot can be said for travelling the world to talk to different states about what Northern Ireland has to offer and says as soon as it is safe for Diane Dodds MLA to do so, she should resume this activity with the full support of both the first minister and deputy first minister. Robinson reflected on his own experience of travelling with Martin McGuinness to appear before businesses advocating the same thing. He said: "we found that particularly in the US, Martin McGuinness and I appearing before businesses and giving the same message was a massive encouragement to businesses coming to Northern Ireland, because no matter how we think we have moved on over these past years, the memory out there of NI and violence and terrorism and instability still lingers. There is a massive job to be done in selling Northern Ireland and that needs to occur when businesses are looking to expand."





Brexit and the future of trading relations

On Brexit, Robinson says the issue has been “very disruptive” and displayed scepticism that the government would place the best interests of Northern Ireland at the centre of those negotiations. “I hope there is a beneficial outcome and it is to the advantage of Northern Ireland if there is an agreement rather than a no-deal, but an agreement that disadvantages Northern Ireland would inflict economic catastrophe - our business people are finding it difficult to cope with everything that is being thrown at them, to then have regulations and friction at the border is more than they need to handle. I hope there will be a better outcome, but I am not terribly optimistic on that front.”

Robinson says that it is likely that Northern Ireland will forge a unique relationship with the EU as a target market and other countries could be more disposed to NI as opposed to the rest of the UK given it can be inexpensive to set up offices in the country. He thinks that showcasing this, and the talent that Northern Ireland has - particularly given its abundance of graduates from its world-class universities, for sectors such as financial services, law, compliance and IT - is an important selling point.

Social mobility in Northern Ireland

Aside from the economic fallout of COVID-19 and Brexit, a very real problem across the globe is equality of opportunity and the advancement of social mobility in the workplace, particularly in professional jobs. According to the UK Government, 44% of people think where people end up is determined by their background, but there is scarce reporting for Northern Ireland specifically.

Robinson praised businesses taking action to ensure that the next generation are all given a fair chance, acknowledging the launch of Shoosmiths' Social Mobility Action Plan last month. Robinson, from a working-class background himself whose parents had championed education, said businesses would be the main changemakers, and gave a clear message for the consumption of all job creators in the interests of a more socially diverse workplace and buoyant future economy: "Anybody who thinks talent can only be found in those who are 'well to do', really need to adjust their thinking. It is important for any in the economy that you find the most capable people and [that we] educate people – no matter what their backgrounds are – so that they all have equality of opportunity."

What next for the economy?

Referring to the last global economic downturn, Robinson said: "I remember going out with the head of Investment NI and the economy minister and saying 'I'd like you to go out and buy call centre jobs and we brought thousands in and it was very much the government making an attractive package for NI and we're at that stage now. NI will be slower coming out of the Covid recession so there will not be the luxury of choosing [jobs]... the agriculture is a massive part of our economy and will continue to be very important to us we're entering a stage where there will be.

"Investment is needed to drive those high tech jobs, to digitise and maintain a high tech economy – but we have so many areas of the economy that underpin it and have done for years that it is going to be difficult to rebalance those books. Where do you put the emphasis?"

