

Those were the days my friend

WHAT IS THE POWER-SHARING Executive all about?

It's more than a government for Northern Ireland; it's a symbol that Northern Ireland has grown up and we're ready to live and work together.

It must be driven by a vision and that can only be that it is a government for everyone, not just in the traditional sense of Unionists and Nationalists, but also for the vulnerable, disadvantaged or excluded.

SCOPE was born soon after the power-sharing Executive collapsed in May 1974 and it ceases to exist soon after a new devolved government is born. That political agreement should be a cause of celebration and indeed it is. Yet, there is a lingering doubt that the vision is not quite right.

And the thing about vision is you can't decide afterwards that you're going to take it on board – you must have it from the start and make sure people know you have it. You must radiate it for everyone to see, so they can be confident that this Executive is for them. You can't be seen to be dragged into having vision.

Early issues of SCOPE had a mission to challenge the Direct Rule administration in support of disadvantaged Protestant and Catholic areas and to offer a neutral space at a time when hundreds of people were being shot and bombed by Republicans and Loyalists.

This issue of SCOPE gives space to several doughty veterans to trace developments since those days in the mid-1970s. There is a little nostalgia in their contributions, only to be expected as our printed magazine ends. But there are important analyses also of what needs to be done on issues like building a shared society and tackling poverty and exclusion.

Our contributors have avoided the trap of hankering back to good old days of voluntary sector radicalism. SCOPE in 1977 quoted a government Minister, albeit the progressive Peter Melchett, complaining that there were too few bodies in Northern Ireland compared with Britain pressurising government on wider policy issues. He wanted better research and more widely based criticism.

The voluntary and community sector has moved a great deal in that direction in the last 30 years. What we lack in the raw

intensity of some of the 1970s' activists we have made up for in professionalism. And that's not just in management and governance, but also in research, advocacy and campaigning on a host of issues – the environment, child poverty, human rights, equality or whatever.

And most important of all, we've never lost sight of that vision about creating a better society for all... For in our hearts, the dreams are still the same.

As well as the veterans, SCOPE asked two young people to give an antidote to any romantic reminiscing (pages 21-22). Their articles are truly inspiring, setting out a clear agenda, coupled with a refreshing view of the distinctive role and values of the voluntary and community sector. As the veterans leave the stage in coming years, the sector is in good hands.

But we cannot do it on our own; the input from government is crucial and that's where the worry about vision arises.

Our report on the latest Young Life and Times survey shows a big jump in the number of 16-year olds who believe relations between Catholics have improved in recent years and will continue to do so, and that's largely due to the creation of a power-sharing executive.

But that is not enough; such enthusiasm can rapidly dissipate unless it is channelled. The Executive is a symbol of togetherness but it must build this into the fabric of society, ensuring that all public bodies play their part and that civil society is mobilised in support of a shared future.

It must also very urgently make clear that it is a government for everyone. The delay in agreeing an anti-poverty strategy – one of Peter Hain's major achievements – is a major fault. There are too many signals that Ministers do not want to upset ratepayers and taxpayers and too few signs that it will take robust action to end disadvantage and exclusion.

If the Executive wants to build support, it should do it by meeting the needs of the 'have nots' and give them a stake in society. Northern Ireland is a small place and we could make it a model government – if we have the vision.



SCOPE on the web — This is the final issue of the printed SCOPE and a good opportunity to thank the many people who have written for it and read it over the last 32 years. News will continue to appear on www.nicva.org and www.communityni.org, as well as in the printed NICVA News. SCOPE's challenge role will continue as we develop a new website, which will be as good as the voluntary and community sector makes it. So please continue sending your comments and analysis of social policy issues to scope@nicva.org.

Bye from us, **Paul McGill**, editor **Fiona Veitch**, designer

Managing Editor: Frances McCandless Subscriptions: Cathy Breslin Printing: gps colour graphics

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61 Duncairn Gardens, Belfast BT15 2GB. Tel: (028) 9087 7777. Fax: (028) 9087 7799. Email: scope@nicva.org