

David McCann

KEY:

A: Anne Marie Fleming
M: Marina McConville
D: David McCann

A: Hey everybody. Thank you very much for joining us to see this video. Marina McConville and myself Anne Marie Fleming from the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Service are delighted to welcome today David McCann. David is a well-known commentator, lecturer, and writes about politics. He has a special love for elections not just in Northern Ireland but across the world. So, David is going to give a talk very soon on his analysis on the recent Assembly election and how that bodes for Northern Ireland's political parties.

After the presentation, we are going to share some questions that have been kindly sent to us. And on that note, big thanks to everybody who sent us questions. So that's Miss McKinley at Carrick Grammar. Mrs. O'Hare at Our Lady and St Pats, Knock. The Year 13 class and Mrs Nixon at Lismore Comprehensive. Miss McMullan and St Patrick's Academy. A shout out to students Caoimhe, Aisling, James, Christopher, Caolan, Matthew, Eimear and students Bethany and Olivia from Royal Dungannon. So, on that note and hand over to you David.

D: Okay. Thanks very much for inviting me back from the last time we did this. It was really enjoyable. A lot has a lot has happened since then. So just first of all, before I start, can you see the slides, the presentation?

A: Yes, we can. Yeah.

D: Yeah. Perfect. Fantastic. So, thanks very much for all your questions as well. Looking forward to answering them. And AE22. My goodness, what an absolutely fascinating election it was. Not only was it historic in terms of the fact that it was just 100 years after the foundation of the Northern Ireland state, it was also historic in terms of the results that it produced.

So, this kind of presentation is going to go through some of the dynamics of the campaign. What did some of the parties run on? What were the main issues? What did the polls say as well? This election was quite significant as well, in that it featured a lot of polls. And the results, what should we take from it as well.

So, going on to some of the basics. Okay. So, the election came after the resignation of Paul Givan as the First Minister of Northern Ireland in February 2022. So, for those of you, you may remember Paul Givan, in response to lack of movement on the protocol, Jeffrey Donaldson, the DUP leader, pulled Paul Givan out of the Executive as First Minister in February 2022.

There was for a few days there talk that we may have had the election date moved forward from May 5th to maybe the end of March. And it was speculated that the Secretary of State then at the time, Brandon Lewis, again, a lot has happened. We've changed. We've had two Secretaries of State since then, that he may have pulled the date forward, but he didn't.

He stuck with the May 5th deadline, which was the last possible date for an election. Those of you may remember that oddly, when the Executive stopped functioning, because once the First Minister went, Michelle O'Neill, the deputy First Minister went with him and then that put

an end to Executive meetings, formal Executive meetings, although under the New decade, New approach rules ministers stayed in post after the election.

People may remember there was a rush of private members bills, MLAs all of a sudden discovered all these private members bills that they could put through in the final months. So, for example there was a bill on period poverty. There was climate change legislation, there was stuff around rents, there was lots of other different pieces of legislation. There's legislation around integrated education, which was all put through in those final weeks of the mandate.

So, this was around about the March period. And Alex Maskey, the Speaker, had a bit of a tough job to try and get everything through but they actually had a rush of legislation. So, the Assembly didn't totally grind to a halt. The Assembly was officially dissolved at the end of March 2022 with the election period being held during April and the first week of May of 2022. Election campaigns typically in Northern Ireland, last four to five weeks formally, even though that the actual campaign begins a couple of weeks before that.

But the official campaign takes place over five weeks and that was held through April of 2022. And one of the really astounding things about the election campaign was if we go back to the election campaign in 2017, my goodness, the campaign was fractious. My goodness, the campaign was pretty it was pretty out there. This one was very dull.

It was very dull. I'll be honest with you. For commentators and for election analysts like myself, it was slim pickings in terms of issues. There was no crocodile moment, the famous crocodile moment, the then DUP leader, Arlene Foster got herself into. There were no missteps like we saw during the 2015 general election campaign that tripped up some high profile politicians.

There was nothing like that. Politicians ran a pretty low key campaign. They played it safe. There was no there was very few faux pas. There was no real kind of trip ups in interviews. So, the campaign was actually very low key. And it did worry some of us that maybe the high turnout that we had had in recent elections was maybe going to fall off just because voters, we thought, would maybe just cry off and just cry off due to boredom.

And because very few things actually happened, the campaign itself was particularly low key. Polling day, of course, was on May 5th. And I appreciate that many of you weren't able to vote in that election. Very few of you probably were able to vote in that election, but it was on May 5th and 63% of us turned out to vote.

That was down at just under 2 points from the previous Assembly election. Although it is worth noting that the that the voting register was bigger this time for a variety of different reasons. People, of course, don't forget to get many of the COVID supports that were that were produced by the Executive throughout 2020 and 21. So things like the High Street voucher scheme, people had to be on the electoral register.

So many people signed up, registered to vote just to get those supports, but didn't actually turn up on polling day. So, turnout was 63%, which if you extrapolate it out, it was roughly the same size as 2017. So that was a couple of us were thinking maybe turnout would fall below the 60% mark down to maybe the low 50% range, which it had been at from the 2011 to 2016 period as well.

So, we're worried about that. So, what did the parties run on? What did they really look at? So, to start off with the DUP going into the election as the lead party, the party that were probably

under the most pressure out of any of them. And why was that? Well, again, it's been a long time since we talked.

The last time I did one of these, Arlene Foster was the First Minister. Michelle O'Neill was the deputy First Minister, and Naomi Long was the leader of the fifth place party. And a lot of change since then. The DUP of course throughout 2021 went through three leaders in just the space of a few weeks. This was Jeffrey Donaldson's first election as DUP Leader.

They very much ran on this narrative of vote DUP in order to get a good deal in terms of taking on the protocol, but also to stop what they called a divisive border poll. They ran very heavily on those two messages as well. And again, you can see their slogan, Moving forward together. And there's Jeffrey Donaldson at the DUP's Manifesto launch.

So those were the type of things that they actually ran on about removing the Irish Sea border and on stopping and warning about the risks of the potential of Sinn Fein becoming the largest party. So that was their campaign and that was very much what they focused on and that was the details of some of their manifestos as well online.

And again, the DUP ran a very low key campaign and they didn't play on any of the kind of divisions that they had previously. It was very much a defensive campaign for the DUP. You know, we'll get into it a wee bit later in the presentation. A lot of the polls had the DUP very much under pressure and they were very much fighting an uphill battle against a resurgent, Traditional Unionist Voice and also a surging Sinn Fein and Alliance Party as well.

And that leads me all very nicely to the other party, the other main party in Northern Ireland politics which is Sinn Fein, Sinn Fein of course were polling pretty well throughout 2021 towards the latter part of 2021 and through the first bit of 2022. And they ran a very safe and sober campaign. They, ran on a very much a what's the word for it?

A very nice and cuddly campaign would be the way I would see it. They kind of put a border poll as a lesser priority for them as well. They portrayed Michelle O'Neill as a First Minister for all, and that was what she was trying to run on. It was time for real change. They ran on for example, cost of living pressures, talking about, you know, getting £330 to household - and with John Finucane North Belfast MP fronting their election campaign as well and they ran a very safe and sober campaign.

They didn't give any hostages to fortune and they didn't run a particularly hardcore republican campaign whatsoever. It was a very nice, cuddly campaign. In fact, you know, when you looked at the Sinn Fein Party election broadcast, it was remarked upon during the election that if you took if you took the party label out of it and just read the script and the context of it, you could be forgiven for thinking that it could have been something delivered by the Alliance Party.

It was very much about working together, getting the Executive back up and running as well. So, Sinn Fein ran that type of campaign as well. That was very much their pitch, real change and a very nice light side of Sinn Fein as well. The other party that was very much the focus of the campaign was the Alliance Party. The Alliance Party throughout 2019 had done incredibly well and they ran on the slogan of "Together we can". Naomi Long again very much fronted the campaign, but it was surprisingly low key when you consider that Alliance probably the most to gain of any of the parties in Northern Ireland during this election. They wanted to capitalize on the on their surging momentum from 2019, but they ran a very low key campaign and also

significantly, they were the only one of the main parties that weren't defending any seats going into the election. They had 8 safe, solid seats. None of them were under pressure.

The only thing the media ever talked about was how much the Alliance would gain. But they ran a very sober campaign. They ran a very safe campaign. In their party conference just at the start of the election was again a very safe and sober affair. It was they didn't really give any hostages to fortune either. A couple of their candidates had some minor slip ups during the campaign, but it wasn't anything remotely fatal.

They weren't particularly out there in terms of policy pronouncements. And again, unsurprisingly, Naomi Long was someone who led for them in most of the debates and in most of the interviews. They wanted to capitalise on the on the on the strong support that was being recorded in the polls by about their about their party leader.

And again, they were looking to capitalise on that momentum. So that was how the three main focus parties, the parties who gained the most attention throughout the campaign, that was very much what they focused on. But again, if you aren't a fan of the DLP, Sinn Fein and the Alliance, there are other parties that did stand in the election as well.

Another party that really dominated parts of the coverage was the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV). And why was that? Well, polls throughout 2021 and 2022 were really showing a surge for the Traditional Unionist Voice. Polls previously would have had the TUV on 1% and 2%. But in this campaign, polls were showing the TUV at 7%, 8% and 9% of the vote they were picking up strong support and strong shares really from the from the DUP.

And this did give them a lot of traction. And why, they ran very much on the protocol you can see there, Jim Allister "No To A Sea Border" running very hard on that platform and on that message of taking on the sea border and sending a message really it was a good, good vehicle to park a protest vote if you were a Unionist voter. And they ran very heavily on that. And again, they were a party that seemed to have some momentum coming into the campaign as well due to that poll rating narrative. And in some polls, they were only a few points behind the DUP and in some polls they were even ahead of the SDLP as well, or just behind the SDLP, which, if repeated at an election, would have yielded to some significant success for them as well.

Of course, the other parties, the SDLP were probably the party that was under the most pressure going into the campaign. And why was that? They had sagging poll ratings. Some polls showed them at 10% and 11% and that was down from what they received in 2017 and in 2019. They were under pressure in a number of seats as well, places like South Down and places like Upper Bann, places like East Londonderry.

They seemed like they were they were under pressure, but they did have some moves for gains as well. Places like West Belfast and Strangford. And the SDLP, of course wanted to fight the campaign very much on the cost of living crisis. They ran very much on the platform of what they called people first and that was about putting £300 into every household to help with the cost of living crisis and things like that too.

And that was very much what they ran on as well. They sought to capitalize. You could see they got the big bus. They ran very heavily on their leader Colum Eastwood, Claire Hanna and Nicola Mallon. But again, as we'll get into a little bit later, part of the problem that the party

eventually found was that two of those three people were at Westminster and not actually standing as candidates in the election.

The UUP as well, Doug Beattie was a relatively new leader too. He only took over in May of 2021 and then he was fighting his first election as the UUP leader. And of course, they wanted to run very heavily on Robin Swann, the popular health minister of Northern Ireland. And of course, he featured very heavily on their billboards and featured very heavily on their advertisements too.

Quite naturally, every poll had shown that Robin Swann was by a country mile, the popular politician in Northern Ireland, and that he was someone that people very much trusted. And there did seem to be a bit of a close crocodile moment for Doug Beattie. People remember before the campaign got started, some old social media posts of Doug's came back to haunt him and did look like his leadership was a bit shaky there for a while, but he was able to get through it after a couple of interviews on the BBC and he was able to get through. But that was the closest we ever got to any kind of substantial kind of scandals or missteps in the campaign as well. But that was very much what the parties ran on. And you can see here, there wasn't really one issue that caught fire. There wasn't a crocodile moment.

There wasn't an Irish language style moment as well. The campaign was peppered with many, many, many different issues as well. So, the cost of living crisis, which was taking place at that time as well, don't forget, context is important. Vladimir Putin had just invaded Ukraine. Energy debt, a spike at that point. So, you had the cost of living issues that were starting to bite, although they are much more prevalent today at the start of the campaign.

So, parties were beginning to run on that as well. And also, who would be the First Minister? Don't forget, Jeffrey Donaldson was coming back from Westminster. He didn't actually have a seat in Stormont, so he was standing in Lagan Valley, which placed a bit of hokey cokey in terms of DUP MLAs. Edwin Poots, of course, the former DUP leader, he was the MLA for Lagan Valley.

He tried to seek selection in South Down, didn't get that selection and then ended up going to South Belfast after the very tragic death of the setting of MLA Christopher Stalford and ended up getting selected and co-opted into that seat to replace him. Maybe it was very much about who would be the First Minister, would it be the DUP? Would it be Michelle O'Neill?

And if the DUP came second, would they serve under a Sinn Fein First Minister again, not just the DUP, but other Unionist parties like the Ulster Unionist Party wouldn't give direct answers to that question throughout the campaign, which did fuel that issue throughout the election as well. And then also another issue was the protocol too, big issue within unionism.

Not so much an issue within other sections of the electorate. You know, the Nationalist electorate or in the other designation as well. It wasn't really so much of an issue either there either. But those were three issues that really kind of dominated throughout the campaign. So, you got your cost of living crisis. Who would be the First Minister?

And the protocol very much within unionism was definitely an issue there too. This leads me on one of my favourite topics in the world, polls. I absolutely adore polls and shameless plug, I did analyse a couple of them in the Irish News when the University of Liverpool Social Market Research polls were done and it was a lot of fun actually extrapolating ahead because in

Northern Ireland, typically during election campaigns we haven't had as many polls typically before.

So Lucid Talk and University of Liverpool were, I thought, a very useful addition to the context of this election campaign polls during the campaign that existed. And you can see some of the some of the very bad opinion polls that were out there for parties like the DUP. And you can see very much how Sinn Fein led and all of them, and that very much fuelled their narrative as well about becoming First Minister.

And that was a very attractive prospect for Nationalist voters. You can see the Ulster Unionists kind of going up and going down. Some polls were very encouraging for them. Some polls had them up at 14%, others had them around 13% mark, which would have been very encouraging for them. But you see the SDLP not doing great in the polls.

They performed pretty poorly throughout and the Alliance Party again doing very well, averaging from 16% up to around 18% in some opinion polls as well. And you can see the TUV as well, like I was telling you, doing incredibly well. Again, don't forget, the TUV would normally get around 2% and no matter what way, you're chopping it the TUV were very much scoring very well in opinion polls throughout the campaign as well.

And polls did dominate a lot of the coverage and did help frame how we how we viewed opinion polls during that period as well. But those are just some of the ranges. And at the top there you can see just how the polls, how the polls recorded things compared to the actual result. And slightly underestimate the DUP a little bit.

They got Sinn Fein's vote roughly within the margin of error. That's the other thing I should stress the polls will always have a margin of error of around 2 to 3%. So, they roughly got Sinn Fein's vote pretty much bang on. They got the Ulster Unionist roughly ok. Wee bit, wee bit favourable to them. The SDLP, yeah, they caught the SDLP were dipping down.

Alliance some polls were not much too favourable to Alliance than where they ended up. The TUV did roughly round about where the polls expected them and you'll see some of the other parties there as well. Just a wee bit over where they actually ended up. But they got the basic trends right so it wasn't a bad day for the pollsters in terms of the election.

They roughly got the broad trends right as well. And what were the end results and why were they significant? So, you could see Sinn Fein with a clear vote lead. It was much closer in terms of seats. So, what you're seeing there are a percentage vote terms. So, Sinn Fein record their best ever Assembly election result, 29%.

I actually think this was actually the best ever showing that a Nationalist party has ever had at a devolved government level at 29%, I think is one of the best ever showings there since the foundation of the state in 1921. So very strong for them. Don't forget, we were, Sinn Fein were going into the campaign expecting to probably dip back a wee bit...(audio lost at this stage)

A: You were dipping in and out but we have you David

D: Okay. Can you still see the screen?

A: Yes, we can.

D: Yeah. Okay, that's okay. Okay. So, the so the DUP scored their lowest vote preference share for winning Unionist parties since 1998. And even though this wasn't reflected in terms of seats the DUP roughly held up ok in terms of seats but they did take a real knock in their first preference vote share. The DUP, just for context, scored around 28% in 2017 but they dipped quite substantially in this election even though in terms of seats they only lost 2 or 3. The SDLP as well they lost vote share and in seats.

This was the first time ever that the SDLP polled below 10% in a Northern Ireland election. The Alliance Party won the most or won the most seats in their history. They scored 17 seats, Assembly seats. That was up from the 8 that they had going into the election and their vote share was up quite substantially as well. So, they did incredibly well too.

The Ulster Unionist Party they had a bit of a disappointment. They lost votes and they also lost a seat as well. So that was the first time ever that the Ulster Unionist Party came back with single figures in terms of seats. They only won 9 seats. That was the first time ever in the history of Northern Ireland that in a devolved election, the Ulster Unionist Party were in single digits as well.

The TUV score their highest vote share of 7.6%, but they gained no extra seats quite significantly. And they went in with Jim Allister and they came out with Jim Allister. They weren't very transfer friendly from other parties. And that meant that they just didn't pick up seats. Even the ones in constituencies like Strangford, and Newry and Armagh, they actually polled very well on first preferences, but they didn't get the results in terms of seats.

Another disappointment was for the Greens. The Greens lost both their seats in South Belfast and in North Down to the Alliance Party. So, they were wiped out. The first time since 2007 that there's no Green Party representation in the Assembly and People Before Profit, even though they held their seat in West Belfast, they lost votes in key constituencies like West Belfast and places like Foyle. They fell back in votes as well, even though they didn't win any seats.

A party worth noting here is Aontú. They actually picked up a decent number of votes across Northern Ireland and that may be one to watch when you're looking at local elections as well. So that's just something to keep an eye on.

So, what were the takeaways from the election? One - transfers matter. Transfers really matter. Again, I told you about the TUV, 7.6% and no seats. That's very unusual for Northern Ireland. If you think back to the Alliance Party who were able to elect 6 or 7 MLAs albeit in a 108 seat Assembly on about 4% of the vote. And that's quite something that the TUV couldn't get someone else elected.

If you think about the DUP, they dropped from 28% to 21.3%, but yet they held nearly all their seats. So again, being transfer friendly really matters. And again, the Alliance Party picked up loads of seats on transfers. So, it really is important to be transfer friendly as well. Both Unionism and Nationalism fell back in terms of seats. So, both blocks were down in seats.

The "others" did incredibly well. The United Community designation, as they're sometimes referred to, they scored record results and naturally the Alliance surge going from 8 seats up to 17. So even though the Greens lost all representation in the Assembly, the further gains from the Alliance Party that they were able to pick up a did make up for that as well.

But it is less diverse out of the 18 seats in the Other designation (audio dropped out....) so it is a less diverse group when you consider that there were, what, 10 in the previous Assembly in the Other designation, 8 of those were Alliance, 2 Greens and actually it was 11. One other was People Before Profit. So, it's less diverse as well.

And the other take away is welcome to the three party state. The combined UUP SDLP vote share fell quite substantially. They are now just under a quarter of the vote in Northern Ireland, whereas the combined vote share of the DUP, Alliance and Sinn Fein make up quite a substantial portion of the electorate now when you consider the legacy parties are falling back. So welcome to the three party state.

When you consider Sinn Fein on 28 seats, the DUP on 25 and Alliance on 17, you've got the Ulster Unionist back on 9 on the SDLP on 8. So again, they are the three main parties who will dominate the next Executive, the Ulster Unionists just qualifying for a spot in the Executive. They've got, they're just on the 9 seat mark that you need to qualify for the Assembly.

The SDLP don't qualify for the Executive 8 seats is too low for them to get in. So that's the first time ever in Northern Ireland's power sharing history that the SDLP won't get in the Executive. As of right. So that's so that's something noteworthy there as well with the Ulster Unionist just hanging on to that status as well.

The Alliance Party are clearly in as of right with the Sinn Fein and the DUP. I know if you've ever listened or follow me on any of the election stuff, I can't do an election presentation, without finishing off on some fun facts. Okay, I love election fun facts and here are just some for you that are useful for you.

So, who are the biggest vote getters in Northern Ireland? So, this is first preference votes? Who did the best of all the parties in Northern Ireland of all the candidates in Northern Ireland? So, the top spot this year goes to Sinead Ennis with 14,381 first preferences. She is the Sinn Fein MLA for South Down. She interestingly takes this mantle from her boss, Michelle O'Neill, who got the most first preference votes in 2017. So, she takes this from her boss there. Sinead Ennis did incredibly well.

Jeffrey Donaldson, the DUP leader, he got 12,626 first preference votes. Interestingly, he is the only DUP MLA on this list actually, and he didn't take his seat in the Assembly. And there's the joke that the biggest vote transfer in the 2022 election was actually the 12,626 votes that Jeffrey made to Emma Pengelly who was who co-opted in the following week after his election, because he opted to stay in Westminster. Because if he came to Stormont, he would have had to have given up being an MP and there would be a by election for Lagan Valley but also, he opted not to do that. There are no by elections for Stormont seats. You can see Michelle O'Neill there.

Number 3 - I'm going to go through a whole list of Sinn Fein candidates here, by the way. So, Michelle O'Neill, Sinn Fein, Cathy Mason, also Sinn Fein in South Down and Conor Murphy, the Finance Minister, also Sinn Fein. Cathal Boylan also Sinn Fein. Alex Easton he's interesting and former DUP MLA ran as an independent. He left the party in 2021 and ran as an independent, got easily elected in North Down with 9,500 first preferences.

Robin Swann also did incredibly well in in North Antrim. He got a huge swing to him of 8% of 8 percentage points in North Antrim, easily elected. So, he's the only Ulster Unionist in the list. Deirdre Hargey is also Sinn Fein, the Communities Minister, Pdraig Delargy, also Sinn Fein.

Philip McGregor and also Sinn Fein. John O'Dowd Current Infrastructure Minister, also Sinn Fein.

So, you can tell from that who did incredibly well in the election. Sinn Fein absolutely dominates this list of the top vote getters in Northern Ireland as you can see there as well. But what about the candidates who got really high first preference votes and didn't get elected? So, it isn't all positive for Sinn Fein. You can see Liam Mackle got 7,260 first preferences and he didn't get elected again, didn't get the transfers to get in.

So, he scored really high in first preferences. But other candidates Eoin Tennyson from Alliance was able to catch up as other candidates transferred more to him. Mervyn Storey as well was a big shock defeat of the election he lost to Alliance's Patricia O'Lynn again transfers were key. Either he didn't get enough transfers coming down from the Traditional Unionists Voice but also the SDLP transferred very highly to Alliance as well.

Keith Radcliffe TUV polled incredibly well, but didn't get elected again, didn't get the transfers, and Stephen Cooper as well did very well in Strangford, but didn't get the transfers and was caught by other candidates as well. And Kathleen McGurk at 4,500 first preferences in East Londonderry, she again missed out as well as she was in the final mix.

But Alliance's Chris McCall went out and transferred to Cara Hunter of the SDLP, putting her ahead for the final seat to take that seat as well. So, transfers really, really, really matter as well. So that's my fun fact for that.

And last one as well. What were the best performing constituencies for each party? Well, West Belfast, Sinn Fein stronghold Sinn Fein took 63.7% of the vote. This is actually the only constituency in Northern Ireland where any party holds 4 out of 5 seats. It's also the only part of Northern Ireland where a party has taken takes more than 60% of the vote, also the only constituency where there's no DUP MLA. So that's why it's a stronghold for Sinn Fein, we thought when Sinn Fein took 61% in 2017 that it couldn't get any better for them.

Well, it did. They got a swing to them in West Belfast City. Strangford, this was the only constituency in Northern Ireland until this election where the DUP held more than 2 seats. They had suffered a high profile loss here in the former education minister Peter Weir. But again, it is still their best performing constituency with 35.8% of the vote. Alliance made a pick up here in that constituency.

East Belfast, again, an Alliance stronghold, 32.4% of the vote for Alliance in East Belfast. This was the first time ever that Alliance out-pollled the DUP in this constituency at Assembly level, it's only the second time ever that they've done it. The last time before that was when Naomi Long ousted Peter Robinson from the Westminster seat in 2010. For the UUP, East Antrim, 24.2% of the vote for the UUP up there.

Again, that was the only constituency up until this election where the UUP held 2 seats. They did lose a seat there, despite the fact they actually pulled a pretty decent result. John Stewart held on there whilst Roy Beggs lost out. The SDLP Foyle, of course, again, a heartland for them, the only constituency left where the SDLP hold more than one seat. They lost their second in South Down but they hold 2 here, just over 30% of the vote and again also the only constituency left in Northern Ireland where the SDLP poll above 30% of the vote. So those are the best performing constituencies in Parliament as well.

I appreciate I've thrown loads of numbers at you in this presentation. I make no apology for it because they're absolutely fascinating to be able to understand. It was a massively historic election and I hope you enjoyed the presentation and I'm really looking forward to answering some of your questions.

M: Okay. Well, thank you very much, David, for that. An excellent analysis. And I think, you know, figures actually do stay with you and your fun facts as well, you know, really, really helped make your presentation very engaging too. So, thank you very much for that. You've given huge food for thought I think to our teachers and students and I'm sure they'll be debating a lot of what you've said in the classroom and it will take quite a bit of time. So, thank you very much indeed.

D: And if I can just jump in, if any of the teachers listening or want that presentation, I'll happily send it over and make it available through yourselves. And if they want them.

M: Well, that would be fantastic. Thank you very much. We could make that available on the website with the actual video and also the transcript and of the of the video, which is fantastic. So, thank you, David. And as Anne Marie said earlier, we have some questions for you. We're very grateful to teachers and students for taking the time to send in their questions.

M: And I am going to hand over to Anne Marie, going to lead on this a by asking questions in relation to Sinn Fein, the Alliance Party and the DUP. So, thank you.

A: Thanks very much, Marina And again, David, thanks very much for an enjoyable presentation. I learned a lot myself. Yeah, as Marina said I'm going to focus here on some of the questions for the party. So, we have got Olivia from Royal School, Dungannon, she wants to know, do you think that Sinn Fein's success at this election, will cause issues with people who fear a united Ireland?

D: Well they ran...The DUP did run heavily on a border poll and they said, look, if Sinn Fein become the largest party, it would feed the drive for a border poll. But of course, one of the big things within the debate at the minute is that we don't know the criteria for which a border poll would have to be held.

D: All the Good Friday Agreement says is that if the Secretary of State deems it, that that would be won. But what the what does that mean? Does that mean a nationalist majority in the Assembly? Does that mean a majority of MLAs requesting a poll? Does that mean opinion polls? Does that mean surveys? Is it a census result?

We just don't know. So, there's a lot of ambiguity out there. In terms of the issue. I can understand why the DUP ran on this because of course it helps fuel votes for them. It ironically doesn't do Sinn Fein any harm either on the other side because it fuels that narrative on the nationalist side too.

So, I don't think we will get a border poll off the back of it because people will point to the fact that there are less nationalist MLAs in the Assembly today than there was before, before May this year. So, while that "Other" ground has grown, some.

A: Thank you. The next six questions that I have for you all have a focus on the DUP. So, I think every school that has sent us some questions are involved in this section. So, starting off with

Carrick Grammar, a question here about how secure do you think Jeffrey Donaldson in the leadership of the DUP and how divided is the DUP?

D: Well I was at their conference not too long ago and they actually seem in good form. I think Jeffrey Donaldson has actually steadied the ship. When you consider that, as I'll quote Arlene Foster's special adviser Lee Reynolds @In 2021 the DUP jumped off a cliff and they have crawled about a quarter of the way back up the cliff."

They've still got a way to go. But I think Jeffrey Donaldson has steadied the ship. I think he can take credit for that. But they still do have a way to go to get back to where they once were, which was the leaders of unionism. Even though it was a difficult election for them, they still did take a majority of the Unionist vote, around 53%.

But I think that they've got a degree of rebuilding to do. But I think they will be quite content at the moment that the Ulster Unionists and TUV didn't make the breakthrough on May 5th that they potentially could have done. The DUP could have lost 10 or 12 seats and after the year they had had not that that could have been possible, but they didn't. So yeah. So, I think he's secure.

A: Lismore Comprehensive school ask will Jeffrey Donaldson and the DUP remain out of the Assembly if there isn't a deal done on the protocol?

D: Yes, I think they will probably stay out if there isn't a deal on the protocol. I think that their position is overwhelmingly popular with the unionist voters. North of 70% of unionists back their position on the protocol. And again, those are the voters that elect the DUP. People go well oh but you know, lots of people really don't support the position.

Yeah. A lot of those people are, people here aren't voting for the DUP anyway. You know the DUP are looking at the polling data for how unionists think because it's unionist votes who are electing DUP MLAs. It's not people who vote Alliance, or people who vote for Sinn Fein or the SDLP being realistic about it. So, they will very much follow that so if that changes within unionism and yeah you may see some movement but I was optimistic with you guys last time, so I'm going to stay on my optimistic note.

I think that they will, that there will be a deal on the protocol, and I think there will be something to get them back to the Executive. But then the fun and games start because the Executive has got a lot of problems waiting for it when it reconvenes. So, they may wish they had stayed out when they get back in and see the and see the mountain of problems.

A: And we're staying on that theme this time. A number of students in Dungannon want to probe you on your thoughts on the real reason why the DUP have refused to go back into the Assembly. Do you think it's NI Protocol linked or do you think it's the fact that Sinn Fein are now the largest party? So just to hear your thoughts on that.

D: Well, during the...I can understand why people still ask that question. I know Ken Clarke, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer in the House of Lords, fairly recently made comments to that effect and much to the annoyance of Nigel Dodds, the former deputy leader, or Lord Dodds as he is now. I think that during the campaign you can understand why, because they wouldn't answer that question.

The DUP, not just the DUP but the Ulster Unionist Party avoided that question like the plague. They were like, well, you know, we're running to win. And so, so you can understand why they would think that. They accept that that is where things are at the minute and they will be whoever the DUP...we don't even know who would be deputy First Minister as well.

They still haven't clarified that. But yes, so I can understand why people are asking that. But yes, I think they will go in government. I think I think once they get past the whole the whole once you get past the symbolism of Michelle O'Neill as First Minister, people move on. You know, people forget. These guys are probably too young to remember.

As now I've twigged that I'm old enough to do an in my day statement. But the DUP going into government with Sinn Fein was a big deal. That was huge at the time in 2007 you know but people moved once they got used to it people moved on so I think that once that happens and the symbolism of it goes people will move on.

But I think it is the protocol that's mainly driving it because most people acknowledge it's hard to foresee Sinn Fein not being the largest party for the foreseeable future. So that position I doubt will change any time soon.

A: So, thanks David. Another question here from Dungannon. Do you think the DUP will suffer due to the cost of living crisis and them staying out of the Northern Ireland Assembly? Will that impact them in your view?

D: No, I don't think it will, and I appreciate that in a normal democracy yeah, you would imagine that cost of living issue would be something that would penalise a government. The current UK government is struggling in the polls for that reason. The current Irish government is struggling in the polls for that reason. In a normal democracy that would be the case.

But the reason why it's not here is very simply, one, there's a general cynicism in the public about the ability of the Executive to do most things. The Executive did not have a very high approval rating even during COVID, where the Executive was actually doing loads of things. I don't actually think that's a fair rating for the Executive.

I think the Executive does do lots of positive things, but it just doesn't always get the credit for it. So, I don't think the DUP will get blame for that reason. There is a general scepticism about the Executive's ability to make things better and two for the Unionist voters, for the people that elect DUP MLAs, that this is an issue for them.

And the DUP are linking the protocol to the cost of living. They're saying this is raising the cost of getting goods in from the rest of the UK and they would argue their position is for the cost of living and to the people that are voting for the DUP that will resonate with them. It doesn't resonate with other voters, but again, those voters aren't going to vote for the DUP anyway.

A: So, kind of linked to that and voting, Emer in Dungannon - Given the DUPs stance. If there were to be another election, can you see people turning to other Unionist parties?

D: Thank you for the question Emer. It's a great question. I don't think so, for the very simple reason. Well, actually, I don't say I don't think so. The thing I love about politics and political campaigns is they're not predictable. You know, the great thing about democracy and elections is that things can change in campaigns, which is why we love doing it.

Even here, things change and things get different. As I started off last time we spoke about, what, 18 months ago, you know, you look at the change we had, we had Arlene as First Minister, Naomi Long's was the fifth place party, the SDLP were third and the DUP was the largest party and Sinn Fein were in trouble.

When we talk, when we spoke last time, it looked like Sinn Fein really is a whole bunch of seats and look at the change. It changed that that that dynamic has totally shifted. So, I think in terms of at the moment I would say no for the very simple reason I think the Ulster Unionists have got a rebuilding job to do that's going to take them many years to do.

The TUV again have got a rebuilding job because May 5th was a disappointment for them. Yes, they did up their vote, but they didn't get the seats. So, for a lot of Unionists, the DUP will have a very compelling message this time of the TUV can't win. And if you think that that message isn't powerful, go ask the Alliance Party who spent 40 trying to shake that message that kept the Alliance in the doldrums for 40 years. And it took until 2019 for many of the guys listening to this again I'm doing an "In my day" again for me...That kept Alliance down because lots of parties went and said, sure, why would you vote Alliance. Alliance can't win, now Alliance can win and Alliance are winning.

It's very difficult to shake that narrative when you've got it. Suzanne Breen very, very astutely made that tag about the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists. You know, once you get the kind of the you can't win tag in politics it's really hard to shake it and you know people like to vote for winners.

People like to back the winning team. And there actually have been studies about this. People do like to back the winning team and the DUP seem like the winning team in unionism, albeit in a reduced capacity.

A: Okay. Thank you. My final question before we hear from Marina who'll take us through some other questions. This is a topical question. This is from Our Lady of St Pats in Knock - Given the current stalemate in Northern Ireland politics, do you think there is any merit in the Edwin Poots view that next April's 25th anniversary of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement will in fact see the funeral of the Good Friday Agreement? Any merit in that view?

D: Wow Okay. I think there's merit in obviously looking at the agreement 25 years on. Many people who are proponents of the agreement would say that, look, the agreements never been fully implemented. All aspects of that agreement have never actually been fully implemented. So, we would need to fully implement it first before we actually saw we actually made a judge by whether it's a success or failure yet.

But it's the agreements been changed, it's been tinkered with over a period of time. But I think that look, for the agreement, I think it's useful always to look at it. I don't think that the structures are set in stone. I don't think the aspects of the agreement are fully set in stone. So, I think that there is that there is a cause to look at it.

But I wouldn't say scrap it over overall for the very simple reason of what's the alternative to go to what, to do what? Do we go to a majority rule, do we go to a weighted voting system? Do we go to other different things? Are there different models that are out there? So that would be that would be my question.

Sure. I mean, fine. Have a proposal to scrap the agreement, but what's your alternative to go to.

A: Thank you very much. And over to Marina.

M: Okay. And so, it's me going to ask you some questions about Alliance, David. And our first one is from Carrick Grammar School. Would a border poll prove to be an existential threat to the Alliance Party? In other words, could Alliance avoid taking sides?

Wow. No, I don't think Alliance could avoid taking sides in a border poll. They would have to come down on a on a position I would say. They could while theoretically do a free vote and just say, do whatever you want. The problem that Alliance would have has been a problem over the years (audio drops out here)...or kind of fishing. Alliance used to be, when I was growing up, regarded as a soft Unionist Party, they are now very much fishing across different pools of support.

So, they're taking support from the SDLP, their taking support from the Greens. Many of those people would be pro-Irish unification as well as pro-Union. So, I think whatever way they go there will be people who will be alienated within Alliance because there would be some Alliance representatives, I would say, who would be in favour of Irish unification, and there'd be some who would be in favour of the Union.

But it'll be interesting to watch how they make that decision and how they balance that. So that would be something that we'll keep looking for. But I do think the Alliance will have an issue when they get to that.

M: Okay. Well, thank you very much for that answer. Our next question is from Lismore Comprehensive - If there is an early election could Alliance do it again or were they a one election wonder?

D: No, I don't think they are a one election wonder. Alliance have been rising high consistently since 2017. They were making incremental moves really since 2007 actually. It's slowly but surely making incremental moves. And they did incredibly well in 2017 and they built on that in 2019. Alliance are an easy port for many Northern Ireland voters. If you're a middle class, many people just really like Naomi Long, they are the incredibly popular.

Not the only thing that could stop the Alliance is if Naomi Long stepped away from the leadership, say she woke up tomorrow and just stepped away. I think that would pose a challenge for the Alliance Party. But if she doesn't do that in the foreseeable future, I think Alliance at their current level and when I say current level, I mean just more of a force as a third largest party, I think could be here to stay as that type of force.

M: Okay. Thanks, David. And from Matthew in St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon, - Why do you think the political landscape has changed in favour of the Alliance Party? Do you think their success will continue to grow at such a rate to challenge the two main parties?

D: Matthew, thank you for the questions. Great question. I would say I don't think so. I don't think they will they would challenge the DUP or Sinn Fein in that respect, even though they will compete with each other for votes and seats in some respect. But like even at the recent election, Alliance scored 13 and a half percent, which was a great result for them.

The DUP scored 21.3% which was a poor result for them, and that's still a good 8 point lead. And if that's a bad DUP result and if that's a great Alliance result then that just gives you the scope. And in the polls, there is some sign of a DUP recovery where the DUP or now polling around 24% or 25% Alliance are still around 13% and Sinn Fein are up in the high 20s.

So, I mean I suppose I'm about to contradict myself here, we would have had thought the same about the SDLP and the UUP back in the 1990s. If you asked me if Sinn Fein or the DUP would overtake them, I probably would have said the same thing about them. But at the moment I would say it would be very difficult for them to do.

But again, you can come back to me in ten years and I could be proven wrong.

M: Thank you for that. And another question relating to the Alliance Party. Do you see the United Ireland question being diluted? If the growth of the Alliance Party continues?

D: Ummm...

M: That's Caolán in St Pats.

D: Caolán thank you for the question. Well, that's a really good question, really pressing question that I think people in the pro-union, pro United Ireland movements are trying to get their head around. And it depends how compelling an argument people in a pro unification movement can make towards people who backed the Alliance Party really. Quite often it's very tempting to attack the Alliance Party for not having a view or a stated position on the Constitution.

But in the past, when Unionist parties in the past have tried to do that, it has backfired quite spectacularly on them. Alliance tend to have this Teflon kind of quality when if parties like the DUP and the Ulster Unionists in the past have tried to take have tried the stop the movement of votes to Alliance. It typically hasn't worked. So, you know there is that statement of and I don't mean this literally but you know, killing someone with kindness and I mean that in the in the most not violent sense, in the politest sense.

And that would be the approach I think that that they would take is that you need to be just nice and kind to them and figure out maybe how you can make your offer attractive.

M: Okay. Thank you, David. And we're moving on now to the Ulster Unionist Party. Would the UUP benefit from another election and that question is from Caoimhe in St Patrick's Academy.

D: No, no they would not. They also didn't do very well on May 5th at all. There were signs of Doug Beattie talked about the Beattie bounce and it was turned out to be more bounce of a dead cat really. They lost votes and they lost seats. They scored a very poor showing. Now, in fairness, I don't think very much that had to do with their party leader.

But I think that they narrowly squeaked through in some seats. So, they had a bit of a close shave in Strangford they had even Doug looked like for a while there he was, he was sweating. Although Ryan McCready in Foyle ran the DUP very close. They would not benefit from an election. The Ulster Unionists need a bit of time to reorganise and they need a bit of time to think about what they're about, what they can do.

Can they stick to the Union of People message? The problem is...(audio dropped out) probably seen as party over the years. It's varied from one to the other, one minute with the

Conservatives. The next minute they're going to make Stormont work for you. And they've gone to the right of the DUP and they've been in pacts with the DUP then it was vote Colum get Mike, then it was standing on their own two feet, then it was union of people.

And that's all been in the space of 10 years. So, they need a message and need to stick to it as well. So, with Doug, maybe they can do that.

M: Okay. Well, thank you for that. And we have a question now in relation to the SDLP. And you've talked obviously about how the parties have performed in the election and you've just been talking about the UUP having had a difficult time, how will the SDLP bounce back from their poor election campaign if another election is called? And that question is from Emer at St Pats.

D: Emer, thank you for your question. Wow. Okay. So, the Ulster Unionists do have problems. So, Doug Beattie doesn't have half the problems that Colum Eastwood has. The SDLP have been in decline now consistently for a number of elections and they had a really disciplined campaign with some really good candidates. And Colum Eastwood won the live debates. They've got the Claire Hannas and people like that and they still got the result that they got.

And that would be very worrying that they lost some good talent. People like Nicola Mallon, losing their seats, you know, didn't help them. They're very marginal in two or three of the seats that they hold and so the SDLP if another election happens, could fall further back to six seats, which again another in my day thing, you know, when I was growing up, the SDLP had 24 MLAs.

The SDLP actually got the most first preference votes in the 1998 Assembly election and they're down to where they are now. So, they've got a way to come back, they've got a way to go. Also, the big problem for the SDLP is some of their best performers aren't in the Assembly. Colum Eastwood and Claire Hanna are at Westminster and in terms of the Assembly team there, aside from Matthew O'Toole, you know, no disrespect to the MLAs that they've got I mean in terms of actually in terms of just who you see the most of it from the SDLP, which is Colum and Claire, they're at Westminster, so they're there, they're not on the ballot paper for an Assembly election. So, they've got a lot of rebuilding to do. You never say never in politics that they lost all their Westminster seats in 2017 and came back very strongly in places like Foyle and South Belfast in 2019. But they've got a long way to go, so I think I gave probably a bit of a politician's there. But just to just to outline the factors.

M: Absolutely, David. And I think it's helpful, you know, for our audience of young people to go back to, you know, the days when, you know, the SDLP and the UUP had the biggest number of seats and it really puts it into context. So that completes our party focus questions. And I'm going to pass over again to Anne Marie because we've got a few additional questions for you. Anne-Marie.

A: Thanks very much for that Marina. Yeah, David, just four questions and four kind of separate things as Marina said set aside from parties. From Lismore comprehensive - What, if any, impact would another election have on the current political stalemate?

D: It wouldn't have very much. I don't think a lot would change. I don't think a lot has changed in voter sentiment from May. But then again, I'm reminded that when we held the snap election in March of 2017, a lot of the thinking going into the last one in the February was sure we only voted seven months ago.

What could possibly change? And then a lot changed. My goodness, it was it was a totally different result from what we had in the May of 2016. So, at the moment, I would say the DUP would probably, in terms of votes, recover a bit of it. Sinn Fein would still be the largest party in terms of the running order.

It wouldn't change, which doesn't change the dynamics of the political situation that we have at the minute. Alliance could fall back and are also places where Alliance could gain. The only thing is it's just I just think it would punish the UUP and the SDLP. And who does that help in terms of the wider political dynamic? It doesn't stop it doesn't stop any of the issues.

I still think that the three party state I talked about, which is Sinn Fein, the DUP and the Alliance is still I still think there if anything it could be a tighter it could be a tighter grip on that than anything else.

A: And staying on the theme of another election. Aisling from St Pats want to ask - Do you think the cost of living crisis would have an impact on parties' fortunes were there to be another election?

D: It depends which party it is because not we don't have elections traditionally in Northern Ireland in the same way there are elections in the UK or in the South. You know, where blocks of swing voters who literally can move from Labour to Tory to Lib Dem or Fianna Fail to Fine Gael to Sinn Fein to Labour, we don't have votes like that, we don't have voters like that.

We have voters who are who take a Unionist lens and they stick within the in this fold where voters have a national lens and stick within the nationalist fold. And then the kind of others, the people that move within those blocks as well. So, I don't know if you voted the DUP in May is there a reason not to vote for them?

I don't think there is, same thing for Sinn Fein. I don't see a reason why you wouldn't vote for them now. Same thing for Alliance. Only thing that I could see is that if you voted SDLP and you thought you maybe wanted to teach the DUP a lesson and well yeah, you could maybe move to Sinn Fein if you voted for the Ulster Unionists and maybe you wanted or the TUV, maybe you wanted to help the DUP or Alliance, in the Ulster Unionists case not TUV.

I don't think I don't think there'll be TUVers going to be the Alliance Party. But if you wanted to go to either of those parties, I could see a reason. I could see a reason to move. Same thing if you go to Green, you might think "Oh Flip!" Maybe you will want to bolster kind of the middle ground. Maybe we'll go to the Alliance Party.

You can see that. So that's where that kind of three party state things still solidifies. So, the mobile votes I think would be like magnets towards the DUP, Sinn Fein and to the Alliance Party. That's what I think would happen.

A: OK David, thank you. Moving on to the topic of the recent census. Do you think the census results are important to Northern Ireland politics, is the first part of that question. And again, something that you've touched on earlier. Do you foresee a border poll on the basis of this recent census?

D: Are the census results important? Yeah. My goodness. Jeepers, they are. They're all we're going to talk about for the next 10 years. Yeah, yeah. I mean, a census, by the way, it's meant to plan public services, by the way. That's the reason why they do it, it's literally to count

heads. But here, of course, we have to use it for a context for that we ask about identity and things like that here.

Yeah, absolutely important. Everyone takes different things out of a census. So, and that never surprises anyone in Northern Ireland. So obviously people and we saw that Sinn Fein say yeah, it's a good platform to hold a border poll. The Unionist go, well, no, not really, it's we're a block of minorities now. Which is true. Absolutely true.

So, it depends really what statistic you want to take. Lots of people are great for adding the British only identity and the Northern Irish identity and going together and going HA! I think that's support for the union there. But then lots of people want to add the Irish identity. I mean maybe look at Irish passports and go HA!

We're on the we're all Dublin road! So, look pick your statistic and argue about it that that's what will happen over the next ten years. So, no, I don't think the census will be used to get a border poll as well. But yeah, it's important for Northern Ireland politics. Not for the reasons it's meant to be.

Like where are we supposed to put hospitals and schools and things like that, which is what we're supposed to use it for. It's going to be used for things like that. So yeah.

A: Okay. Thanks for that. This focus is on direct rule. Caoimhe from St Pats wants to know - Do you think direct rule would help any parties in Northern Ireland?

D: It would probably help, I would say Alliance and Sinn Fein probably the most it could help the DUP. Would the British government direct rule Ministers, do things that would bolster the DUP? Although, the DUP has been burned before by being too close to this Conservative government so I think in terms of who would benefit most probably Sinn Fein, probably the Alliance Party, I don't think it would benefit very many people here to be honest with you, in terms of the decisions that would be made, they would be pretty disconnected.

So, I think that would be who would benefit the most, just for the very simple reason of it would motivate those voters. So that would be who I think would benefit. So, Sinn Fein and the Alliance Party.

A: Okay, David, thanks. So, a final question. This is a topical question, given that our Finance minister commented yesterday on the state of our monies in Northern Ireland - Do you think Northern Ireland will have a budget in place by the end of the year?

D: Ohh Flip! Well, it needs an Executive. It needs an Executive and they were hopefully going to do a three year budget. We always talked about multiyear budgets in Northern Ireland being the way to go. So, there was the hope for that. I would hope so. I would hope so because as has been pointed out, the Executive is facing mounting fiscal pressures.

There is talk of a deficit of or overspends or liabilities, whatever you want to call them, of over £1 billion. When you factor everything all in. Yeah, it's a big problem. You would hope that they can so that departments can plan things and can do things and plan projects and things like that. That could help the economy and things like that.

I could give you a real politician's answer and say, do you mean the calendar year of the financial year? I go for a financial year because it buys me four more months. And so, I go with the financial year, which runs to April, April 5th. So, I will say I hope so by the end of this year.

I don't think so by the end of the calendar year. I don't think so by the end of the financial year. I hope so.

A: So, watch the space to see what happens there. David, thank you very much. And thanks to the teachers and pupils who sent in those fantastic questions and I'll hand over to Marina to sign us off, thanks very much.

M: So, David thank you for sharing your expertise. You know, it was really interesting and really informative and I know it'll be much appreciated by teachers and students across Northern Ireland that are studying both GCSE and AS Government and Politics and even of general interest to people and pupils everywhere. So, we look forward to, as you say, a lot has happened since the last time you talked to us so you know we're very excited about the next talk to see what happens between now and then. So, thanks again.

And happy birthday and thanks for taking time on your birthday David.

D: Thank-you for having me.

M: Have a great evening!

D: Well, thank you for having me. I enjoyed it.