

## David McCann Talk

### KEY:

D: Dr David McCann

D: Bit excited yesterday 'cause there was a news report saying that Leo Ragger, was thinking about calling an election next year, a few months early. So that would mean we would have a UK, a US presidential, and an Irish election all within a few weeks of each other. So it absolutely did my heart good, and I'll be, I'll be the happiest guy in Ireland if that happens next year.

So today we're gonna look at elections in Northern Ireland. How they fared over recent years and my, hopefully my, the others there and how they fared over recent years and how also some of the parties have moved in recent times as well.

So, let's start with the basics. I've had a really charmed existence since 2014. We've had eight elections in eight years just in such a short period of time. So we've had three assembly elections. One of those has been a snap assembly election, of course, in 2017. Martin McGinnis famously joked in the middle of 2016 when he welcomed investors to Northern Ireland, said, welcome to the most politically stable part of the UK 'cause of course, David Cameron had resigned in the UK. There were problems with the Scottish government being formed, and there were problems with the Welsh government being formed. And of course, like Northern Ireland, it never actually lasted. Of course, five months later our own executive had its issues and we had the snap assembly election in 2017.

So three assembly elections. During that time, we've had two general elections. So two of those have both been SNAP elections. So that's the one in 2017 and the one in 2019. Ironically, these two snap elections have happened under the fixed term Parliament Act, which is now repealed, but in its eight years as a, in legislation, which was meant to prevent snap elections being called. There were actually two Snap general elections. Only one of them in 2015 was actually held when it was supposed to.

We've had two local elections as well, one in 2019, and the other one in 2023. We had the 2019 European election, which again we shouldn't have actually had. We were meant to have left the European Union in March of 2019. You may remember electoral office officials had scurry around very quickly when Theresa May asked for an extension beyond March, 2019, and we held a European election. Some of our MEPs like Naomi Long served a grand total of seven months as an MEP in office. We also held one referendum on the European Union.

And what can we say about the various elections? I'm gonna go through the various results in the next slide that I have up. But just to say about the environment in which we have operated Northern Ireland is typically a very engaged political region.

So let's go with the most recent local government elections. Our elections were delayed by two weeks because of the coronation. So we were actually meant to vote on the first Thursday in May. We ended up voting towards the end of May. The coronation delayed that because why? Because unlike the local election, the local election system in England where they still use first pass the post and can count overnight, we use STV, it takes about two days. There's no way to

speed up the counts, by the way. We often hear people in the media saying, why are our accounts taking so long? They take so long 'cause of the STV system.

So they moved our election back by three weeks. Turnout in the English local government elections was in the mid 30% range. Turnout in Northern Ireland was at 54%. That's actually incredibly high for a local government election. Only turnout has only been below 50% in one recent election, that was the 2009 European election, where it was 43%. Turnout in Northern Ireland has been consistently north of 50%.

In 2017, we saw the real exclusion in turnout in May, sorry, in 2017, we saw the real exclusion in turnout in May, 2016, turnout for the assembly election was just below 55%. Seven months later, that excludes and jumps to 65%. So it jumps nearly 10 points in just seven months. And this really does show Northern Ireland as a politically engaged region.

Northern Ireland didn't even devolved election turnouts has led turnout across the devolved regions in all but one elections. Scotland beat us in 2016, so they, they beat us once. But in every other election, we have LED wheels. We have led Scotland, we typically are the most politically engaged region by virtue of turnout as well. So that's just to give you a bit of a sense about where Northern Ireland is in terms of engagement.

But the bit I like, what about the results? So I really excited did up this table for this slide. So let's just start off. We're gonna go by party by party, and I'm gonna show just some of the trends. And I'm also gonna make some commentary on some of the recent polls that have appeared in the Belfast Telegraph and the Irish News, just so you've got that as well.

So let's start at 2017. You see at the assembly election the DUP and Sinn Féin and neck and neck, they were just 0.2% apart in popular vote. So the DUP scored 28.1%, Sinn Féin scored 27.9%. So they were neck and neck with each other, and there was only just one seat separating the two parties.

Together, most of us kind of laughed at the idea it would be that close Sinn Féin in the 90 seat assembly were actually meant to get penalised. They were only meant to come back with about 24 seats, but the surge in nationalist turnout came and they did much better. They scored 27 seats to the DPS 28, just one seat in it between the two. And this was much better than the 24% that Sinn Féin scored in 2016.

And then Sinn Féin, as you can see, build on this in 2017, where they sweep the board. They obliterate the SDLP. They win Foyle, they win South Down. And they, they come very close in places like North Belfast. They win back from Aontú South Tyrone. Sinn Féin scored their best ever result at a Westminster election, winning 29% of the vote.

And this again, for Sinn Féin really capitalising on the recent surge in the nationalist vote. They also benefit electorally. I always say that winning the seat of Foyle, it was Martin McGuinness parting gift to Sinn Féin. Martin McGuinness, of course, died in the March of 2017. The election is held in June, the snap election. And they win the seat of Foyle by less than 160 votes. So they sweep the board obliterating their main nationalist rivals, the SDLP. They win places like South Down, which again, historically very significant for the SDLP.

The seat of Eddie McGrady used to be the seat of Enoch Powell as well. Eddie McGrady famously defeated Enoch Powell in 1987. Who again who was Enoch Powell's constituency agent at the time, none other than Jeffrey Donaldson. So again, a very significant, historically

significant seat for the SDLP. They lose that. They also lose South Belfast, but I'll come to the SDLP in a second.

But Sinn Féin do incredibly well. 29% of the vote, and again, building, they actually upped their score from their very impressive assembly election result. And don't forget the consensus in 2017 with the assembly election was that Sinn Féin really couldn't do any better than they, that they'd just done so well. The 27 seats they had, they had elected in a smaller assembly. Don't forget, 90 seats we're dealing with. We thought that they probably couldn't do much better, but in terms of popular vote, they did 29% of the vote just upping their score ever so slightly from 20 from what happened in March of 2017.

Significantly, the party just falls short in places like North Belfast with John Finucane. Again, that sense of new blood. But the interesting thing about Sinn Féin 's dynamic is that whilst we talk about the inexorable rise of Sinn Féin, ironically this week is the 20th anniversary of the DUP and Sinn Féin becoming the largest parties of unionism and nationalism. The anniversaries on Sunday of the 2003 Samba election, it like all progress.

It's not just going in one direction. Sinn Féin have lost support. Sinn Féin have been penalized before, and we see this in 2019. 2019, we're now two years into being outta government. And what happens is voters start to get annoyed. Voters start to get really get frustrated with the lack of progress. And Sinn Féin pay an electoral penalty for this. They actually pay it more so than any other party of the main parties that are out of government.

So the 2019 local elections, they score 23% of the vote. We all thought Sinn Féin were gonna do very well in that local election, but they end up falling back. Derry was an absolute disaster for the party in terms of the local elections. They fall back in places like Belfast as well, which wasn't in the script for the party. The party was meant to do much better than that. And the 23% score was incredibly disappointing, actually. So disappointing that we actually saw something unprecedented for Sinn Féin. There was a public challenge to Michelle O'Neill's vice presidency within the party. John O'Dowd, who was former education minister senior person in Sinn Féin, former Chief Whip announces he's challenging Michelle O'Neill for the vice presidency of the party. He gets one third of all the party delegates voting for him. And again, in a party like Sinn Féin where public dissent is so unheard of, he gets big endorsements from people like Michelle Gildernew who argue that the party does need to reflect and rethink where it is.

So whilst we look at Michelle O'Neill as the first Minister for All Now, and while she has turned around her image, she wasn't looking to flash in 2019 when one third of her own party were voting against her, and she suffered the indignity of becoming the first person in the modern SF movement to actually suffer a leadership challenge to her position.

2019 locals also coincide with disastrous results for Sinn Féin across the island of Ireland. They lose their European seat in Dublin. They lose European seats actually across the island of Ireland. They also suffer the indignity in Northern Ireland. We all talked about who would get the third seat in Northern Ireland. It turned out it was Martina Anderson, Naomi Long leapfrog Martina Anderson on preferences to get the second European seat. And Martina Anderson actually ended up coming third. That wasn't in the script for Sinn Féin either in 2019. And there is dissent within the party that we see manifested at the rde later that year.

The party goes on to the general election again, the Snap election, and they do score a success. Only one North Belfast. They take Nigel Dodds, who again was the leader of the DUP at

Westminster. They take his seat. That's the only success for the party. The party suffers, swings away from them in every other constituency.

Foyle is an absolute disaster. The party goes from 37% of the vote to just 20% of the vote column. Eastwood wins Foyle with the biggest majority in in the Constituency's history. He out polls John Hume 13,000. He held the record before. And Alicia McCallion ends up losing by 17,000 votes to column Eastwood. So it was an absolute catastrophe for the party.

Chris Hazard comes within 1200 votes of losing South Down as well. Michelle Gildernew holds for South Tyrone by 52 votes, which isn't actually bad by Fermanagh / South Tyrone standards. Michelle Gildernew has a great line. She says she's fought four elections and formal, and three of them have ended up in court. So that isn't too bad for them.

But apart from North Belfast, the results are not great. The results are not great for Sinn Féin. They score 23% of the vote, copying a six point swing across Northern Ireland. They suffer big swings in West Belfast, Newry/Armagh West Tyrone places that are Heartland constituencies as well.

So what happens for the party? Well, the party, again, Sinn Féin are very skilful in doing this. They rebrand, they readjust, they go back into government in 2020. And this also helps propel them to a record result in the Irish general election that is held in February of 2020. Michelle O'Neill very successfully re-badges, rebrands Shin Finn, rebrand and rebuild themselves into an effective fighting force. And in 2022, we get the result that we see 29% of the vote, once again, confounding pundits in the election.

Again, most people thought in 2017 that Sinn Féin had passed their peak. A good result for Michelle O'Neill by an unnamed commentator on the Red Lines podcast was going to be 24 seats. Apparently if they could hold 24 of their seats, they would be doing incredibly well and they end up doing much better. They actually hold their 27 seats. They come within a hair of winning places like East Derry. They actually left a seat on the pitch in South Down. Had they ran three seats, three candidates, they would've got three seats. They took 44% of the vote in South Dine in places that where there marginal seats like North Belfast, places like South Belfast, they cruise to victory. They ramp home everywhere and they run rampant across Northern Ireland.

So what changed between 2019 and 2022?

The issue of the First Minister enters nationalist politics. What worked and what the DUP saw in 2007 comes to Sinn Féin in 2022, the power of the First Minister. And this helps that this helps Sinn Féin very successfully lure over that long base that they've tried to get for a long time. Middle class nationalists, the part, the group of voters that have been propping up the SDLP for so many decades, that breach, that defence falls for Sinn Féin in 2022. And that's how they end up winning places like South Belfast. They get in over the quota, places like North Belfast. Two Sinn Féin candidates in over the quota. Don't forget North Belfast, their second seat, they only held it by 500 votes going into the election. Yet currently Colin and Gerry Kelly get in over the quota in 2022.

The party comes very close again to getting two seats in East Antrim, even in Foyle. Remember I told you Foyle, what a disaster that was. They end up actually out polling the SDLP in Foyle in May of 2022. The SDLP were so confident from the colonies would bounce that they had in 2019 that they ran three candidates. Yet it ended up being that Sinn Féin out polled the SDLP in

the constituency, even in places where the party was anticipating potentially maybe losing ground or maybe where they were under a bit of pressure. In places like West Belfast, the party easily holds four outta five seats and they get a swing to them. They take 63% of the vote. Sinn Féin remained to this day, the only party that that holds four outta five seats in any constituency in Northern Ireland. And they also hold more than one seat in multiple constituencies across the place as well.

So the party does incredibly well. And again, being political pundits, well Sinn Féin can never do any better than May, they could never do any better than May. And of course they come along confound that again, 2023 local government election. It was Sinn Féin 's election. There's no question about that.

While Sinn Féin in May of 2022 had to share the stage with Alliance, there was no question that the local elections that we held this year were Sinn Féin 's election. The party elected north of 140 councillors. The interesting thing, had Sinn Féin ran more candidates, they would've elected more. There's about six or seven of the SDLPs current local government crop who got elected quite simply 'cause Sinn Féin didn't run enough candidates in places like Limavady. Places like Castle in Belfast had Sinn Féin and ran more, they would've elected more. They clearly become the largest party winning 31% of the vote, albeit on a lower turnout.

Just for context on turnout, the turnout in May of 2022 is 63% turnout in the local elections is 54%. So just to put that in some sort of context as well, more nationalists turned out to vote in the local elections than unionists did. So if you put that, if you weight that percentage, they roughly got about 29. They roughly held the vote that they got out in May of 2022 this year as well.

So Sinn Féin do something else that's actually quite astounding. In Fermanagh and Omagh district Council in an STV system, this isn't supposed to happen. They win an outright majority. They win a majority in their own right. They've got a majority of councillors in Fermanagh and Omagh District Council. They fall just one vote and one crotch leave. They lost this seat by one vote. They didn't get this seat by one vote.

They have 20 of the 40 seats in Newry, Mourne & Down District Council, had they got one more vote in 1 DEA, every vote counts, they would've ended up with a majority in Newry, Mourne & Down council as well. They just fell short of a majority in Mid Ulster District Council as well. They hold 18 of the 40 seats in Derry and Strabane District Council. I could go on and on and on. The party went from third place in a BC council to first place in Belfast. They upped their score to 22 seats.

Again, it was just Sinn Féin 's election everywhere. Sinn Féin improved their result everywhere, even in unionist heartland Councils like Mid and East Antrim Council, they get in over the quota in Ballymena, a seat where they didn't even hold a seat. They do incredibly well across the place. There wasn't a single DEA that you can point to that was a disappointment for them. They do incredibly well in unionist dominated councils. They do well on the nationalist dominated councils. It really just was their election.

So what about the symbiotic relationship that they often have with the main party of unionism?

The other thing, sorry, another stat, sorry, I just wanna throw at you here. If I'm throwing too many at you, please tell me to stop. Sinn Féin have taken since 2022, north of 70% of the

combined nationalist vote. So they took around 75% in May of 2022. They have held that in 2023.

So what about the party of unionism?

The main party of unionism, the DUP. You can see the DUP'S results have more than varied. They've averaged, they took 28% at the 2017 election. That was actually considered a slightly disappointing result for the DUP. This is what we would consider a good result for them today. But again, they were able to actually up that score, the DUP just to bring it home to you that they dominate Westminster elections.

Why? Because they basically bully the main other unionist parties off the pitch. And so many other constituencies, they really are the only unionists show on time when it comes to a Westminster election.

Whenever we talk about pacts with the Ulster Unionist Party, those also unionists are only really competitive now in two constituencies. South Antrim and Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Outside of that, they're not really competitive anywhere else. So whenever people talk about pacts, well, the DUP are the only party that really can run in North Belfast, East Belfast, South Belfast. I could go on and on.

Apart from those two constituencies, they're the only two that can run. And the Westminster results for the DUP actually make this clear. You can see the DUP, there are 36% to those unionist parties, 10% in 2019, 31% to the UUPs, 12%. So the DUP strength that the being able to bunch unionism unionist votes around them is really apparent.

You can see in an STV system there's much more fluctuation within unionism. Unionists really do get the, the different electoral systems. They're actually much better at it than their main nationalist rivals. Unionists get two things over, I think nationalist voters, better. One, the power of transfers.

Many Sinn Féin voters don't transfer to any party outside of Sinn Féin, which does dilute their vote. Many people within the SDLP don't transfer back either, which again, dilutes their vote. Unionists do, unionists transfer to each other. Unionists transfer within the fold, and they get it much better than their other main rivals.

So you can see unionist voters will lump behind the DUP. There's a big differential between what the DUP will score at the Westminster election and the assembly election. And you can see it's almost as much as 10 points in some elections. Look at Sinn Féin support. Sinn Féin support hovers 28 to 30. 28 to 30. It's within two points. There isn't much variation, but the DUP look at that there, 28 to 36, that's within just a few months of each other. And then 24 to 31 to 21 to 23, there's a lot of variation there. Those big swings are happening within unionism and within the DUP support.

Now, the DUP, as I'm sure you knew, jumped off a cliff in 2021 after the protocol, the getting rid of Arlene Foster in a very public way that they did. That was as a result of opinion polls. Bill White and Lisa Talk had an opinion poll that showed the DUP at a very poultry, I think it was 16% in the polls. And the DUP panic, Arlene Foster, is ousted and Edwin Poots comes in. Jeffrey Donaldson then comes in after him. And Jeffrey Donaldson ends up getting the party to a 21% score.

Now, you may think, God, that was a disastrous result for the DUP but when you consider the fact that loads of polls had them on 13%, they had them trillion those three units at some stage, it wasn't actually a bad score for them. Ironically, this, they scored 21.3% of the vote. This was the weakest share for a winning of the vote for a winning unionist party since David Trimble in 1998. Okay, so ironically, a result that Jeffrey Donaldson would've once called for David Trimble's resignation for, was a result that he actually scored in 2022, 21.3%, right on the button. Same thing David Trimble got in 1998.

But the DUP go into the election with 28 seats to theoretically defend, even though Alex Easton had left, they come out of it with 25. Why did the DUP not lose, bleed seats considering the fall in their vote? Well, the simple answer is their dominance within unionism and their ability to get transfers.

So let's talk about their dominance within unionism In so many constituencies like North Belfast, East Antrim. At North Antrim, the DUP have built up such huge margins over their main unionist rivals, they could cop five, six, 7% swings and still hold their seats because the margin was so good.

And this was the thing that when people were analysing the polls, they weren't actually factoring in the margins with which the DUP in somewhere like East Belfast, somewhere like North Belfast that they held.

So the DUP cops massive swings. Ironically, some of the biggest swings that they had against them were in places like North Antrim, where the swing was more than double the Northern Ireland average. And places like for South Tyrone. So there was an Arlene Foster effect from South Tyrone, I think it was the second biggest swing against the DUP of any constituency in Northern Ireland. So there was an Arlene Foster effect across in places, in certain places. So the DUP did manage to hold 25 of their seats. So again, seen as a good result from 'em.

The other reason why they held them was transfers. The DUP have 25 seats and the TUV who scored 7% didn't get a single extra seat. They went from 2% up to 7%. Why was that? The DUP got transfers and the TUV didn't.

So the DUP are a very transfer friendly party within unionism. So in places like, again, north Belfast, in places, excuse me, like North Down, in places like South Belfast, they're able to get transfers from other unionist parties. So TUV candidate gets eliminated also unionist candidate gets eliminated. They go up to the DUP, gets the DUP elected. And that was the story we saw across constituencies in Northern Ireland.

There were some disappointments for them on the transfer front. Again, in places like North Antrim Alliance copped a bit of luck there as well. It came down to the final, this, the penultimate count, 800 TUV voters did not transfer down to the DUP. Trisha Lin won the seat for the Alliance Party by 400 votes. Again, every vote counts, even your transfers as they go further.

Go further down the DUP, So over this period, it is worth noting, even in their weakened states still have always taken a majority of the union vote. In 2022, they took 53% of the combined unionist vote. And again, a bit of success for Jeffrey Donaldson in 2023, he upped that to 61%.

Okay, so the DUP still by a country mile are the main party of unionism. Their nearest rival sales unionist party at best take around a quarter of the unionist vote with the TUV even

further behind that. So the DUP still can say even through, even in their weakened state, that they speak for a majority of unionist voters.

Moving on the real comeback kids of politics this time 20 years ago, the Alliance Party were actually contemplating whether to fold. They scored less than 4% of the first preference vote in 2003. It's an absolute disaster for them. But again, they've managed to rebuild and actually sustain their success.

The Alliance Surge starts in 2017. What happens in 2017? Naomi Long at the end of 2016 becomes the Alliance party leader. There is a straight trajectory from the moment she becomes the leader to how Alliance do. So it is probably more accurate to call it the Naomi Long Search. Naomi Long takes over the party. The party does well.

In 2017, all six of their MLAs are elected. And whilst we always had the narrative of Alliance being the party that got the fifth seat or the sixth seat when there were 108 MLAs in 2017, Alliance MLAs get elected on the first and second counts. So Alliance get elected by clear margins in the seats that they hold, and they come really close in a couple of others to making gains. So Alliance start, the momentum for Alliance starts in 2017.

In 2017, by the time we get to 2019, that's where we start seeing the Alliance surge take off. Again, that was alliance's election in the locals in 2019. They gained councillor's everywhere across the piece. Even in places like Derry and Strabane, they gained two, councillors there. Alliance representation increases everywhere across the piece.

And then in the 2019 general election, this is typically an election where Alliance are squeezed. Alliance get squeezed in general elections. They get 17%, they come third, they get 17% of the vote and look at the change. They go from it to 17%. They gain more than any other party.

And why is that? They are the party, they're the protest party. They're the party where people can park their votes. They are the party where people can park for protest. And this I think is the real election where you really start seeing voters registering their dissent and Alliance in 2019 run on the simple slogan of demand better. The DUP and Sinn Féin are failing you demand better, we can deliver better.

So they score 17% of the vote and Stephen Farry has the honour of being second to Naomi long for being the second elected Alliance MP in Northern Ireland's entire history. So Naomi Long was the first elected Alliance MP, Philip O'Neill defected. He was never elected in 2010. He continues that in 2019 by winning the seat of North down from a standing start. Don't forget, we all thought Sylvia Herman was gonna run again, and she pulled out or she announced she wasn't running at the start of the campaign.

So he wins North down, and Naomi Long comes incredibly close to winning the seat of East Belfast by less than 2000 votes. Alliance's surge has continued 14% of the vote and 13% of the vote in 2023 Alliance gets 17 seats doubling their Parliamentary party representation, and they gain their seats predominantly in the east of Northern Ireland.

Even though Alliance have brought, have broadened their support, it is still worth noting that 83% of Alliance's vote is still in the eastern constituencies of Northern Ireland. Just 17% of it is scattered out in the west of Northern Ireland.



And this is really the Achilles heel of the Alliance Party. They lose seats in Derry and Strabane District Council. They're wiped out in the local elections. In Mid Ulster where they talked themselves up, they didn't make any inroads there either. Mid and East Antrim was a disappointment for them too. Ards and North Down was good for them. They made a bit of inroads in Fermanagh and Omagh. Newry, Mourne and Down was a bit of a disappointment for them. So 2023, I think what we can say is Alliance had peaked. I think what we can say is Alliance have peaked.

The other interesting thing is that whilst Alliance three quarters of Alliances, council gains have come at the expense of unionist parties, only a quarter of them have come at the expense of nationalist parties. One thing that Alliance have successfully done within unionism is they've won over middle class unionists. Sinn Féin showed that they, that Alliance struggled to do that within nationalism.

In some areas, Sinn Féin took votes away from the Alliance party in places like Castle, in places like Botanic, in places like Lisnasharragh the Alliance vote actually drifted to Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin were able to win back middle class nationalists, which is something that the DUP and all unionists have not been able to do.

I have to bunch of these two together because this is just where we are with the two of them now. It's a story of decline.

You had to be brutal to the SDLP and UUP again, we thought that it couldn't really get any worse for the two parties than the 2017 election. We thought the two of them had kind of bottomed out in the low teens. Well, it actually does get worse for them.

So in more recent elections, the SDLP scored 9% of the vote. That's the worst in the party's history. The party has never scored a result that low. That is also the first time in the history of Northern Ireland that the SDLP are in single digits. Also the first time ever that the SDLP do not qualify for an executive. And I'm going all the way back to summing deal there in 1974, when you consider the party has always had enough seats to qualify for the executive, it's the first time in their history they say they're in opposition. But the bit that they're not mentioned is that they're in opposition by force of the electorate. They're not there because of choice.

The Ulster Unionists as well, 11% of the vote electing nine seats. They, they are still an executive party, but only by just one seat. Nine is what you need to qualify for the executive. And they have only just held that position. Significantly that is the first time in the entire history of Northern Ireland that the Ulster Unionists have been at single digits in assembly or parliamentary seats at a devolved level in Northern Ireland. And again, quite significant when you consider that's the founding party of the state when you consider we had never had anything but UUP led rule until 2007. It is actually quite something when every other first minister until Ian Paisley has come from the party ranks.

Again, where are we today on the polls? There've been a number of polls since by Lucid Talk in University of Liverpool. They're showing things getting worse for the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists and things getting better for the DUP and the UUP. Most polls now have the DUP and Sinn Féin on an upward trajectory.

Sinn Féin are averaging around 31% of the vote, which would be a moderate gain from their recent assembly election. The DUP are now back up to 25 to 28%, give or take. Depends what poll you look at. But Jeffrey Donaldson is successfully winning back that support and landing

them back at their 2017 levels. Alliance are holding firm as well. And again, this is coming at the expense of the UUP and the SDLP. SDLP now are averaging 6% across nearly all of the opinion polls. And again, the all street units are down around nine to 10%, which again, is where the bleed off is coming from.

Another significant factor within that is also that the TUV support has ebbed away, TUV now averaging about 4% in most opinion polls. So they're down from their 7% and that's gonna be a problem for the TUV going forward. The TUV didn't stand at the last Westminster election at all. They didn't stand in a constituency. So it's gonna be a difficult act for the TUV now to see what they do next year in the general to try and get that oxygen, try and get that support because outside of North Antrim, they may try and make a stand there, but in any other marginal seat, it's gonna be very difficult for 'em to get oxygen and, you know, the kind of thing eating bread soon forgotten in politics. So it is worth, um, it is worth looking at it.

Is there anything else I've missed out there? No. If anything comes back to me, I'll bring it up.

So where are the parties? How have they changed over recent years?

I was actually thinking about this because the anniversary of the 2003 election is coming up this Sunday. And I remember looking back at the 2003 election watching it when I was, I was only in third year at the time, but watching back at the election result someone is very helpfully by the way, uploaded the 2007 and 2003 election coverage on the YouTube from the David Roy channel. So it's worth a look. Just going back and looking at some of the results.

I didn't do it that much in advance this presentation, but it's interesting to see how the parties have changed. So how Sinn Féin mostly changed during that time. Sinn Féin, which was once kind of the fringe party, not just in Southern Ireland, but also in Northern Ireland as well. They've moved quite significantly. Mostly the policy area. I could probably see how they've moved as been really on Europe.

It's hard to believe. In 2004, Sinn Féin ran on a platform of taking Ireland outta the Euro. They opposed a single market. They opposed the Customs Union. They wanted Ireland out of nearly all the European programs, that existed. But they've moved, they've moved actually quite significantly. Sinn Féin has become much more pro-European, both north and south.

Sinn Féin of course campaigned to stay in the European Union. It's the only time in a referendum, actually north or south that they've campaigned for a positive pro-European vote as being the 2016 referendum. So they've become much more pro-European, and this is probably just more reflective of where they are. They're taking more than 70% of the nationalist vote in Northern Ireland.

Again, they've moved from over the years from their low point of 23% to their high of about 31%. They're a much more nuanced party. Sinn Féin was always very much the black and white political party from '98 onwards. They're now much more shades of grey. Their response to Gaza, for example, is a much greater example of that. Sinn Féin took their time before calling for the expulsion of the Israeli Ambassador. Sinn Féin in council after council and in places were making the point about diplomacy. They were positioning themselves there as well.

Interestingly, as well, in 2016, when the SDLP were saying, we won't meet Donald Trump, we won't meet President Trump Sinn Féin of course lead party in the executive said, well, we're not gonna follow that. We're not gonna do that. Again, party of government, again, it's the

party of government. The SDLP were in the opposition at the time. They could make that call. Sinn Féin of course with the finance portfolio, deputy First Minister, they couldn't, of course they're gonna meet the president of the United States. So again, Sinn Féin have become a much more nuanced party.

They've also become a much more pro-business party. Sinn Féin, again, there was a very significant, comment made by one of the senior economic figures in the South about not fearing a Sinn Féin government in the South. And again in the North Sinn Féin have become very pro investment. They're pro FDI. Again, this isn't really the language of what we would classify as classical leftist parties. But Sinn Féin in the North have very much talked up their pro business credentials. They haven't totally moved away from their left wing positions. I don't wanna overstate it, but they have become much more pro business. They welcome foreign direct investment. Sinn Féin have made it incredibly clear that they want to take the Economy Department.

Don't forget, until 2016 Sinn Féin didn't hold an economic portfolio in the Northern Ireland executive, and this was seen as a real weakness. They kinda gifted those to the DUP, the DUP held finance, the DUP held DETI which is now the economy department. They left those to the DUP. And it was only until 2016 that they actually took an economic portfolio, finance, which again, they retook during the pandemic.

And this ironically, his assertion fame. Well, Connor Murphy always reminded me during the pandemic of that bank manager, you don't see a bank manager anymore. But when we did have them, he reminded me of that kind of bank manager who just give a very assured presence. You know, when he was dishing out money during the pandemic when he was talking about procurement and things like that in a very orderly type way. Again, I think that does give another image and another narrative to Sinn Féin that they can manage money, they can handle a pandemic.

And again, Sinn Féin did have some successes in that respect, particularly with the Rates office. They were able to turn that around from a rates collecting agency to an agency that gave out money fairly quickly. And again, Sinn Féin were able to talk up their economic credentials particularly in the South as well, by being able to point to what they were doing in the north.

So the DUP, now, the DUP again have varied. They take between 53 to 61% of the unionist vote. So again, their support levels vary, but they still speak for a majority of those unionists who do vote.

It's broadened its base on many issues away from social issues to kind of the mainstream. So if you remember the DUP back in 2003 would've been very anti LGBT would've really ran heavy on social issues. We remember some DUP politicians as late of 2010 calling, you know calling, people in the LGB calling, how do I say this, sorry, my words are failing me. Making language, calling using language like abomination when we're talking about, for example, gay people and, and lifestyle choices and so on and so forth. And some really unfortunate commentary, that happened during that period.

You don't really see DUP politicians making those types of statements anymore. The DUP outside of issues such as abortion have stayed away from things like marriage equality, the DUP now kinda regard those as settled issues.

Interestingly, the DUP don't lobby as much. If you go back to 2003 and if you even look at the moralistic language, the DUP almost used back then, the DUP don't really focus that much on social issues as they once used to. The party has changed the stance on things like governing machine fee and adopted pragmatic responses on other issues. And again, for the day that's in it, Peter Robinson, of course, his statement today is emblematic of where the DUP are, um, uh, on many different issues.

The DUP once upon a time in 2003, one of the famous things of that election was Ian Paisley grabbing Ivan Little by the lapels, then UTV political correspondent and saying, do I have to grab you by the neck and say, I'm not talking to Sinn Féin. And that he wouldn't go into government with Sinn Féin. And that was 2003.

And of course, by 2007, we had the Chuckle Brothers. And again, we've had the DUP in government, ever since in 2021, again, quite unheard of for the DUP. They publicly had a leadership spot, as well during that time. And again, that caused massive ructions within the party. The party is still recovering from those ructions as well. Again, never in their history had there been such a public political assassination of a party leader.

The party has since stabilised, not really, I think is Jeffrey Donaldson's main claim to fame. He has stabilised the DUP, he has stopped the bleeding. He stopped the ship from sinking and he has managed to stabilise the party. And still to this day, whenever you look at election results or even public debates, even today, for example, the fact that Peter Robinson can command so much attention when he left office seven years ago is just evidence that the DUP are the only show in town for unionism. Nobody's really focusing on Jim Alistair or Doug Beatie. They're focusing on the DUP because the DUP of the main unionist show in town. And again, I think the fact that after the two years that they've had, I think that speaks volumes for the support and the governing coalition that they have.

Okay, onto Alliance, again, they are the main vote of the unaligned movement. Whilst Alliance had a great election again, you can make the argument that it was a bit of a missed opportunity for the online movement. Alliance's gains came at the expense of some other unaligned parties like the Greens. They wiped the Greens out. Alliance took, they hate me saying this, obviously it wasn't Green Party seats, but they won the seats that were previously occupied by the Green Party in North down and in South Belfast. And the Unaligned block is actually bigger, but it's less diverse. Okay? So only the Greens and People Before Profit occupy those benches now.

So only Alliance and People for Profit occupy those benches. The party accounts for 17 of the 18 seats within that block. They're 20% of the assembly, which again is growth in 2003. The unaligned or others only represented 6% of the as of the total assembly. Now it's 20%. They're the biggest growth of all the parties. So they've moved from an average of seven to 8% of the vote. They're now averaging around 13 to 17% of the vote.

This growth though, has come at the expense of other parties who they would maybe consider themselves aligned with. They're not doing a very good job of taking votes from parties like Sinn Féin. They have taken some support from the DUP, but again most of their gains have come at the expense of the SDLP, the UUP and the Greens. So the party still occupies more liberal centrist positions.

Again, the Greens for a while there did steal a bit of a margin and did get oxygen by pitching themselves as the really left wing version of the Alliance Party. The party that was

unequivocally pro-Choice, unequivocally pro-marriage equality. Whereas Alliance were all conscience positions and all over the place. The Greens did get some oxygen there. But as Alliance have moved to now more pro-choice positions, they now have a party position on marriage equality, the Greens have struggled, really to combat that as well. Also, with things like the Climate Act have been passed, the Greens job could be largely seen to be done.

So the UUP, the grand Old Party of Northern Ireland the party has suffered consistent electoral decline apart from a few, apart from a few bounces of a dead cat like 2015. The party really has not had very much to write home about. It has been in terminal decline. The governing party of Northern Ireland, the party that founded Northern Ireland, the party has just continued to suffer things.

It's tried many different things to arrest the decline. Remember the pact in 2010 where they had a pact with the conservative party and we had the prospect of UUPers potentially being in the cabinet. That was what was being floated that backfired on them, didn't work. They lost their own MP over that as well. Sylvia Herman, she thought, no, I'm gonna run as an independent. And she only won North Down with 63% of the vote in 2010. So that completely backfired on them. So they tried their pact with the Tories in 2010. That was gone by 2011.

We then had vote Colin, get Mike in 2016, if you remember that. Mike Nesbitt did the very briefing in the 2017 election by saying he would transfer to the SDLP column. Eastwood wasn't too keen to reciprocate that, it should be noted. but the interesting thing about that was, again, lots of voters did. Many UUP voters actually followed their party leader's advice and that gifted the SDLP success in places like Lagan Valley Upper Bann. They got in on UUP transfers. Many UUPs ended up actually following the advice of their leader and actually transferring to the SDLP. So it's just voters were we. So Mike Nesbitt wasn't totally isolated in what he was thinking. Neither party is unequivocally pro evolution.

Of course, they want to go back into the executive and try and fix the protocol at the same time. But this hasn't really struck a chord with unionism. Even with Doug Beattie, the BD Bounce, we heard about it, probably a bounce of a dead cat is probably the best example we can give. It hasn't worked. Storming, they failed the single digits for the first time.

The only real success story for the party, well, there were two. Robin Swan, even though they had the health portfolio. Robin Swan, every poll showed was by a country mile, the most popular politician in Northern Ireland. He was one of, I think, just two ministers with a net positive view from the public. He had a massive approval rating. It only worked in North Antrim. He got an 8% swing to him, and he got in above the quota, did incredibly well, but it only worked in North Antrim. Didn't translate anywhere else.

Another one to keep an eye on his Ram McCready ran, McCready came within I think 200 votes of winning the seat of Foyle from the DUP. So Gary Middleton and in and, north, Gary Middleton and Foyle, Robin Swan in North Antrim were two positive things for the party in that election.

But again, first time ever they fell in the single digits. They also fell behind the Alliance party. We've been waiting for this to happen since 2012, but it actually did at assembly level. They're now behind Alliance. They've also held no Westminster seats since 2017 and barring an absolute miracle next year, that trend will set to continue. They won two Westminster seats in 2015, but that was only briefly. They lost them again in 2017. The party, of course, suffered the

indignity, if you remember back in 2005 of losing all but one of their Westminster seats, including the party leader David Trimble. They've never recovered that since they've ceded that ground to the DUP. And that has always been the case.

Since the SDLP again the once dominant Party of Nationalism party of John Hume scored their worst performances in 2022 and 2023. The party lost 20 council seats. They now have just 38 seats across Northern Ireland. Worth noting some of those seats were achieved because Sinn Féin underran in many areas, places like Limavady, places like Castle, they underran, Sinn Féin would, would've won more seats if that had been the case.

So the party had the indignity of losing their deputy leader, Nicola Mullin, I think I'm right in saying this. Nicola Mullin is the only city minister in Northern Ireland history to lose her seat. I can't think of another city minister in either the old Northern Ireland parliament or in the parish sharing executive that had lost their seat. She's the second deputy leader in a road, a loser seat. Fergal McKinney, of course, in 2016 lost his seat. So don't become deputy leader at the SDLP if you wanna succeed in politics.

The party has moved leftwards on issues such as austerity party has pitched itself as anti welfare reform. Again, it's taken strong issues on things like expelling the Israeli ambassador in opposition. It'll be interesting to how they develop that it refused to meet Donald Trump. But again, electorally, this hasn't done anything for the party. It hasn't really moved its interest that they're going towards more positions that we would know as People before Profit.

What about some of the others? Well, the Green's not in the assembly for the first time since 2007, they've had two leaders defeated in a row. Mahara lost his council seat this year. Clara, Billy lost her seat last year. And again, what space do the Greens have with the Land Party now? Dominant? Can the Greens rebuild? Neither Greens have been here before. The Greens were wiped out in the south in 2011. They lost their six seats. They're now back. They've got 12 TDs now. So the Greens have been here before and they've come back. So maybe there is a route back for them, but we'll wait and see.

The TUV, they hold their base in North Antrim and have made inroads in some other places. Places like Rafford and places like near, they made, they made decent inroads, but transfers are a problem. That was the problem that they had. And Rafford in places like that, that TUV got a strong first preference vote and they just sat there. Alliance were able to leapfrog them and catch them, even though they were significantly ahead on first preferences. The party didn't have a great local election. They hold just a handful of council seats. Even in places like Mid and East Antrim, which would be heartland seats. The parties vote stagnated. Issues like the protocol help them get traction, but they haven't been able to turn that into seats. The STV system just doesn't really reward parties that are very polarised.

And I've given you loads of figures, but this is just some of the, some of the imagery I think that just tells its story. You can see the DUP, Alliance. The reason why I put these things up is again, look how young and energetic those parties look. Just look at them. I mean, people, Suzanne Breen says this, and I think she's right. Voters like to back winners, they like the back who they think are winners. They like the back who they think look like winners. And I think these people and Naomi Long with all these young people there, they look like winners. And I think that's what people back not to do the other party style, they have tried their best to reunify.

Interesting thing about the SDLP was that was actually their youngest ever lineup. But this time, 10 years ago, we lamented the amount of grey herd men in the SDLP. But even the new lineup didn't manage to help them. But maybe, that may stand them in good stead.

You can see the also unionists tried to make play on Robin Swan. It didn't really work. And that picture, I think sums up the TUV, the one man band Jim Alister, and that's the only one we really know. They do. The thing about putting Jim Alistair behind every candidate, the weird thing is like peering over their shoulder.

But the reason why I bring this up is that, you know, quite often we think we've got politics figured out, but it was, remember back in 2003, when Alliance were contemplating their very own future and the party, they held their six seats, but it was a Houdini act. They got in on the last seats in nearly every single constituency, and there was a candidate who got elected, and I think there was a quote during the election that they were scraping the barrel by getting this candidate to run for them and that this person was succeeding, Lord Derice. And that going from Lord Alderdice to this person, oh my goodness God Alliance really were in the downward slide and they were never gonna recover. The candidate who replaced them was Naomi Long, and she scraped in. She literally scraped in in 2003 and yet she and her leadership have been able to take Alliance forward.

So maybe some of those young faces in there, maybe there is a Naomi Long style figure for the SDLP and the UUP in there, and maybe Jim can find another drummer to come along with him as well.

Look, I've thrown a lot of stats at you, but look, thank you for your attention and look forward to questions.