

The 2016 election

KEY:

RW: Rick Wilford
CG: Cathy Gormley-Heenan

(MUSIC)

RW: The five former Executive parties, it was a bit of a mixed bag. I think all of them saw their vote share decline, most particularly, both the SDLP and Sinn Féin which collectively was a vote share drop for nationalists of just over 5%. The DUP more or less held its ground and the UUP which was hoping for an advance, didn't. And Alliance, you know, it stabilised, its vote fell fractionally as well. So in terms of vote share not a great set of outcomes for the five major parties. There was some fraying of the votes so that we saw Sinn Féin out-flanked by two parties on the left in Foyle and West Belfast of course: People Before Profit. And we saw the Green party make a small advance by getting a second MLA and just narrowly missing on a third.

So in a sense it was much as before, the relative seat strength of the parties remain in the order that they were in 2011 with the DUP, I think, pulling off really quite a commanding performance under the new leadership of Arlene Foster, returning with 38 seats. Sinn Féin losing just the one.

The Ulster Unionists remaining back where they were in 2011, given that there were three defections. They got back to 16. They lost 3 during the course of the mandate and for the SDLP, it was a story, I'm afraid, of further decline. So they're down to a dozen seats now. They lost a couple and for them and their new leader, I think it's going to be a bit of a Sisyphus-like task, as it were, to recoup some ground. So, a curious egg of an election really. I think the most significant, perhaps, point was that in terms of turnout, it was fractionally up on 2011. There was quite a lot of anxiety before the election that it could fall to 50% or indeed, lower and up until 2016, in fact, just to put the record straight, the turnout in Northern Ireland for the Assembly elections has always been higher than the Scottish Parliamentary elections and the Welsh Assembly elections. But this time, it fell just behind the turnout in Scotland. So the electorate weren't as disaffected as perhaps some doom mongers were suggesting prior to the election, but seat strength, relatively, almost the same with a couple of new additions which will enliven the Chamber in the shape of Eammon McCann, I think, and Gerry Carroll. And Jim Allister, of course, returns to be a one-man opposition, albeit 'small o' opposition, rather than large scale or full, you know, for 'Capital O' Opposition.

So, a mixed bag, but really I suppose on reflection, steady as she goes. The broad trends remain stable with some changes at the margins, but nothing that is going to make the earth move.

CG: I have a question. Why do you think so many people refer to the DUP's success as a stunning electoral victory when the number of seats were exactly the same as 2011?

RW: I think partly because in 2011 nobody expected them to get as many seats as they did and given, I think, the jiggery-pokery towards the latter part of the Assembly, not least the hokey-cokey Ministers and maybe a new leader, and really rather the remarkably swift demise of Peter Robinson. Perhaps they felt that they might count against; those factors might count against them in the election. Plus there was the anticipation in some quarters that the Ulster Unionists would actually benefit because of the discomfiture that the DUP had faced. But that didn't happen, and in fact the UUP more or less stood still. So it was standing in the sense that it held its ground in really quite problematic-

CG: Circumstances.

RW: -circumstances, I think.

CG: I suppose for me, this last election told us a number of stories about the state of democracy in Northern Ireland, the first story being the growth of the 'Other'. So for a long time, we have focused on unionists and nationalists. And as Rick has pointed out, the three new seats went to other parties. So two for People Before Profit who were very clear on the doorsteps during their electoral campaign, that they were neither unionists nor nationalists – they were 'Other'. Despite the fact that they had stood in fairly nationalist areas and won the seats in fairly nationalist areas. And again, that second seat for the Green Party. So the growth of 'Other' is certainly something to applaud in the context of the state of democracy in Northern Ireland. I think as well, the establishment of an Official Opposition very quickly after the election again speaks well to the state of our democracy. But most of all, the 50% growth in the number of female representatives that were returned following the election speaks volumes. One of the Committees, the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, had actually looked at female participation in public life in an enquiry recently, and the fact that we then had a 50% increase in the number of women returned to this Assembly was a big plus for the state of democracy at the moment.

RW: I agree with that. I think the fact that there are now 30 female MLAs is a significant advance to be really applauded. It's down to the parties, of course. It's the gatekeepers, they select the candidates rather than any perhaps massive shift within the electorate in terms of favoring women candidates. But no, that's most welcome. And it may well have an effect, I think, on the agenda of the Assembly. If you get a critical mass of women in a parliament, that can actually shift the agenda a bit provided, of course, that the women who are returned can find common cause on certain policy and maybe legislative questions. That's you know, a question that's hanging in the air. But I think in terms of the demographic profile, the gender profile of the Assembly, this is probably the most, I think, significant change that we witnessed at the election.

(MUSIC)