

Elections - Academic Reflections 2014

Key:

RW: Professor Rick Wilford

(MUSIC)

RW: Well, you know, I take the view that every election we have in Northern Ireland is a 'first order' election, you know, they're not 'second order' elections in the sense that they're less significant. I think they're all significant because they become measures of the condition of inter-communal relationships in Northern Ireland and that's made it particularly difficult for newer parties, or perhaps parties that seek to try ascend, you know, the communal division within Northern Ireland very difficult. There's very narrow space for them, I think electorally in Northern Ireland.

I think for psephologists like Cathy and I, you know, the fact that we're going to have this run of elections over the next two years is, you know, manna from heaven really. I mean it's what we live and breathe by really because they're so exciting apart from anything else, not least because, you know, there is always a prospect of, and there always is, a surprise or two yielded by any election.

I suppose in the last Westminster election the big surprise was Peter Robinson losing his seat in East Belfast. Nobody really saw that coming. I think you know, a sharp intake of breath was the collective response to that outcome. They're important because of the nature of the design of our political institutions really, because the balance of advantage between and among parties in Northern Ireland is going to sort of tilt to some extent the balance within, for instance, the Executive. If you go back to the first Executive it was six Unionists, six Nationalists. Currently it's seven Unionists, five Nationalists. So it can matter at the margins of Executive composition.

It also is important because it tells us something about the condition of inter-party relationships, particularly now, because we have a dominant two party system in Northern Ireland - the condition of relations between the DUP and Sinn Féin, in particular.

If you look back at the last Assembly election and, indeed, the one in 2007, you'll see that the DUP were particularly keen to demonstrate, or to convey the view that it really mattered which party topped the poll. Because it's an Assembly election the party at the top of the poll had the right then to nominate the First Minister. And the DUP said in its election literature, for example in 2007, that if you don't vote DUP first preference, Martin McGuinness is going to be nominated as First Minister, as the leader of the largest party in the largest designation.

Now the process by which the First and deputy First Ministers are now nominated has changed which enables, if the largest party in the largest designation is not overall the largest party in Northern Ireland to nominate First Minister. It means that, for instance, Sinn Féin, let's say, wins more seats than the DUP even though it's in the smaller designation, it actually now enjoys the right to nominate the First Minister.

So the temperature of the elections and the temperature of inter-party relations, I think, to a very large extent explains how the parties then approach the elections, and the kind of

temper of those elections, and the character of the relationships between those two major parties. I think, in the UK, this is distinctive because as far as the Assembly is concerned which party is the largest really does matter.

I cannot, for instance, in the foreseeable future, envisage a situation where a Unionist leader would be prepared to be Deputy First Minister if Sinn Féin were to emerge as the single largest party and therefore had the right to nominate First Minister. I mean, if we ever did get to that position, then I would say that actually Northern Ireland has experienced, you know, a real shift because, even though, formally, the deputy First Minister and the First Minister enjoy exactly the same powers if that were to come about I think that would signal a "sea change" in attitudes and a much more, if you like, biddable relationship between the two dominant parties in Northern Ireland which is not the case currently.

The reason we've moved to a five year term is, well, first of all, it puts us on a par with Scotland and Wales. It also means that, now that there are fixed term parliaments for Westminster elections, they don't clash so that, you know, they're different points, if you like, in the new election cycle and that, among other things, can be said to avoid any voter confusion that could occur if we have, say for example, three elections occurring on the same day - local government, Assembly and a Westminster election, which is not beyond the bounds of possibility. But this has alleviated that problem, or removed that problem.

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