

## Political Parties in the Assembly – An independent perspective

### KEY:

CS: Claire Sugden

CS: My name is Claire Sugden. I represent East Londonderry and I'm an Independent Unionist.

*Why are you an Independent MLA?*

Right now, I don't have a political party within the five main parties that would satisfy the political ideals that I believe in. So I'm happy enough to remain Independent. I think that the role of independence is really important in the Assembly, particularly now because the system that we currently have, all five parties; five of the main parties sit within the Executive. So can we really effectively be holding them to account if we as MLAs are in the same party as them? I'm not quite sure we can.

*What are your main priorities as an Independent MLA?*

For the year ahead, until the election, I am focusing on older people, younger people, local business, rural communities and the community voluntary sector. Those are key issues within my own constituency, so we've been working on them up until now and we're looking at how to move them forward.

*Do you think the Assembly and Executive are effective?*

I think we could be more effective. I very much see my role as an MLA to hold the Executive to account. As an Independent, I ask more questions than any other member in Northern Ireland, which I actually find quite difficult to understand that more MLAs couldn't be asking questions. I see that very much as a key role so I think we could be doing more.

*What challenges face Independent MLAs in the Assembly?*

I find that as an Independent, one of the biggest challenges is being able to do everything. It's very much expected of me that as an Independent, I will have an opinion on every motion, every debate, every piece of legislation which of course, is impossible. It is more difficult because if I was a member of a political party, I would be able to share those different issues out. However, it's all up to me as an Independent.

*Corporation Tax*

I think it's another tool in Northern Ireland's belt to encourage more foreign direct investment. I'm working on a couple of issues in respect of local business in Coleraine and a lot of the businesses, you know, have been enquiring when our corporation tax is going to be devolved

to Northern Ireland. So it's something that we really need to utilise and I think the opportunity is there, but as long as we use it right.

#### *Voting at 16*

I'm quite happy to allow votes for 16 year olds. An awful lot of people who are past the voting age may not necessarily be equipped or informed to vote, so I don't think it's an excuse to say that 16 year olds don't know what they're doing when they're voting at 16 years old.

#### *Academic Selection*

I suppose my biggest concern about academic selection, whilst through that, we have some of the best education systems in the world, the flipside of that is that people who are slipping through the net who are perhaps not getting to high quality schools (if you can call them that) are suffering. And I do have an issue there. That said, I'm not sure if we'd get rid of academic selection entirely. I think our approach to education has to be different than the way we currently approach it. It doesn't necessarily have to be focused on academic type subjects. Perhaps looking towards vocations, and I think the work that's going to be happening through the regional colleges and perhaps even through universities might sort of start creating a more positive path in that respect.

#### *Student Fees*

In terms of fees, should we raise them? I'm really not sure. We're in a situation currently because of budget cuts where a lot of courses are being cut. I'm working on a situation in Coleraine where we're trying to get a Veterinary school to the area but we can't do that because there's no money. Whereas those are good, practical skills that would actually benefit the Northern Ireland economy and all those other things that skills and training does. So I'll be honest, I'm a wee bit out yet on whether we should raise tuition fees or not. In an ideal world, no, but at this stage, we can't afford to keep paying for it in the way that we do, so I'm yet to be convinced.