

# Political Parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly - The Green Party

## KEY:

SA: Steven Agnew

SA: Steven Agnew; I'm Leader of the Green Party in Northern Ireland and MLA for North Down.

*What does your Party stand for?*

The core principles of the Green Party are social and environmental justice, grassroots democracy and non-violence.

*How has your Party changed in the last 20 years?*

I think we've learnt to better communicate our message. The core message has remained the same but I think where we often talked about global issues, we've learnt how to explain how they relate more locally. So we're thinking globally but we're acting locally.

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

I think we do need to move to a situation of voluntary coalition where the government agrees a Programme for Government and where you have collective responsibility. The situation where you can have government parties voting against the budget, potentially even voting against a Programme for Government but still being in government. I think that's leading to some of the problems we're experiencing, some of the deadlocks. We need collective government around a Programme for Government that's agreed by all parties. I think we have a way to go before we're effective. I think if you compare the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive to the Scottish Parliament, I do think we have some way to go. And I think until we reform the Institutions, I don't think we'll get effective government.

*What challenges face your Party moving forward?*

I think challenges always are how to grow without losing what we've got, how with limited resources we can increase our vote. And indeed, I think as well, how to... get taken seriously on issues that aren't seen as our core issues outside of the party; they are within the party so for example, the social justice issues, the economic justice as well as the environmental concerns that we have.

### *Corporation Tax*

We don't believe we should reduce Corporation Tax. We believe to take 300 million extra out of public services at a time of severe austerity cuts is immoral. You know, to take away those valuable services needed by the most vulnerable in our society to give a tax break to big businesses, we don't believe is the right approach.

### *Voting at 16*

We're very supportive of voting at 16. In fact, I'm proud to have brought forward the motion which was passed by the Assembly, calling on Westminster to change the legislation to allow votes at 16. I believe young people are well informed. The internet means that they are very much engaged on a lot of campaign issues and I think it's right that when they can pay taxes, they've got their national insurance card, they should have a right to say how those taxes are spent.

### *Academic Selection*

Academic selection is something the Green Party in Northern Ireland is opposed to. We believe it serves those who do well, serves them very well but we don't believe it serves those who struggle in education. And surely the core of education should be to help those who need it most. Those who are already academically able will do well regardless.

### *Student Fees*

The Green Party is opposed to the system of student fees. We think it was the wrong place to start. So the debates about how much they should be are almost a bit lost on us. It really was about almost setting a market model for education. We think that's the wrong approach. We think that university education should be paid for through general taxation and we believe we all benefit when we have a strong education system. It's good for our economy, it's good for our people and it's good for our prosperity as a society.