

Political Parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly - The Social Democratic and Labour Party

KEY:

AA: Alex Attwood

AA: Alex Attwood, member of the SDLP, the Social Democratic Labour Party, and I represent the constituency of Belfast West.

What does your Party stand for?

We are a social democratic party, we are a labour party, we believe in the Unification of Ireland, but we believe that Northern Ireland has to work in order to ensure that all our people have all the benefits of a stable working progressive democracy.

How has your Party changed in the last 20 years?

Well, in one way we are very like we were since the day and hour that we were born. We remain democratic, we remain committed to equality and social inclusion, we remain committed to bringing about a United Ireland but the environment in which we make our argument has changed because 20, 30, 40 years ago those arguments were being made in a context of the terror groups and the State using violence.

Do you think the Assembly and Executive are effective?

It's better than what we had because it is better than the violence and it's better than Direct Rule but, is our government and Assembly living up to the ambitions of the Good Friday Agreement? No, it is not. Are people all over the North feeling let down by our politics and our government? Yes, they are. Are there too many ministers who don't know the difference between being in government and being in power? Yes, there are. Are we measuring up in the way that the Scottish Nationalist Government does for their people? No, we are not.

What challenges face your Party moving forward?

20, 30, 40 years ago we were the major Democratic party of the nationalist tradition and now we are the second party of the nationalist and republican tradition. So we have major electoral challenges.

Corporation Tax

We support the principle, but we're very worried about the practice including the reduction to the Block Grant, including the fact that Corporation Tax may help the Greater Belfast area where there is a skills cluster, but not the rest of Northern Ireland.

Voting at 16

We support it. We believe that people who are 16 are mature enough, and grown up enough, and wise enough to be able to vote, and there are some very good examples, not very far from Northern Ireland to demonstrate and prove that case.

Academic Selection

We are opposed to academic selection and have been for a very long period of time. But we think it's terrible that whilst the 11+ was abolished years ago, it was replaced by a series of 11+ that children and their parents, and grandparents, now have to go through. So we need to push on with the full abolition of the 11+ so that Academic Selection is not a feature of division of our young people going forward.

Student Fees

I'm of the generation, probably the last generation that went to college for seven years and had a full grant from the State for going to college, including a grant to live away from home. That's where we have to get back to because the evidence is beginning to show that fees over the life-time of a student's career in college, is a disincentive for people from lesser economic and social backgrounds to stay: and if they stay, for them to do the courses that are more expensive.