

From Binary Politics to a New Ireland

Article by Clare Bailey

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Northern Ireland is a society that remains deeply divided and where the legacy of the violent conflict, known as “The Troubles”, that began in the 1960s and lasted several decades, remains very present. Its devolved parliament, the Legislative Assembly (also known as Stormont) was designed as a power-sharing institution from its foundation in 1998, as part of the Good Friday Agreement. This arrangement allows Nationalist and Unionist parties to govern together, to ensure the interests of the two main communities are protected. However, this system presents significant challenges for parties who do not align themselves with a particular side and seek to do cross-community politics, such as the Greens. Clare Bailey, leader of the Northern Irish Greens, sheds some light on the latest election results, the current political deadlock, and how these sectarian divisions might be overcome in the future.

Green European Journal: The May 2022 elections in Northern Ireland saw Sinn Féin, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and the Alliance Party gaining most of the vote, while the Green Party unfortunately lost its two seats - yours and that of your fellow Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) Rachel Woods. What’s your assessment of these results? ;

Clare Bailey: Every election is different in terms of the dominant issues. Important to the context this time was it being the centenary year of the partition of Ireland. For Unionists, it’s a reason to celebrate - the creation of the state - but for Nationalists it represents the partition of our island. So it was always going to be a contentious year, and this was the first time in our history that a Nationalist party - Sinn Féin - emerged as the largest party.

Then we saw a drop in the DUP vote, which was expected. They’ve been doing a horrendous job - between Brexit, disastrous policy decisions like the [Renewable Heat Incentive](#), and a crisis of leadership - they’re now onto their third leader in a single year. So we knew they wouldn’t come back as the largest party this time. So the DUP lost seats, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) kept the same number of seats, and there was a rise in the extreme Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) vote. The SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party] lost quite a few, including one of their ministers, and the two Greens went as well. And in fact, although Sinn Féin’s vote grew, they came back with the same amount of seats. So it was a tough battle for everybody this time.

But the Alliance Party, in the middle ground, had a very tight strategy - and they swept the board. For anybody who lost a seat - it went to Alliance. The narrative that dominated the whole campaign and was fed through the media was that if Sinn Féin were the largest party then Michelle O’Neill [party vice-president] was going to be the first minister. The DUP were saying that they wouldn’t be deputy to a Sinn Féin first minister. But the power-sharing

institution doesn't allow for the Alliance Party as "others" [neither Unionist or Nationalist parties] to hold the posts of first or deputy first minister.

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Looking back at the past term - what do you see as the key moments or breakthroughs where you were able to make a real impact, and what were the main challenges you came up against?

The challenge is trying to operate in an environment of such political instability - the system that we have hasn't been designed to allow "others" into the institutions. Anything outside of the five-party block isn't really accommodated for within that system. We don't really have an official opposition, so we have what is, very patronisingly, called a "naughty corner". In the last assembly there were the two Greens, People before Profit, a couple of independents, and [TUV leader] Jim Allister. The six of us were called the naughty corner because there was no opposition. Trying to operate in that and find your space and relevance and wider audience in terms of media pick-up as well is really, really tough. I think everyone who has gone before us has always struggled with that.

The climate bill was really important, and it allowed me to work with all the parties in a way that I never would have as a backbencher. Because we were able to do that as Greens and not as those identity blocks - there's a greater freedom in that. I really enjoyed the process of stepping into those spaces, having a reason for being there, finding new ways of working and bringing people with you. It also led to just doing politics differently and this was recognised by others even after we lost our seats.

Do you think that following your contributions in the assembly people think about the Greens differently and have a better sense of their politics?

I hope so. Before me, we'd only ever had one Green seat in the assembly, it wasn't until 2016 that we gained a second - when I joined Steven Agnew. But I came with a very different agenda and a strong focus on social justice. I'm an abortion rights campaigner. This widened our remit and the issues we worked on and who we could give a platform to - which helped people see us as more relevant and not just a single-issue party. For years we've been struggling to prove this, and we'll continue to do that work.

How do you interpret the vote for Alliance as one of the parties that are "others"? Is it a rejection or endorsement of the current model, or just a sign of frustration among voters?

People are really frustrated, and fed up with the non-delivery, with the bickering and the fall-outs. It remains to be seen if the Alliance vote has longevity - as we all know in politics, it's ebbs and flows. Whether they hold onto that will be the real test. There's talk about this tsunami of change - but we've come back with the same five parties in the same stuck executive that we've had for decade. Show me the tsunami of change!

Sinn Féin is a party that seems to have undergone something of a transformation in terms of their platform and how they communicate. How do you see their success?

There's been a huge change – also in terms of leadership – the gradual shift from Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, who ran the party and were the faces of it for many years, to two women who have no baggage in terms of any association with armed conflict in the past. It's the complete rebranding of the party as well as a move to talking about social issues rather than just the political narrative of the past. They're shifted their narrative and actively try and get young women into the party and elected, through open-doors quotas and so on. I think they're the only party with more female elected representation than male. Let's not forget that there's big money in the party and you can see how it's been invested in their key players. So there's a lot to learn from the strategy in terms of communication and modernisation of the party.

To outsiders, there might be a tendency to think if Sinn Féin is winning in both the North and Republic this will inevitably lead to a united Ireland. Is that an over-simplification?

I think it is. It's a *raison d'être* of the party, of course, so that debate will be there. But Sinn Féin can't create a united Ireland. Only the people can. Behind the scenes, there are other bodies which Sinn Féin is driving that are trying to have these conversations about what a new Ireland would look like. Through civic discourse, public meetings, academic and citizen engagement. All that's going on in the background.

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being done to them and not with them.*

I think the key question is: what *is* a new Ireland? Political history aside, from a Green perspective, it comes from the fact that we are going to be facing the ramifications and impact of climate change very, very deeply in a very short space of time and we need to start preparing for that. For me, that's what a new Ireland's all about. It's not about the Unionists or Nationalists but about creating safety and security, where people can survive and thrive in the future. But people say to me, "Will it be Nationalist or Unionist? Will it be Catholic climate crisis or a Protestant climate crisis?"

It's not just about Ireland, but all the islands – it's about getting behind the Good Friday Agreement and properly rolling it out to create new working relationships for England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

So, you think that the framework of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) sets out a way forward?

Absolutely. The framework it sets out is so strong and necessary, but we just never applied or delivered it in full. We don't do north-south cooperation very well and we certainly don't do east-west, and then you've got the Isle of Man, Guernsey, and Jersey in there too, and the Scottish Islands... As a Green, I want to remove the power block of Nationalism v Unionism politics and replace that with climate adaptation and mitigation and apply the

framework of the GFA to that. Then I think we've got a new Ireland, there. New *islands*, in fact!

Besides the institutional framework, what are the other areas in which you can see a new Ireland being brought about?

It has to come through civic engagement. Change will always be resisted if people feel it's being done to them and not with them. It doesn't matter if it's a united Ireland or if its climate adaptations or overhauling the education system and bringing in integrated education. These big shifts have to be done with the people. In the Irish Constitution, they organise citizens' assemblies. And we need those too, because we have a system of governance and politics that is failing and can't deliver.

People talk about looking to politics to lead – what I would say is that politics has never led, ever, because political parties always need votes and we are always in short-term electoral cycles, so we never want to upset the electorate. So we avoid those risks and taking on those challenges. But when you give permission to politicians to be brave, they step up to represent, to argue. We need politicians who are held accountable to deliver what they've promised. That's the shift in power dynamics that is needed. We need a civic discourse to allow the collective agreement and then give politicians permission and a mandate to get it done.

The Northern Ireland Assembly has been unable to function for several months after the DUP withdrew from the power-sharing administration. To what extent are the discussions around Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol creating blockages? Or could the need to find a solution be what finally ends the deadlock?

If it wasn't Brexit and the Northern Ireland protocol, it would be something else. These are conversations that politics doesn't want to have because if those conversations create a desire for change, that's a threat to the political status quo. They don't want to be threatened. This is what I call the bogeyman politics: every time we need a distraction from actually delivering, what they'll do is create a crisis. "Oh, we can't do Nationalism and Unionism again!" Here we go. In ordinary people's lives, everyone is getting on with things and the protocol is not an issue, it's a political problem of political creation so let them get it done. Let's not forget the Northern Ireland Assembly members and executive have no stake in the game or seat at the table, so why can't we have an executive? We can continue to lobby through the proper channels. But this is a negotiation between UK and the EU, not the Northern Irish ministers or political parties. We've been given a vote in two years' time on the protocol and that's as far as our involvement goes. They can influence but there are no blockages there, it's completely manufactured. And it's not an issue for people. That's how fragile the institution is, that's how easily it can be blocked and stopped.

The Green Party has eight local councillors in Northern Ireland - will you build back from the local level? What are the main objectives now for the future?

Losing the resources is really, really tough, so we've stripped down to an absolute volunteer-led party, and we have to reenergise people to make sure we get motivated and out again. It's going to be a tough year, but we have council elections coming up so we're

making a plan on how to manage over the summer. We'll go right back to the constituency level, identifying target candidates and possible seats, to build a strategy rooted in the grassroots democracy that's one of the founding principles of the Greens.

We've seen a real membership jump since we lost our seats; it took a lot of people by surprise that we didn't get back in. Fundraising, activism, and engagement with our new members can bring a bit of positivity and provide support for our councillors, which will be absolutely key because I don't want them to feel burned out or under too much pressure, either. We have to look after our councillors, and just start building from the bottom up again.

This interview was conducted on 5 June, 2022.



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