

# **A real Shared Future: why the Labour Party should stand for elections in Northern Ireland**

## **Submission to the *Refounding Labour* organisational review by the Northern Ireland CLP**

### **Introduction**

The discussion document *Refounding Labour: a party for the new generation* invites comments from Party members about the future shape of the Labour Party.

The document does not mention Northern Ireland at all. It does not acknowledge that Northern Ireland has 350 paid-up Labour Party members, 32,000 trade union members paying the political levy, and almost 260,000 members of trade unions in the region, nor that Party members participate in an active Constituency Labour Party, assist in British election campaigns, attend Conference and are active in the National Policy Forum. Members also participate in the wider Labour movement through membership of trade unions, socialist societies, the Co-operative Party, the Fabian Society, Labour Students and the Party of European Socialists activists' network. Some have helped the Irish Labour Party in election campaigns over the border. Northern Ireland's Labour members are involved in a wide range of civil society organisations which seek to influence policy both at regional and UK level through lobbying.

However, Labour Party members in Northern Ireland are still not permitted to stand for elections. The Northern Ireland Constituency Labour Party (NICLP) believes it is time for this to change, for three reasons:

1. It is the final stage in achieving a fully functioning Labour movement in Northern Ireland. As has been said many times by senior Labour figures, there should be no 'no go' areas for the Labour Party. In a democracy, a prospective Party of Government should seek a mandate across the UK, including Northern Ireland.
2. Labour can fill the political vacuum caused by the lack of a cross-community, anti-sectarian democratic socialist political party. Labour in Northern Ireland provides a voice that is un-mediated by community divisions, a voice that can develop policies that will encourage sharing in a divided society and build a future without the fear of sectarian tensions.
3. We have the capacity to build our case around the Labour values of social justice, equality of opportunity, strength of community and rights matched with responsibilities. Labour in Northern Ireland accepts the duty to stand for Labour values, to use those values to promote prosperity and a shared future, and to represent the wider Labour Movement politically.

## The Labour Party and the Labour movement in Northern Ireland

***Standing for elections is the final stage in achieving a fully functioning Labour movement in Northern Ireland. As has been said many times by senior Labour figures, there should be no 'no go' areas for the Labour Party.***

Just over one hundred years ago, the trade unions created the Labour Party to represent their interests in Parliament. The first Labour Party Conference was held in Belfast in 1907. There is a long and proud history of trade union activity in Northern Ireland, much of which has been anti-sectarian during difficult times and in which Labour members and sympathisers have been deeply involved.

Northern Ireland has the highest density of trade union membership of the four UK jurisdictions<sup>1</sup>. There are almost 260,000 trade union members in the region, many of whom are members of unions affiliated to the Labour Party. The four largest affiliated unions are: Unite (44,400); Unison (37,250); Usdaw (14,700) and the GMB (12,700)<sup>2</sup>. Most significantly, 32,000 members of affiliated unions have 'contracted in' to pay the political levy<sup>3</sup>, which is normally paid to the Labour Party. These members, who have made a conscious decision to contribute to a political fund, are disenfranchised from any representation by Labour in Parliament, the NI Assembly or in local councils. No other political party in Northern Ireland has a structural link with the trade unions; the region's trade union members deserve better.

Northern Ireland has a vibrant wider Labour movement, including the trade union activity mentioned above and:

- a branch of the Fabian Society founded in 2007;
- a branch of the Co-operative Party founded in 2009;
- active participation in the Party of European Socialists' activists' network;
- active participation in the Socialist Educational Association;
- a new Labour Students Society at Queen's University Belfast;
- some of our members hold dual membership with the Irish Labour Party.

Northern Ireland also includes a large and lively civil society, with an estimated 4,700 voluntary organisations employing 27,000 people and involving 88,000 volunteers – not taking into account other types of community involvement such as the churches, school governors and parent teacher associations, neighbourhood watch, housing associations and other social enterprises. 'Refounding Labour' correctly suggests that local Labour parties should engage closely with other civil society activists and the Labour Party in Northern

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<sup>1</sup> Labour Force Survey 4<sup>th</sup> quarter 2010:

[http://stats.bis.gov.uk/UKSA/tu/Press\\_Note\\_Trade\\_Union\\_Membership\\_2010.pdf](http://stats.bis.gov.uk/UKSA/tu/Press_Note_Trade_Union_Membership_2010.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Northern Ireland Certification Officer for Trade Unions and Employers' Associations Annual Report 2009-10 Appendices 1 and 2: <http://www.nicertoffice.org.uk/publications/>

<sup>3</sup> In Northern Ireland members have to indicate in writing their willingness to make a contribution to a political fund, unlike the rest of the UK where a contracting out process applies. The figure of 32,000 is from Appendix 7 of the Certification Officer's report op. cit.

Ireland is well equipped to do so. However, we cannot offer what many sympathisers want when they inquire about joining the Party – a route into government. Standing for election is the last piece in the jigsaw.

### ***Other political parties***

It has been argued that there are other parties in Northern Ireland for which Labour sympathisers can vote, most particularly the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) which is currently the only Northern Ireland member of the Socialist International. However, *it is not widely known that Socialist International membership is not restricted to one party per state*. The list of full member parties reveals fifteen countries with two members, including Belgium, Italy and Poland; and one country (Chile) with three<sup>4</sup>.

It would be wrong to depict Labour Party members in Northern Ireland as hostile to the SDLP. Many members would have high regard for some individual SDLP members – who in a ‘normal’ society would be in the Labour Party – and most would wish such relationships to continue through organisations such as the trade unions, the PES and the Co-operative Party. Labour-oriented members of the SDLP are, like ourselves, part of the international Labour movement and we would like to see the resurrection of an all-Ireland Labour body such as the 1960s Council of Labour in Ireland, which would include the UK and Irish Labour Parties along with the SDLP. The contribution the SDLP has made to the Northern Ireland peace process through the work of John Hume and others is also recognised and valued.

There are two fundamental differences between the parties that reach to the heart of a Labour approach to policy on Northern Ireland. The first, not well known, is that the SDLP has no formal link with the trade unions. Labour members in Northern Ireland appreciate the importance of trade union membership within the Party, value the progressive influence of trade union activities across society, and are determined to make that relationship work. The SDLP are a party without a structural link to the unions and, we believe, with a very limited interest in developing such a link. Labour movement links with the SDLP were strongest at the time of its establishment in the 1970s, but were effectively cut when the Party shifted towards a nationalist ideology – the second difference between us.

Labour members in Northern Ireland want to see the development of anti-sectarian politics that can challenge nationalist and unionist polarities for the betterment of the whole of our society. Members do not believe that anti-sectarian politics can wipe out the past in Northern Ireland, but we do have a vision that can re-write the future. Some Labour members are unionists and some are nationalists, some have no strong views either way and others feel strongly that their identity and heritage is *both* British and Irish. The Labour Party’s policy UK-wide is to support the constitutional mechanism put in place for deciding this issue in the Good Friday/ Belfast Agreement<sup>5</sup> and the 1998 Northern Ireland Act<sup>6</sup> and we do not differ from this. However, we believe the current political priority should be uniting the communities here and now for a shared future.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.socialistinternational.org/viewArticle.cfm?ArticlePageID=931>

<sup>5</sup> Section 2, Annex A <http://www.nio.gov.uk/agreement.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Section 1 and Schedule 1: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/contents>

Therefore Labour disagrees with the SDLP's decision to identify itself as a nationalist political party and to adopt a nationalist community designation in the Northern Ireland Assembly. We see no attempt to reach out to non-nationalists and we do not see how Northern Ireland residents who are unionists, or who are neutral on the subject of the union, could feel comfortable joining or voting for the SDLP. Furthermore, the party includes some who are closer to the centre right than centre left, who hold close ties with the Fianna Fáil political party in the Irish Republic. As it happens, the SDLP's electoral support has been steadily declining in recent years as Sinn Fein has taken over as the dominant nationalist/Republican party.

Some would say there are other political alternatives. The cross-community Alliance Party is enjoying increasing success and has taken a principled stand against sectarianism for many years. However, it has a formal link with the Liberal Democrats. Its former leader, Lord Alderdice, is the Liberal-Democrats Chief Whip for the Coalition in the House of Lords, even if its single MP chooses to sit on the Opposition benches. The small but growing Green Party, like Alliance, designates as 'Other' in the Assembly and contributes to anti-sectarian debate, but again like Alliance has no formal connection with the Labour movement, although there would be times when we would agree with their policies. The Workers' Party and other small far left groups do not provide a mainstream social democratic alternative to the Labour Party.

Neither the SDLP, Alliance Party, Green Party or the far left parties can substitute for a fully functioning Labour Party and Labour movement in Northern Ireland. The Labour Party provides a forum for cross-community, anti-sectarian politics based on economic and social issues rather than on territorial position. Labour elected representatives, working within an anti-sectarian framework and including people from both main communities and from minority ethnic groups, can make a major contribution to the creation of a genuinely shared society in Northern Ireland.

Labour would designate as 'Other' in the Assembly and strengthen the growing third strand of political activity in the region. Northern Ireland should no longer be a 'no go' area for the Labour Party.

### **Political identity and support in Northern Ireland: building on the peace process**

***Labour can fill the political vacuum caused by the lack of a cross-community, anti-sectarian democratic socialist political party. The Labour Party in Northern Ireland provides a voice that is unmediated by community divisions, a voice that can encourage sharing in a divided society and build a future without the fear of sectarian tensions.***

Political identity in Northern Ireland is often erroneously presented as a simple cleavage on the issue of territory, with nationalists supporting a united Ireland and unionists wishing to remain part of the United Kingdom. However, this is only part of the picture as it disregards opinions on social and economic issues, and other aspects of political identity such as class

and gender. Indeed, it can be argued that a fixation on territorial politics has disenfranchised a substantial percentage of the Northern Ireland electorate.

Continuing research has shown that the Northern Ireland electorate does not divide simply on the issue of a united Ireland. Rather, a majority of the population do not support the sectarian political parties and define themselves as neither nationalist nor unionist. Under the circumstances it is not surprising that turnout at elections is declining, and public confidence in the governance of the region is low.

Another document, available on LabourNI's web site, provides details of research pointing towards the existence of a political vacuum that could be filled by Labour<sup>7</sup>. To summarise:

- Political identity in Northern Ireland is not straightforwardly divided into two mutually exclusive sectarian camps. It may surprise those who know little of the region's political dynamics that a substantial proportion of people consider themselves to be neither unionist nor nationalist. Between 1998 and 2009, this figure has increased from 33% to 43%<sup>8</sup>.
- During the period 1998 – 2009, support for unionist and nationalist parties from the general population combined reached a low of 56 per cent in 2006 and never rose above 69 per cent<sup>9</sup>. In elections, the 30 – 40 per cent of the population who do not support the territorial parties reduces to a band of generally around 5 – 7 per cent who turn out to vote<sup>10</sup>.
- Over the same period, many people did not show support for any party (varying between 11 and 26 percent between 1998 and 2009) and only between 5 and 12 percent showed support for non-territorial parties such as Alliance or the Green Party<sup>11</sup>.
- Although there could be a number of reasons for this lack of support for 'third parties' around 70 percent of people who didn't vote indicated in 2005 that they had sympathy with the statement that 'I would have voted if there was a strong non-sectarian party' (Table 1).
- In 2009, only 51% of people described themselves as 'very likely' to turn out to vote in council elections, 50% for the Assembly, and 47% for their Westminster candidate<sup>12</sup>. It was not surprising, therefore, that turnout in the 2011 Assembly and

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<sup>7</sup> <http://iwc2.labouronline.org/165424/uploads/3d6f3257-d97a-fa04-91bf-bb22fd8f0ade.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey time series 1998 – 2009 (latest available)* <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/>

<sup>9</sup> *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey time series 1998 – 2009, op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> ARK NI elections analysis <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/>

<sup>11</sup> *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey time series 1998 – 2009, op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ipsos MORI Public Attitude Survey 2009 for the NI Assembly*

[http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/researchandlibrary/2010/Public\\_Attitude\\_Survey.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/researchandlibrary/2010/Public_Attitude_Survey.pdf)

council elections dropped to 55.6% (from 63% in 2007), with a range from 45.9% in North Down to 69.0% in Fermanagh and South Tyrone<sup>13</sup>.

- Only 20% of Northern Ireland's population feel they have a say in how the region is run, compared to 27% in Great Britain. 49% believe they have no influence at all on how Northern Ireland is governed and 75% believe improvements are necessary<sup>14</sup>.

Although there may be other reasons for decreasing turnout, it is the belief of the Northern Ireland CLP that much of that loss is due to disillusionment with a local political system that fails to offer a politics that can transcend the communal politics of the past. *Low turnout in combination with indications of changing political identity and lack of confidence in regional governance points to a political vacuum which the Party can fill.* Politics in Northern Ireland is changing – slowly but surely – and Labour must not miss the opportunity. We believe that Labour Party politics can offer a home to those disillusioned voters and to many more voters who simply put up with current parties because there is no viable, non-sectarian alternative.

Labour is the cross-community, anti-sectarian democratic socialist political party that is currently lacking in Northern Ireland. It has been argued that disturbing the existing political system will damage something called the 'peace process'. But the peace process is exactly that – a process. The growing success of the Alliance Party shows that political identity and support can change as a result of changing circumstances, with a number of voters no longer wishing to support or be active in political parties that only represent the views of one section of the community.

### **Table 1: Support for a new non-sectarian party?**

*Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2005 module on democratic participation*

In 2005, the Life and Times Survey included a one-off module of questions on Democratic Participation<sup>15</sup>. One question is of particular interest for Labour:

Q22: Here are some of the things that people said who didn't vote in the last Northern Ireland Assembly election in November 2003. Can you tell me how much sympathy you have with these statements – even if you yourself did vote in that election.

One of seven statements provided was: 'I would have voted if there was a strong non-sectarian party'. The responses were:

A lot of sympathy:	41%
A little sympathy:	29%
No sympathy:	25%
Don't know:	5%

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.eoni.org.uk/assembly\\_turnout.pdf](http://www.eoni.org.uk/assembly_turnout.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Ipsos MORI Public Attitude Survey 2009 for the NI Assembly op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results/dempart.html> and access to reports at: <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results/dempartres.html>

Indeed, there is a sense that the structure of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, based on an enforced coalition with most parties in government, may have been necessary in 1998 to kick start the process of regional governance but that it is now in need of review. As non-sectarian democratic socialists we want to see the establishment of a decision-making system that provides an incentive for the development of non-territorial politics, in which 'cross community' decision-making takes place *within* parties rather than between them through the Assembly's system of designation as 'unionist', 'nationalist' or 'other'. Such a system still needs to take into account national allegiance in the way policies are developed, decided upon, equality proofed and reviewed, in order to ensure true parity of esteem between all traditions (including minority ethnic groups). It may or may not include the establishment of an official opposition.

### **Organising around Labour values - for a shared society**

***We have the capacity to build our case around the Labour values of social justice, equality of opportunity, strength of community and rights matched with responsibilities. Labour in Northern Ireland accepts the duty to stand for Labour values, to use those values to promote prosperity and a shared future, and to represent the wider Labour Movement politically.***

The Northern Ireland CLP made a statement about Labour values and Labour's place in Northern Ireland society as part of the response to the consultation document ***Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration***:

*'The Labour party holds true the values of social justice, equality of opportunity, strength of community and rights matched with responsibilities. As a Labour party in Northern Ireland, we seek to uphold those values in the context of a society trying to move beyond sectarian division and find a common ground based on values, rights and responsibilities we all share. We seek a new political paradigm that is not dependent on territorial politics.*

*Labour believes in moving towards a truly shared society, in which individuals may express any aspect of their identity securely, rather than living in a society where expressions of identity are outlawed in the interests of coping with division rather than addressing its root causes.*

*Labour believes that the political impact of a divided society has been profound....The Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive is set up on a communal basis which devalues the votes of the 'other' designation and thus hampers the efforts of those working to develop a third strand of politics that is neither unionist nor nationalist. A political system based on communal division cannot provide the leadership to implement a policy to abolish such division...'<sup>16</sup>*

Labour Party members in Northern Ireland believe in working for a genuinely shared society and culture based on the Labour values of social justice, equality of opportunity, strength of community and rights matched with responsibilities, which apply to the whole community.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.labourpartyni.org/> Consultation response October 2010.

There is an appetite in the region for a focus on everyday political issues. The MORI Public Attitude Survey in 2009 asked people which issues they had discussed with their family and friends over the past year. The top three topics were crime (56%), education (50%) and the economy (47%), with other significant areas including health, the environment and housing.

As part of the wider Labour movement, the Northern Ireland CLP can draw in others to campaign effectively in elections and at other times. Although there are frequent calls for politics based on 'bread and butter issues', the majority of electoral debate in elections is still focused on sectarian issues: for example, in 2011, on whether Sinn Féin would take the post of First Minister. Labour can use our values to promote prosperity and a shared future because we are not part of that dynamic.

Labour in Northern Ireland is well placed to participate in UK-wide Labour campaigns and activities. In particular, we aspire to stronger links with Labour in the other devolved jurisdictions of Scotland and Wales (we have assisted with election campaigns in Scotland for several years). These links would supplement our existing connections within the Northern Ireland Labour movement and with the Irish Republic.

### ***Party organisation and campaigning in Northern Ireland***

The NICLP has already achieved a critical mass of 350 members, along with support from the trade unions and from other Labour movement organisations. A top priority is to continue to recruit new members (in a society where party membership is regarded with some suspicion) and to raise funds. All of our members have stories of would-be supporters who will join when the Party fields candidates. That is what will make Labour politics real in Northern Ireland.

A strong member and financial base is crucial for fighting elections. A further priority is to raise the profile of the Party locally through appearances at Labour movement events, holding events of our own and issuing press statements on current issues. Many of our members have extensive networks in political organisation and in the voluntary sector, and are active in many different aspects of civil society, which helps awareness of Party activity as well as providing us with a pool of potential election candidates who are already locally known and trusted. However, we would look to the Party's wider organisational structures for the same degree of support as any other CLP, for example the help of a regional organiser and funds to supplement our own efforts.

Because we already have strong connections with the rest of the Labour movement and with civil society, we would be able to select candidates who are known locally or who in some cases are more active at regional level. The mix of potential candidates indicates that we would be able to begin our electoral activity by contesting both Assembly and council seats, although it is unlikely at first that we would be able to put forward candidates in every electoral area. The Assembly elections are certainly those which have most significance in relation to the wider population, but local government is the seed bed of politics, producing future politicians and meeting local needs.



There will, of course, be pressure for Labour to be seen as the ‘unionist’ alternative to the SDLP and to stand only in unionist areas. We reject this categorisation and are emphatically not interested in a sectarian carve-up. Rather, we would seek to put forward good, local candidates wherever we thought we had a chance of winning on our values by seeking votes from all sections of the community. As has been stated earlier, the Labour Party includes nationalists, unionists, those with no views and those who identify with both local traditions. It is of paramount importance to us not to be seen as representing the views of one ‘side’ only.

It is important to remember that the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system for councils and the Assembly provides opportunities for working with other parties in a way that is different from England. STV allows voters to express as many preferences as there are candidates, which allows Labour to seek transfers from other parties across the community divide. Labour is unlikely to be in the position of being elected on the first count, initially we will be contending for transfers much further down the line. In Northern Ireland, with six seat constituencies and often 10 or 12 candidates in each contest, the sixth candidate is often elected after all transfers have been completed. In some cases, agreements with other parties on ‘transfer promotion’ may be possible. Once elected, it would be essential to that our representatives would designate as ‘Other’ (i.e. as neither unionist nor nationalist) in the Assembly and in councils. Labour representatives would consider working closely with other parties when it would be beneficial for the advancement of Labour values.

Elections to the Westminster Parliament may prove more problematic due to the First Past the Post System and the recently reduced number of constituencies. It is likely that Westminster will continue to be a sectarian headcount for the foreseeable future, but it may be that Labour needs to field candidates all the same, as part of a long-term strategy. The same applies to the region’s three seats for the European Parliament (elected by STV), which are always gained by the territorial parties on a province-wide poll.

Our Party activists would be encouraged not to forget unelected bodies, which are important in Northern Ireland as they still run many essential services such as education, housing, social services, libraries and planning. Other opportunities including the District Policing Partnerships, regeneration boards, and housing associations. We have one local member of the House of Lords who takes the Labour whip (which appears to have caused no problems for the Party, although she remains resident in Northern Ireland)<sup>17</sup>. There are many opportunities for Labour members in Northern Ireland to make substantial contributions to society as part of regional governance – but elected office must be at the heart of such activity for a democratic socialist party.

### **Conclusion: ‘Refounding Labour’ in Northern Ireland**

This submission to *Refounding Labour* has concentrated on the most important issue for the Northern Ireland CLP, namely standing for elections. We need to be a fully functioning political party in order to contribute to the four ‘Big Questions’ which the Party as a whole is addressing in the organisational review:

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<sup>17</sup> Ironically, moving to an elected House of Lords would prevent Baroness Blood from adopting a Labour affiliation in the Lords, as she would not be able to stand as a Labour candidate.

- We have described how we are part of a strong Northern Ireland Labour movement, but we cannot be a completely **outward-looking party** without the electoral connection to make sense of our place within that Labour movement and within Northern Ireland politics.
- We cannot offer Labour supporters and members full participation in regional, national or European level governance and therefore our **voice for members** is compromised.
- We can think of no better contribution to **renewing our party** than extending its activity fully to the whole of the United Kingdom, thus strengthening the commitment to devolution as well as opening up new opportunities for membership and policy-making contributions.
- Labour in Northern Ireland will contribute to **winning back power** by giving the region's voters a new political alternative. By ensuring there are no no-go areas for the Labour Party, the Party's national credibility will be increased.

To conclude, we reiterate the overwhelming importance of moving forward to electoral activity for Labour members in Northern Ireland. We have shown that political views in the region are more complex and nuanced than the stereotypical unionist/ nationalist divide, with potential for Labour to gain votes from those who are not satisfied with the current options as voter turnout continues to decline.

In such a climate of dissatisfaction and frustrated aspirations, Labour has to act. The consistent absence of a Labour voice in Northern Ireland elections has not, as would otherwise be expected, resulted in other parties taking up the slack. They have failed to reach beyond their old intolerances. They have failed to nurture Northern Ireland's future. They have failed to forge real links with the trade unions. Labour is better grounded in progressive politics than other political parties and is not prone to be blown around by the winds of sectarian discord that blow through Northern Ireland society. The Party will not be damaged by moving into electoral politics in Northern Ireland; rather, it will be seen to be responding to a changing political environment in an appropriate and responsible way.

We end by asking: if not now, then when? The next stage of the 'peace process' is to work towards a genuinely shared society which acknowledges the importance of history but refuses to be held back by it. Labour must stand up and be counted. As a Party of Government we have a duty to seek a mandate in Northern Ireland. We have a duty to offer an alternative to the people of Northern Ireland. We have a duty to challenge sectarianism and offer the option of a real shared future based on Labour values. Such a future cannot be achieved without the full and active involvement of a democratic socialist political party in which all voters can have confidence.

That party is the Labour Party.