

**Manifesto**  
**of the**  
**Northern Ireland Labour**  
**Representation Committee**  
**2016**

# A Manifesto for an Opposition.

**Labour: Challenging, questioning, holding to account**

**– for a better government**

## **Introduction**

It is universally accepted that one of the tests of a democracy is that the voters are able to remove from office a government that no longer carries out its functions to their satisfaction.

Northern Ireland fails that test and fails it badly. Parties with even a small percentage of the vote have an absolute right to a place in the Executive. Their right is only diminished but not extinguished if the electorate decides to punish them at the polls by reducing – possibly by a substantial amount - the level of electoral support they had formerly enjoyed. That right to be in government persists even if there is not a single iota of public policy on which that party is in agreement with the other parties in the Executive.

The consequence of this system is on the one hand the absence of effective challenge, oversight and scrutiny of the Executive. On the other hand it is an administration that is systemically incapable of producing a coherent and integrated joined-up programme of government.

## **This election**

The election is taking place against the most sombre background of any election since the 1930s. The way in which the developed world's political classes abandoned control of economic policy to unregulated markets brought the world to the brink of economic collapse less than ten years ago. The recovery from the financial collapse of 2008 is far from complete. Many distinguished commentators warn of another economic crisis waiting to happen not least because of the refusal to recognise that the ever growing mountain of public and private debt can never be repaid. Consequently the pretence that it can be needs to be abandoned and this issue of debt needs to be managed in an agreed, structured and orderly way.

But if the still broken financial system were not sufficient cause for alarm there are also the centrifugal forces pulling the European Union apart including the real possibility of the UK's exit from Europe, the inability of member states to cope humanely with the refugee crisis, the rise of extreme right wing and xenophobic parties, the ever widening gap between the mega rich and increasingly impoverished working population, the inability to respond rapidly and efficiently to the problem of climate change and the current industrial revolution based on information technology which has the potential to destroy millions of service sector jobs throughout the developed world.

Yet to judge from the way that Northern Ireland's election is being conducted it would be easy to imagine that none of these issues could possibly affect life in Northern Ireland now or in the future in the slightest degree.

#### **How Labour Positions itself on these issues.**

Unlike other parties we have two strands to our approach.

The first is to recognise that many of these issues must be tackled on a larger canvass. Unlike any other party contesting the elections we make no apology for believing that part of the key to a successful Northern Ireland is the return to office of a Labour Government at Westminster willing and able to bring a new approach to the UK's government and - most importantly - to cooperate with other governments in forcing change through the institutions of the European Union and the other international organisations of which the UK is a member.

The second strand is a recognition that the institutions and resources of our devolved region have a part to play - if they are properly used - in enabling Northern Ireland to prosper in a turbulent world and to protect the people who live here from the negative effects of global social and economic change while exploiting their positive aspects.

#### **Why we are standing as the Northern Ireland Labour Representation Committee.**

All our candidates are members of the Labour Party and we would like to be contesting this election as Labour Party candidates. The Labour Party in Northern Ireland, which in the last year has grown in membership and signed-up supporters from some 300 members to 1800, decided before Christmas - without a single contrary vote - that it wanted to contest elections. And it started to make the necessary preparations to select and train candidates and learn how to manage an election campaign.

As is generally known the Labour Party is not currently registered as a political party in Northern Ireland. It undertook to review its position with regard to registering - which is a necessary pre-condition to contesting elections and this was certainly encouraging and helpful as it opened the door to the possibility that Labour would register in Northern Ireland. It was not however possible to complete that review before the final date for registration.

Consequently we are not and do not pretend to be official candidates of the Labour Party in Northern Ireland. We are not endorsed by that party or supported by it financially although the party did at its AGM unanimously acknowledge - and without any suggestion of censure - that some of its members would contest the election.

It is not possible under electoral law to have a party political name associated on the ballot paper with the candidate's name unless a political party has been registered with the Electoral Commission.

The name Northern Ireland Labour Representation Committee (NILRC) was therefore registered. Its name recalls the origins of the Labour Party in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Northern Ireland Labour Representation Committee will be dissolved as soon as the Labour Party registers as a political party in Northern Ireland. That is clearly stated in the NILRC's constitution. Pending Labour's registration, NILRC may seek affiliation to the Labour Party as a socialist society to

continue to make the case for Labour contesting elections in Northern Ireland if that should be necessary.

In the meantime the electorate in Northern Ireland should have no doubt that if they vote for candidates of the Northern Ireland Labour Representation Committee they are voting for candidates who will pursue Labour policies and represent Labour values.

Accordingly we invite voters in Northern Ireland – whether or not you agree with all the details of Labour policy but especially if you do – to vote for Labour candidates who are your neighbours, fellow workers and fellow citizens.

If you do that you will be sending an important message to decision makers in London. And that message is that the people of Northern Ireland demand the right to be able to choose to vote for or vote against all the mainstream parties in Great Britain.

### **Opposition as a force for good government**

The old political division in Northern Ireland between orange and green, unionist and nationalist in which religious affiliation was an accurate predictor of voting intention is clearly breaking down – especially among the younger generations. But sadly it has not hitherto been replaced by a new kind of politics but rather by a form of anti-politics. Half the electorate doesn't bother to vote. In addition there are many who don't bother to get on the electoral register. The disillusionment with, and cynicism about, politics are understandable but they are not the way to change life here for the better. On the contrary – they ensure that all the decisions that affect everyday life in Northern Ireland are more rather than less likely to be made by the sort of people whose views you disagree with.

Labour recognises that many people in Northern Ireland may feel that they are not yet ready to embrace Labour policies. But citizens of all political persuasions have an interest in seeing that their money is spent wisely, that ministers and civil servants are obliged to give a good account of their stewardship of office and the manner in which they carry out their duties, that the laws that are enacted have been carefully scrutinised and will work to the public good.

Opposition is not negative, niggardly or begrudging; it is on the contrary a wholesome and necessary part of a healthy democracy.

We have therefore no hesitation about being emphatic in insisting that the best contribution we can make to the life of our province is as a critical opposition both within and outside the Assembly. At the same time we will be seeking to build up support for our own policies.

Most of the business of the Assembly is set by the Executive. The role of the opposition is consequently a re-active role. To date, with rare exceptions, back bench members of the Assembly have shown little evidence of the tenacity needed to hold ministers and the administration to account. We will be different. We believe that we have already shown that we will take difficult decisions, will not kowtow to authority – even in our own party – but will be fearless in standing up for what we believe is right.

But as well as being re-active to what the Executive brings forward we have our own agenda. It consists of holding up to critical, forensic, and public examination the already evident failures, shortcomings and policy errors of the parties which made up the last Executive and in all probability will constitute the next one.

Labour MLAs will provide a vigorous and vocal opposition. But it will be a principled opposition dedicated to raising the standards of public debate; challenging the proposals and the actions and inactions of Ministers on the basis of whether the measures have been well thought through and are likely to deliver their objectives in a fair, economical and efficient way. We will turn a searchlight on the Executive's proposals to see who benefits and who loses by what they propose. We will not tolerate lazy policy making. With a Labour opposition Ministers need no longer expect subservient respect.

And the quality of government and the management of taxpayers' money will in consequence improve.

### **Our "bad list" starts with the failure to grow the economy and the Corporation Tax policy in particular**

There are two tests of the Executive's ability to manage the Northern Ireland economy – its record and its plans for the future.

For the Executive policy is largely a matter of slicing up the cake handed to it periodically by the British Government. It has virtually no role in raising revenue and has shown scant interest in acquiring that role. It has no mechanism for growing the economy. The normal reward any government reaps from economic growth is increased tax revenues but in our case these flow straight back to the Treasury. Consequently any increase in expenditure in one area is invariably at the expense of a cut in another. Policymaking in the Executive involves robbing Peter to pay Paul and thus varying which minister's face appears in the subsequent photo opportunity.

The Executive did not create the financial crisis of 2008. But they pursued policies which exacerbated its effects. They made no attempt to prevent the overheating of the housing market which has placed many newcomers to home ownership in a position of negative equity. This not only impoverishes those households – possibly for decades - and makes it harder for them to move. It also takes spending power out of the local economy as such a large proportion of household income is taken up by inflated mortgage payments.

Nor has the Executive led an effective recovery. The jobs which the Executive claims to have created are largely the economy recovering of its own accord from the 30,000 job losses that happened in the years following the global financial crisis. Unemployment which stood at 35,000 in 2008 is still 56,000 and shows signs of rising rather than declining. Long term unemployment which pre crisis was around 30% of a smaller unemployed total is now over 47% and youth unemployment has doubled from 8% to 18%.

For some there has thankfully been a recovery; but clearly many have been left behind. The fear must be that they will be left permanently behind.

There is an irony in seeing politicians who put their trust in markets solving all economic problems claiming that they have created thousands of jobs. If they claim that it is their policy framework rather than their direct intervention that creates the jobs they must accept that it is their policy framework which destroys jobs too.

But the Executive's blind faith in market forces refuses to learn from the failures of the past or why else would the principal instrument at their disposal for the next Assembly be the reduction of Corporation Tax?

Labour regards the proposed reduction of Corporation Tax as the all conclusive proof that the parties of the Executive have not the competence to manage and grow the Northern Ireland economy.

We invite the electorate to ask exactly what the Executive propose doing with taxpayers' money.

First question: How much are they giving away to companies which by definition must already be highly profitable in order to benefit from this tax reduction? Is it £200m a year or £320m a year? The Executive cannot even tell us for certain exactly the size of this "gift". And of course it is a "gift" not a contract. With a gift you are not entitled to receive anything in return.

Second question: How many socially useful jobs – for example in health, social services or education would the £200m finance? If each of these socially useful jobs cost £50,000 to fund including salaries and national insurance and workplace overheads, is it a minimum of 4,000 socially useful potential jobs the Executive is writing off?

Third question: The manufacturing sector in Northern Ireland supports directly 85,000 jobs. Last year it paid £75m in corporation tax which with the reduced rate would fall to £45m. How many new jobs in Northern Ireland would have to be created - over and above the number that would have occurred under the existing policy - to produce even the £200m in lost revenue?

In Greek mythology each year some young people had to be sacrificed to a monster called the Minotaur.

Do the people of Northern Ireland really want the Executive each and every year to feed the equivalent of a minimum of 4,000 nurses and doctors to enhance the profits of the most profitable companies? At least in the Greek story the Minotaur was killed and youth of Greece were liberated;

The youth of Northern Ireland may not be so lucky. Why? Because once the rate of corporation tax is reduced it will be difficult to reverse except in the context of the establishment of a higher rate becoming mandatory across the European Union.

For all these reasons Labour members of the Assembly will strenuously oppose the implementation of this measure.

If this proposal is implemented Labour members of the Assembly will introduce a bill in the Assembly called the "Corporation Tax Performance Monitoring Bill" to require the Executive to publish each

year a balance sheet of the costs and benefits to Northern Ireland of the reduction of Corporation Tax.

Should this bill be voted down by the Assembly we will seek the support of the trade union movement and civil society to establish an independent monitor outside an Assembly which will clearly have abandoned its duty to hold the Executive to account.

### **Safeguarding the people's assets**

Recent administrations have followed the Tory practice of privatising parts of the economic infrastructure which are natural monopolies. We all pay a high price for this. When these assets are re-sold the new owners seek to recover the inflated purchase price by imposing new charges on a defenceless public – such as the passenger set down charges at Belfast International Airport.

Privatising natural monopolies is economically inefficient and imposes additional costs on consumers and businesses. We do not trust the Executive parties to safeguard public assets. Our current publicly owned assets such as Translink, the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and the invaluable Harbour Estate that belongs to the people of Belfast, the social housing stock and Northern Ireland Water all need to be put beyond the risk of privatisation. We will oppose any further privatisation and press for the establishment of mutual ownership of any public assets at risk of being privatised.

We will also press the Executive to amend the law so that where a private company which currently owns electricity, gas or airports and wishes to sell any or all of its assets the sale must be proceed at a pace which permits the formulation of a bid from a cooperative, mutual or public interest vehicle.

### **Managing the transition to a low carbon energy system**

Northern Ireland like the rest of the European Union is reducing its carbon emissions. There are two principal ways of doing this: by energy efficiency – that is using less energy to achieve the same outcome; and by using energy from less polluting sources.

Northern Ireland should have welcomed the pressure to move to a low carbon economy because that is where our natural advantage lies. When fossil fuels were dominant we had to import them. But compared to the rest of Great Britain and much of mainland Europe we are wealthy in renewable resources.

The energy transition provided the once in a century opportunity to endow Northern Ireland with energy security because energy would be largely sourced here; to achieve energy price stability because the price of wind does not fluctuate; and to secure the profits of ownership. None of these potential gains have been realised because the Executive is totally wedded to allowing markets to set the price of energy and the profits from the ownership of energy continue to seep out of Northern Ireland as surely as they did when we were a hundred percent dependent on imported coal, oil and gas.

People in Northern Ireland need to be given the opportunity step by step of establishing an ownership stake in energy through the promotion of community energy co-operatives, and the facilitation of a large scale accredited roll out of retrofitted energy efficiency measures to the housing stock. And the SME sector which has built up an industry in photovoltaics, small scale hydro

and wind, heat pumps, wood pellet boilers must be supported by a consistent framework which does not change year on year at the whim of ministers. Business needs the protection of a stable and predictable framework and a Labour opposition would ensure that ministers delivered that.

### **Reducing household living costs**

The structure of government here frustrates the scope for joining up public policies which would deliver the best and most efficient outcomes. Households can enjoy a higher standard of living and a better quality of life if they have a higher income. But they can also experience the same gain in quality of life if they have to pay less for some of life's necessities or if public services are delivered in an integrated way.

Housing costs are for many - and in particular for young families - the biggest element in the household budgets. And we are all affected by their burden because every pound that goes in rent or mortgage is a pound less to spend on other goods or services in the local economy. House prices inflated by scarcity and housing bubbles in particular are bad for families and have a deflationary effect on the local economy. Inflated house prices and a restricted social housing sector force many into the private rented sector where rent is subsidised by the tax payer through housing benefit.

A holistic approach to managing the supply of housing and the evolution and structure of the housing market is one of the most important economic management tools at the disposal of the Executive if it wishes to protect citizens' health and living standards, improve the life chances of its children and generally enhance the quality of life of people in Northern Ireland. With a growing population this will necessitate ensuring that the supply of housing keeps sufficiently in step with demographic and social changes so that there are no housing bubbles, no new periods when negative equity is created and that new tenure forms of social housing such as housing cooperatives become available for those who want security without being locked into full ownership.

Hitherto there has been no sign that the Executive Parties understand that managing the housing supply is critical to the economic well-being and the ease of mind of the entire population. But with a Labour opposition in the next Assembly they will have to understand the central importance of managing housing policy in a holistic way so that housing works for the general economic interest and not against it.

But there are other ways in which the costs to which citizens are exposed could be reduced at minimal cost to society and greater overall gain to the economy. Free travel for pensioners has the effect of reducing carbon emissions and improving the usage of buses and trains. But insofar as they don't require additional buses or trains to be run the true economic cost must be miniscule. The extension of this system to everyone up to the age of 25 would reduce the cost of living for both students and young workers and for the latter make securing that first job both easier and more worthwhile. Lower household energy bills should be a by-product of an intelligent linking of housing policy and a strategy for combatting climate change.

There must be many opportunities for joined up solutions in our society which would result in a much more efficient and cost effective expenditure of public money. Labour members would canvass them from the public and press ministers to consider them.

### **The parasites of quangoland: putting the power of patronage under the microscope**



This administration has built up a cadre of people who take money from the public purse by sitting on boards of various bodies where they contribute their “expertise”. The processes by which they are appointed are opaque and the value of their contribution is not measured and recorded. But it is clear that the sorts of people who populate these boards are drawn from a narrow spectrum of society. Manual workers or other citizens who have experience of these sectors “at the coal face” are never appointed. In general business experience is valued above all else - though in practice the most successful businessmen are likely to be fully occupied running and developing their businesses. Ministers also bring with them special advisers into office without there being any objective test of whether the advisers have any relevant experience or abilities. This contributes to the public feeling that a separate class of people is emerging cut off from the people they are supposed to represent and for whom politics is a self-regarding career option for a new self-perpetuating oligarchy: it reinforces public cynicism with politics and politicians.

We will press for the publication of a full list of all appointments which are made via ministerial or civil service patronage and the publication of their payments from the public purse as well as the evidence of the contribution they have made to the boards to which they were appointed.

We will seek evidence that appointments are more reflective of a broad range of the skills and talents of the population; that candidates for appointment are vetted beforehand and that there is no scope for political cronyism.

We will also insist, before any appointment via ministerial patronage is confirmed, that it is referred for scrutiny to a committee of MLAs who will have the right through oral examination of the candidate to establish his or her potential to make a positive contribution to the organisation in question.

### **Challenging costs in health and education**

Health and Education account for a very large proportion of the public expenditure overseen by the Assembly. The education and skilling of the next generation and the care of any and every citizen who is either going through a short term physical or mental difficulty or who has to cope with chronic or long term disabilities are both central to our society and our sense of solidarity and inter dependence.

These sectors are both cherished and the source of frustration and disenchantment.

It is not the job of the opposition to attempt to micro manage these departments. It requires all the resources of large government departments to do that. But it is the job of the opposition to test and challenge any aspect of Executive policy in managing these vital institutions.

Particular general areas of concern are:

- The possibility that decisions are made by politicians for party or constituency reasons and not for the best delivery of the service in question;
- The persistent concern that overall outcomes per pound spent is inferior to what is achieved elsewhere;
- The discontent and demoralisation of staff and in particular staff in those professions for which their work is not just a job but a vocation.

## **UK wide laws on human rights and an end to regional criminalisation**

The archaic laws in Northern Ireland on matters of human rights in general and as they affect the female population in particular have been useful to sectarian politicians in Northern Ireland as a convenient way of distracting public concern from pressing social and economic issues.

Labour will campaign for Westminster's legislation on human rights to be the minimum standard that can be applied in Northern Ireland reflecting our unequivocal support for equal marriage, same sex adoption rights, trans and gender equality and our opposition to the lifetime ban on gay blood donation.

In Labour's view it is absurd that in a single state there can be such differences on these matters as to make a person guilty of a serious crime which would not be a crime elsewhere in the same state. It would be absurd to have a county council in England legislating on abortion and equal marriage and it is absurd to have a regional authority here having these powers. It is doubly absurd because the Northern Ireland exception is not about defending individual rights but of removing them. However horrific the circumstances in which a woman became pregnant or however harrowing might be the life prospects of the foetus, if the pregnancy is carried to term, no-one proposes compelling a woman in that predicament to have an abortion. On the contrary society will respect and support her decision. But what the current law does is give people not involved in that situation the power to impose all the pain of an outcome on others. It is power without responsibility. It is thus the very opposite of the protection of a human right. It is a licence to bully.

## **Incentives to grow the economy**

Northern Ireland has been well treated by the Barnett formula which has consistently given us a generous per capita share of increases in public expenditure in the United Kingdom. The distribution of resources within the United Kingdom is subject currently to pressure to change and the present government seems determined to shrink the proportion of GDP which will be directed by the state.

The present arrangements do appear, from a Northern Ireland perspective, to have one particular weakness. If Northern Ireland does allocate its resources to stimulating economic growth and this results in an increase in tax revenues in the form of income tax and VAT paid by employees the additional tax revenue goes to the treasury. At an overall UK level that makes perfect sense and is equitable but at a Northern Ireland level it means there is no direct incentive to grow the economy.

In general the Executive is without its own financial instruments and shows no sign of wanting to develop them after its sole heroic and confused foray into the plastic bags tax.

A Labour opposition would press the Executive on the failure to develop and mobilise own resources. Scotland is getting and Wales looks likely to receive devolved powers in Airline Passenger Duty (APD). Northern Ireland's interest and potential in this matter are different to theirs because residents of Northern Ireland have the option – exercised 850,000 times last year – of flying out of Dublin which is especially valuable on long haul flights. But the Executive might have sought to have APD credited to us as a purely local tax like regional rates as it is mainly paid for by Northern Irish people as air travel is inescapably unique to Northern Ireland for day to day links with Great Britain.

There are other examples. In matters of managing local savings the Executive far from extending its range of powers has relinquished powers back to London. There is a great deal of unmet need for investment in housing and infrastructure but the savings amassed by credit unions and other sources of local savings cannot at present be accessed for enabling local money to be used safely, securely and responsibly to meet local need. A Labour opposition would exploit the potential of the Assembly committees to press Ministers on their failure to mobilise regional resources and develop regional financial instruments which could contribute much both materially and psychologically to the self-sustaining growth of the regional economy.

### **Cross Border institutions – making them work for Northern Ireland.**

There is little evidence that either part of Ireland is genuinely interested in fully exploiting the scope for managing to the mutual benefit of all the people who live on this island the opportunity to save costs and share resources. The Republic has become much more inward looking since the financial crisis and in the north the Unionists seem to lack the confidence to deal with the Republic as equal partners on the island. But north-south issues are issues where Northern Ireland should punch fearlessly and proudly well above its weight and exploit the opportunities which our situation gives us to complete the single energy market so that it works for us and not against our manufacturing sector, to work together to make our island a low carbon jewel in the European crown, to develop transport infrastructure, to manage the tourist potential of our interior waterways, canals, rivers and lakes and exploit the mineral, energy and fishing potential of our coastal waters and continental shelf, to harmonise plans for healthcare and educational and training programmes in border areas.

While on the northern side our politicians define themselves as Orange and Green we will never be able to get the fullest advantage from cross border cooperation. But until we totally change Northern Ireland's political culture a Labour opposition will hold ministers – orange and green alike – to account for their failures to maximise on a business-like pragmatic basis the opportunities for deriving tangible benefits from cross border cooperation.

### **Conclusion.**

There are many signs that Northern Ireland is changing.

The younger generation in particular is no longer so easily corralled into the traditional patterns of orange and green politics. And they also know that the present neo-liberal model of the global economy does not offer them the prospect of the ever improving quality of life which was the expectation of every generation growing up in the twentieth century.

And they can see that as the Executive Parties don't understand the question there is no way they will know how to provide an answer.

Our population is also gradually changing and the proportion of the population originating from outside Northern Ireland is also growing. These New Northern Irish may be indifferent to or may have views on whether we should remain in the United Kingdom or at some stage seek to join the Irish Republic. But the sharp orange and green division is not part of their culture and the way they view world.

Northern Ireland is a special place for all of us simply because it is our shared home. Making it a good place to live in and a good place in which to bring up a family hurts no traditional allegiance. And if that is our shared aspiration the forces which divided, weakened and disfigured our society in the past can be harnessed to making this a very special polity of which the people of Northern Ireland of all traditions, faiths and allegiances will be proud.

To make this vision a reality is the contribution Labour brings to the politics of Northern Ireland.

This may not be the election when everything will change. But it is the election in which the seeds of change are well and truly being sown.