

The Resilience of Cross-community Northern Irish Labour

"I do think we should have a Labour candidate that people can vote for wherever they live and depriving them of that is not the right thing to do".

Sir Keir Starmer MP. The Times. 24.12.21.



A contribution by the Labour Party in Northern Ireland (LPNI) to the NEC Review 2023 on standing Labour Party candidates in Northern Ireland

The suppression of Northern Irish Labour

The governmental architects of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement constructed a binary peace agreement around the two main communal/national traditions in Northern Ireland. It is a major achievement that has held for 25 years.

To do so, they had to disappear a third tradition, the cross-community Northern Irish Labour tradition. The two governments achieve this by ruthlessly suppressing Labour Party candidates in Northern Ireland elections.

It is literally impossible to vote for a Labour candidate in Northern Ireland. The basic democratic right to vote for a candidate of a major party of UK government is denied.

This pamphlet traces the history of the Northern Irish Labour tradition over the past one hundred and fifty years. It highlights how Labour's development has been thwarted at every stage by the intervention of state actors with their own agendas. The detrimental impact of this deliberate policy of suppression of Labour Party politics on inter-community relations is impossible to calculate.

LPNI demands that Northern Irish politics be emancipated from this suppression and that we are given the right both to stand Labour Party candidates and to vote for them.

The formative Labour years

Trades unions had been developing in the north of Ireland in the 1870s and 1880s, in the prevailing Lib/Lab political ethos of the time. The Belfast Trades Council (BTC) was established in 1881.

The introduction of Gladstone's First Home Rule Bill in 1886 split the Liberal Party in Ulster, resulting in the formation of the Liberal Unionists.

Gladstone's Bill also split the Belfast Trades Council. Its founding Secretary, a Liberal who had stood as a Labour candidate in 1885, supported the Liberal Party's all-Ireland Home Rule Bill against the wishes of the majority of BTC's members and had to resign.

The Liberal Unionists went into alliance with the Conservatives to oppose Home Rule. They eventually merged into the Ulster Unionist Party on its formation in 1905.

This meant the local labour movement, unusually for the time, had to develop in its early days without any Liberal Party support.

Labour politics recovered over the following two decades. A Belfast branch of the Independent Labour Party was established in 1892. In 1897, six Labour members were elected to Belfast corporation.

The holding of the TUC's Annual Conference in Belfast in 1893 gave a boost to the local Labour movement. Trade union membership was expanding rapidly, organised mostly in GB-based unions. With the upsurge of New Unionism membership was

spreading out from the skilled to the semi-skilled and unskilled workforce.

In 1903, Belfast Trades Council formed a branch of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC).



Belfast Labour Representation Committee Rally. Early 1900s.

The LRC formally adopted a change of name to The Labour Party and held its first Annual Conference as The Labour Party in Belfast's Wellington Hall in 1907.

This Labour buoyancy was reflected in William Walker's narrow failure to win a Westminster seat for the Labour Representation Committee in North Belfast in 1906. Keir Hardie MP had been his LRC election agent and spoke on his electoral platform in a Westminster by-election the previous year.



Keir Hardie speaking at William Walker's election meeting.

It has been argued that at this time the Belfast Labour Movement was in advance of those in Glasgow and Liverpool.

The re-emergence of the Home Rule issue following the election of the Liberal Government in 1905, set local Labour back. The Third Home Rule Bill introduced in 1912 resulted in polarisation between Irish nationalism, backed by the Liberal Party and UK Labour, and Ulster Unionism backed by the Conservative and Liberal Unionist Party. Cross-community Northern Irish Labour was squeezed between these two massive political forces.

The First World War ended in a period of serious industrial conflict. The massive Belfast '44 hour' engineering strike of 1919 was followed by Labour taking twelve of the sixty seats in Belfast City Hall in the municipal elections in 1920.

The Sinn Fein led Provisional Government under Michael Collins came to power in the south of Ireland in 1920. That Government's decision to extend the IRA campaign to the north of Ireland ('The Northern Offensive'), together with the 'Belfast Boycott', resulted in maximum local nationalist-unionist polarisation.

The Northern Irish Labour movement (both political and industrial) suffered severely at the hands of the subsequent Loyalist reaction, which considered UK Labour (and local Labour by association) to be in league with Sinn Fein.

Northern Irish Labour had already been severely weakened by the decision of the Labour Party NEC in 1919 to refuse the affiliation of the Belfast Labour Party (formed in 1917) as a CLP. The Labour Party's new 1918 constitution allowed for individual membership. This refusal resulted from a deal the NEC had made with the newly formed Irish TUC and Labour Party in 1913-14. This gave that body organising rights for the island of Ireland, in an assumed future context of all-Ireland Home Rule.

Belfast Labour was thus in a very weakened state when, following partition, Northern Ireland was confirmed as part of the UK in 1921.

Unionist majority rule

Thus, post-partition, Belfast Labour was on its own. It was rejected by UK Labour, while Dublin-based Irish Labour was essentially no longer interested. The Labour Party (NI), an independent provincial party, later to be called the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP), was set up in 1924, the same year as the first Labour Government came to power. Its platform was neither unionist or nationalist.

The inter-war period was characterised by the successful attempts of Sir James Craig, the Unionist Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, to consolidate Unionist Party political hegemony. The main threats to this were perceived to come from

two quarters: militant Unionist independents splitting the Unionist vote and the cross-community Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP), that also had the potential to split the unionist vote. The Nationalists (largely abstaining) were not thought to represent a threat at the time.

Early elections to the Stormont parliament were held under a multi-seat PR STV electoral system. This was changed by the Unionist Government so that the 1929 election was held under the Westminster style First-past-the post system.

As intended by the Government, both the NILP and the Unionist independents were damaged as a result, with the NILP reduced to winning just one seat.

The Unionist Government's stated aim was to force Northern Ireland politics into two confrontational communal blocs: you could either be for the Union or for Dublin rule. Northern Irish Labour was weakened by this self-serving strategy.

Various requests were made by the NILP to Labour's NEC during the inter-war period for UK Labour to stand candidates in Northern Ireland. All were rejected. The Labour Party let Unionist political hegemony in Northern Ireland, with its discriminatory practices, continue unopposed.

While continuing to receive funding from thousands of affiliated trade unionists in Northern Ireland who had 'contracted in' to pay the political levy, Labour's NEC ignored requests from the NILP for help with its finances.

The effect of this studied neglect on catholic and protestant working class inter-community relations was ignored. As far as

the NEC was concerned, Northern Irish Catholics would just have to grin and bear living under permanent Unionist majority rule.

Post World War 2

The Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) revived strongly during the full employment economy of World War 2. It won a key by-election in 1941 and became the main opposition to a poorly performing Unionist Government. Jack Beattie won the West Belfast seat for the NILP in a Westminster bye-election in 1943.

This revival was cut short by the decision of the Irish Inter-Party Government under John Costello in 1948, to declare Ireland a Republic and to leave the Commonwealth. In response, the Attlee Government brought in the Government of Ireland Act 1949.

This put the constitutional future of Northern Ireland in the hands of the Unionist majority of MPs in the Stormont Parliament. This was a powerful motivation for continued Unionist electoral unity, again to the detriment of the NILP.

The idea that the NILP could become a region of UK Labour was floated in the press at this time and rejected by the NEC amid strong opposition from the Irish Labour Party (ILP), a component part of the Costello coalition Government.

To add to the NILP's woes, the Irish Labour Party decided it would form branches and run candidates in Northern Ireland

constituencies. The NILP was split and the links between the two parties, via a Joint Consultative Committee, were sundered.

The Irish Anti-Partition League then ran candidates in what became known as the 'Chapel-gate' 1949 Stormont election. In reaction to this perceived constitutional crisis, the NILP came out in support of the constitutional guarantee in the Atlee Act. The ensuing acute polarisation allowed the Unionist Party to consolidate its governmental hegemony at the electoral expense of the NILP.

The NILP's fortunes revived in the 1950s, winning four seats in the Stormont Parliament elections of 1958 and 1962. It was attracting a growing cross-community vote. The NILP became the Official Opposition at a time of Nationalist Party abstention from Stormont.

Seeing the revived Northern Ireland Labour Party as a real threat to Unionist Government hegemony, the Unionist Party under its new leader Terence O'Neill MP purposefully targetted the NILP in the 1965 Stormont election. His modernisation agenda cost them seats.

Like Sir James Craig in the inter-war period, in its desire for majority Unionist (protestant) communal unity, the Unionist Party couldn't tolerate the success of a middle of the road cross-community Labour Party.

The NILP was articulating civil liberties demands and won over 100,000 votes in the 1964 Westminster general election, but no seats. It was developing as an electoral vehicle which increasingly had the support of catholic community and could have enabled

that community to achieve their place in the sun, without violence.

Paddy Devlin was elected the NILP MP for Falls in the Stormont election of February 1969, illustrating the strength of its catholic support. However, the Unionist Party had no vision and could only see the NILP as a challenger to its hold on power.

The growth of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s put further strains on the NILP. The party had been, from the late 1950s, increasingly articulating concerns about civil rights and discrimination. In 1967, together with the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC ICTU), the NILP made a strong representation to Terence O'Neill's Unionist Government on the issue of citizens' rights such as 'one man-one vote'. It was strongly rebuffed.

The Northern Ireland Labour Party was represented on the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) Executive. The EC of the NILP voted to send a speaker, Erskine Holmes, to the first civil rights march – from Coalisland to Dungannon. The NILP also had many members who were active on the ground on civil rights issues – such as Jack Hassard in Dungannon, Paddy Devlin in West Belfast and Eamonn McCann in Derry.

However, when NICRA backed the civil rights demands with militant street activity, the NILP was outflanked. With its commitment to constitutional and parliamentary methods and a tendency to timidity from a fear of appearing sectarian, it fell between two stools.

The NILP was also undermined at the time by the UK Labour Government's ongoing support for O'Neill's Unionist

Government, as it struggled to meet NICRA's demands. Even after the troops went in in August 1969, Labour continued to prop up the Unionist Government, rather than get involved itself and bring about necessary reform.

The NILP's vote held up in the 1970 Westminster general election. However, the emergence of the SDLP in the summer of 1970, bringing together civil rights leaders, Nationalist and Republican Labour politicians, was again to split the party and hive off a lot of its catholic support.

The Alliance Party (sister party of the Liberal Democrats) was also formed that year and competed for centrist NILP supporters in both communities.

The start of the Provisional IRA campaign in 1970, with its violence aimed at forcing a united Ireland, provoked an inevitable security response. This would further polarise the electorate and fatally damage the NILP's prospects.

The emergence of the SDLP, led at the time by the ex-Republican Labour MP, Gerry Fitt, had come with the tacit support of the both the Irish and British governments. The Labour Party leadership held talks with the SDLP in late 1971.

At about the same time, Harold Wilson, now Leader of the Opposition, went public with his 15-point plan for a united Ireland. This caused the NILP to lose support to the newly formed DUP.

Following Direct Rule in 1972, instead of domination by one community, the two communities power-sharing model would become the norm. First-past-the-post was replaced by PR STV for

local government and Stormont elections. Cross-community Labour was increasingly sidelined in favour of the growing SDLP, whose appeal was largely to the catholic community.

Building the Right2Stand campaign

The demand for Labour candidates in Northern Ireland goes back to the refusal by the Labour Party of the affiliation of Belfast Labour Party as a CLP in 1919. The NILP had no option but to be a stand alone Labour Party at its formation in 1924.

The demand that UK Labour run candidates in Northern Ireland was raised with the NEC a number of times in the inter-war period but was repeatedly turned down.

The suggestion that the NILP could become a regional wing of the Labour Party was floated in the media after the war in 1948, but was again turned down by Labour's NEC.

Faced with the Irish Government's decision to leave the Commonwealth and become a Republic, Attlee's Labour Government gave its effective backing to the Brookeborough-led Unionist Government.

The demand that the NILP become a Regional Council of UK Labour was raised again by the NILP in 1970, at the suggestion of Harry Nicholas, the Labour Party General Secretary.

Lobbying by the Irish Fianna Fail Government and the Irish Labour Party led to the NILP's demand for regional status being rejected by the NEC in January 1971, presumably to ease the launch of the SDLP. As in 1920, cross-community Northern Irish Labour was held out to dry by UK Labour's NEC.

In February 1971, Jim Callaghan MP, then Shadow Home Secretary, came to Belfast on behalf of the Labour Party and gave a highly encouraging address to a rally of over 1200 cross-community NILP supporters in the Ulster Hall. He later made it clear in *A House Divided* that he had thought the cross-community NILP was the way forward and that he didn't favour the SDLP which, he wrote, only appealed to one community and had absolutely no trade union support.



Jim Callaghan MP. A strong supporter of the cross-community NILP.

Recent decades have been dominated by attempts by the Irish and UK Governments to operationalise power-sharing devolved government in Northern Ireland, based on a two communities model.

The 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement marks the culmination of this approach. However, to put the Agreement in place it was necessary to suppress cross-community Labour. The SDLP, which at the time was the largest party representing the nationalist community, had to be electorally protected against Sinn Fein. Communalism again triumphed over cross-community Labour.

Campaigners for the Right2Stand Labour candidates and for the rights of people in Northern Ireland to be able to vote for a Labour government, had been extremely active over the previous twenty or so years. However, it was made crystal clear by the Blair leadership that cross-community Labour would be suppressed as a precondition for the construction of a power-sharing agreement between the communal blocs.

Labour Party supporters have continued campaigning for proper Labour Party representation. Following an anti-discrimination court case backed by one of our supportive affiliated trade unions, Labour supporters won the right to individual membership of the Labour Party in 2003, something denied from 1919. The party could no longer politically justify denying membership to residents of Northern Ireland, when you could join it if you lived anywhere else in the world.

Then in 2007, following another court case, the growing Labour Party membership in Northern Ireland won the right to have a Multi-constituency CLP covering all 18 Northern Ireland constituencies.

Northern Irish Labour Party members now have essentially full rights within the party, except the right to stand Labour candidates. We are thus unable to campaign electorally to build cross-community anti-sectarian Labour politics in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland electorate is denied the right to vote to elect a Labour government.

It is more than a hundred years since this basic democratic demand for the right of Northern Irish people to be able to vote for a Labour Government was first raised in 1919.

In refusing this demand for Labour representation over the decades, the Labour Party has essentially, directly or indirectly, propped up communal politics of one variety or another in Northern Ireland. We can only speculate about how damaging Labour's suppression of basic democratic political rights in Northern Ireland has been to inter-community relations.



The late Baroness May Blood and the late Paddy Devlin MP. Past LPNI Presidents.

Until the Troubles broke out it was the single community protestant Unionist majority government that benefited politically from Labour's abstention. The catholic community,

denied the right to engage in Labour Party politics had, in addition, to bear the discriminatory brunt of this arrangement.

Since the early 1970s, Labour has supported the two communities model, facilitated by the introduction of PR STV in 1973 at the time of the ill-fated Sunningdale power-sharing initiative. This has clearly transformed the position of the catholic/nationalist community. However, the difficulties the Stormont Executive is currently facing under the Good Friday Agreement suggests the two communities model is facing its own serious problems.

The weakness of the two communities model is that it incentivises the more militant communal-oriented parties to be the largest party in their community. They are compelled to target the median voter in their respective communities and not the median voter of the whole electorate.

This has resulted in the dominance of Sinn Fein and the DUP at the expense of the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists. It drives the communities apart, encourages sectarian competition, renders power-sharing difficult and does not facilitate reconciliation. The weakened SDLP is no longer a buffer against Sinn Fein.

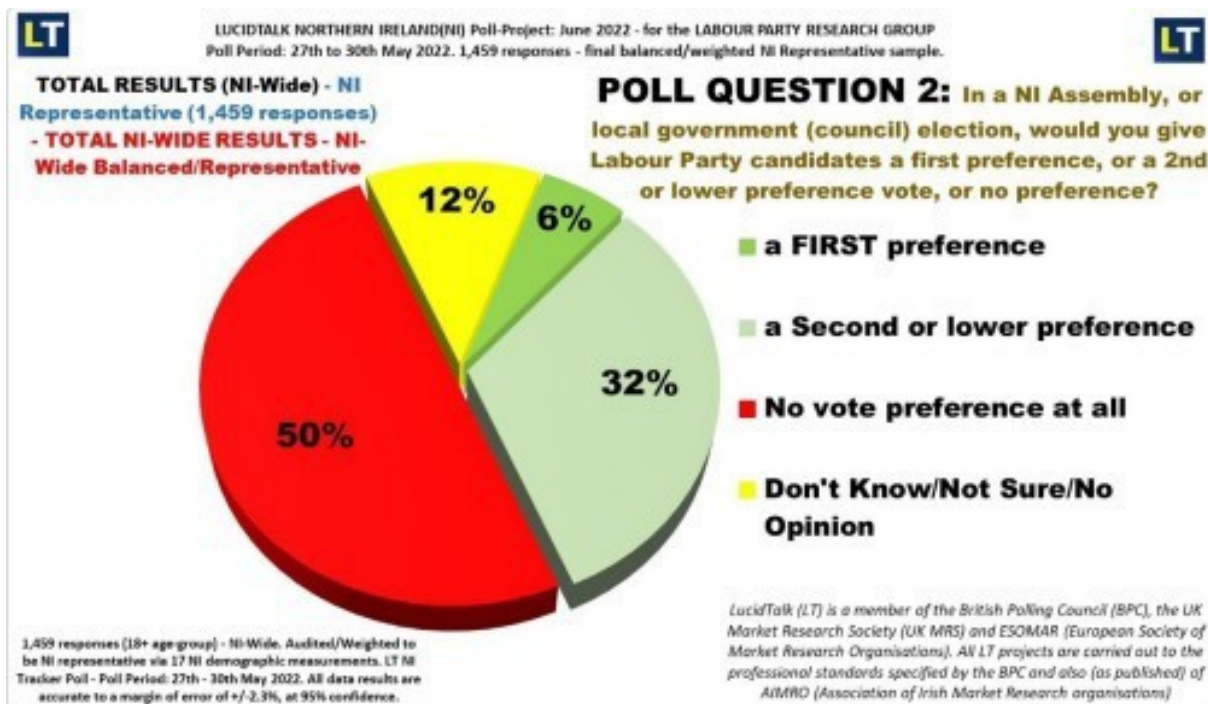
The hope of emerging new politics

Meanwhile Northern Irish politics have been evolving. We have seen over the past number of years the emergence of a 'third community'. The 2020 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey showed the proportion of the population identifying as neither Unionist or Nationalist has now reached 42 per cent. For the 25-34 age group this figure reaches as high as 54 per cent.

Another feature of our politics has been the rapid growth of our minority ethnic and migrant communities. Our politics, dominated by the communal parties focussing on the green and orange divide, fail to reflect the rapidly growing diversity of the Northern Ireland population. As a result our ethnic minority communities feel overlooked and unrepresented in local government and the Stormont Assembly.

Recent election results have shown the growth of the so-called 'Other' category (neither Nationalist or Unionist). This is exemplified by the growth of the Alliance Party (sister party of the Liberal Democrats) and the emergence of the Greens – what we might call the middle ground. However, what should be the main 'left' constituent of the this middle ground is missing – the Labour Party.

Our own opinion polling research, commissioned from LucidTalk, suggests there is a substantial demand for Labour Party politics in Northern Ireland. Six per cent of respondents to our poll said they would give Labour party candidates a first preference vote. A further thirty two per cent said they would give Labour candidates a second or lower preference. This support was very much cross-community.



Under our PR STV system of voting for District Council and Stormont Assembly elections, this level of support would likely result in Labour candidates being elected. This is a very positive result for a party starting from scratch.

Northern Irish Labour has had enough of a punishment beating from parties of government in both jurisdictions. UK Labour must allow Labour candidates to stand. Working with the Cooperative Party (NI) and the affiliated trade unions, in opposition to the Tory Government, they can build on the resilient cross-community Northern Irish Labour tradition.

If we are to learn lessons from the failures of the past, this must surely be the best way forward to achieve reconciliation between our divided communities.

**Published by The Labour Party in Northern Ireland (LPNI)
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