

WHAT IMPACTS ON YOUNG PEOPLE?

The above is an interesting question. In the 21st Century, we see more and more young people switching off from politics. Those with an active interest in politics are often derided by their peers. Many young people have no idea who the Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition or Chancellor of the Exchequer is. An oft-quoted statistic is that more young people (aged 18-24) voted in the final of the Channel 4 TV series 'Big Brother' in 2001 than voted in the General Election of the same year, which saw a record low turnout of 59%.

Of course, these problems are not specific to Britain; certainly, elsewhere in the United Kingdom, it is a struggle to interest young people in politics as we traditionally know it. More 'modern' forms of political activity appear to be more youth friendly; signing a petition, going on a protest march, hurling verbal (and possibly physical abuse) at President Bush, amongst other leading politicians. The Live 8 Campaign of 2005, with its attendant white wristbands and worldwide open air concerts, were a masterpiece in youth political involvement. Yet, Young Labour, Conservative Future, etc, are experiencing declines in membership. Indeed, the Young Conservatives, that party's former youth wing, was forced to fold for lack of membership.

In Northern Ireland, which traditionally has seen a greater degree of political interest and involvement than elsewhere in the UK, many of these issues also ring true. Young people appear to have little interest in the traditional way of politics, as a cursory glance at the marked registers will show. That said, it seems that activism seems to mean a healthy membership; to that end, the Young Democrats and Ogra Shinn Fein are blessed with fairly strong membership. But, politics in Northern Ireland has suffered from stagnation. Many young people have traditionally been genuinely repelled by the seemingly endless tit for tat, Unionist v Nationalist struggles, the ongoing violence, the sectarianism and the apparent stagnation; for decades, Ian Paisley, Reg Empey, Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, William McCrea, Peter Robinson, etc, have been the faces of local politics. Occasionally, the new faces do appear on the scene, such as Basil McCrea, Daithi McKay, Christopher Stalford, etc, but when they promote basically the same message as those that went before them, what really has changed? Young people are idealistic creatures; they want to make their mark on the world, both as individuals and as a generation, and in Northern Ireland, recent political events excepted, local politics is really just one long skirmish. The oft-quoted phrase 'a sectarian headcount' is used to describe elections to any representative body. Unfortunately, many young people here see elections, and politics generally, as exactly that, and choose to opt out.

The aforementioned problem of political monotony is also a problem, for the UUP as much as anyone else. In 1998, we saw Reg Empey, Michael McGimpsey, Alan McFarland, Fred Cobain, etc as key UUP spokesmen; a decade on, they are still key party representatives, although many faces that were familiar then, such as John Taylor, Ken Maginess, David Trimble, etc, have moved on. Relatively little fresh talent has come up through the ranks to replace them, Basil McCrea, John McCallister and David McNarry being just about it. Perhaps more than any other party, the UUP suffers from a lack of women and a lack of young people. The benches of most other parties have many young representatives. The DUP have Simon Hamilton, Michelle McIlveen, Ian McCrea and Alastair Ross. Sinn Fein has Michelle O'Neill, John O'Dowd, Daithi McKay and Michelle Gildernew. The UUP are the only party (excepting Brian Wilson of the Green Party) to have an Assembly team entirely composed of primarily middle aged males. While the Ulster Young Unionist Council has been making significant headway in recent years (and we have every reason to hope that 2008 will be a good year

also) it still produces no real answer to the party's misfortunes with youth. Surveys conducted in recent times show that we poll very badly amongst many youth (that is, those who actually care enough to vote.) We trail the DUP very heavily. Quite simply, while our Assembly team are very worthy and are stern advocates for the Union, for Northern Ireland and for their constituents, they are not representative of the community at large. At local government level, the possibility of co-opting competent young people to replace older councillors should be seriously considered. The lifetime of devotion to the community and the party of these councillors should not (and will not be) forgotten; but, they will not be around forever. It is important to bring on the next generation of elected representatives. A familiar name and face should not be the main attribute for selection, if that elected representative has occupied his/her position for twenty years. Other parties are semi-permanently engaged in training their next generation. I see no reason why the Ulster Unionist Party cannot do likewise. Anyone set on a career in elected politics will be keen to have a belief that they will be selected to fight a winnable seat while still relatively young. More often than not, that will require a long serving public representative to stand aside in their favour. I am not suggesting a mass cull of all senior elected representatives, or indeed, all those over a certain age! I am suggesting that it will do our party no harm at all to promote young candidates, in tandem with those with several years' experience behind them. This, after all, is how the DUP and Sinn Fein do it. Even Traditional Unionist Voice have wheeled out a highly electable candidate for the Dromore area by-election in Banbridge District; Keith Harbinson is a well-known young solicitor, believed to have been the youngest in the UK when he qualified.

There remains also the real issue of female representation. NI politics has always been a 'cold house' for women. While remaining significantly outnumbered in the Assembly, there are now more females than ever in the Chamber, although none are Ulster Unionists. The DUP push their prominent women quite well, i.e. Iris Robinson, Arlene Foster, etc, as do Sinn Fein: Michelle Gildernew, Catriona Ruane, Bairbre De Brun, Sue Ramsey, etc. Even the SDLP have Margaret Ritchie, Mary Bradley, Dolores Kelly, and the Alliance Party has Naomi Long and Anna Lo. As I have already mentioned, our party suffers from a severe female deficit. Notwithstanding the victory of a female UUP candidate in the Dromore by-election to Banbridge District Council, we have very considerable progress to make if we are to address the near-terminal lack of women in our party, especially young women.

There is a danger of my digressing from the main point, which is the involvement of youth in politics. While having an active youth wing can help (especially when that centralised body has a local branch, organising its own meetings, social events, fundraisers, etc) it alone cannot make for youth engagement. I believe that elected politicians, at all levels of legislature, have to make a greater effort to engage with young people. If that involves getting involved in community projects to help young people (for example, the construction of a youth centre) touring local schools to address sixth formers (thus making his/herself available for questions and answers), or simply going out with the sole intention of meeting and talking to late teenage and twenty something voters, so be it. Too many of our young people just don't see politics as relevant to their lives. If that attitude continues, the future does not bode well for democracy in this country.

I believe that the bulk of young people need to be assured that Northern Ireland politics will not revolve around the hoary old chestnut of the border for yet another generation. It needs to be relevant; it needs to impact on their day-to-day lives. This is the real glory of devolution. Local politicians are in control of education, healthcare, transport, university provision, etc. It is up to the politicians to make these issues really matter to people, and to make the Assembly matter

too. Too many people of all ages see Stormont as merely 'the big house on the hill' and take little or no interest in the proceedings of business. Local legislative power must be seen to impact positively on the lives of local people, or we must ask ourselves why it is there. As far as most people are concerned, the border is no longer an issue. The Union is safe for as long as we want it to be. Poll after poll shows that the majority of people in Northern Ireland are in favour of the *status quo*. Even the government of the Republic of Ireland have renounced their old territorial claim. Only republican romantics and scaremongering dissident Unionists still consider the border a major issue.

That is not to say we should downplay the Union; Northern Ireland thrives and survives under the Union, and we have all the benefits of British citizenship. In an increasingly fractured period for national identity, I believe the Ulster Unionist Party can make a case for being a BRITISH party, promoting the values of positive, modern, 21st Century Britishness, as opposed to 'little Ulster' parochialism and a mythical, 32 county, Gaelic, Irish state. Britishness is an all-embracing identity – Scots, Welsh, Ulster, Irish, Cornish, Manx, Londoner, Mancunian and Geordie, not to mention the Commonwealth immigrants. The sectarian ethos of 'little Ulsterism' (to all intents and purposes, a Protestant State for a Protestant People) and the racial bigotry of a 'pure' Gaelic Ireland do not lend themselves to this modern image.

While downplaying the constitution in favour of domestic issues, we must never fail in our duty to educate new generations in the intrinsic value of the unity of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland has been blessed by the Union, from 1801 onwards. In 2008, we can take pride in the fact that Belfast is the fastest growing metropolitan economy in the United Kingdom and that the regional economy is the fastest growing in the UK. In many ways, this is due to the message and wisdom of our party.

However, we must also be careful not to fall into the trap of complaint. While justifiably feeling aggrieved that the Democratic Unionist Party have 'stolen our clothes' in recent times, it is essential that this grievance does not become the bedrock of our message; almost nothing is more guaranteed to alienate, not just the young, but voters of all ages. It will look merely like a case of 'sour grapes' and will do us no good at all. As a party, we must be proactive. As I have already intimated, I believe our message should be that of a party which cares for the unity and preservation of the UK, but is a party with the very best interests of Northern Ireland at heart. We want to see the region prosper; we want to see our youth stay here for tertiary education, and we want to see those who went to Great Britain to pursue university education or careers to return. Let us not get bogged down in sniping at the DUP for the sake of it; that is, after all, what that party did when our electoral fortunes were reversed. Let us instead paint ourselves as an alternative to the DUP, as a party of forceful British Unionism, a party with genuine community concerns, a party that genuinely cares for young people.

I do not for a moment believe that young people in 2008 are switching off from politics. It is just finding different forms of expression. The signing of petitions ('hard copy' or internet) social networking sites (it should be pointed out that bebo and facebook contain profiles for Reg Empey, Peter Robinson, Gerry Adams, Bertie Ahern, Gordon Brown, Nigel Dodds, etc, but surprisingly enough, none of them are the work of the politicians themselves; that said, campaigns can be started reasonably effectively on these sites.) protest marches, phone-in contests, etc.