

**Billy Armstrong MLA**

**My Views: The Democratic Process**

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Whilst I am absolutely delighted that Jim Nicholson regained his seat in last Thursday's European Election, all those who care about the political process will be concerned at the low turnout.

It is clear that recent events at Westminster with regard to MPs expenses has brought about a general disillusionment with politics and politicians.

Turnout figures in Northern Ireland were traditionally high, but have been declining, to the extent where at the European Election turnout slumped to 42.81 per cent.

This can only be bad for democracy and should concern all true democrats.

As a Unionist, I am particularly concerned at the low turnout rates in those constituencies which have strong Unionist majorities, such as Lagan Valley, South Antrim, East Antrim, East Belfast, North Down and Strangford, where all saw a turnout of less than 40 per cent.

If the current trend continues, it would be possible to foresee a situation whereby Northern Ireland has a Unionist majority, but that the majority of elected representatives would be non-Unionist, due to large numbers of Unionists choosing to stay at home or not even register in the first place. I believe that such a situation is not good for Unionism and not good for Northern Ireland.

Just as it is vital that the individual citizen registers to vote and actually turns out to exercise that vote, so it is vital that Politicians give people something to vote for in order to preserve a healthy and vibrant democratic process. We have to engage with the electorate and demonstrate that we are relevant to their daily lives and can act to make a positive difference in terms of Health Education, Employment etc. Devolution was supposed to bring government closer to the People it serves. If we as elected representatives are failing, then we have to take a look at ourselves, and see what changes we can make to show people that we are worthy of their votes.

The alternative does not bear thinking about.