

**Billy Armstrong MLA**

**My Views: Non-voters can't run the country**

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For some time now I have heard people in the streets and particularly on tv and radio bemoaning local politics and politicians.

The current political impasse and the ongoing failure of the Executive and Assembly to address issues which really matter to ordinary people - particularly education - do nothing to improve the credibility of politics and politicians in Northern Ireland.

If the public are frustrated at the lack of progress and focus on bread and butter issues such as jobs, education and health, I can assure them that as an MLA I share that frustration.

One of the most frustrating things I hear are people attacking politics and politicians here, and then admitting that they don't vote or have never voted. I appreciate that some of them may feel alienated from the political system but I would ask them just how on earth do they expect things to improve if they themselves don't get involved in the political process?

Ideally they would join existing political parties and work for change from within or form new ones, perhaps even put themselves forward as new faces with new ideas. Goodness knows that politics in Northern Ireland needs new blood. At the very least they should turn out and vote for someone, and seek to hold that person to account as that is the only way they can hope to effect change.

In 2008 Barack Obama swept to power in America promising "Change you can believe in" and the crowds who flocked to see him chanted "Yes we can." He managed to energise and motivate whole sections of people who either hadn't voted before or who had given up and as a result became the first President of African-American descent. That was certainly change, and it was change that many people thought they would never ever see, and it was made possible by people being energized by a politician and an ideal, and actually turning out and voting.

In 2010 for the UK Westminster Elections the Conservatives message is “Time for Change” and they will be hoping to tap into the public’s desire for an end to Labour rule which has lasted since 1997.

On a smaller scale, politicians and the political parties in Northern Ireland have to demonstrate to the electorate here that we too can bring about real change, that we can make a positive impact on the lives of the people who live here. We must encourage them by giving them something to vote for, something to believe in, and they need to reciprocate by turning out and backing those politicians who are trying to make a difference.

I do not believe that the Unionist community is fixated on the issue of parading any more than I believe the nationalist community goes to bed every night praying for the devolution of Policing & Justice.

I do however believe that the wider Northern Ireland community – Unionists, nationalists, non-aligned, voters and non-voters alike – are desperate so see politicians address issues such as education, health, employment and the wider economy.

This is the challenge which faces us all at the present time. The People must use their votes to elect those politicians and Parties who they believe will focus on the issues which really matter to them. Staying at home on election day will solve nothing. At least if you vote for someone, you have someone to account. If you don’t vote at all you have merely opted out and made it easier for someone you don’t like to get elected.