

The Labour Party in Northern Ireland (LPNI)

**Submission to the Labour Party NEC Review 2022,
including new supportive opinion poll evidence.**

Why the Labour Party should stand in elections in Northern Ireland.

***"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.



Introduction:

Under an agreement the NEC made with the Labour Party in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland CLP) in 2007, the NEC is required, at least once in every parliament, to *'review the issue of Labour Party democracy and the enhancement of participation by members in Northern Ireland'*.

We are currently undergoing our latest Review, but we have had absolutely zero enhancement of our democracy and the participation of our members in the fifteen years since.

We still have only one CLP to cover eighteen Westminster constituencies in Northern Ireland. This discriminates against us in internal elections.

And, crucially, we are denied the right to run Labour Party candidates in any Northern Ireland election – whether to District Councils, to the Stormont Assembly or to the Westminster Parliament.

Labour Party electoral politics are suppressed by the NEC in Northern Ireland. The people of Northern Ireland are denied basic democratic political rights.

This is our response to the NEC Review Group's questions.

Labour Party in Northern Ireland (LPNI).
Northern Ireland CLP. Executive Committee.

September 2022

Labour Party in Northern Ireland (LPNI).

Responses to Labour Party NEC Review 2022

Asked why he wouldn't agree to an electoral pact with the Lib Dems, Sir Keir Starmer MP said: ***"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"***. The Times. 24.12.21.

Q.1. Should the Labour Party stand candidates in Northern Ireland, what would be the Party's prospects of electoral success? And what evidence can we rely on to meet your conclusion?

Labour will have to work hard to be taken seriously as an electoral force and to establish trust in its brand. This will take time. It is something we can do using our own political and other resources, as long as we have the full political backing of the Party leadership.

Labour will want to initially concentrate on getting councillors elected in our eleven District Council areas. We would be entering the District Council elections as a new party, with officially-backed Labour Party candidates.

We will be presenting our positive vision of a new opportunity to transcend communal divisions on the basis of Labour and trade union values. We will aspire to be the party of reconciliation.

We will offer a Labour alternative to the communal politics within which both the nationalist /republican and loyalist / unionist communities are currently confined by the Labour Party boycott.

We stress that elections to District Councils and to the Stormont Assembly are held under the PR STV system. As new entrants in a PR STV election, we will have to fight for first preferences.

We will however, be very transfer friendly and we will expect to pick up transfers from all sections of the community, especially with Labour, cooperative and trade union backing.

Hopefully, we will pick up seats further down the count in a PR STV election.

There are a large number of electors, including a majority of younger people, who are completely alienated from the existing communal party political structures and we would hope to turn some of them into Labour voters.

Opinion poll evidence:

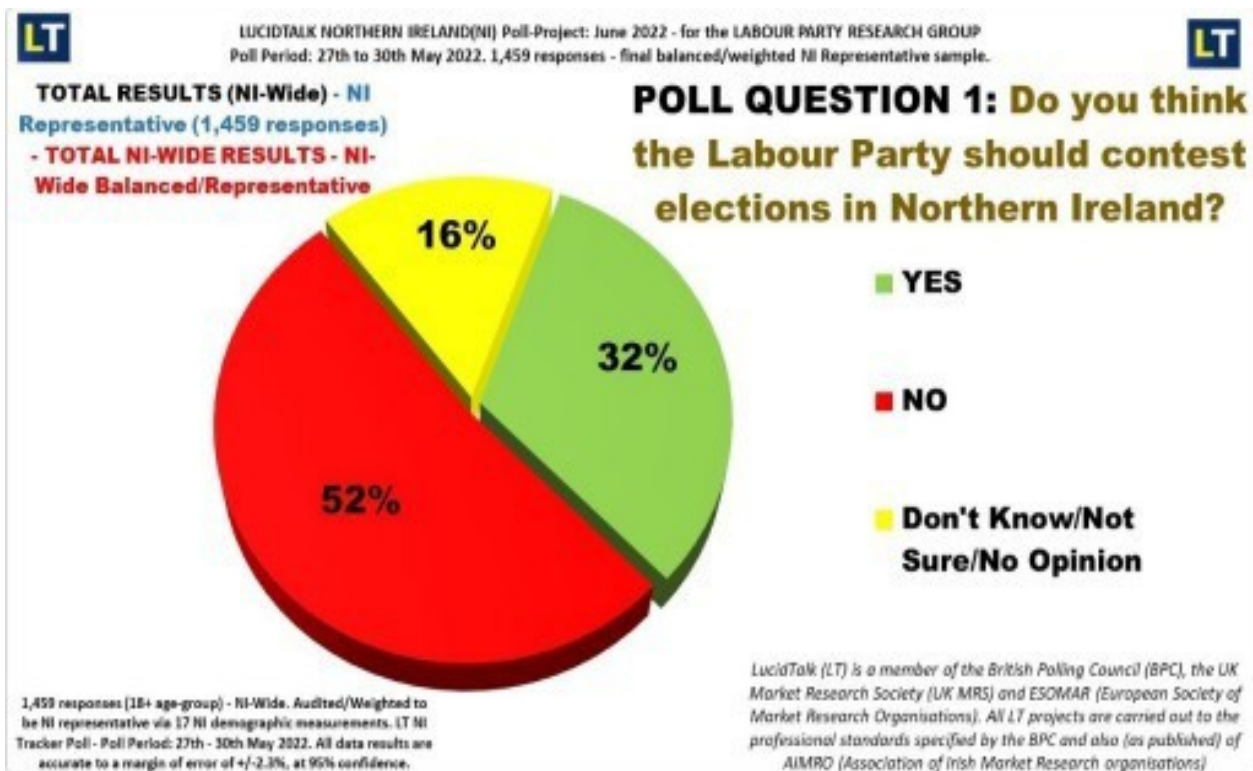
To demonstrate the level of support we have, the LPNI recently commissioned Lucid Talk to conduct an opinion poll.

32 per cent of people who responded to this poll said that LPNI should contest elections in Northern Ireland. This is a very substantial result – even more impressive once you consider just how many large political parties there are in NI.

Clearly, there is space for us in electoral politics in Northern Ireland.

See Figure 1.

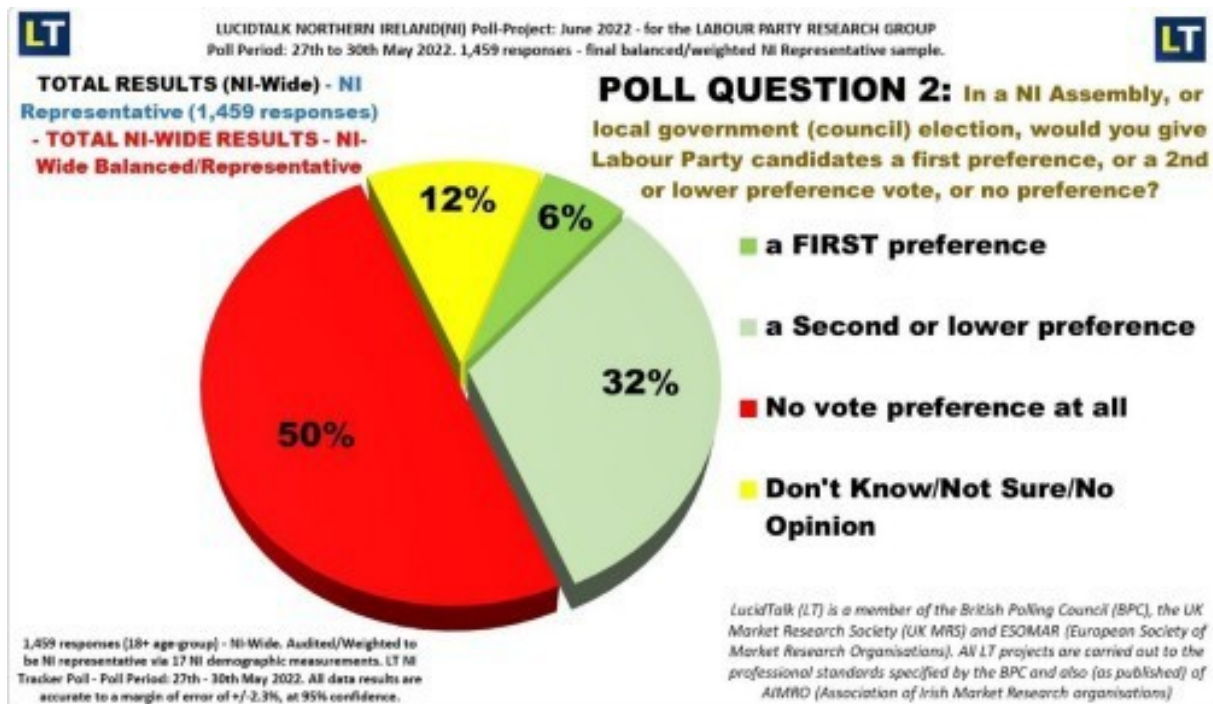
Figure 1: “Do you think the Labour Party should contest elections in Northern Ireland?”



In addition to this question, we asked how people would vote.

As Figure 2 below shows, 38 per cent of people stated they would give us a Preference vote, with around 6 per cent offering a first preference.

Figure 2: Would you give Labour Party candidates a first, second or lower, or no preference?



Subsamples don't provide the most robust data so we have not broken the data down into those levels here, but it is clear from the data we can draw some support across every major region in Northern Ireland.

Importantly, significant elements of both communities lend us support.

In our poll, Nationalists are broadly more in favour of Labour than Unionists. This undermines the argument we would only appeal to Unionists. But similarly, our ability to gain support from unionists makes us particularly well placed to pick up votes in areas where parties like the SDLP aren't competitive.

It is clear from the data that there is huge potential for a non sectarian, mainstream left-wing party to do well in Northern Ireland. The evidence speaks for itself. It is high time UK Labour stopped acting as a break on political progress in Northern Ireland and allowed Labour to stand in elections.

It is also possible that when the Labour Party announces we are standing Official candidates, we will get defections from existing parties.

These individuals will only transfer to Labour when the Party is registered with the Electoral Commission and in a position to stand candidates for election. This will add to our momentum.

It should be stressed at this point there are vast areas of the south of England where there are no Labour councillors and maybe never have been any, yet Labour runs candidates.

As the NEC Report 2016-19 says: *'the unlikelihood of electoral success is not a reason for continuing to not stand candidates (para. 2.3)'*.

Given the strength of the trade union movement in Northern Ireland (trade union density at 33 per cent in 2020 was higher than in Wales or Scotland and higher than in any English region), we expect to do much better than that.

LPNI already has trade union affiliations from UNITE the UNION, GMB, USDAW and Community.

We would particularly stress that we should do well in elections held under PR STV, the system used in elections to our District Councils and to the Stormont Assembly.

The 2020 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey shows

the proportion of the population identifying as neither Unionist or Nationalist has now reached 42 per cent. This figure reaches as high as 54 per cent for the 25-34 age group.

Recent Assembly election results show a surge of the Northern Ireland Alliance Party (allied to the Liberal Democrats) and the emergence of the Green Party. This demonstrates the growth of the designated 'Other' category (neither 'Nationalist' or 'Unionist'), that we might call the middle ground.

But what should be the main constituent of the 'left', the Labour Party, is missing.

Labour Party candidates, working together with the Cooperative Party NI, would augment this resurgence (especially under PR STV) and would share in it.

Labour would aspire to be part of the leadership of this bloc.

Q.2. How could the Labour Party work constructively with our sister parties, the SDLP (in Northern Ireland), and the Irish Labour Party (in the Republic of Ireland)?

The British Irish Labour Forum (BILF) was initiated by LPNI. Regular meetings of the BILF provide a framework for constructive cooperation between the above parties, both in the Stormont Assembly and on Cross-border Bodies.

The Terms of Reference for the BILF explicitly provide for consultation between these parties on economic and political questions of common concern.

The individual members of the above parties on the island

of Ireland, north and south, are all members of the Party of European Socialists (PES). The PES, working in conjunction with the BILF, could provide a vehicle for cooperation among the parties on matters European.

We have been exploring, with the Irish Labour Party's Northern Branch, if there is a possibility of UK Labour and Irish Labour jointly sponsoring 'Labour' candidates in Northern Ireland.

This could work on a model similar to that used successfully by the student unions in Northern Ireland, the National Union of Students / Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI). Also, a similar model is used by the trade unions in the Northern Ireland Committee, Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC ICTU).

We are happy to cooperate with the SDLP. We point to Article 3:4 of the Statutes of the Party of European Socialists (PES) which requires the promotion of close working relations between member parties.

This means the SDLP should not be allowed to veto LPNI standing candidates on the basis of some 'convention'. Instead, the two parties should reach an accommodation, for example on policy, that could be to the benefit of both.

Under PR STV, there could also be agreement on the use of transfers.

We would point out there is considerable overlap in membership between UK Labour, Irish Labour and the Cooperative Party. Individuals can be members of UK Labour, Irish Labour and the Cooperative Party at the same time.

Some members of the SDLP are also members of the Irish

Labour Party and the Cooperative Party.

The denial of the Right2Stand Labour Party candidates results in the Cooperative Party also being denied the right to stand candidates, even though it is that Party's national policy to run candidates in Northern Ireland.

Q.3. What lessons can be learnt from the Welsh and Scottish Labour Parties, particularly in terms of establishing the Labour Party as a cross-community party?

Like Scotland and Wales, Northern Ireland has a religiously and ethnically mixed population, with competing national identities, a strong trade union movement and a language question.

Glasgow and Belfast are very similar in that each has been a heavy industrial city with a long history of communal / sectarian problems.

One can only imagine what inter-community relations would be like in Glasgow today if Labour Party representation had been suppressed in that city over the decades, as it has been in Belfast.

The prospect of uniting behind Labour to remove the Tories and install a Labour Government would give a big boost to cross- community Labour in Northern Ireland, as it has done in Scotland.

Similarly, the broad societal impact of a progressive UK Labour Government in power at Westminster would be a powerful influence in forging a cross-community Labour Party in Northern Ireland, with trade union support.

As the example of Wales shows, the quality of local Labour leadership is of key importance in building an inclusive Party.

While Scottish Labour has adopted a firm pro-Union position, Welsh Labour defines itself more ambiguously as neither unionist or nationalist and as an 'autonomous' party (Carwyn Jones 05.04.22). It is, however, opposed to Independence and to a referendum.

LPNI is distinctive. It supports the Good Friday Agreement and the principle of consent on constitutional change.

LPNI declares itself to be 'neutral' on the partition question: it is neither '*Unionist*' or '*Nationalist*' and its members are free to hold whatever views they wish.

This makes us attractive to members of both main communities. Nationalists / Republicans may aspire to an eventual united Ireland, but in the meantime support Labour in preference to the Tories. Unionists / Loyalists can support us as a progressive party of the left compared to mainstream Unionism, but not an anti-partition party.

The Northern Ireland Alliance Party has thrived electorally in recent years while holding a similar neutral position.

LPNI candidates would be free to hold and advocate their personal views in elections and in a border poll, while upholding the Party position.

The Stormont Assembly, established under the Good Friday Agreement, has the broad support of the public (NILT 2020). LPNI would support reforms to the Good Friday Agreement that would make it less communally divisive.

LPNI MLAs elected to the Stormont Assembly would declare themselves as '*Other*' rather than '*Nationalist*' or '*Unionist*' and would fully support the Labour Party's '*honest broker*' stance on contentious issues.

The key to Labour Party success will be to strengthen an emerging cross-community Northern Irish identity in the Assembly around a left of centre programme based on human rights and Labour, trade union and cooperative values.

This could mean the LPNI becoming a more autonomous 'Northern Irish' Labour Party, possibly with strong links to the Irish Labour Party. The successful National Union of Students / Union of Students in Ireland model for the Northern Ireland student unions could provide an example to follow (as mentioned in Q.2 above).

We have developed an exploratory set of draft Rules for a hybrid 'Northern Irish' Labour Party that operationalises this model.

An inclusive approach will take the political focus off communal differences.

Labour must concentrate on 'fairness' and 'inclusivity' and on 'changing lives for the better'. It will emphasise bread and butter issues such as the cost of living, health, education and housing, as well as human rights, Irish language rights and the climate emergency.

In electing Anas Sarwar MSP as Leader, the first Muslim Leader of a UK political party, Scottish Labour is giving a timely boost to the campaign for equality and inclusion, not just for our

growing minority ethnic and migrant communities, but for all. That is an example that LPNI must aspire to follow.

The *Report* of the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on '*The experience of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland*' highlighted the fact that the public and political spheres have failed to reflect the very rapidly growing diversity of the Northern Ireland population.

The *Report* suggests this was the result of mainstream preoccupation with the traditional green and orange divide.

Many ethnic minority communities feel overlooked and unrepresented in local government and in the Stormont Assembly.

At the same time, racial equality strategies e.g. ethnic monitoring and hate crime legislation, have fallen by the wayside.

Minority ethnic and migrant communities in Northern Ireland urgently need inclusive Labour Party representation.

We have examined the rules of Scottish Labour and Welsh Labour for insights as to how LPNI could best be organised.

We note that the Scottish Labour Executive is inclusive, with representation for all stakeholders, including CLP and trade union delegates. Both CLP and trade union delegates have full speaking and voting rights on the Executive.

The rules for the make-up of the Welsh Labour Executive are similar to those for Scotland.

In Wales, the Welsh Labour Leader is the Leader of the Wales

National Assembly Party, unlike in Scotland where the Leader is directly elected by the Party membership.

To date, under LPNI Rules, our Leadership model has been collective, concentrated in the Officers with the support of the EC. This has worked relatively successfully and inclusively.

If we were running Labour candidates in District Council elections in 2023, LPNI would need a Leader in place.

Q.4. What would be the implications for trade unions in Northern Ireland, should the Labour Party choose to stand candidates?

Four major affiliated trade unions, GMB, UNITE the UNION, USDAW and Community are affiliated nationally to LPNI and strongly support our demand to run Labour candidates.

If there were any major adverse implications for the unions, these large unions with long experience in Northern Ireland would not have affiliated. They see it as in their trade union interest to have Labour Party electoral representation.

As the GMB put it in their response to the NEC Review 2016-19:

'Labour candidates, free from sectarian baggage and the 'them and us' mentality will make a refreshing change.'

Many affiliated union members in Northern Ireland contract in to pay the political levy, sending nearly £200,000 per annum in levies to the Labour Party, which then denies them representation.

Labour Party representatives, holding a cross-community, even handed view on contentious issues would be a strong force for harmony among the workforce and a support for organised labour, as Keir Hardie intended.

USDAW surveyed their union members in Northern Ireland for the NEC Review 2016-19.

The results showed an 80 per cent response rate in favour of running Labour Party candidates.

To quote:

'A number of consistent themes came through in the responses:

- * It would provide a true, cross-community outlet for Labour politics*
- * A clean break with the past and the old parties*
- * It would contribute to the breaking down of sectarian politics.'*

The British Irish Labour Forum (BILF) is empowered to have observers from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) at meetings, with speaking rights on every issue.

Any contentious issues can be resolved on a broad cross-community / cross national basis.

Q.5. *What would be the implications for the Good Friday Agreement of the Labour Party standing candidates in Northern Ireland, particularly given the ongoing disruption caused by Brexit?*

It is our view that having elected Labour Party representatives acting as a force for reconciliation in broader society, in the District Councils and in the Stormont Assembly, would enhance and strengthen the Good Friday Agreement.

The Good Friday Agreement 2.1. (5) affirms the *'power of the sovereign government will be exercised with rigorous impartiality'*. LPNI fully supports this *'honest broker'* role and would itself act in an even-handed and impartial way to support a Labour Government acting in this capacity.

LPNI is neither *'Unionist'* or *'Nationalist'* and would designate as *'Other'* in the Stormont Assembly.

This would in no way impede the ability of the UK Government to maintain its *'honest broker'* role. Elected Labour Party representatives would be committed to supporting that role in the Assembly and elsewhere.

Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol are contentious issues in Northern Ireland and threaten the future of the Stormont Assembly and the Good Friday Agreement.

Responsibility for negotiations with the EU lies with the UK Government. UK Labour should play its role in overcoming these disagreements through negotiation.

Labour Party representatives in Northern Ireland would not be directly involved, but would be supportive in resolving

disputes.

Labour Party representation would help UK Labour nationally to formulate policy on issues such as Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol, taking into account the views of the Northern Ireland labour and trade union movement.

Q.6. What other steps could the Labour Party take to enhance democracy and the participation of members in Northern Ireland?

The basic democratic demand of LPNI is that the Labour Party should enable us to run Labour Party candidates in elections.

To minimise any administrative / cost burden to the Party, we would take responsibility for the devolved arrangements.

The steps that need to be taken are easily implementable.

1. The Party should register as 'Labour' with the Electoral Commission NI, preferably in agreement with the Irish Labour Party. It should also register a Nominating Officer.

2. As already requested of the NEC, the Party should establish official Constituency 'branches' in the eleven District Council Areas where our initial electoral activity will be focussed. (Labour Party Rules. Chapter 1, Clause II.B.)

3. The Party should allow us to set up an office facility. This would be needed primarily for electioneering. It might be provided by a supportive trade union.

If we had the above local party structure and the ability to field official Labour candidates, we would be very well

placed to raise our own resources.

4. To enhance the participation of members, when the Party Leader comes to Northern Ireland and is meeting with other parties, LPNI should be included in his/her itinerary. It is insulting to our members for the Leader to continually avoid us and it generates bad publicity for the Party.

No Labour Party Leader has met or addressed the LPNI membership since we were established as a Multiple-constituency CLP (covering eighteen constituencies) fourteen years ago.

5. The Labour Party in Northern Ireland should be included throughout the Labour Party Rule Book, like Scottish Labour and Welsh Labour: eg in Chapter 9A and 9B (Regions, Wales and Scotland: Rules) and in Chapter 11 (Regions, Wales and Scotland: Young Labour Groups).

6. The Party should treat its members in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland equally when it comes to elections to their devolved institutions.

7. Like Scottish Labour and Welsh Labour, the Labour Party in Northern Ireland (LPNI) should have a seat on the Labour Party NEC. This is a longer term aspiration.

Published by:

The Labour Party in Northern Ireland (LPNI)

Northern Ireland CLP

19 Church Road,
Belfast. BT8 7AL.

Email: labourparty.niclp@gmail.com

Twitter: @labour_ni

Facebook: Labour Party Northern Ireland

Home site: labourpartyni.org

Instagram: @labourpartyni

You Tube: Labour Party Northern Ireland

R2S Home site: right2stand.co.uk

R2S email: info@right2stand.co.uk

Social Media Hashtag: #Right2Stand