

Written Submission by the Labour Party in Northern Ireland (LPNI) to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Inquiry into the Effectiveness of the Good Friday Agreement institutions. January 2023.

The Labour Party in Northern Ireland (LPNI) aspires to run Labour candidates in Northern Ireland in all elections. It is prevented from doing so by the Labour Party National Executive Committee.

Inclusive, cross-community Labour Party politics are suppressed, with the result that our inter-communal political stalemate is exacerbated.

This is both undemocratic and discriminatory.

We believe the suppression of Labour Party electoral politics in Northern Ireland has been one of the contributing factors to the breakdown in the Good Friday institutions. It has seriously held back the development of the non-communal centre.

The encouraging political development of recent years has been the growth of the '*other*' designation, which is becoming a third bloc in the Assembly.

This confirms the message coming from opinion polls which shows a growing proportion of the population claiming not to identify as '*unionist*' or '*nationalist*'. The share of the population not identifying with any religious denomination is also growing. These trends are particularly noticeable among younger people.

The development of Labour Party elected representation would have considerably augmented this centre ground. It would have helped mitigate the strength of the communal extremes which

are deliberately privileged in the Agreement and which have brought the institutions into crisis.

Regrettably, the Labour Party, that could potentially be the party of reconciliation on the basis of labour and trade union values shared across all communities, has been deliberately and ruthlessly silenced.

It is impossible to calculate the damage this has done to the Northern Ireland body politic.

Were Labour allowed to run candidates for the Stormont Assembly, elected Labour representatives would designate as '*other*' and not as either '*nationalist*' or '*unionist*'.

For the purposes of this inquiry, our concern is that parties that designate as '*other*' are discriminated against under the terms of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Sections 1 and 5 of Strand One of the Good Friday Agreement say there will be safeguards to ensure '*all sections of the community are protected*'. But the GFA does not protect those sections of the community represented by parties that designate as '*other*'. Instead, this third bloc is heavily discriminated against.

1. In the processes of electing the First and Deputy First Minister and of electing the Speaker, if the largest party in either the '*nationalist*' or '*unionist*' designations refuses to nominate, the process is void.

This greatly disadvantages those parties designated as '*other*'.

2. Clause 5d(i) on arrangements to ensure key decisions are taken on a cross-community basis:

'parallel consent ie. a majority of those members present and voting, including a majority of the unionist and nationalist designations present and voting'.

This again discriminates against those MLAs designating as 'other'.

While these features of the GFA are highly discriminatory it is not clear how they can be removed without also getting rid of the vetoes which the largest parties in each designation currently have: eg by a move from 'parallel consent' to 'weighted majority voting'.

There is not currently support for this change from any party outside of the 'other' bloc, for varying self-interested reasons.

If there was agreement to remove the veto, then we could either move to a three bloc system (nationalist, unionist, other) where at least two blocs are required to form a government, or to weighted majority voting (65 per cent plus or whatever).

The likeliest government formation in each case would be nationalist/other or unionist/other. 'Other' would now be in a pivotal position.

While this might be seen as a desirable outcome, it is questionable if either of these combinations would provide stable government, with either Sinn Fein or the DUP excluded.

What the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee can and should recommend is that the Stormont Assembly be democratised by

ending the ban on Northern Ireland electors voting for Labour Party candidates in Assembly elections.

It is surely outrageous that, more than fifty years after the civil rights movement marched for 'one man one vote', no man or woman in Northern Ireland is allowed vote for candidates of the party that will hopefully form our government after the forthcoming general election.

LPNI would support a full Review of all aspects of the GFA.

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