



New Politics for a New Northern Ireland

Assembly Elections 2007 Manifesto

This is what we intend to do:
Our 10 top election commitments

- Protecting our grammar schools and keeping academic selection
- Improving schools that are failing to deliver
- Giving more power over NHS priorities to doctors and nurses and scrapping red tape and bureaucratic targets
- Taking immediate action to limit the unfairness of Labour's rates system
- Thoroughly reviewing the entire system of local taxation
- Rigorous regulation of the water industry and a faster move to domestic metering so people pay only for what they use
- Setting up an independent environmental watchdog to drive up environmental standards throughout NI
- Making the Assembly deliver value for money
- Making Northern Ireland the best place in the UK to do business and creating a business start culture
- Helping to create a society where social responsibility is encouraged and people enabled to make changes for good.

A New Beginning...

The Conservative Party is trying to create new politics for a new Northern Ireland. It's time that politicians started focusing on issues that *matter* to people - rather than the same old arguments about the constitution and the border. The Assembly, if it is re-established, will focus minds. But we also need to be aware that there is a big world outside the Assembly. And Northern Ireland is more than capable of playing its part in that world - given the talent of its people. And it's this talent that the Conservative Party wants to nurture.

We're delighted that as a result of some of the ill-considered legislation that has been put forward by the Labour government in Northern Ireland - such as the Education and Rates Orders - we are seeing the emergence of effective cross-community political pressure groups, illustrating very effectively the concept of Social Responsibility. We have supported many of these groups by lobbying at Westminster and using our influence as the main opposition political party.

Conservative Party members in Northern Ireland have worked hard within independent and cross-party campaign groups to help to retain academic selection and the ethos of Northern Ireland's fine Grammar and Secondary schools - schools that serve all communities. But we will also do everything we can to ensure that standards overall are improved and that Northern Ireland's reputation for excellence at GCSE and A Level is enhanced. We recognise that 60% of post-primary pupils do not attend grammar schools. Therefore we want schools and employers to work together to improve vocational education across grammar, secondary and FE sectors.

Conservatives have also been very concerned about the proposed rates legislation for Northern Ireland. We believe that Labour will attempt to force this system across

the UK, using the people of Northern Ireland as guinea pigs. Amendments to this legislation negotiated by the Conservatives will ensure that an upper cap on rates will be put in place and improved support given to poorer pensioners.

David Cameron, in his Conservative Party Conference speech, talked about social responsibility – the idea that government should empower and support the community rather than always directing or telling people what to do. This attitude should apply in Northern Ireland too. We want to nurture talent, community mindedness and co-operation. Social responsibility will be the defining philosophy of a Conservative government and of Conservative members of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

As a democratic party we are active in every part of the United Kingdom. Our Shadow Secretary of State, David Lidington, has been active in the Commons against the worst excesses of Labour policy here. Our members here, in the constituencies, are getting stronger and more organised every day. A Conservative Future organisation has been established – drawing on students from Queen’s and the University of Ulster. With so many young people involved in the Party locally, we’re breaking new ground.

We have attracted several former members of other parties – including an elected councillor, Peter Bowles, and a former MLA and Minister in the Assembly, James Leslie – both of whom will be contesting the Assembly elections, alongside seven other candidates.

There are many good and hard working people in all the local political Parties. But the Conservative Party is unique as it is the only national political party that organises and contests elections in Northern Ireland. It is the only Party in these Assembly elections which could also form the next government of the United Kingdom. Our members are people who believe that, if Northern Ireland is to progress, its citizens need to take part in the political processes of the country in which they live – not just the *region* of the country in which they live.

We hope that, in time, the Labour Party too will recognise that people here are not born sectarian and that we in Northern Ireland face the same issues and challenges and share the same hopes as people across these islands and nations.

The alternative would be to doom people here in Northern Ireland to a political debate dominated by one perpetual topic – the border, despite the fact that the Agreement settled the border issue, and that the two governments have agreed to binding commitments that Northern Ireland will remain part of the United Kingdom unless and until a majority of Northern Ireland’s electorate wish it to be otherwise.

Our view is that we need to move on. We need, as a region of the United Kingdom, to start focusing on real issues that matter to people here. We also need to develop better and closer relations with our nearest geographical neighbour- the Republic of Ireland. Good North-South relations are not an alternative to strengthening East-West ties. In a common travel area and a single European market, the two should complement one another. We also need to look beyond these shores. We must recognise that it is too easy to become absorbed with Northern Ireland’s problems and that we are only a small part of a planet with much bigger problems.

Like every other part of the world, we must wake up to the fact that there are big challenges facing us. There is the threat of climate change. There is the issue of massive divergences in wealth. There is the ever-present threat of international terrorism. Unless we start to focus on these more pressing issues – as well as our own problems - then our people will not be heard and will not contribute.

Continued political isolation and a reputation for sectarianism would be tragic, because Northern Irish men and women have contributed so much to this world. Our scientists and inventors have made it a better place. We have contributed to the arts, to business and to sport. Our people are no different from those in any other modern democracy. They have the same aspirations – they want to be safe, prosperous and happy. They want to ensure that the beauty of this place is protected for their children and grandchildren. They want to be sure that their successors can expect the same standards of education and social provision that they have come to expect for themselves. They want to ensure that this can be a place to be proud of.

It is in this context that we propose our manifesto. It recognises that all our people, of all faiths and none, regardless of their income, sex or sexuality, their age or the colour of their skin – all our people – can contribute and play a part in this new Northern Ireland.

We want to create a new politics for a new Northern Ireland. And this is where we intend to start.

Education

Conservatives have been the most active opponents of the Labour Government's Education Order that proposes ending academic selection in Northern Ireland and imposing a one-size-fits-all system.

Last year the Conservative Party voted against the Northern Ireland Education Order when it came before Parliament. At the time our Shadow Secretary of State, David Lidington MP, made clear the extent of opposition to the measure. He said, *"This measure is both undemocratic and bad for education in Northern Ireland. It is wrong for Ministers to ram through such a far-reaching Order when every test of public opinion shows that nearly two-thirds of people in Northern Ireland oppose a ban on academic selection. The Conservative Party will vote against the Order when it comes before Parliament."*

David, unlike the Liberal Democrats, stuck true to his word. Although the Government forced through the Order, the Conservatives opposed it in both Houses.

The Conservative Party spokesman on Education in Northern Ireland, Jeffrey Peel, echoed David's words when he stated *"what the Labour government has done must surely rank as one of the most offensive attacks on democracy in British history. Here we have a government that has received no votes from the people of Northern Ireland telling the local population it will ride roughshod over their democratically expressed wishes in the event of a failure to restore devolution."*

He continued, *"Instead of acting decently and on principle – separating education policy from the desire to restore devolution to Northern Ireland – the government prefers to act, once again, like an arrogant colonial despot."*

In this manifesto we state our commitment to do everything we can to ensure that what is excellent in our education system here is protected.

In Northern Ireland, children born into less well-off families can still aspire to attend some of the highest performing schools in the United Kingdom – without their parents having to pay for the privilege. Indeed of the 100 best performing schools in the UK, Northern Ireland provides eleven. This is four times the number that would be expected based on population. Unlike most of the other 89, none of the eleven is fee-paying.

We are committed to raising standards right across the education system. But we believe that Northern Ireland's grammar schools and academic selection should be protected because it works well for Northern Ireland and has overwhelming public support. We do not wish to defend the 11+ selection test – but we believe it can be replaced by a fairer selection process. And we believe that the proposed selection approach – where academic selection is replaced by post-code selection – is grossly unfair.

We also recognise that 60% of post-primary pupils do not attend grammar schools. Therefore we want schools and employers to work together to improve vocational education across grammar, secondary and FE sectors.

Heads and classroom teachers are burdened with far too many targets and directives from on high. We want the Assembly to scrap the red tape and trust all schools with greater independence to order their own affairs.

Many schools in Northern Ireland have taken the lead in building bridges between divided communities. We salute those efforts and will do our utmost to encourage them. Government should allow the integrated schools sector to expand to meet parental demand.

Local Government Finance

On November 7 last year the Labour Government accepted a Conservative amendment to the legislation introducing the new system of domestic rating in Northern Ireland, which guarantees the introduction of capping and extra relief for pensioners on low incomes.

Our hard work resulted in the government accepting a significant amendment to a piece of legislation that was fundamentally unfair.

The Conservative spokesman on Northern Ireland in the House of Lords, Lord Glentoran, who moved the amendment, said at the time, *'This is a significant climb-down by a Government that has sought to use domestic rating reform to blackmail the people of Northern Ireland.'*

He continued, *'It means that if the new system goes ahead in April 2007 then the Government has accepted that there will definitely be a cap on rates and extra relief for low income pensioners. That will happen irrespective of whether the parties sign up to St Andrews and devolution is restored. We bitterly dislike the new rates system that the Labour Government is imposing on the people of Northern Ireland. It is an unjust and undemocratic house price tax. But at least our amendment will go some way to minimise the impact of the new system on people facing very high rates increases, and also on some of the most vulnerable in society.'*

'We also made clear that the next Conservative Government will review the whole system of domestic rates in Northern Ireland in the event that devolved government has not been restored.'

Our elected representatives in the Assembly will work to ensure that a fair system of rates is implemented. As immediate reforms, we shall press for:

- A lower cap to match that in England;
- A discount for single-person households, and
- A system of banding.

In the longer term, we want to review the entire system of local government finance in Northern Ireland, taking account of Sir Michael Lyons' forthcoming report into the English system and our own Party's policy review.

Health

Health spending in Northern Ireland will top £3.8 billion by 2008, accounting for over 40 per cent of the entire Northern Ireland budget. Yet despite this record investment in the NHS, and higher per head spending than the United Kingdom average, service provision here falls behind the rest of the country.

Professor John Appleby in his Independent Review of Health and Social Services Care in Northern Ireland published at the end of 2005, highlighted the fact that while spending had increased, this money hadn't made its way to care provision:

"In common with the rest of the UK, significant additional resources have been devoted to the provision of health & social care in Northern Ireland in recent years. However, the short-term and uncertain basis on which funds have often been allocated has hampered the strategic planning of services. Around three-fifths of the additional funding has been absorbed by increases in staff costs, reflecting the labour intensive nature of the sector, although most of this has been in higher wages and salaries rather than more frontline staff. Whilst it is estimated that around a quarter of the additional funds have been spent on service delivery improvements, looking forward, cost pressures (such as funding required to implement Agenda for Change and the new GP and consultants' contracts) mean that a much smaller share of future funds will be available for service improvements."

Conservatives are committed to the NHS in Northern Ireland. But under Labour the NHS across the UK has been mismanaged with additional resource not being matched by improvements in delivery.

David Cameron has declared that a key component of Conservative policy towards the NHS is to continue to increase spending. As our economy grows, one of the most important calls on the proceeds of growth will be the NHS. That is what we mean by sharing the proceeds of growth.

Conservatives believe that we will see improvements in the quality of health care if politicians and civil servants put more trust in the professional judgement of doctors, nurses and other NHS workers. Labour's moves to simplify the organisation of the NHS in Northern Ireland are a step in the right direction but we want to go further in increasing the power and independence of GPs and PCTs, putting them in the driving seat. We support foundation hospitals. We want to see all hospitals given greater freedom.

Trusting professionals to take responsibility includes reducing the number of centrally-imposed targets. We will allow professionals to make the important judgements about the best interests of their patients

The Economy

The business community in Northern Ireland is doing its best - under a mountain of red tape and taxes. Despite these burdens, new businesses are being established, funded by a small but growing venture capital community, and are growing and spinning off new ventures. As a result, Northern Ireland is emerging as a world leader in scientific imaging, telecommunications software, agri-food and veterinary pharmaceuticals - among many other business areas. The business community here can hold its head up high. It weathered years of troubles and not only survived, against all odds, but thrived.

But the public sector in Northern Ireland is still too large a proportion of the regional economy. The Government's own figures show that the public sector accounts for two-thirds of Northern Ireland's GDP – a far higher share than in the Republic or in any other part of the United Kingdom

Northern Ireland is not immune from the competitive pressures of a global economy. If we want jobs and investment to come here, we have to free our businessmen and women to take on the best in the world.

The Conservative Party in Northern Ireland wants to see a much greater focus on a phased reduction in dependency on public sector employment. This can be achieved through the gradual replacement of public sector employment with private sector jobs. We believe that the most effective instrument for the creation of higher levels of economic investment in highly paid and skilled employment, of the sort that can fully tap the potential of our highly educated workforce, is the reduction of government red tape and the creation of a more business friendly environment that will encourage start-ups and business growth.

Government needs to cut the costs that it imposes on business, not add to them through yet more taxes and regulations. The lesson of the Republic's economic success is that we should reduce the dependence of our economy on government and rekindle the enterprise culture that first made Belfast the industrial and commercial powerhouse of the island of Ireland.

We believe that the Assembly should actively focus on how Northern Ireland can become an entrepreneurial economy.

Conservatives want to see everyone share in the opportunities and the prosperity of a growing economy. There are still too many families and too many neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland trapped in poverty. The government's own figures show that there are as many young people today as when Labour first came to office who are neither in work nor education and training. Improving vocational training and education is essential. We also want to encourage and strengthen the work of social enterprises and voluntary organisations to bring people who are disaffected or who have given up hope back into the mainstream of economic life.

Policing and Justice

Although Northern Ireland today is a more peaceful society than it has been for decades, the police face a huge task – as they do throughout the UK – to support the community, tackle organised crime, and maintain order. Not long ago, there were parts of Northern Ireland where the police were not welcome. This is now changing, and, increasingly, all citizens who live here recognise that the police are the first port of call in a crisis. Support for the police and courts is one of the most elemental parts of a civilized and democratic society.

Conservatives are encouraged that republicans are starting to support the PSNI. This fine force of men and women has shown both courage and even-handedness since it was established. It has the ability to deal sensitively with situations that would tax any civil police force.

We look forward to the time when devolution of policing and judicial powers to the Assembly can be achieved, as that should signify the completion of transition to a normal peaceful society. In our view all political parties need to prove to the Assembly that they are genuinely and actively supporting the rule of law. In the words of David Lidington, "*Now we need to see evidence of actions on the ground to demonstrate the republican movement is matching words with deeds.*"

Our representatives in the Assembly will work to ensure that the police service gets the resources it needs to do its job effectively and that the courts deal more effectively and efficiently with law-breakers.

Agriculture

Agriculture and food production are key sectors for Northern Ireland's economy. Our farming community is at the core of our rural society and forms a crucial part of our social fabric.

Unfortunately a combination of low prices for primary produce, excessive regulation and uncertainty about future policy have reduced this once powerful industry to a nearly terminal state.

Nonetheless, if the present storm of difficulties can be weathered, there are reasons to be optimistic for the future. Our long hours of sunlight in the summer months, the North Atlantic Drift and our skilled and flexible workforce give us many inherent competitive advantages, particularly in the production of non-food crops. These crops can be used to generate energy and further advantage can be taken by converting certain of their components into added value sustainable products such as lubricants, plastics, building materials or even electronics.

The Conservative Party in Northern Ireland wants to see the research and teaching resources of the Department of Agriculture re-focussed from traditional sectors onto these new, sustainable products, in the knowledge that developments in this field will lead to opportunities for export of materials and expertise.

We will also lobby for a level playing field between home produce grown in a tightly regulated way and imports from less regulated producers.

We recognise that Northern Ireland farmers are also very important to the local and wider UK economy in terms of traditional agricultural products. Our meat and dairy products are world class and our standards of production amongst the best in the world. We want to ensure that our farmers get a fairer deal in a globally competitive market. We'll be pushing for stricter country of origin food labelling to ensure that our local producers get greater competitive advantage.

We also believe that our farmers should be treated fairly when it comes to welfare standards across the EU. Rather than penalising and adding costs to our farm businesses we need to support them and consult with them when we plan new measures. Conservatives will commit to giving the farming community the respect it deserves given its importance to the Northern Ireland economy.

Water Charges

Good water and sewerage services are essential to families and to business. Much of the current infrastructure in Northern Ireland is old and now needs massive additional investment. It is not up to the task of meeting 21st Century pollution standards nor the growing demand for water.

That investment has to be paid for, but Labour's charging system, linking water charges to house prices rather than to the amount of water consumed, is unfair and provides no incentive for conservation.

The new water company needs to be subject to strict and impartial regulation, to protect the interests of consumers. Our team at Westminster, have extracted firm assurances from Ministers that the water regulator will exercise full powers from day one of the new system. In particular, he will be able to block the disposal of water company land and other assets.

We would like to see the programme of water metering speeded up, both to protect pensioners from excessive charges and to benefit the environment.

Restoring devolution, building a democracy.

The Conservative Party wants to see devolution restored to Northern Ireland. We supported the St Andrews Agreement as a means to that end and cooperated in getting the legislation through Parliament. It is not a perfect settlement and we look forward to the Assembly in due course using its powers to review its own procedures and making changes.

Once the Assembly and the Executive become established, and trust begins to grow, we would like to see the system of designation phased out. Within both the unionist and nationalist traditions, there are people whose views are centre-right, supporting free enterprise and social responsibility, and others who would place themselves on the left. In almost every mature democracy, elected representatives align themselves according to their views on social and economic policies. It will be a true signal that normal politics has arrived in Northern Ireland when we can achieve that stage here.

We would also like to see the First and Deputy First Ministers appointed after a vote in the assembly, rather than automatically, on the basis of party strengths.

Environmental protection

The way we treat our environment says a lot about what's been wrong in Northern Ireland in recent years.

Climate change, environmental degradation, water management and loss of natural resources are some of the biggest challenges facing governments around the world. These issues are at the heart of modern government and must play a central role in the thinking of any new administration. Northern Ireland has a rich and varied natural environment and an important built heritage. We need voices in the Assembly that speak for the natural and built environment.

David Cameron has put the environment at the heart of Conservative policies. Nationally, we're providing real leadership in areas such as climate change, renewable energy and sustainable development.

The Conservative Party welcomes the Review of Environmental Governance in Northern Ireland and shares many of the wide range of concerns which it has identified. It is clear that direct rule ministers have failed to act as guardians of our natural heritage.

People want joined up government that can plan properly in an integrated way for our environmental, social and economic challenges. For example, public procurement is a major element in the Northern Ireland economy. Central and local government should be working closely together to ensure that our public procurement supports innovation and business development within Northern Ireland particularly in the area of environmental technologies.

This will require close cooperation between Departments and local government in Northern Ireland.

Conservative members in the Assembly will be a strong voice for joined up government and will provide a challenging and informed voice on sustainable development issues.

We will promote:

- Carbon emission control measures
- Renewable energy initiatives
- Energy efficiency
- Integrated and effective waste and water management
- Protection of our green spaces in urban areas
- Effective and fair environmental regulation

The Conservative Party believes that good environmental governance can only be achieved by the separation of regulation and policy-making. Consequently we want to see a powerful and independent environmental protection agency established here, as there is in the rest of the UK.

Planning

Town and country planning in Northern Ireland is in a state of crisis. Responsibilities are divided between departments and there is a multiplicity of overlapping and often inconsistent plans and strategies. Government's priorities for the system have changed constantly and many of those working in the planning service are no longer sure what they are expected to achieve. Reform has been promised for years but today most people see our planning system as too bureaucratic, too inconsistent and too obscure. On the one hand, planning delays are a serious blight on business development. On the other, many see our planning laws and enforcement as having utterly failed to protect our buildings and natural environment.

The problems we face today are complex. We need to find ways of living which require fewer natural resources. We have to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions from transport and energy use, cope with increasing numbers of small households, create sustainable communities within our cities and towns and protect our countryside. Conservatives are showing leadership in these areas across the United Kingdom.

The current Government has failed to integrate and streamline our planning processes nor seen the importance of sustainable development for Northern Ireland's planning system. Conservatives understand that, in dealing with these challenges, we must achieve economic and social improvement in ways that protect and enhance our environment. We also see that issues such as climate change, energy use and water and waste management must be taken account of in our planning processes.

We need to set clear policies and objectives that will bring about a healthy balance between economic and social development and environmental protection and enhancement. This means that the administration must take seriously the idea of integrated spatial strategies. The Northern Ireland Regional Development Strategy showed innovative thinking about the approach to planning but, in the hands of the current Northern Ireland administration, it became a mere paper exercise. Conservative members of the Assembly would play a full part in developing the wider thinking on planning because we realise that people are interested not just in their immediate surroundings but also in the wider environment.

Housing

Difficulties and delays in planning have restricted housing supply, contributing to the rapid rise in prices. The Conservative Party in Northern Ireland is particularly concerned about the problems this is causing for first time buyers. Urgent action is needed to make home ownership a reality for those at the foot of the ladder.

The intention of recent planning restrictions is to encourage more brown-field development and town centre regeneration, which we applaud. However, for this to succeed both appropriate land (much of it in the government estate) and planning permissions need to come forward more quickly. Conservatives will press to break these logjams.

Renewable energy

Northern Ireland is heavily dependent on imported energy. We are right at the end of the gas supply chain and heavily exposed to supply disruption and price escalation.

However, we do have the potential to generate more of our own energy. We could harness the power of wind, waves and tides, grow more biomass and extract considerable energy from the 1 million plus tonnes of residual waste* which is dumped in landfills every year.

It is often overlooked that there is much more to energy than just electricity. Indeed, electricity represents only around one third of total energy consumption, with heat and transport accounting for most of the rest.

The Conservative Party will ensure that renewable energy policy takes appropriate account of all energy usage. In particular, we shall seek more incentives for renewable heat sources as these can be most readily met by locally available resources using existing technology.

**residual waste is the waste and rejects remaining after recycling and composting*

Efficient and localised generation

Micro generation plants, which are up to four times more efficient than the existing power system, should be encouraged, as they can substantially reduce fossil fuel use and the consequent carbon emissions which contribute to climate change. Many of these micro generation plants can run on locally available and renewable materials. This secures local supply, while at the same time keeping money within our community.

The Conservative Party will support research and development in these fields as well as financial incentives for environmental good practice.

Review of Public Administration

The Conservative party is carrying out a UK-wide review of local government structures and financing with a view to making a significant transfer of power from the central to the local level.

The number of local councils in Northern Ireland needs to strike a balance between administrative efficiency and local identity. Labour's seven-council plan gets that balance wrong. There is a serious risk that we shall end up with authorities that are seen as remote and bureaucratic by the people they are supposed to serve. Labour's policy appears to be a thinly disguised return to the pre-Macrory county council system, but without the district council structure below.

The need for considerable further work on the review of public administration before the current proposals are imposed is one of the key reasons why an early return of devolution is vital.

