

GREEN PARTY CONFERENCE 2009
Embargo 12 noon Saturday 25th April 2009

Green Party MLA Brian Wilson's speech

I want to welcome all of our guest speakers here today:

- Irish Environment Minister and Green Party leader John Gormley,
- Liz Snook from the Plane Stupid Campaign,
- Glynn Roberts from the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Association

I would like to thank them all for their contribution to the success of this Conference.

I would also like to congratulate Steven Agnew on his selection as our candidate for the European Parliament.

The Greens are a major force in the EU and much of the legislation which impacts on our daily lives in Northern Ireland, particularly in the environment and agriculture areas initiate from the EU Parliament.

I have no doubt that Steven, with his youth drive and idealism is an outstanding candidate. He would make a significant contribution to the Green Party Group in Brussels. I would therefore appeal to you to give him your full support in his campaign.

I should like to begin with a review of the year's events at the Northern Ireland Assembly.

In the Green Party election manifesto, we were very supportive of the new institutions and hoped that the reconstructed power sharing Executive would begin to resolve some of the long-standing divisions in our community.

Such hopes have not been fulfilled and progress at the Assembly over the past year has been disappointing.

Five months were wasted because Sinn Fein and the DUP could not reach agreement on the devolution of policing. Many other issues

such as the future of the Maze, the Irish Language Act, water charges and the funding of local services remain deadlocked.

However the greatest indictment of the Executive is its failure to get agreement replacing the 11+. The Executive has failed to have one successful discussion, on how to resolve the matter of post-primary transfer, since the restoration of devolution.

The issue is causing distress among teachers, parents and pupils and must be resolved urgently.

We in the Green party have always opposed the 11+. Indeed the first time I stood for election in 1973 was as an 'Abolish the 11+ candidate'. However the Minister's proposals have led to chaos and action must be taken to avoid anarchy.

In recent weeks a number of anxious parents have sought my advice. Parents concerned because they do not know if their child should sit a test, sit two tests or do the Protestant or Catholic test....I was unable to advise them – because I don't know myself.

The issue of education has become a political football between the DUP and Sinn Fein.

Now neither side wishes to be seen to give in, despite the fact that their interagency is causing uncertainty and division within the education system and anxiety and distress among parents and children. This uncertainty cannot be allowed to continue.

I would appeal to the Minister to authorize the Department to provide a test on a temporary basis and give the Executive an opportunity to resolve the issue.

While progress has been disappointing there have been some positive signs. The Executive's response to rising fuel prices, was welcome and appropriate.

However the most encouraging aspect of the past year has been the Executive's response to the terrorist murders at Antrim and Lurgan. This could have developed into recriminations and political points scoring, but all parties united in their condemnation of the terrorists and in their support for the PSNI.

For the first time since the Good Friday Agreement I was truly convinced that all the parties in the Assembly were determined to make the power sharing Executive work.

However the Assembly's progress as far as green issues are concerned, has been dismal.

In fact, it would seem to be stuck in reverse gear.

While the Programme for Government refers to the need to tackle climate change, which is one of the most serious problems facing the world, many of the Executive's decisions in fact make matters worse.

It is extremely frustrating to listen to Ministers talk green but when it comes to making green decisions, they fail.

- This was highlighted by the abolition of the Reconnect grants. Introduced by former Secretary of State Peter Hain to support small, renewable energy systems, they were ended by this Executive.
- We've also witnessed the reduction of the percentage of the Department for Regional Development's budget for public transport coupled with a hike in fares.

- Similarly Peter Robinson's decision to amend the building regulations, removing the mandatory inclusion of renewables is a total negation of the Executive's claim to support sustainability.

These decisions sounded the death knell for many small alternative energy businesses in Northern Ireland. It was also a huge betrayal to those who had taken sponsored courses run by DETI, to acquire the skills necessary for the installation of new renewable-energy systems.

Another major disappointment was former Environment Minister Arlene Foster's refusal to set up an Independent Environmental Protection Agency. That decision was definitely FOSTER'S FOLLY.

That decision was taken despite the fact that

- the Burke Report,
- the Coalition for Climate Change,
- the Consumer Council,
- anglers,
- conservationists
- and Friends of the Earth

...all called for an Independent Environmental Protection Agency.

And it's worth noting here too that when I moved my motion in the Assembly calling for an independent EPA it received unanimous support. Yet Arlene rejected it.

We remain the only part of these islands without an independent Environment Protection Agency.

Mind you we are the only part of these islands which officially refuses to recognise man's influence on climate change. So we're a very special place.

To highlight the lack of concern by the DUP on issues relating to the environment, First Minister Peter Robinson thought it was a good idea to appoint climate change sceptic Sammy Wilson to the position of Environment Minister.

I'm sure you've followed the great amount of publicity that our Minister has enjoyed since entering this role.

- Channel 4's Jon Snow,
- the Guardian's Laura Canning,
- London Reuters,
- BBC Radio Scotland,
- RTE,
- Downtown,
- Stormont Live,
- UTV,
- all the local and international press,
- even blogs in Canada and Australia...

...contacted the Green Party asking me how can a Minister responsible for implementing the Climate Change Act do his job correctly, if he does not believe in manmade climate change?

Sammy Wilson certainly raised Northern Ireland's profile, but for all the wrong reasons. While he sat talking about grapes growing in the South of England during Roman Times and argued against the top scientific minds of our generation, he confirmed many views that Northern Ireland still operates in the dark ages. It was embarrassing.

Thankfully the Green Party let the world know that many in Northern Ireland do not share our Minister's views and despair at his lack of knowledge.

The Minister's views are completely incompatible with his role as Minister for the Environment and his responsibility to promote the fight against climate change as set out in the Programme for Government.

The Minister's ludicrous decision to censor the 'Act on CO2' television advert made Northern Ireland look ridiculous throughout the world.

The DUP's response to a motion criticising Sammy actions showed just how far the largest party in Northern Ireland is willing to go to protect this Minister even though he is destroying Northern Ireland's international reputation.

It was unsurprising that a motion of no confidence was supported by all the parties except the DUP.

However to prevent any criticism of Sammy the DUP issued a 'petition of concern' which meant that the motion could only be passed with the support of a majority of both Unionists and Nationalists.

The DUP's decision to demand a cross community vote on the issue of climate change is a gross abuse of procedure.

The 'petition of concern' was designed to protect minorities and should be used sparingly, on sensitive issues, when it is felt the rights of one community are being ignored.

It was certainly never designed to protect a Minister who had made an idiot of himself. The 'petition of concern' should now be viewed as a veto tool and will lead to total gridlock within the Assembly.

It also raises the issue of designation within the Assembly. While Unionist and Nationalist designation was necessary, to help get the Assembly off its feet. Designation today is being used as an undemocratic tool, which reinforces the sectarian nature of the chamber.

When I signed in as a newly elected Assemblyman I was asked to designate as a Unionist or Nationalist. I refused and was designated as an "other".

This means that in many votes such as a 'petition of concern' or 'the budget' my vote does not count.

This is unacceptable in a democracy. It is wrong to deny those electors who voted for me any say in important matters such as the budget.

It cannot be justified.

My voters should have the same rights as those who voted for MLAs who agreed to designate.

I can assure everyone here, that in the past 12 months the Green Party has punched well above its weight. We have fought tirelessly on behalf of our environment, we have a green economic vision which will create thousands of jobs and we will continue to challenge the Assembly's main parties.

Therefore it is vital that you, your friends, your workmates, your families get out on June 4th and vote Green in the European election. It's time for the electorate to tell the big parties that they have not impressed so far.