



THE BASICS

Moderate Nationalist Party with its roots in the civil rights movement of the 1960's and 70's. Dominated northern nationalism for decades and was instrumental in the peace process and Good Friday Agreement. It was ironically eclipsed by SF following the 1998 agreement and has struggled to recover votes in recent years enduring damaging electoral results and a string of leaders

Current Leader: Colum Eastwood



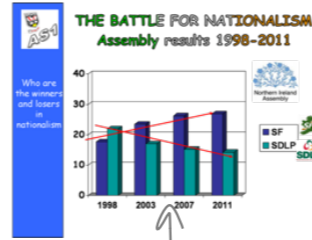
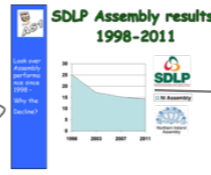
Executive positions: It has 1 Executive position; Environment (Mark H Durkan)



2011: It had 14 MLA's (2 down on 2007)

2010: It had 3 MP's (no change)

South Belfast; South Down and Foyle)



1) NEW LEADERSHIP
 The election of Colum Eastwood from Derry is a big step forward in many ways.

- This helps to rebrand the party as a party of the young boosting its relevance. Eastwood is only 31
- Eastwood is a lot more charismatic than McDonnell although still has quite a job to unite the party.
- Eastwood brings a new slightly more radical form of nationalism called PROGRESSIVE NATIONALISM which aims to answer some of the criticisms given to the party over previous policies. He is much more 'greener' in terms of his nationalism and also more left wing which counters the middle class image. The fact he is from Derry also bodes well for the party's fortunes in the city

However he does face a challenge uniting the party after quite a bitter leadership struggle.



The SDLP has its roots in the Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement of the 1960's and 70's. It was founded in 1970 in the midst of the beginnings of the Troubles.

It has based itself on moderate, non violent nationalism. The party aspires to a future united Ireland but is prepared to achieve this by winning over the people of Northern Ireland.

The party has had an illustrious past. It has its 1970s civil rights roots but it also was a key architect of the ground breaking 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Its leader John Hume was internationally recognised as an icon of peace.



BACKGROUND

SDLP DECLINE



POSITIVES

WEAKNESSES

WHAT WAS THE PARTIES POSITION IN 1998?

In 1998 the SDLP seemed like they could do no wrong!

- They had achieved what they had always sought ...
- 1) A power sharing assembly in the north of Ireland
- 2) Firm north south links (NSMC) supported by unionists
- 3) They had got Sinn Fein involved in constitutional politics and a seemingly permanent cessation of violence from the IRA
- 4) They got RUC (police reform)

- John Hume was feted across the globe as a peacemaker and won the Nobel peace prize jointly with David Trimble (UUP)
- To prove they were at the height of their powers, the party won the most votes in the 1st assembly elections and gained the position of Deputy First Minister (Seamus Mallon) along with many of the key executive seats
- They maintained 3 MPs at Westminster and had the support of over 1 in 4 voters in NI and 2/3rds of nationalist voters



DECLINE

HOWEVER, ironically the agreement they helped to produce also set in motion events that would lead to an era of long term decline.

They lost over 80,000 votes between 1998 and 2011

Sinn Fein have been the undoubted nationalist party of choice for the majority of northern nationalists since about 2003.

The party has struggled with numerous leaders, poorly thought out policies, Sinn Fein strengths and a lack lustre image which has dogged it since the heady days of 1998.

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?



1) LEADERSHIP

The first key element of weakness is leadership. The SDLP have had a succession of quietly capable leaders since 1998. Good administrators or capable politicians but they have clearly lacked the charisma and gravitas of JOHN HUME or SEAMUS MALLON.

The achievement of the GFA saw Hume step back from politics due to health reasons and because he had achieved his goal. Hume was personally hugely popular within the party and with the voters and had a long history of helping the nationalist community. His were big shoes to fill.

The SDLP. Had a succession of leaders:

- Mark Durkan- capable and effective but not charismatic. The party lacked new direction
- Margaret Ritchie- a capable minister and effective constituency MLA. However, there was party in fighting and she stood down after just 1 year
- Alasdair McDonnell was a very capable administrator but he was regarded as a bull in a china shop and lacked the charisma needed to drive the party forward and challenge SF



3) CONFUSED IDENTITY

The party has also been accused of a confused identity. A report commissioned by it was leaked to the press and made for interesting reading.

- Many nationalists regarded them as being part of the 4 Ms
 - Too Middle Class
 - Too Moderate
 - Too Middle Aged
 - Too Male

Criticisms included that they were not doing enough to promote nationalism and a goal of a united Ireland.

Many consider them too geographically focused on Derry and South Down. The leadership was criticised and voters thought the party lacked a clear direction



2) POOR POLICY DIRECTION

In 1998 the SDLP achieved almost everything they had fought for over two decades. They had a power sharing executive and assembly agreed by almost all. They had the north south links they had coveted and with Unionist cooperation. They had reforms of the RUC. They had brought SF in from the political cold and got them involved in peaceful politics.

HOWEVER, the quick achievement of these long held goals produced problems. The party struggled to find new policy goals to galvanise its supporters behind. Instead SF began to moderate and produce effective and dynamic policies which were more ambitious and radical than those of the SDLP.

The SDLP soon became a party seeking an objective. Their claim to be THE nationalist party was subsumed by SF who gained seats on both sides of the border.

The SDLP tried to counter SF by trying to forge a link with FIANNA FAIL one of the top political parties in the Republic of Ireland. This policy was confused and never came to fruition.

The party also failed to forge a strategic way forward. They rejected a possible link with the UUP to form an opposition. They agreed to pass a pay rise for MLAs at a time of austerity. They failed to put an end to double jobbing. It began to look like it was feathering its own nest.

2) STRONG HISTORY

The party has been accused of resting on its laurels. However it does have an impressive history and background which many nationalists still identify with. SF's carve up of power with the DUP may raise concerns amongst new SF supporters. SF will have to work to maintain support among voters who now see them as being part of the political establishment. These voters could be won back by a new and dynamic SDLP if they galvanise themselves in to a new youthful and dynamic force (taking a leaf out of SF's book)

3) OPPOSITION

The new Opposition bill raises the prospect that the SDLP could perhaps form part of an opposition to the DUP/ SF. This could help the party win an identity again and place them, in direct competition with SF ... making them a real 'alternative'



4 SINN FEIN MODERATION AND SUCCESS

Of course one key reason for its decline is the success of SF. SF have in many ways capitalised on the GFA and have moved quickly into the SDLP's traditional ground.

In 1998 a SF voter would more than likely be from hard line republican heartlands such as the Falls Road or Andersonstown. There would be a firm working class agenda and a hard line towards the way forward.

The GFA successfully engaged SF politically and saw it prosper. SF politicians proved remarkably effective politicians and household names. They were also effective in achieving nationalist policies such as prisoner releases. The longer the ceasefire lasted the more trust they had from nationalist voters. They slowly began to be the main nationalist party and SF surged forward as the vote polarised between the DUP and SF.



5) VOTING SYSTEM

The SDLP have perhaps also suffered at the hands of the voting system ..

STV allows voters the chance to make a number of votes in order of preference.

While SDLP voters would transfer their votes to SF on a regular basis. It is clear that this is not reciprocated. SF voters do not tend to pass their vote on. This is a major success for SF but a drawback for the SDLP

