

Responses from SDLP

1. The SDLP has always been in favour of powersharing and has made the defense and restoration of the Good Friday Agreement's powersharing model a core part of our current election campaign.

We believe that this current election is a fight to secure the future of power sharing. The choice has never been more stark - if the same parties that can't work together and don't want to work together win then we're going into a period of direct rule.

That will mean Tory Ministers under the direction of Theresa May implementing unfettered policies of naked austerity and laying the groundwork for a hard border Brexit.

However there is an alternative available. There is an alternative to direct rule and unbridled Brexit. On Thursday 2nd March, people can vote for parties that will form a government based on partnership. We can have a government that prioritises the health service crisis, the challenge of Brexit, and building a socially just economy.

2. The SDLP has published a set of proposals ('Securing Our Future in Europe') which outlines the particular circumstances and needs of Northern Ireland in relation to Brexit and calls for a bespoke 'Special Status' to be secured.

These criteria include continued access to the European Single Market, the maintenance of free movement of goods, services, capital and people and a continuation of the various streams of European funding such as the Common Agricultural Policy, PEACE funds and Interreg.

Specifically we also believe that workers across the island of Ireland and those working on a cross border basis must also be protected by the principles of non-discrimination and equal treatment.

The SDLP firmly believe that while existing protections derived from European legislation should be retained, there is a requirement for a political commitment across the island of Ireland to ensure no 'race to the bottom' develops which sacrifices workers' rights or allows a regulatory degradation.

The SDLP is proposing a cross border protocol to be agreed in relation to workers rights. This would coordinate and strengthen rights and protections in the workplace in line with progressive European standards. The Assembly has devolved competence in the field of employment law and can establish a framework of protections suited to the needs of Northern Ireland.

3. The SDLP has remained consistent in our resistance to the introductions of punitive welfare 'reforms' and recognise that those who will be affected most by the reform of welfare are those who are the most vulnerable. The SDLP have consistently attempted to negate the devastating impact of Welfare Reform changes by amending legislation, presenting alternative proposals and calling for protections for the elderly, disabled and marginalized through the introduction of mitigations and rights.

The SDLP believe that the process for dealing with Welfare Reform in Northern Ireland needs to be remodeled. We are reiterating our calls for a bespoke Welfare Reform committee, to run in tandem with any proposed changes to Welfare Reform from Westminster. This committee will ensure that we do not face the recurrence of our current situation, with the Westminster Government having the power to implement welfare changes without taking the situation in Northern Ireland into account.

The SDLP has welcomed the attempts of the Evason recommendations to soften the blow of welfare reform but we will continue to defend the most vulnerable and do all we can to ensure that deprived communities do not end up paying the price for the economic crash.

4. The SDLP believe that people's living standards and conditions can only be improved through increasing the availability of better paid and jobs.

Jobs enhances society by alleviating poverty and making sure that as many people as possible have the dignity of work. More jobs will also stem the flow of our young people emigrating in pursuit of a better economic future.

As such we support the adoption of an Industrial Strategy to aid in the creation of economically diverse, stable and rooted industry within Northern Ireland. In order to ensure workers have sufficient protections and are valued appropriately we need to provide the routes to developing a skilled work force. Therefore our workers, particularly young people, need to be up skilled to ensure that their labour and roles are valued appropriately.

5. The SDLP have long believed that services and support should be provided according to objective need and support an urgent building initiative to alleviate the housing crisis in Northern Ireland. We have published proposals as to how the Housing Executive and Housing Associations could access low interest loans from the European Investment Bank to finance the restoration of existing but uninhabitable housing stock and the creation of new homes for those on the waiting list.

6. The SDLP has been vocal over many years in our support of a comprehensive Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. We support the inclusion of social and economic rights within such a Bill and feel that the recognition and protection for the diversity of communities in Northern Ireland is long overdue.

A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland should in our view incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights along with other measures and as a matter of urgency, provide much needed reassurances to those listening with alarm to the British Government's comments on the Human Rights Act.

There is a need for an urgent refocus on the protection and progression of citizen and community rights in Northern Ireland, part of which will require new initiatives on the island. This should entail a new initiative on a Charter of Rights for the island of Ireland with the respective Human Rights Commissions taking forward a dedicated work programme.