



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR THE
ENVIRONMENT**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Local Government (Disqualification)
(Amendment) Bill**

20 May 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR THE
ENVIRONMENT

Local Government (Disqualification) (Amendment) Bill

20 May 2010

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Cathal Boylan (Chairperson)

Mr Roy Beggs

Mr Jonathan Bell

Mr John Dallat

Mr Danny Kinahan

Mr Ian McCrea

Mr Alastair Ross

Mr Peter Weir

Mr Brian Wilson

Witnesses:

Ms Lynn Carvill) Women's Resource and Development Agency

Dr Margaret Ward)

Professor Rick Wilford) Queen's University, Belfast

The Chairperson (Mr Boylan):

We will now hear a briefing from the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) on the Local Government (Disqualification) (Amendment) Bill. Members, I remind you to ask questions, rather than make speeches, because we are now behind schedule. I welcome Lynn Carvill, the women's sector lobbyist from WRDA, Dr Margaret Ward, the director of WRDA and Professor Rick Wilford, professor of politics at Queen's University, Belfast. You are all very

welcome. You will have between five and 10 minutes to make your presentation. I ask members to ensure that they declare their interests first.

Mr Beggs:

I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council.

Mr Bell:

I declare an interest as a member of Ards Borough Council.

Ms Lynn Carvill (Women's Resource and Development Agency):

The lions' den syndrome springs to my mind, and I hope that we will be heard out and that questions will be put to us after our presentation. I thank the Committee for inviting WRDA to give evidence on the Bill to end dual mandates; we are pleased to be here.

I am the women's sector lobbyist with WRDA. We are pleased that Professor Rick Wilford is able to join us today. He will share with the Committee his views on enhancing diversity in political decision-making, and he will provide examples of the tools and strategies that could be employed to increase female participation in this area. Dr Margaret Ward is the director of WRDA, and she will speak about the international obligations that apply to Northern Ireland and which are relevant to the issue of enhanced participation of women in decision-making. Each of us will provide a brief input to the Committee.

In the Northern Ireland Assembly, 15% of the MLAs are female. That compares very poorly with other devolved regions of the UK. The corresponding percentage in Scotland is 33%, or a third, and in Wales it is 46.7%, which is almost half.

Twenty-two per cent of local councillors are female. At the beginning of March 2010, 67 MLAs in Northern Ireland held dual mandates as local councillors, 88% of whom were male. The proportion of female MLAs in the DUP is 5.5%; in Sinn Féin the figure is 29.6%. None of the Ulster Unionist Party's MLAs are female, while 18.7% of the SDLP's MLAs and 28.6% of Alliance Party MLAs are female.

Recently, a major concern of ours has been the gender composition of the voluntary transition committees, the membership of which is 16% female. Significant proposals were made to ensure

inclusivity in that the committees needed to be balanced in their political representation in proportion to the representation that is already on councils. However, gender inclusivity, even proportionate to the current representation, was completely ignored.

Before I pass over to Professor Wilford, I will mention two recent developments in the enhancement of representative democracy. The first is the Speaker's Conference, which reported to the Westminster Parliament recently. Speaker's Conferences are rare; I think that the previous one occurred in 1979. The terms of reference for the 2008-2010 Speaker's Conference were to:

“Consider, and make recommendations for rectifying, the disparity between the representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people in the House of Commons and their representation in the UK population at large”.

A raft of recommendations emerged from the conference, many of which I hope will be followed up by the newly elected Government.

Simultaneously, the Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights in the Republic of Ireland agreed to establish a subcommittee on women's participation in politics, and it recorded its recommendations in October 2009. It is significant that those two jurisdictions deem it important to address the issue, and, therefore, it is perhaps timely for our Assembly to do likewise. Political leadership and decision-making should mirror the society that it represents, but that is clearly not the case in Northern Ireland.

Professor Rick Wilford (Queen's University, Belfast):

Good morning, everyone. Lynn touched on the current level of representation of women in the Assembly, and it is by far the lowest in the United Kingdom. Each year, the Inter-Parliamentary Union produces a league table of women in elected Parliaments across the world. If it were an independent political entity, Northern Ireland would rank eighty-first on that list. It would tie with Zimbabwe in respect of the elected representation of women in its Parliament.

Mr Bell:

What is the total? Eighty-first out of —

Professor Wilford:

The total is 138; Northern Ireland would be in the bottom quartile.

Mr Weir:

Strictly speaking, it would be in the third quartile.

Professor Wilford:

OK; it would be in the bottom half.

There are lots of reasons for the under-representation of women, including, as Dawn mentioned, those concerning the politics of the selectorate. Another reason is incumbency. The same people get returned year after year, election after election, which creates a blockage for under-represented groups from the wider population, particularly women. Dual mandates create a double hurdle in the form of double incumbency, which denies opportunities to a very talented group. Indeed, women are not just a group but the numeric majority in the population.

Incumbency denies women the opportunity to gain access to even the lowest rung of the ladder of a political career, namely local government. Female representation is low in our local government and correspondingly low in the Assembly. Indeed, it is appallingly low compared with Parliaments in Scotland, Wales and even the recently elected House of Commons. Ending double-jobbing and the dual mandate will create opportunity spaces for all kinds of groups in the population, including women, to enter the political sphere and use local government as a stepping stone to a further career at regional or national level.

Dr Margaret Ward (Women’s Resource and Development Agency):

I thank the Committee for giving us the opportunity to talk about increasing the representation of women. I will remind you of our Northern Irish and international obligations to increase the representation of women in political life. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister’s 2006-2016 ‘Gender Equality Strategy’ was re-published recently, and it contains key action areas that are relevant now. At paragraphs 2.8 and 2.9, key action areas, which were confirmed in the formal consultation on the strategy, include representation in public life, decision-making and peace-building. Under those action areas, we have a strategic objective:

“to ensure the active and equal participation of women and men at all levels of civil society, economy, peace building and government”.

A strong message from the consultation, which is contained in the strategy, concerned the strategy’s links with global gender-equality commitments that have been ratified by the UK Government. I will mention the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), both of which the UK

Government has a commitment to further.

The Beijing Platform for Action's critical area 7 refers to the inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels, while critical area 8 refers to the insufficient mechanisms that exist to promote the advancement of women. CEDAW talks about state parties being obligated in all fields — in particular, the political, social, economic and cultural — to take appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women. It urges state parties to adopt temporary special measures, which are aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women. It states that those measures would be discontinued when the objectives of equality have been achieved.

The CEDAW committee examined the UK Government's progress in the summer of 2008. The concluding comments of CEDAW made some very critical points. It talked about the under-representation of women in political and public life and in key institutions that were established directly as a result of the peace process. One key institution is the Assembly. The committee called for measures with benchmarks and concrete timetables to increase the number of women in political and public life at all levels. It also called for the full implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325 to Northern Ireland. It concerned women, peace and security, and it was adopted by the Security Council in 2000. It calls for all countries emerging from conflict to increase the representation of women at all levels of decision-making and participation, peace-building and conflict prevention.

All of those are highly relevant to the private Member's Bill that is being put forward by Dawn Purvis. I urge the political parties to look more widely at how the opportunity would enable them to have some positive action measures to increase women's participation.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for your presentation. Sinn Féin does not have a problem with promoting 50:50 representation in the party. That is clear. We have the highest percentage of women representatives, but a lot more work can be done. This may come across in respect of the role of women, but I want to talk about workloads. Mr Brian Wilson talked about councils operating part time. I know a lot of councillors, especially young mothers, who have a full-time job and are councillors also. The rest of their time is spent doing council work. The role of a councillor has now changed. The transfer of powers that is proposed by the RPA will increase their workloads.

Professor Wilford, have you done any research into the workloads of councillors and how that will tie into their role? Is it something that we need to look at in respect of legislation and how we can create more opportunities?

Professor Wilford:

I have not done any work explicitly on the workload of councils. With respect, however, that is missing the point. There is a normative issue and a practical issue. The normative issue is the one that Dawn raised earlier, which is that it is not a matter of whether one can do two jobs. Being a mum of young children, a carer or a parent is an incredibly demanding undertaking. I have not done any particular work on that.

Mr Brian Wilson and a number of other members made the point that being an MLA is a full-time job. You do not just sit on this Committee; most of you sit on at least two Committees. The fact that two out of three MLAs here are also councillors is an appalling statistic because it suggests that one representative position or the other, or maybe both, are rather Corinthian activities that you can juggle and do equally well. I do not buy that. If you are conscientious and take the job of MLA and your role as Committee members wholly seriously — some of you are members of more than two Committees — it is very much a full-time job. It is not something that you can stop doing at six o'clock in the evening and attend a council meeting. It is not like that at all.

I wish to spike the argument that came up earlier about whether one can be, for example, a GP or a teacher and a councillor. One can, but the issue is whether one should do that. One should be making choices before an election, and that is where I depart from Dawn's viewpoint.

In May 2015, we will face the prospect of a general election, a local government election and an Assembly election all happening on the same day. Think of a situation in which a Member's name is on all three ballot papers. Such a scenario will fuel a perception about politicians. In 'The Devil's Dictionary', Ambrose Bierce put it rather well when, being the cynical man that he was, he described a politician as somebody who pursues public office for private gain. In the particular context in which the debate about the dual mandate is taking place, and given what has happened both here and across the water in the recent past, it is incumbent on all politicians to do everything that they possibly can to allay the perception, or misperception, that holding two or, in some cases, three mandates may convey. That may fuel the perception that people are

undertaking political office for the wrong reasons. It is also greedy.

As all bar 15% of Members are male, and because women are equally under-represented at local government level in Northern Ireland, you are, in effect, blocking opportunity for a seam of talent. As party members, you are responsible for that, because candidates are selected by parties. Parties need to address the way that they select candidates, whether it is for local government, the Assembly or Westminster. The politics of selectorates really matter.

There are different ways in which parties can pursue those strategies, and I can elaborate on them if you want me to. Parties need to examine themselves as organisations, inspect how they set about candidate selection and ask whether they are giving all potential candidates a fair crack of the whip. I do not think that they are.

The Chairperson:

I was a councillor and an MLA, but, after two years, I co-opted my council seat. As you mentioned, it takes a lot of dedication and hard work to be able to leave here to go to council meetings in the evening and deliver at those meetings. People who think otherwise and say that they can do both jobs fully are fooling themselves. They may participate in certain aspects of both jobs, but if they were open and transparent, they would probably agree.

Professor Wilford:

I am reminded of my sons, who each had a hamster when they were young. The hamsters were very busy running round the wheel, but they did not produce very much. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Weir:

I may be running round the wheel for a little bit longer. Thank you for the presentation. There are a considerable number of wider issues, some of which I agree with you on and some of which I do not. Specifically, we need to focus on the council side of things.

As the Chairperson said, there is an issue about people going from here to council meetings. I understand that, but nearly all councillors, unless they are retired, have full-time jobs. The level of remuneration for a councillor is such that someone who is not retired could not afford to do it as a full-time job; it is about £9,500 a year. Therefore, on the issue of being able to give enough attention to the job, is someone who is an MLA and a councillor not in the same position as someone who is a doctor and a councillor? We flatter ourselves if we think that the intensity of

an MLA's work is greater than that of a doctor or an accountant. Is there an analogy?

The participation of women in local councils is important to me, and I have been involved with that for some time. Any new council structures need to have flexibility; that is key. We have got to recognise that, for some councillors, it will be a full-time job, and they need remuneration for it. By the same token, the role of a councillor has to be flexible enough to allow individuals to combine their council roles with doing another job or carrying out his or her caring responsibilities, for instance. As soon as the role of councillor becomes purely a full-time job, some men and women are excluded.

Ms Carville:

We are here to argue for better representation in politics and political institutions, not to go into the nitty-gritty that was discussed earlier with Dawn Purvis. Some people understand how hard MLAs and councillors work. This is about opening up opportunities to people in Northern Ireland and having better, more diverse and more representative institutions for which people can vote. A lot of discussion has taken place. Candidate selection is key. Political parties have a strong role to play in selecting candidates. A raft of research has been done recently on the perception that it is risky to put women before the electorate. However, we have not put many women before the electorate because of the way in which our political parties operate. They can be cold and not very welcoming for women. We are here to give evidence on better representation rather than on the question of whether someone can hold two or three jobs. Women hold 40 jobs every day of the week, and they are more than able to do so. Do we want that, however? I would say that we do not.

Mr Weir:

Perhaps I am being cynical on one level. Ridding councils of MLAs will create space, but I agree that the profile of the people who come forward is critical. Unless the profile of people who come forward as candidates changes, the same issues will arise for the spaces that are created. That is crucial. When we look at recent trends, we can see some positives. Some 22% of councillors are female. I think that I am right in saying that about 18% of outgoing councillors in the 2005 election were female, and 30% of the new first-time councillors were female. It is by no means equality, but the statistics show significant upward movement. If the councillors were to be replaced by people of the same profile, and if the council average rather than the Assembly average were mirrored, the percentage of female councillors would increase from 22% to about

23%. That is not a significant change.

I do not know what the experience of other parties is, but I think that this is where the problem needs to be tackled. At selection, the problem is less to do with the female candidates who put their names forward than the lack of women putting their names forward. I do not think that there is evidence in Northern Ireland to suggest that a disproportionate number of females fail to be selected. Do you agree that some of the initiatives that are starting or being looked at — for example, the mentoring at local council scheme that is due to take place across the parties in the near future — are the route to making the biggest difference and tackling the problem, because they encourage people, particularly women, to get to that stage in the first place. That is probably the biggest hurdle to overcome. Such schemes encourage women to take part in public life. Councillor Bell can back me up on the benefits of local schemes, and it will allow me to get a plug in. North Down Borough Council and Ards Borough Council run an award-winning scheme, Visible Women, which holds an annual conference. Councillor Brian Wilson will also be aware of it.

In addition, it encourages local initiatives. Getting enough women to the starting line is probably the biggest single hurdle to overcome. Getting women to put their name forward is a bigger problem than getting them selected and elected.

Dr Ward:

That is what we are trying to say to political parties. It is about parties taking the long view by increasing the number of women so that they are there to become candidates. How much are parties doing to mentor and encourage women to come forward?

There are other issues. For instance, if more women were in political life, other issues would arise. Many women have said that, if one has small children, it is impossible to be in council because of the time requirements involved. Many women cannot leave the house at teatime, although they might be able to do so at other times. If more women were in political life, those issues could be addressed.

Mr Weir:

I understand your point, but councils must strike a balance that gives people the flexibility to perform different roles. I am reminded of a colleague with a full-time occupation who was elected to council and was then able to progress further, which he could not have done if the

council had met during the day. Mr Kinahan is a prime example of someone whose time in council focused purely on daytime activities. However, such a narrow focus is liable to exclude many working women and men. Therefore, allocating responsibilities is not straightforward. Allowing a degree of flexibility in roles to fit in with people's lifestyles produces a greater variety of inputs, but it is not just a question of taking action to enable people with children to be councillors, because those actions may end up excluding other women. It is about getting the balance right.

Professor Wilford:

There are various points to consider. If I may put a question back to you, why is it that just under half of the Welsh Assembly, more than a third of the Scottish Parliament, but only 15% of the Northern Ireland Assembly are women? One major reason is that political parties, particularly the Labour Party, in Scotland and Wales have adopted women-only shortlists and have selected women in winnable and marginal constituencies and in those in which the incumbent is standing down. They do that because of a piece of UK legislation, the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002, which permits political parties to adopt various positive action measures that are designed explicitly to improve the representation of women in elected office. Not one political party in Northern Ireland has made use of that legislation. Why?

Mr Weir:

Other parties may take a different attitude, but we do not believe in quotas —

Professor Wilford:

The legislation does not provide for quotas. Quotas are illegal.

Mr Weir:

If people are selected according to an all-whatever shortlist, that is a form of quota; it is not based on merit. Others say that they believe in quotas, but they do not implement them. We have taken the view that I outlined. Furthermore, although women-only shortlists may have produced certain figures in the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, if you look at local government, on which we are focusing today, in Scotland, England and Wales, the figures for female councillors are no better than those in Northern Ireland.

Professor Wilford:

They are better. They are marginally better, but they are better. We have a lower proportion of female councillors in local government than in any other region of the United Kingdom.

Mr Weir:

I am not sure whether that is accurate.

Professor Wilford:

It is.

Mr Weir:

We can agree to disagree.

The Chairperson:

I am conscious that we seem to be widening the debate. We are supposed to be talking about dual mandates. Obviously, we want to encourage women to enter politics, but I do not want to deflect from the line of inquiry.

Mr Dallat:

Members may have heard that I gave up my dual mandate three weeks ago. The SDLP is about to send its first woman MP to Westminster, so we are trying. I used to read in the papers that a political party had held an important meeting at which tea was served by the ladies' committee. Thank God, those days are gone, but, you can see the fine representation of gender balance on this Committee. Thank God for Alex and Antoinette on the Committee staff for giving some semblance of normality.

The involvement of women in politics is nothing new; I can think of Baroness Blood, Pat Hume and various other women who were involved at the height of the Troubles. They were the ones who wigged the ears of the paramilitaries and told them to wise up, so women do not have to justify their right to be in politics.

The Welsh Assembly can pump its chest and say that it has achieved its level of female participation, and our Assembly has an awful lot to do. However, the wider community also has a role. The SDLP puts forward female candidates, and, for whatever reason, the public do not

elect them. Sharon Haughey and various other candidates are bright, intelligent people who did not get elected.

The Chairperson:

If she had been elected, I might not be sitting here.

Mr Dallat:

It is a pity that people such as her did not get elected. I have a strong stomach, but I have listened to an awful lot this morning. What advice can you give on educating the wider community on the necessity for representation from women? How did the Welsh Assembly achieve its level of female representation? I have been there and seen the performance of the female AMs, who are absolutely brilliant. They are on the ball all the time.

Dr Ward:

That is due to the political parties. Legislation is not necessary, and, as Rick said, it is down to how the parties select women to put them up for election. Women are not vote-losers; in fact, we have seen that, in Northern Ireland, they can often be vote-winners. There is no prejudice against having women candidates, but it is important that they be selected for winnable seats and that they are selected in sufficient numbers for them to be elected. The parties can use their systems for candidate selection and for deciding where those candidates will stand to transform the situation.

Mr Dallat:

You are saying that the political parties are selecting women for seats that are not winnable or that they are carving up the constituencies in such a way that the men win.

Ms Carvill:

There is evidence to show that political parties are more likely to select candidates that look like the incumbent. It is risky for them to move away from that. You mentioned the fact that Sharon Haughey did not get elected, but many men who stand for seats do not get elected. There seems to be a barrier to putting people from diverse groups up for election.

In my introduction, I spoke about the raft of recommendations from the Speaker's Conference in the UK. Those will apply to Northern Ireland, and Willie McCrea MP represented Northern

Ireland on that Speaker's Conference. So many recommendations came from it, and, if they filter down to be used here, they will be useful. It is about support, mentoring, opening up and transparency. Before anything else can happen, seats need to be opened up, so the ending of dual mandates is one important element.

In response to a point that Peter Weir made earlier, if women were to continue to enter politics at the current rate, it would take 200 years to reach equality. Therefore, we cannot argue for voluntary equality measures, because we cannot wait for 200 years. Something firmer than that is needed.

Professor Wilford:

There is no magic bullet to solve the problem. Just as there are a variety of causes of women's underrepresentation, a variety of strategies can be adopted to improve that representation. Candidate selection and the strategies that parties adopt for choosing their candidates are factors. Those are important factors, because parties are gatekeepers to the political realm. How parties set about the business of candidate selection is a key issue, and not just in a Northern Ireland context.

In 2001, the then Equal Opportunities Commission in Britain carried out a study of women parliamentary candidates in 2001 and 2005 entitled, 'Man Enough for the Job?'. That study found that some of the questions that political parties were asking women who were seeking candidacy were absolutely outrageous, and would never have been put to a prospective male candidate for a Westminster election.

Therefore, there are still attitudes in parties across the piece that are inimical to opportunities for women. That is why we say that, although it is not the only answer, parties have a critical role to play. If parties simply reselect people to run for both local government and the Assembly time and again, they are, in effect, putting a double hurdle in front of new people and blocking their entry to elected tiers of politics. That is the issue, and dual mandates, double-jobbing and triple-jobbing are factors. If you get rid of those practices, at least you are clearing more opportunity space. That is our point.

Dr Ward:

One issue that was raised earlier in the discussion with Dawn was the decline in the level of

voting and the disengagement that people have with the political process. We do not feel that we are represented by our peers when we have so few women in the political process. So many women are disengaged and do not see people who represent their interests coming forward. That is a crucial issue linked to democracy and legitimacy.

The Chairperson:

There are four more members who still have questions to ask. I ask that members stick to the provisions of the Bill. We want to promote the participation of women in politics, and there is an opportunity to do that through the Bill, but I want members to stick to the Bill in their questions.

Mr Beggs:

Thank you for your presentation. In the discussion with Dawn, the relatively small number of people who are involved in politics was mentioned. From my being involved in politics for the past 20 years, my experience is that relatively few people are prepared to put their names forward as candidates, because there is a requirement to put quite a bit of your personal life into it. Training and support are essential to more capable women candidates being prepared to do that, because that will ensure that women are increasingly confident about and aware of what they are letting themselves in for.

The women in our party have said that they do not want quotas; they want to be in politics as of right. They do not want to be second-class citizens; they want to be elected on account of their ability.

Going back to the Bill, what will your organisation do to make sure that, if vacancies arise, we do not just get more of the same and that there will be an opportunity for a better gender balance? In our own party, we have seen positive results from our mentoring and training group. How does your organisation provide encouragement, training, support and advice to political parties so that, should vacancies arise, we will be able to benefit from more results such as those achieved by Carol Black in Dromore and Jo-Anne Dobson in Craigavon? Those women were very capable candidates and were successful.

Mr Bell:

Sharon Skillen in Castlereaugh.

Mr Beggs:

How is your organisation encouraging more capable candidates to come forward, and what advice and training are you giving to political parties so that those opportunities are taken up?

Ms Carvill:

In my role as a lobbyist, I have worked closely with quite a few male and female Members across the political parties. I have also worked with the women's officer in the Ulster Unionist Party. We have been able to assist with anything that parties have asked us about gender equality or women's equality. Heightening awareness, as we are doing in our evidence today, is important, because some people are shocked by what they hear.

Neither gender equality nor women's equality is at the front of people's minds. People are quite shocked when they hear statistics such as those that I mentioned earlier. We do not offer training, but there are organisations in the women's sector that do, such as DemocraShe, which works with local women politicians, although it has funding problems at present, and the Women in Local Councils initiative.

We were talking about quotas. The carrot and stick approach is important, but we need a little more stick. It has been proven that, unless something is mandatory, nothing moves forward. All the research shows that. With no change, we will have women's equality in 200 years' time. We offer advice and we work with parties, but we are here to ask the parties to take that on board.

Dr Ward:

The main remit of our organisation is education and training of women in grass-roots communities, and raising their level of awareness. Through that, they have lobbied on particular issues. We are not working with women who want to be political candidates. When a lot of American money came here, DemocraShe, which is run by Bronagh Hinds, ran a lot of training sessions. Many women who are now in political life went through that training. Our problem is that funding for that type of initiative is very difficult to get now.

Mr Bell:

Thank you for your presentation. I might not support the methods of what you may be advocating, but I support the need for more female representation. I have spoken to people and encouraged them to enter politics, but they felt that they had no chance. My experience has been

the exact opposite: I know a young woman who told me that she would not run for a local council seat because she felt that she had no chance of being elected. However, she ran, was elected and then re-elected. I have a lot of anecdotal experience of young females who, although they felt they had no chance, allowed their names to go on a ballot paper and were elected. We must encourage that. There is an elephant in the room. What advice would you, as lobbyists for women, give to a female party leader, Margaret Ritchie, who is an MP and an MLA and says that she will definitely do both jobs?

Ms Carvill:

That would not be for me to say. Our role —

Mr Bell:

You are criticising men, in many ways.

Ms Carvill:

I am not criticising men.

Mr Bell:

What advice would you give to a female party leader who is an MP and a MLA, who is setting an example for the party, and who says that she is going to double-job?

Ms Carvill:

My advice to Margaret Ritchie would be to implement an SDLP policy that would create some sort of mandatory positive action to get more women into the party. That would be my advice to any of the parties. I want to emphasise a point: are we happy, as a political institution, with the international lens on us, with 15% of women in our political institutions? That is what I want to emphasise.

The Chairperson:

Certain people have been mentioned. Before we go on, Mr Bell, I want us to refrain from mentioning any Members.

Mr Dallat:

That is a bit rich.

The Chairperson:

Hold on a minute; you mentioned someone yourself. Mr Bell, please.

Mr Bell:

I will abide by your ruling, Chairperson.

The difficulty that I foresee is that, if women are double-jobbing, should they set not the example as well as men? Men have taken a lot of hassle about what they should be doing. Should we ask women the same question? I will not mention any names, but there are other women MLAs. Should we say to them, “one woman, one job”? Is that your message?

Ms Carvill:

Eighty-eight per cent of MLAs in the Assembly are male double-jobbers. That is like saying that lone parents are mostly female, because 90% of lone parents are female. My point is that, at the moment, the ball lies squarely with men as double-jobbers.

Mr Bell:

It applies across the board for women as well as men.

Ms Carvill:

It is about balance.

Mr Bell:

My second question is on the full-time/part-time issue. I listened to Professor Wilford, and I respect what he had to say on the matter. My difficulty arises from the fact that, if one were a GP earning £80,000-plus a year, it is OK to be a councillor. However, an MLA on £43,000 a year who is also a councillor is branded greedy. Is there any logic to that?

Professor Wilford:

That sounds to me like a rhetorical question.

Mr Bell:

Yes, but I am asking you whether there is any logic there.

Professor Wilford:

I said earlier that it is not a case of whether one can do both, whatever one's normal occupation. The issue for me is whether one should. Certainly, in relation to elected office, I can but repeat myself: I regard being an MLA as a full-time occupation. If one is a dedicated public servant and, thus, a servant to the people, 100% of one's time should be given to that role. That is my point.

Mr Bell:

I was a full-time senior practitioner in an intensive-support social work team. Taking a child into care regularly required a child protection investigation, during which I often worked from 8.30 am to 6.45 pm, before dashing to attend a council meeting at 7.00 pm. Does the logic of your argument enable one to be a full-time public servant, social worker and a councillor?

Professor Wilford:

You are comparing apples and pears. I am comparing apples and apples. I am talking about two elected offices.

Mr Bell:

OK. So one can hold a full-time job and be a councillor.

Dr Ward:

The question is worrying, because its logic is that either you must be unemployed or a politician — nobody else would be eligible. Whereas, we want a diversity of people's experiences to decide what people's lives are about.

Mr B Wilson:

I believe that Dawn's Bill will have only an extremely marginal impact on the opportunities available for women. When double-jobbing is got rid of, the vast majority of people who will take up those posts will be virtually identical to the people who gave them up. Something much more fundamental and cultural is required. I do not find that a vast number of women are keen to enter the political arena. Many of them find it distasteful. Although the Green Party is no example, it has repeatedly tried to get women to stand as candidates, but they have totally refused. They do not want to get involved. Therefore, I suggest that this would have a marginal

impact. There are much more fundamental cultural problems to be tackled, including women's reluctance to join political parties and to become political activists.

The witnesses have said that a reduction in the number of people who vote in Northern Ireland elections is evidence that people are disillusioned. Is there any evidence that more women than men are disillusioned? Is there any evidence to support the argument that comparatively more women do not vote because they are disillusioned?

Ms Carvill:

On your first point, about using the Bill to try to end gender bias and to open up opportunities for women, my agency asks the Committee to consider proposing an amendment to the Bill that would strengthen our argument, support what we are asking for, and provide some kind of encouragement to women. I am not sure how that might work, but we want political parties to be encouraged and assisted to enhance diversity and create a better, more representative democracy. Is that possible?

I completely and absolutely agree that a cultural change in politics is crucial if women are to become less reluctant to get actively involved. Women are reluctant because of the quagmire that adversarial politics can sometimes be. However, given different circumstances, that could change. Professor Wilford will deal with the second point.

Professor Wilford:

There are gender gaps in turnout levels and the degree of voting disaffection. In the context of current UK politics, there is no gender difference in attitudes towards the furore over expenses and allowances scandals, and so on. There have been gender differences in electoral turnout in the past. However, those are equalising.

As for Lynn's point, there do not need to be any particular measures, because the existing 2002 statute can be used to explore the methods that are designed to try to recruit more women through whatever means of positive action that a political party seeks to adopt. That parent Act, which is permissive, can be drawn upon and exploited by parties if they so choose, but they have not.

Dr Ward:

If I had an opportunity to encourage women to stand in the next elections, I would focus on the political culture. Many women choose not to stand because political culture is very masculine and quite adversarial and is, therefore, not attractive to them. All the studies have shown that, if a critical mass of representation of at least a third of women is achieved, the atmosphere starts to change. If that happened, the political sphere would become more attractive to women, and it would be less difficult to encourage them to stand.

Professor Wilford:

I wish to reinforce the point about the conservative and inimical nature of that political culture. A lot of comparative studies on women's representation have been carried out, and Germany was an interesting case. Historically and culturally, it has a very patriarchal and militaristic society, and during the Nazi period, Hitler was utterly scathing about the idea of women participating in politics. However, women's representation in Germany, be it pre-unification or post-unification, was and is significantly higher than in the United Kingdom. That is because parties, among other measures, take positive action and use positive discriminatory methods, such as quotas, to lever women into elected office. Therefore, certain instruments can be used to overcome even a conservative political culture.

Mr Ross:

I do not who know is more worried, Brian Wilson or me, about the fact that I agree with what he said today.

First, I think that we all agree with the general basis of what you said about the need to have more women in politics. Every Parliament around the world wants to be reflective of the society that it aims to represent. Given that women, more or less, make up 50% of society, we should look to get that sort of percentage in legislatures. That is a given. Much of what we heard today has been about the measures that need to be taken to address that. John used the Welsh example and said that those women were "on the ball". However, I do not think that they were on the ball just because they are women; rather, they were on the ball because as they are talented individuals who are capable of doing the job. There are some very talented women in my party, and they would be appalled to think that they are in that position only because they are female. They are where they are because they are talented.

I accept that work needs to be done by parties to try to encourage more women, first, to join political parties, and, secondly, to seek elected office. However, work can also be done within the political structures, which Professor Wilford mentioned, such as altering the working hours. I know that Westminster tried to change the hours when Parliament sat in order to try to encourage more women to participate. I am not sure whether that worked as well as had been anticipated. However, that is an aside from the Bill.

I am still slightly confused; you are here to give evidence about how the Bill will in any way, shape or form get more women into local councils. However, there is no guarantee that the individuals who replace those currently with dual mandates will be women, particularly given the fact that, as you mentioned, there is a block of incumbents. I do not necessarily think that that is negative. Incumbents always have a better chance of getting re-elected unless they do something terribly wrong. Therefore, although the general trend, in the longer term, is to get more women involved in politics, the incumbency issue will still exist even if the raft of new councillors are not MLAs. If the majority of new councillors in the first tranche happen to be men, that incumbency issue will still exist. What are your comments on that? Are you also proposing some sort of measures to tackle incumbency, such as term limits, in order to achieve more turnaround? I am interested to hear your views on that.

Professor Wilford:

This relates to the Bill because by ending the dual mandate, an opportunity of space will be created in one, other or both of the elected institutions and an obstacle will be removed. The issue then is: what will the parties do to exploit the opportunities from that, and how will they do that? Everyone wills the end of having more women in elected office, so the issue becomes one of willing the means to achieve that. If the space is created for that opportunity, it is for parties to determine the measures that they should take to exploit that opportunity.

Your point about incumbency is well made, but, as Lynn said already, if women continue to enter politics at the current rate, we will be long gone and have been replaced by our great-grandchildren before women secure equality. That is a real issue that touches on the quality of our democracy and of our representation. Diversity and inclusivity are important democratic values.

During the Reagan years, Newt Gingrich introduced his ‘Contract with America’, one element

of which was a term limits Bill. That was the one piece of the contract that Congress voted down, because the incumbents saw that it was not in their interests to be restricted to serving two or three terms of office. Term limits are certainly an issue, and why should there not be a turnover among politicians, as there is in any other occupation? Turnover can be occasioned by elections, but term limits are another way of doing that.

As I said earlier, there is no single magic bullet, but a variety of measures can be taken. If the dual mandate were abolished, it would create the space within which parties could decide which measures to adopt to increase the level of representation of women. We should be ashamed at ourselves for the level of female representation; our historical record is appalling and inexcusable. There are many bad reasons why there are so few women in politics here, and there are no good reasons.

Mr Ross:

I take those points, and it is a general issue that needs to be addressed by political parties and institutions. However, I am not sure that the Bill is the mechanism to achieve that. The vast majority of work that is required to get more women into politics needs to be done elsewhere.

Professor Wilford:

The Bill is a trigger of opportunity to create the space for women in politics. It would get rid of dual incumbency, which is a block to entry. That is where the Bill is relevant; it would remove a hurdle. When the parties are given that space, it will be up to them to discuss and perhaps even agree measures to address the wider question.

Dr Ward:

The parties could introduce imaginative ways of doing that. For example, if an incumbent councillor were re-elected and were to end up taking an Assembly seat, it could be made clear to the electorate that there is someone else who is a good representative and a woman. It is also important to start to put such women in the public eye by developing their constituency profile.

Professor Wilford:

Women who do best of all in Northern Ireland in public office do so through the exercise of patronage: when they are appointed to quangos, non-departmental public bodies, and so on. Women make up between a third and 36% of those appointments. The fact that they do best

through patronage is another indictment, as are the co-options to the Assembly. Mr Bell, you are the beneficiary of Iris Robinson's seat becoming vacant. Conall McDevitt was co-opted to Carmel Hanna's seat. The parties are not even using co-option to bring women into the Assembly.

Ms Carvill:

I reiterate that the Committee should consider an amendment that would strengthen the representation of women.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for your presentation.