

## Spring, time to grow new policies

**IT'S EARLY MAY**, a new spring and International Workers' Day, an excellent time for a new beginning to Northern Ireland politics. We have had devolution before in the last 30 years but only in short and disappointing spurts. This time there is the prospect of a firmly established Assembly and Executive; it has been such a long time in coming that we can sometimes forget how big a step this is.

As the two main parties acknowledge, there will be many battles ahead, some of them bitter, but there seems to be genuine determination to get down to work for the people of Northern Ireland. We can now lay plans to solve the many problems we face.

One is the legacy of the past, the sectarian animosity that seems to have got worse since sectarian assassinations were part of the 'political' process. On top of that, racism has become an ugly cancer, giving Northern Ireland a reputation as one of the worst places in Western Europe for racist attacks.

A priority for the Executive will be to bring harmony through vigorous pursuit of the Shared Future strategy. That means actions and targets with a lot more bite than those we have now.

But it looks a lot more possible now. Traditional enemies working together in government can offer a model of co-operation to society as a whole. It may be a 'work-in not a love-in' but

that will do nicely for a start. We are not aiming for love but for people to accept difference, respect one another, cherish diversity and work together in harmony.

We can build on this and create an expectation that Northern Ireland exists for everyone and that policies must be designed to promote inclusion. The victory of Anna Lo, the first person from outside the British-Irish community to be elected here, is a welcome symbol of the inclusion of all races and cultures, though much work is needed to make this a reality.

Building the economy and sharing its benefits more equally will be another priority. The consultation on the regional economic strategy brings to the surface both the gains that have been made in recent years and their fragility. We have more people in employment than ever before and our total wealth is increasing but we have poor productivity in too many routine jobs, low levels of workforce skills and too little investment in innovation.

International Workers' Day is a good time to focus on disadvantage and inequality. Very many people living in poverty are on benefits, either because of a disability or caring responsibilities or because they depend on pensions or because they have been detached from the labour market for so long that they cannot find their way back.

But many thousands of adults, especially women, make up the

ranks of the 'working poor' and their children suffer along with them. They are largely people with low levels of education and skill, often working part-time and depending on the National Minimum Wage for their pay rises.

On pages 22-23 SCOPE highlights the huge inequality that exists in hourly pay between the highest and the lowest paid. When that is combined with shorter working hours for badly paid part-time workers, the weekly pay gap is enormous. Worse still it is growing rapidly and there is some evidence that pay at the bottom of the scale is going down.

The large pay gap has always been a disgrace, but it is now a scandal.

We can choose to continue as we have been, so that the rich get even richer and the poor stay the same. An alternative is to give serious thought to how we spend a pay bill of some £14 billion per year – far more than the incoming Executive's annual budget.

A new government in Northern Ireland should ask employers, trade unions and social partners to sit round the table to discuss how a fairer system can be drawn up to put an end to low pay. Even a modest switch of money could mean an extra £2,000 per year to the poorest workers and make a huge difference to their lives and those of their children.



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