

Government and Politics

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Despite the pandemic and the disrupted year at school, the Government and Politics Department managed to become involved in a number of events where we engaged with local politicians in a variety of ways, both while we were at school and even while we were learning from home.

In February we had an excellent session provided by the Stormont Education Service who gave the Year 13 classes detailed information relevant to their study of the Government and Politics of Northern Ireland. We received an insight into how Stormont was trying to operate during the pandemic, the legislation that they were working on and the work of various other bodies within the Assembly and Executive. This was followed up with meetings with 2 local MLAs, namely Doug Beattie of the UUP (prior to him becoming UUP leader) and Dolores Kelly of the SDLP. Both MLAs were happy to engage with us via Microsoft Teams and they gave us information on their own roles and the position and work of their respective parties.

They were also happy to take questions from the Year 13 classes, answering honestly and fully. This afternoon was both informative and enjoyable and we were delighted when the technology cooperated to allow it to work effectively when we were all working from home, including the MLAs!

Further work with the Stormont Education Service followed when the 2 Year 13 classes engaged with different Stormont committees. Our students made submissions on a proposed Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland and they responded to the consultation on the Programme for Government. They also worked with one of the Stormont Education Service team to make a contribution

to the Environment Committee with regards to the Climate Change Bill. We are really grateful to Marina and Anne Marie from the Education Service for facilitating our online visits and arranging the interaction with the committees and MLAs as it provided a much needed break from the rigours of online learning and proved that politics was still alive even during the depths of a global pandemic.

The main event of the year for the Politics Department occurred in May, after we returned to school. We were informed that the First Minister of Northern Ireland was planning to visit the school and Politics students would be meeting with her. She arrived on Friday 28th May to an enthusiastic welcome from those students who were waiting during their break-time to see her. This was the first visit from a notable figure since before the pandemic and the first 'different' thing to happen in school for quite some time which explained the interest in the visit. She was accompanied by her security detail and by journalists from a range of news outlets. This was no ordinary visit from the First Minister as it came the day after she had been awarded substantial damages after proving she had been libelled by a TV doctor and the visit also occurred on her final day as leader of the DUP after a vote of no confidence in her leadership. Arlene Foster had previously visited Banbridge Academy in her early days as First Minister and she decided that she wanted to return in her final days, a gesture that was noted and appreciated. This visit proved to be very different to her first





however as due to the circumstances surrounding her departure from office the media entourage following her were hanging on her every word to see if she would say anything controversial or critical.

Mrs Foster spent time with the Year 13 Government and Politics students and after giving a brief summary of her political career to date, the students had the opportunity to ask her a range of questions covering everything from her experience as First Minister, her regrets, the most interesting person she had met and we even found out what her favourite film was. Despite the pressure she was under and the difficult circumstances of previous days, the First Minister was generous with her time and both pupils and staff were left with a better understanding of her as a person and as a politician.

We enjoyed being able to watch her deliver her final statement as DUP leader in the grounds of the school and to watch the various political journalists reporting on the visit and broadcasting live from below our Politics classroom. A number of our students and their questions found

their way onto both UTV and BBC later that day. This was a really welcome visit after a year when so many of our other planned activities had been restricted and it allowed us to finish the year with a little bit of hope that things will get back to normal and we might entertain other politicians in the future.

As we start the 2021 - 2022 year that is definitely our hope for the future. So many things had been planned

- Youth Parliament elections, Youth Assembly in Stormont and the Model United Nations Assembly to name a few and we hope that this year many of these events and activities will return even if they are facilitated remotely. Thanks to Miss Carson and Mr Erskine for their help in organising these events and thanks also to the Year 13 and 14 Government and Politics students who engaged so well with us during a difficult year.

