

# Local Democracy Week

**Jemma McNeill**

On Wednesday 14th of October 2015, a group of three Year 13 AS Citizenship students: Jemma McNeill, Matthew Doyle and Rory Kelly along with Miss McClelland, travelled to Craigavon Civic Centre to take part in an event organised by the newly formed ABC Borough Council (made up of Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon) as part of Local Democracy Week.

When we arrived, we were each handed a badge with a different number on it that correlated to a number on each of the five tables in the room. Before we split off into these groups, we were also given the opportunity to get a photograph with the Lord Mayor at the time, Councillor Darryn Causby.

After a short talk from the Lord Mayor we were told what the day would entail, starting with a ten minute discussion at four of the five tables about a range of topics, from housing to the environment, to the duties and responsibilities of the Lord Mayor.

Each talk was very interesting as it provided a closer insight into what the Council was doing to help the community and what the community could do to help the Council in return. The Councillors were very helpful and happy to answer any questions we had and were willing to listen to our solutions to problems affecting the community. One of the Councillors present, that we had a chance to talk to, is now the current Lord Mayor of the ABC Borough Council, Councillor Gareth Keating.

Once we had attended four of the tables we were offered a short break, during which we were able to converse with the other students in attendance before we were put back into our original groups along with two/three experienced Councillors to prepare a short eight minute presentation on our given topic.



My group was asked to help plan a Community Awards Night, with the assistance of the Lord Mayor and his Secretary, for those who had made a beneficial contribution to the community. Categories had to be decided, along with who could be nominated and the nomination and voting processes. Not only did the group have to decide on the awards, but we also needed to plan how to get the funding to support such a night and at this point the idea of local business sponsorship was suggested.

When each group had finished their preparations, we were led into the newly built Council chambers and given a brief overview of the order in which we would present, how the voting process worked and the protocols for being in the chamber. The meeting was run as if it were a real council meeting, which at first was incredibly nerve-racking and intimidating but once all of the groups had presented, the atmosphere relaxed substantially.

The nerves got to one student in particular when his politics knowledge

came into play and he accidentally addressed the Lord Mayor as Lord Speaker.

After all of the votes were placed and counted on the new high tech system, it was revealed that my group had won. After a brief closing and word of thanks from the Lord Mayor, we were asked to stay for some lunch and further conversations with the Councillors and students.

A few weeks after the event I received a letter from the Lord Mayor's Secretary thanking us for our participation, along with an ABC Council pen and two McDonald's vouchers for winning. I also received an invite to attend the Council's Winter dinner and the Community Awards, which took place in May 2016, and it was a truly fun-filled night.

The overall experience was enjoyable and interesting and it is a definite must for those interested in the political process and the inner workings of the Council.

# BBC Northern Ireland: The Good Friday Generation Debate



In April 2015, four Year 14 students (who studied a combination of Business Studies, Government and Politics and Religious Studies) were invited to attend an innovative event organised by BBC Northern Ireland. The event was entitled “BBC NI: The Good Friday Generation Debate” and was focused on uncovering the opinions of first time voters in Northern Ireland. The students involved had been born in 1998, the year of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and the event was designed to ascertain their feelings about this, the progress that has been made in NI, as well as a range of devolved issues under the remit of the Northern Ireland Assembly, with both the NI Assembly elections and the EU referendum looming large.

The programme was hosted by Stephen Nolan and Tara Mills and the five main parties were on the panel, with smaller parties also attending, and they were given time to comment on issues that were particularly relevant to them. The audience

were impressive because they were so engaged and enthusiastic about expressing their opinions and they were also clearly frustrated by the lack of straight answers from the politicians. Among the topics discussed were abortion, same sex marriage and the Northern Ireland economy and a number of Banbridge Academy students got the opportunity to ask their chosen question, while others were frustrated at being overlooked.

It was a very interesting and enlightening experience for the

students to interact with both politicians and journalists, discuss their opinions with their peers and also see a current affairs programme being filmed. There was a lot of media interest in the event and the hashtag #GFAGen trended on Twitter across the UK with several thousand tweets per hour using the hashtag. Among those commenting on Twitter was Eamon Mallie who seemed to sum up the opinions of those who were watching at home when he said: “Listening to young voices @StephenNolan they are clearly leaving the politicians behind. Politicians ought to listen.”



# Politics Work Experience

## Rachel Denny

For my Year 13 work experience I opted to further develop my understanding of Northern Ireland politics and went to Stormont under the guidance of Timothy Johnston, Arlene Foster's special advisor. I am studying Government and Politics for A level and I immediately had an insight into the hustle and bustle of Stormont as the election was imminent and everyone was attending meetings. This allowed me to experience many different positions within Stormont.

On my first day I was based in the DUP office within Stormont and I was able to experience the more 'glamorous' side of work in this infamous building. I was able to attend a 'pro-life' Assembly meeting and afterwards I watched Mervyn Storey, at that time Minister for Finance, participate in Ministers' Question Time and answer questions from a range of MLAs on decisions he had taken. Subsequently, I met the Minister for Finance and availed of the opportunity to ask him questions

specifically about his job and the many issues that he deals with on a daily basis. Day 1 finished with a tour of the Media Office and I was lucky enough to meet the UTV Political journalist, Ken Reid.

The second day was even more exciting as I was permitted to shadow our First Minister, Arlene Foster and get an insight into a typical day in the life of the First Minister. The day started with a trip to the Stormont Hotel where we attended a Health Summit on the future of Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland. Subsequently, I was allowed to sit in on one of the First Minister's Business meetings in her office. As if that wasn't enough for one day we then travelled to Dublin, had dinner and then we went to Christ Church Cathedral to attend a talk on the Easter Rising, which the Irish Taoiseach, Enda Kenny also attended. Following the talk we went into a private room so that Arlene Foster could have an interview with RTE. It was

at this point that I got the chance to meet Enda Kenny, the Taoiseach of the Republic of Ireland. Enda Kenny proved to be very nice and when he heard I was from Banbridge Academy, he took time to sing 'The Star Of The County Down' to me. What a claim to fame!

It would be difficult for Day 3 to live up to the previous day and as it was a Friday there were no MLAs at Stormont, as they spend Fridays based in their constituencies. Instead we spent the day at DUP headquarters. There I spent time in the Press Office and was tasked with writing press releases for BBC news and I also wrote a letter to the Belfast Telegraph. The most fascinating thing I discovered on my work experience was how fast everything moved - a topic would be discussed and within an hour it would appear on television or the BBC news website. My work experience was unforgettable and it has led to me really considering a career in Stormont involved in the drama of Northern Ireland politics.

## Personal Touch Florist

We offer a wide range of flowers for all occasions

94 Newry Street, Banbridge, BT32 3HE  
**Tel: 028 4065 8145**





# Year 13 Politics Trip to Stormont

**Morgan Young**

On 10th of February 2016, AS Politics students were privileged to receive a guided tour of the imposing buildings of Stormont, as part of our studies into the workings of the devolved Northern Irish government.

Upon arrival, we were taken through security (where a brief setback occurred after a few tried to pass through the metal detector having forgotten to remove their watches!) and were met in the main entrance hall by a member of Stormont's Education Service. After taking in the grandeur of the hall- the statue of Lord Craigavon, the marble staircase, the ornate patterned ceiling and the rows of chandeliers- we were shown to the room where most of the day's events would take place.

Our guide gave us an informative summary of how Stormont works, detailing the key figures and processes involved. We were shown an interesting video explaining the D'Hondt process, which informed us how the Northern Ireland Executive is formed and why such a system is used. The guide asked us for our thoughts and views on the current political landscape, and discussion turned to pressing political issues facing us today- ranging from such contentious subjects as same-sex marriage to more mundane themes like budget cuts and the reorganising

of the Executive Departments. Then, representatives from the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the Ulster Unionist Party came in to tell us about their parties and answer our questions. Whilst far from a full-on political grilling, the questions nonetheless were quite thought-provoking; with the SDLP, for example, being asked why, despite their Nationalist designation, they didn't contest elections in the Republic.

Following a pause for lunch our guide gave us a brief tour, during which we got the chance to observe a plenary session in the main Chamber, with the focus of discussion being abortion. Unfortunately, we had to leave just after the division bell (which summons all MLAs to the chamber to vote) was sounded, and our tour moved on to the former Senate Chamber. Although Northern Ireland hasn't had a Senate since 1972, the chamber is still used today for Committee meetings. Here we learned of the history of the Parliament building itself, from its completion in 1932 right through to the present day. The walls of the Senate Chamber were adorned with various reminders of Stormont's past, from the plaque honouring the Chamber's use as an RAF Operations Room in WWII (during which Stormont was covered in manure

to keep it safely hidden during air raids), to the huge murals depicting Northern Ireland's former strength in the agricultural, shipbuilding and linen industries.

With the tour over it was time to hear from more political representatives- this time Sinn Fein, the Alliance Party, and the Democratic Unionist Party. The standard questions were asked to each party, with Sinn Fein explaining what they consider the benefits of a United Ireland to be, and Alliance detailing how sectarian politics are holding Northern Ireland back. The DUP representative, as expected, was questioned over his party's stance on same-sex marriage. All five parties received questions on the European Union as at the time of the trip, the referendum was looming and they were also grilled on what they would do for young people. Unfortunately at this point, time was running short and we had to leave our interrogating to catch the bus home.

Overall the trip was very interesting, and in many ways, eye-opening- I know that I personally left with a much better opinion of the UUP and SDLP than I had arrived with. It was great to hear the many opinions on offer, see the history of Stormont and watch the Northern Irish political process up close and personal.