

Hello from Belfast,

February 2010

It's been a very busy few weeks since Christmas and it is fair to say politics is changing for the better in the New Year.

One of the biggest changes has been the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) electing their first female leader of a major NI party, Margaret Ritchie. Miss Ritchie, was the Assembly's Social Development Minister, and replaced Mark Durkan, who will remain as MP for Foyle.

She defeated South Belfast MP Dr Alasdair McDonnell in a vote at the party conference. The election of the more modern candidate has been seen as a welcomed change by many in the party who has lost ground in recent years to Sinn Fein.

It has been said that with a female and younger leader the party can perhaps appeal to a wider demographic including young people and women who seem to shy away from politics now.

She told supporters after her win that she wanted the party to "rise again" and that she wanted to be First Minister.

"I intend to rally the party around a vision that shows how we are different and better than our opponents," she said. "I will lead a party that recognises and rewards performance and teamwork. I want to work with people who, like me, will put the party first."

The SDLP is the second nationalist party in the North and can be seen as one of the most fervent supporters of the Good Friday Agreement.

Born in 1970 out of the civil rights movement, many of its founding members, were drawn mainly from the Nationalist Party, the National Democratic Party and Republican Labour, and played key figures in the civil rights campaigns which grew around the North as Catholics demanded an end to what they saw as sectarian government.

This new change of leadership is seen as a welcomed change to middle class nationalism, in having a moderate woman leader, the SDLP is hoping to increase votes in the forthcoming Westminster election in May.

For further information on political developments over the past number of weeks please refer to the BBC, RTE, and UTV new outlets.

Thanks

Orla Adams

