

WHY SHOULD ARCHAEOLOGY BE OF INTEREST TO POLITICIANS?

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Of course, most archaeologists will know exactly why they feel archaeology should be of interest to politicians: it provides vital information about human life in the past, in all of its fascinating complexity. This information in turn entertains and enriches us, giving a sense of perspective and depth to modern life, helping us to see and understand where we have all come from and the skills, struggles and mistakes it has taken to get the human species this far.

But why should any of this be of any interest to those who are elected to represent the populace in the political arena? By its very nature, the job of an elected politician is to represent people's interests, and there are many, many pressing interests which they are asked to represent. Some of these are local – planning disputes, resolving local conflicts, campaigning for greater resources for healthcare, childcare, schools, roads and rubbish collection. Other interests are wider and more strategic – representing their party's interests, the slow grind of arguing for and implementing policy and, inevitably, doing things that might help them get elected the next time around too.

I work for the Northern Ireland Assembly as Research Officer for culture and heritage. I see the intensely competing claims on the time of our local MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly) first hand, and I often wonder if and how archaeology is of any relevance to them. I am an archaeologist by background; having spent time in commercial archaeology, then carrying out academic research in Britain, Ireland and in the Middle East, and then teaching, I found myself at the Council for British Archaeology with its headquarters in York. It was there that I first began to understand the crucial interface that exists between politicians and organisations like the CBA, and the crucial nature of the work that they do in representing and explaining the significance of archaeology at every twist and turn of legislative, policy or fiscal change to the Ministers and MPs who make significant decisions.

Having moved to the Northern Ireland Assembly, I now support statutory committees by providing them with (hopefully) informative, objective papers and presentations on topics within my brief. I also support individual MLAs who often request research to support either their own internal party discussions, or sometimes constituency business. Starting here in 2010, I suddenly had to think about not just archaeology but also things like arts policy, sport, public libraries, and languages. What funding do each of these sub-topics get within the over-arching remit of ‘culture’? How are the policies pursued here different to the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain, or elsewhere in the EU? What could be tried here in Northern Ireland that has worked elsewhere? Is there evidence of problems within particular policy areas?

These are the kinds of issues which come up regularly, but I am often surprised by how often archaeology and heritage come forward as important issues for MLAs. I have been asked, for example, for papers on the scale of undeposited archaeological archives from commercial projects, the role of cultural rights within museums, differences between the planning policies for the historic environment in each of the jurisdictions of the UK, metal detecting, the restoration of historic canals, and the quantity of Irish artefacts held outside Ireland. All of this work involves careful liaison with staff in the relevant departments here (the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department of the Environment), but also in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in London, and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in Dublin. It also involves talking to those who are often the real experts on these topics: those working in the field, in NGOs and in voluntary organisations. What surprises me further about this work is that the relevance or legitimacy of archaeology alongside all of the other political issues which are around at any particular moment is rarely questioned. Some of the anxieties which I know that archaeological organisations can sometimes feel, like how to argue for resources and parliamentary time for archaeology in the midst of seemingly more urgent business, are almost never real issues for politicians. I have never heard it said that archaeology and heritage are less deserving of discussion or consideration than schools, hospitals or crime. Of course, there are different views on how such issues are to be funded or addressed, but heritage is recognised as being fundamentally important in contributing to community identity (something of real significance in Northern Ireland), but also as an economic driver for tourism and regeneration.

So today I am working on a paper which examines the social impact of heritage: what role, for example, do museums, the historic environment, and community archaeology play in contributing to quality of life, or to alleviating social exclusion? There are lively debates around all of these issues and plenty of evaluations, strategies and assessments to plough through. I will be speaking to National Museums Northern Ireland, to the Northern Ireland Museums Council, to academics at the University of Ulster and, of course, doing plenty of reading, reading and more reading. The Assembly is in recess now so it’s a good time to tackle a complex topic and try to get to the bottom of it before the MLAs return to the Assembly in September.