

Women parliamentarians *of Northern Ireland*

Welcome from the Assembly Commission



A photograph of the Members of the first Parliament of Northern Ireland, with Dehra Parker and Julia McMordie sitting in the front row (image: Northern Ireland Assembly Commission).

Welcome to the Women Parliamentarians of Northern Ireland exhibition. The Assembly Commission proposed this important initiative to highlight the role of the women who have been elected since the passing of the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act in 1918. This legislation gave women the right to stand for election to the first Parliament of Northern Ireland, one hundred years ago.



29 female MLAs of the Northern Ireland Assembly, photographed in June 2021 (image: Northern Ireland Assembly Commission).

While it has not been possible to feature the achievements of all of these women, we have listed the name of every woman elected to the parliamentary institutions of Northern Ireland since 1921. We have also featured those women who have been the first to be appointed to different leadership roles. We know that there are many more achievements than we are able to include in this exhibition. More will be made available in our online exhibition.

Northern Ireland historically has had the lowest proportion of female representation in the UK devolved administrations. However, following the restoration of devolution in 2020, female elected representatives made up 33% of the 90 seats of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Arlene Foster (DUP) and Michelle O'Neill (Sinn Féin) were also appointed to the most senior positions in the Executive, of First Minister and deputy First Minister respectively.



Members of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition at a press conference at Castle Buildings following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, 10 April 1998 (image by Derek Speirs).

Beyond this exhibition, we plan to continue to highlight the achievements of those women elected to the parliamentary institutions which have taken place in Parliament Buildings. However, we are aware that not many sources exist about the role of women. We are therefore asking you to help us by sharing photographs and testimonies about their achievements. If you would like to help us tell the story of the women elected, please email us on wponi@niassembly.gov.uk.



Women parliamentarians *of Northern Ireland*

List of all elected female representatives

Parliament of Northern Ireland House of Commons: 1921-1972

Irene Calvert
Anne Dickson
Eileen Hickey
Bessie Maconachie
Julia McMordie
Dinah McNabb
Sheelagh Murnaghan
Dehra Parker
Margaret Waring

Northern Ireland Senate: 1921-1972

Marion Greeves
Edith Taggart

Northern Ireland Assembly 1973-74 & Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention 1975-76

Sheena Conn
Jean Coulter
Anne Dickson
Eileen Paisley

Northern Ireland Assembly 1982

Dorothy Dunlop
Mary McSorley
Mary Simpson

Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue 1996

Annie Armstrong
May Beattie
Eileen Bell
Lucilita Bhreatnach
Maria Caraher
Dorita Field
Dodie McGuinness
Monica McWilliams
Michelle O'Connor
Joan Parkes
Margaret Ritchie
Iris Robinson
Bríd Rodgers Pearl
Sagar
Mary Steele

*

Northern Ireland Assembly 1998

Pauline Armitage
Eileen Bell
Bairbre de Brún
Joan Carson
Annie Courtney
Michelle Gildernew
Carmel Hanna
Patricia Lewsley
Monica McWilliams
Jane Morrice
Mary Nelis
Dara O'Hagan
Sue Ramsey
Iris Robinson
Bríd Rodgers

* PLEASE NOTE: For the Northern Ireland Assembly, the list includes only those women elected or co-opted for the first time during that mandate.



Women parliamentarians *of Northern Ireland*

List of all elected female representatives

Northern Ireland Assembly 2003

Norah Beare
Mary Bradley
Diane Dodds
Geraldine Dougan
Marietta Farrell
Arlene Foster
Dolores Kelly
Naomi Long
Dawn Purvis
Pat O'Rawe
Margaret Ritchie
Caitriona Ruane
Kathy Stanton

Northern Ireland Assembly 2007

Martina Anderson
Anna Lo
Jennifer McCann
Claire McGill
Michelle McIlveen
Carál Ní Chuilín
Michelle O'Neill

Northern Ireland Assembly 2011

Michaela Boyle
Paula Bradley
Judith Cochrane
Jo-Anne Dobson
Megan Fearon
Brenda Hale
Claire Hanna
Pam Lewis (Cameron)
Rosie McCorley
Bronwyn McGahan
Karen McKeivitt
Maeve McLaughlin
Emma Pengelly
Sandra Overend
Claire Sugden

Northern Ireland Assembly 2016

Caoimhe Archibald
Kellie Armstrong
Clare Bailey
Rosemary Barton
Sinéad Bradley
Paula Bradshaw
Joanne Bunting
Linda Dillon
Órlaithí Flynn
Carla Lockhart
Nichola Mallon
Jennifer Palmer
Catherine Seeley

Northern Ireland Assembly 2017

Nicola Brogan
Jemma Dolan
Sinéad Ennis
Deborah Erskine
Ciara Ferguson
Deirdre Hargey
Máire Hendron
Cara Hunter
Catherine Kelly
Liz Kimmins
Elisha McCallion
Sinead McLaughlin
Karen Mullan
Áine Murphy
Aisling Reilly
Emma Rogan
Emma Sheerin
Rachel Woods



Women parliamentarians *of Northern Ireland*

First parliament

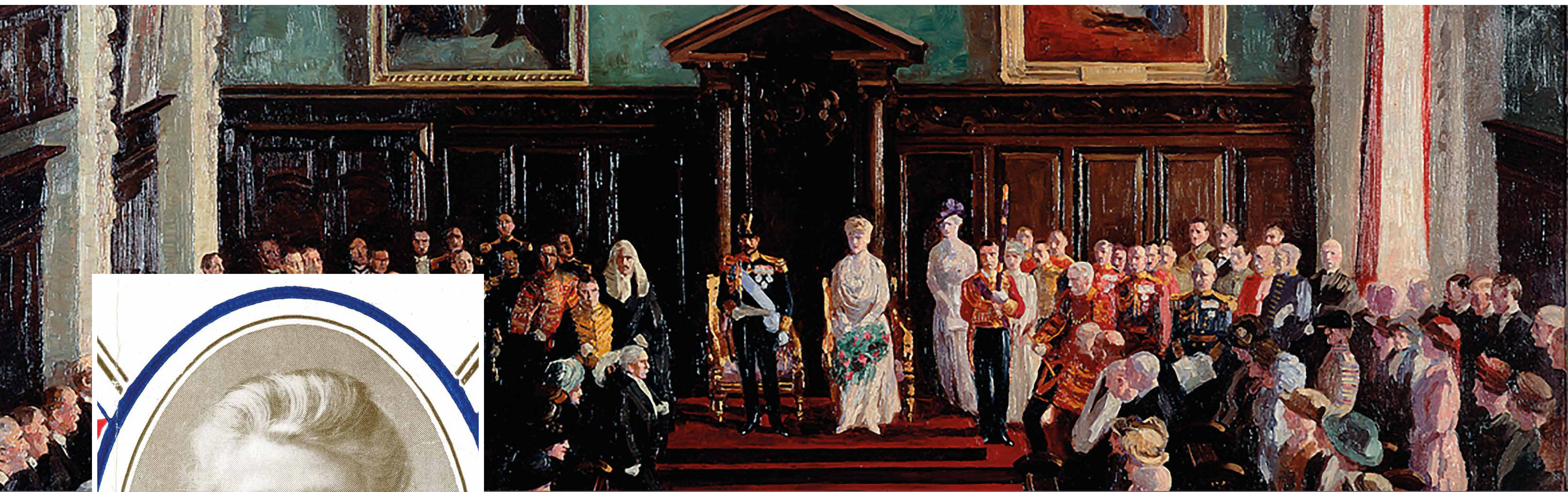
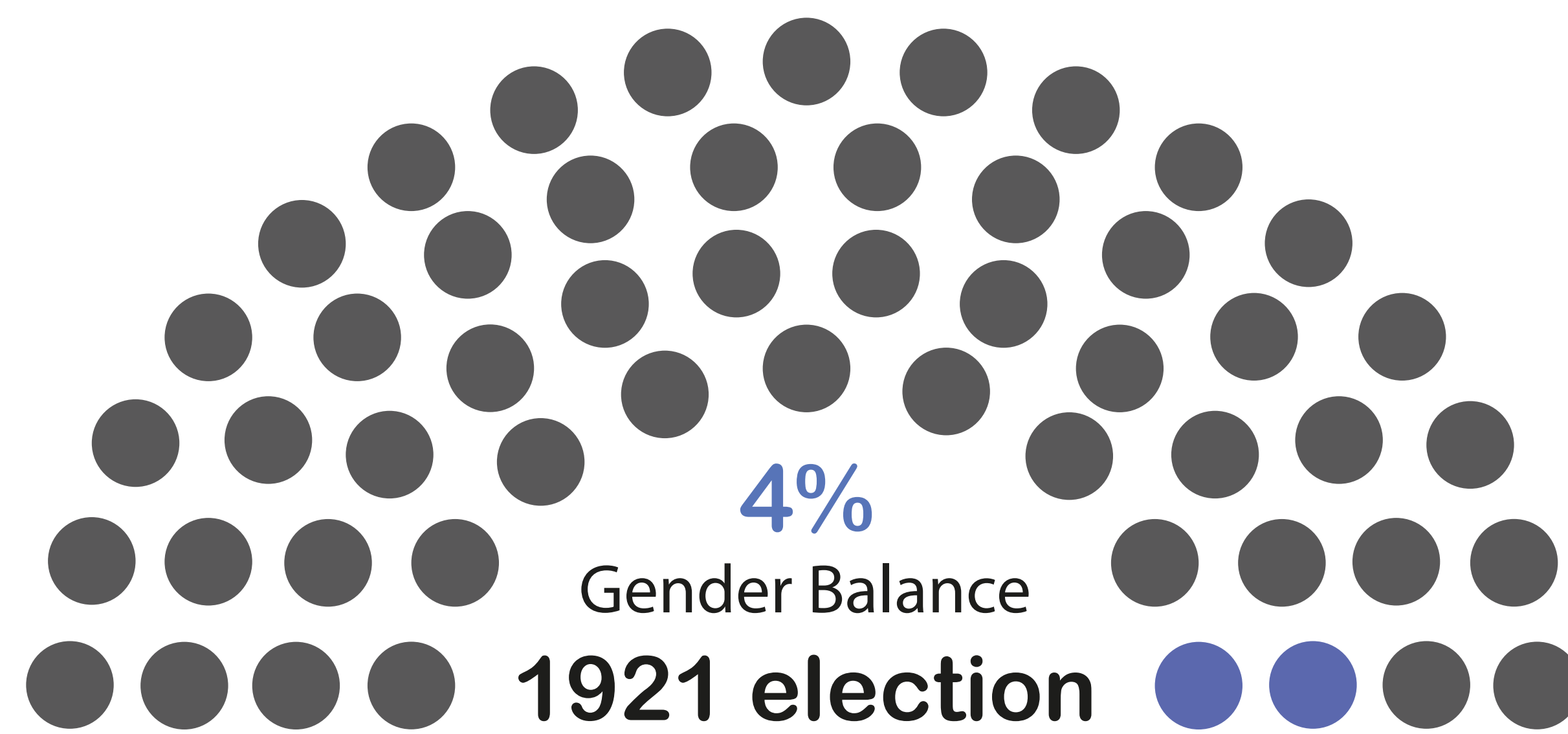


Image: Northern Ireland Assembly Commission



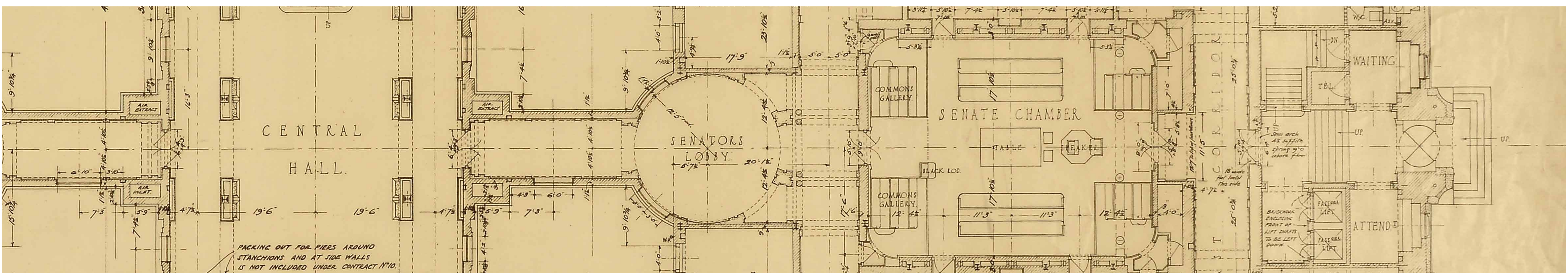
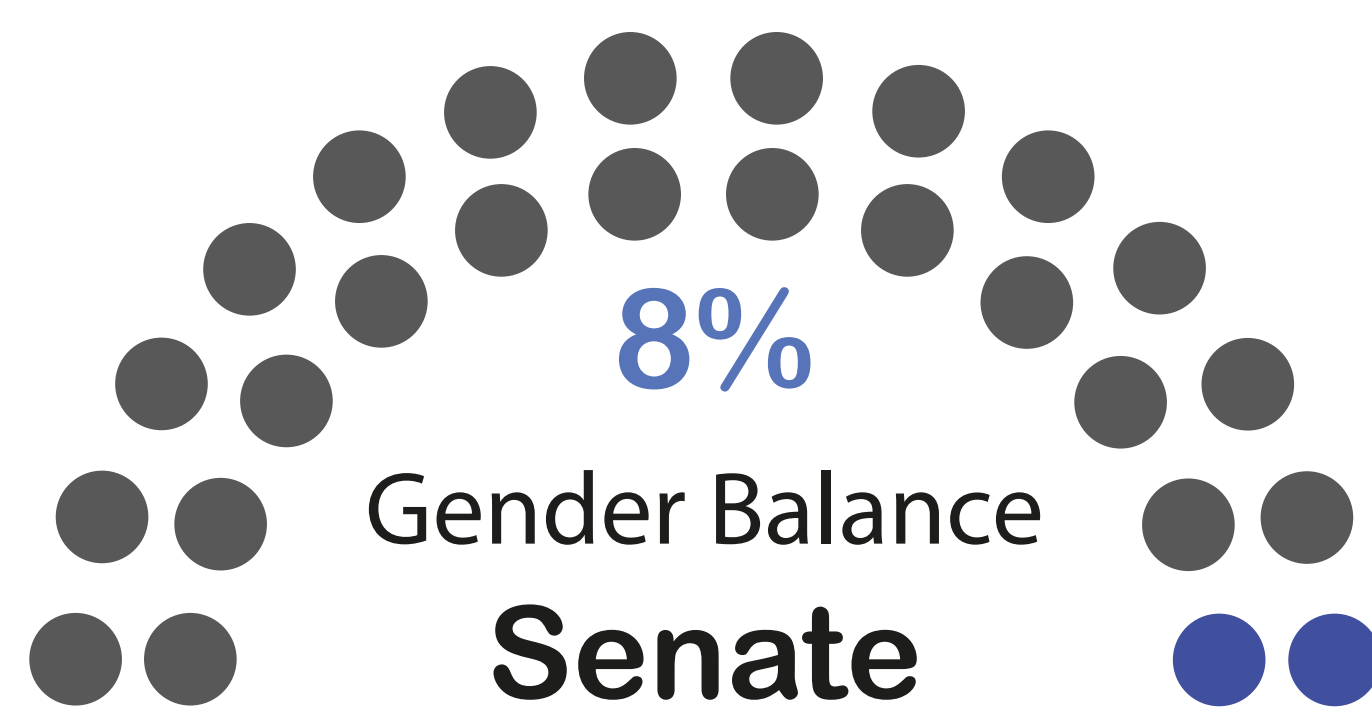
Image courtesy of the Linen Hall Library

Julia McMordie

Along with Dehra Parker, Julia McMordie was one of the first women to be elected to the Parliament of Northern Ireland, in 1921. She stood for the Ulster Unionist Party and was elected to one of the four seats in the Queen's University of Belfast constituency. Born in Hartlepool, County Durham, Julia McMordie was the first female member of Belfast City Council in 1917, an Alderman in 1920, the first woman High Sheriff in 1929 and Vice President of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council 1919–1940. She was involved in various health charities and had been President of the St. John Voluntary Aid Detachments in Belfast during the First World War.

Women parliamentarians of Northern Ireland

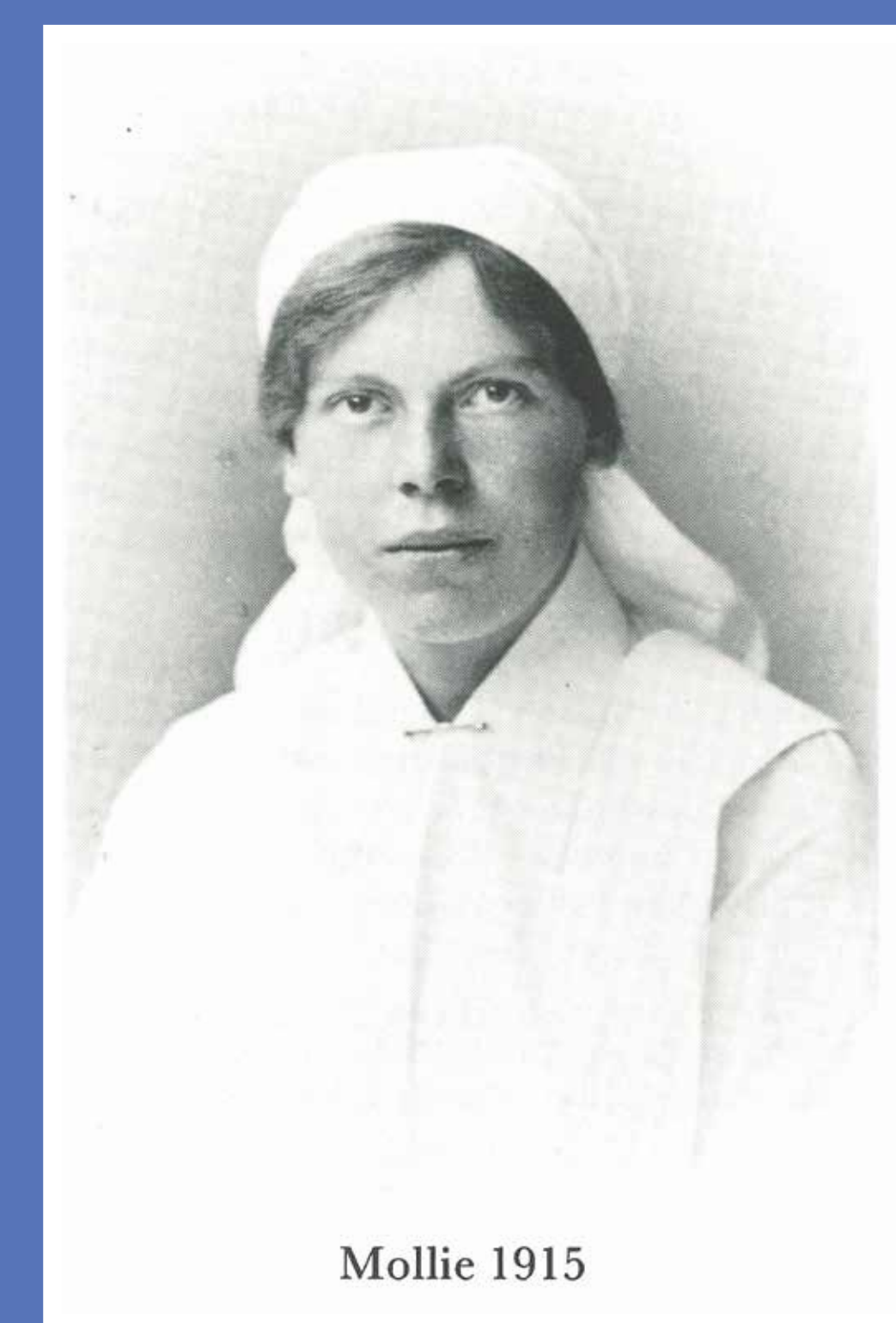
First Senators



The Northern Ireland Senate was the upper house of the Parliament of Northern Ireland. It had 26 members in total. 24 were elected by Single Transferable Vote by members of the Northern Ireland House of Commons in blocks of twelve for eight-year terms; the other two were the Lord Mayor of Belfast and the Mayor of Derry/Londonderry. The Senate was suspended in 1972.

Marion Greeves

Marion Greeves was the first female Senator of the Parliament of Northern Ireland, serving as an independent from 1950 and retiring in June 1969. She was born in England to George and Dame Elizabeth Cadbury, Quaker philanthropists of the Cadbury chocolate dynasty. Marion 'Mollie' Greeves married linen manufacturer William Edward Greeves, Deputy Lieutenant and High Sheriff of County Armagh. She joined the WVS during the Second World War and in 1940 joined the Belfast Charitable Society. Following the suspension of the Senate, she continued to concentrate on charitable work and, in 1976, was one of the founders of Age Concern NI.



Mollie 1915

Marion 'Mollie' Greeves, pictured in a Red Cross uniform in 1915 (image: Bournville Village Trust).

Edith Taggart

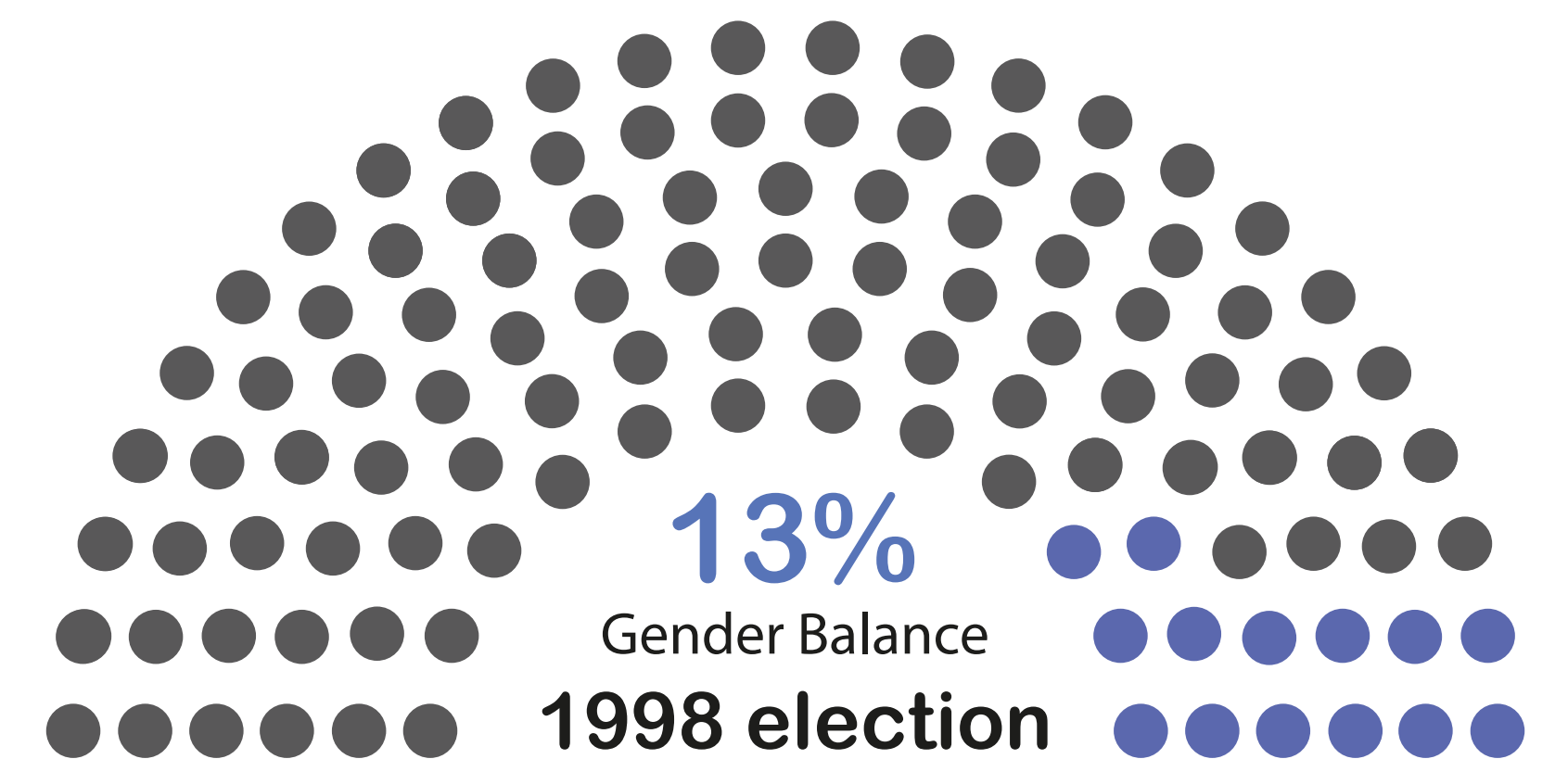
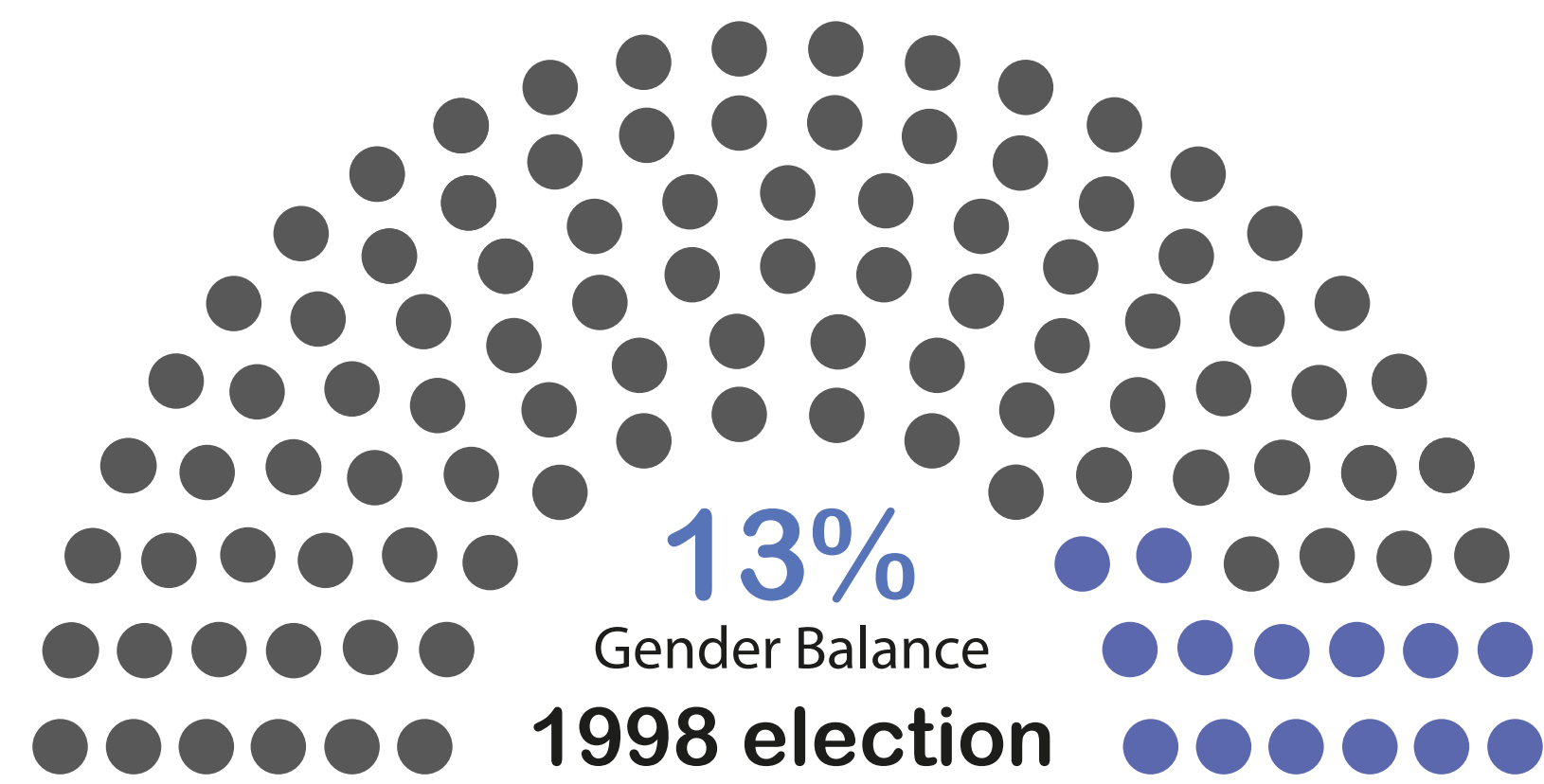
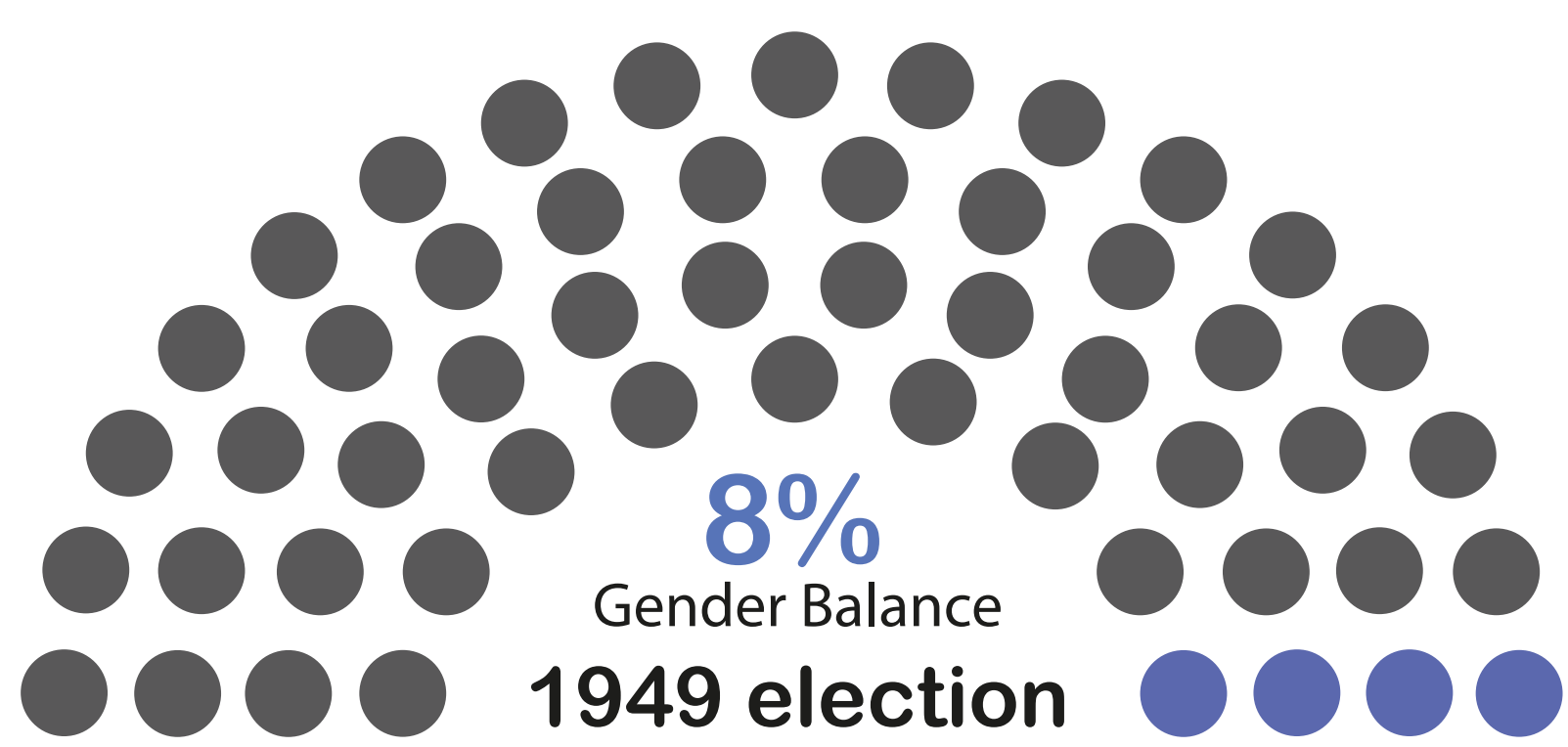
Edith Taggart was elected as an Ulster Unionist Party member of the Senate of Northern Ireland in 1970, becoming only the second female member of that body. She served until its abolition in 1973.



Edith Taggart (image: Belfast Telegraph).

Women parliamentarians of Northern Ireland

First female ministers



Dehra Parker



Image: Imperial War Museum

Dehra Parker was a member of both the Ulster Women's Unionist Council and the Ulster Volunteer Force. She was elected to the first Parliament of Northern Ireland in 1921 (as Dehra Chichester) and served until her retirement in 1960. She served as a Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Education in 1937. She was Minister for Health and Local Government from 1949 until 1957, presiding over the implementation of the National Health Service in Northern Ireland.

Bríd Rodgers



Image: Alamy

Bríd Rodgers was involved in the Campaign for Social Justice and Civil Rights Association from 1965, was a founder member of the SDLP and later became deputy leader of the party in 2001. She was nominated to Seanad Éireann in 1983 and was a leader of the SDLP team in the talks that led to the Good Friday Agreement. Elected as MLA for Upper Bann in 1998, she was appointed to the first Executive in 1999 as Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Bairbre de Brún

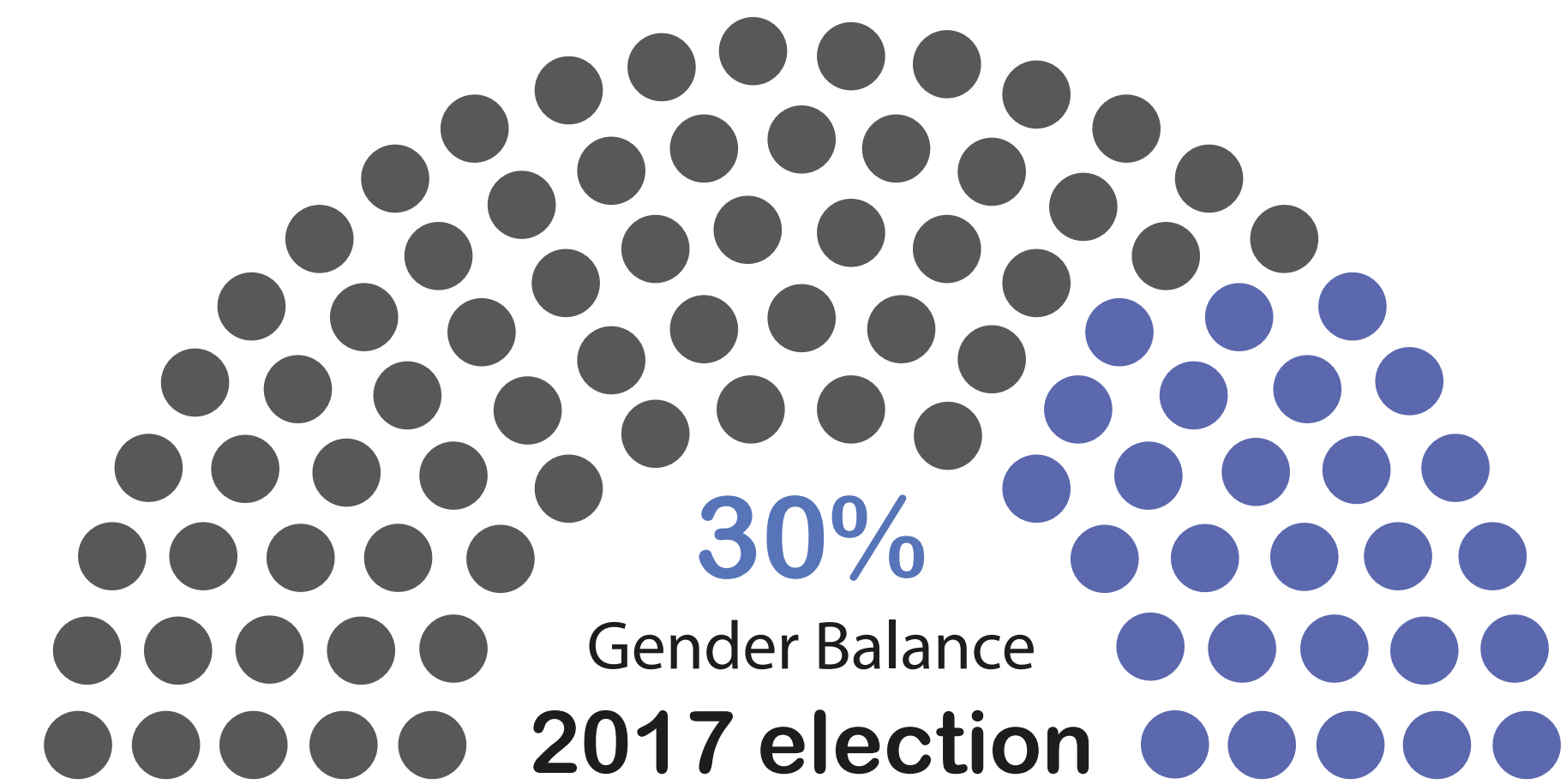
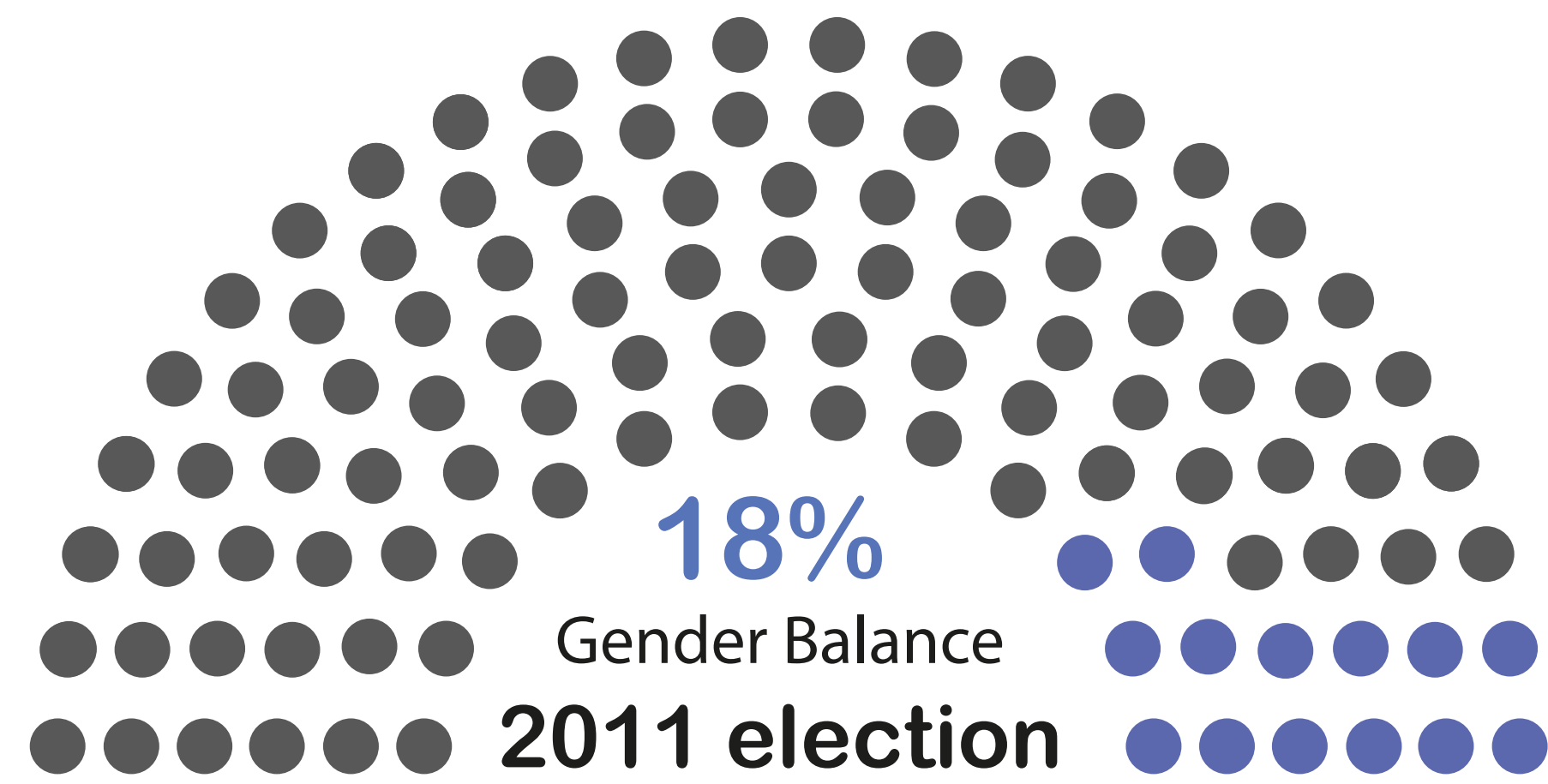


Image: Alamy

Bairbre De Brún began her political career as a member of the National Committee Against the H-Blocks and Armagh Gaol. She was a member of the Sinn Féin Ard Comhairle, and in 1998 became an MLA. She was appointed Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Re-elected to the Assembly in 2003, she became a Member of the European Parliament in 2004, topping the poll in the next election in 2009.

Women parliamentarians *of Northern Ireland*

First female leaders



Arlene Foster



Image: Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Arlene Foster was elected to the Assembly in 2003, subsequently joining the DUP in 2004. She served as Minister for the Environment from 2007 and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment from 2008. In 2015, she was appointed Minister for Finance and Personnel and became leader of the DUP later that year. Arlene Foster was appointed First Minister of Northern Ireland in January 2016, the youngest person to hold the post and Northern Ireland's first female First Minister. She once again became First Minister in 2020, before resigning in June 2021.

Michelle O'Neill

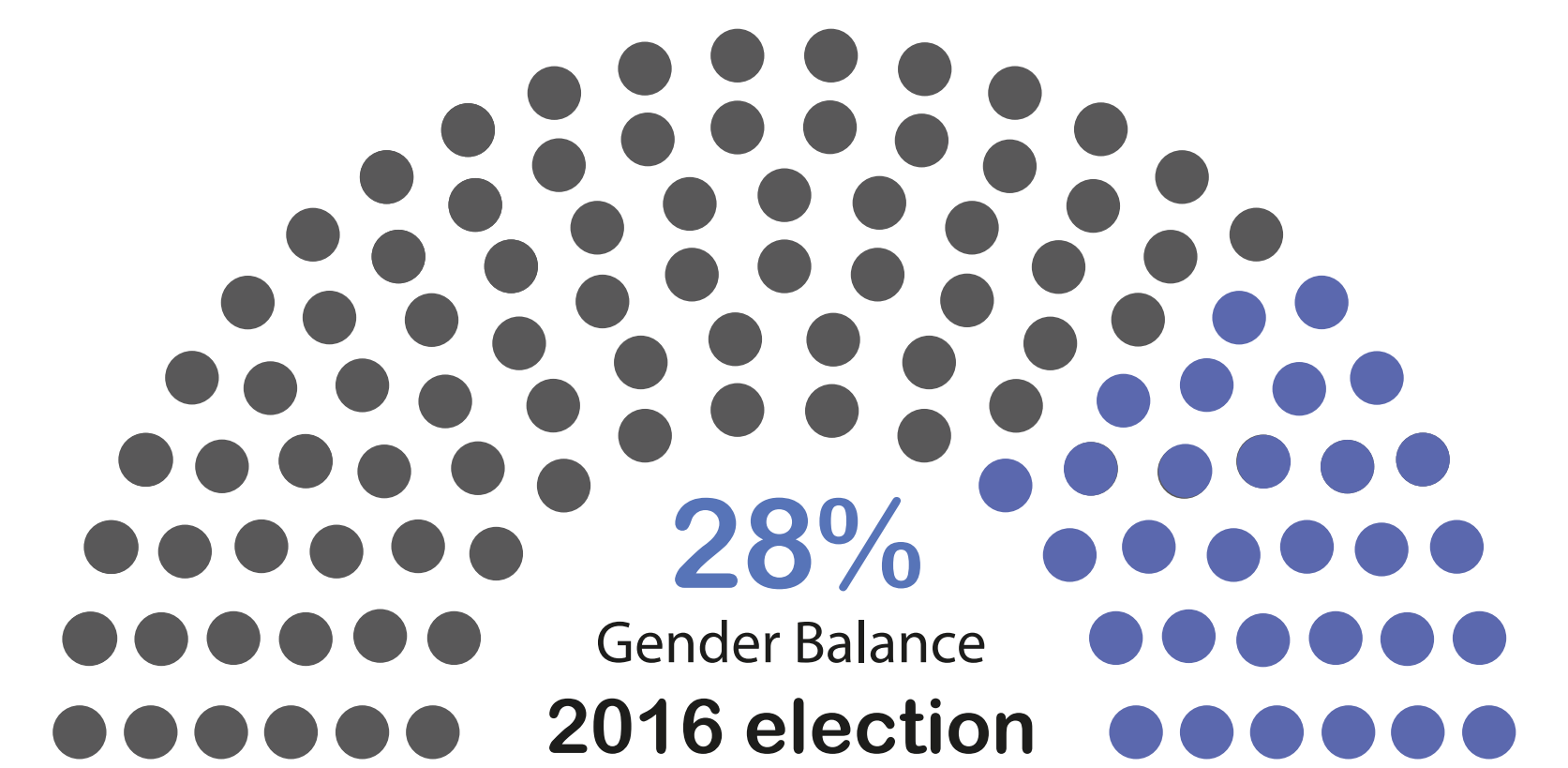
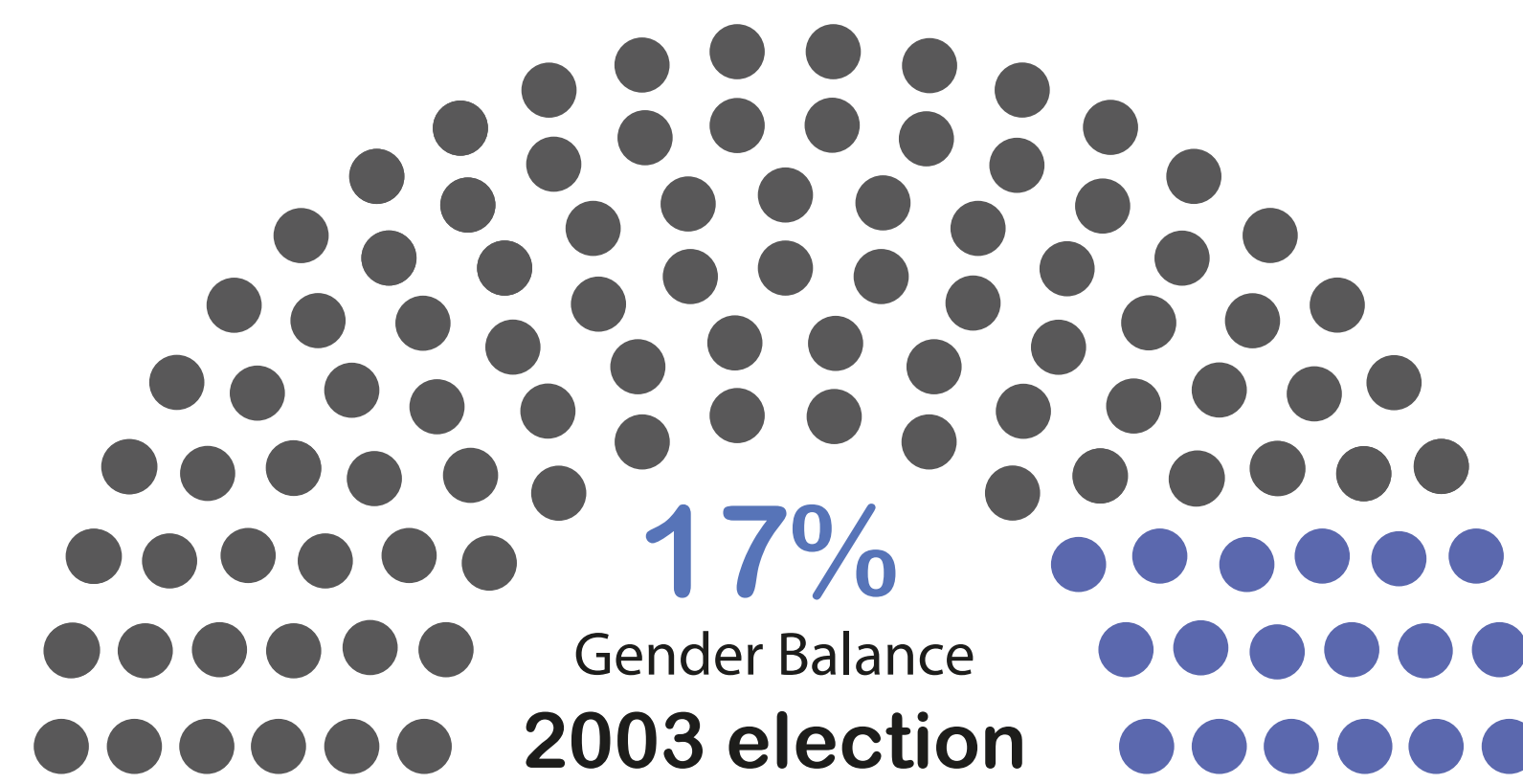
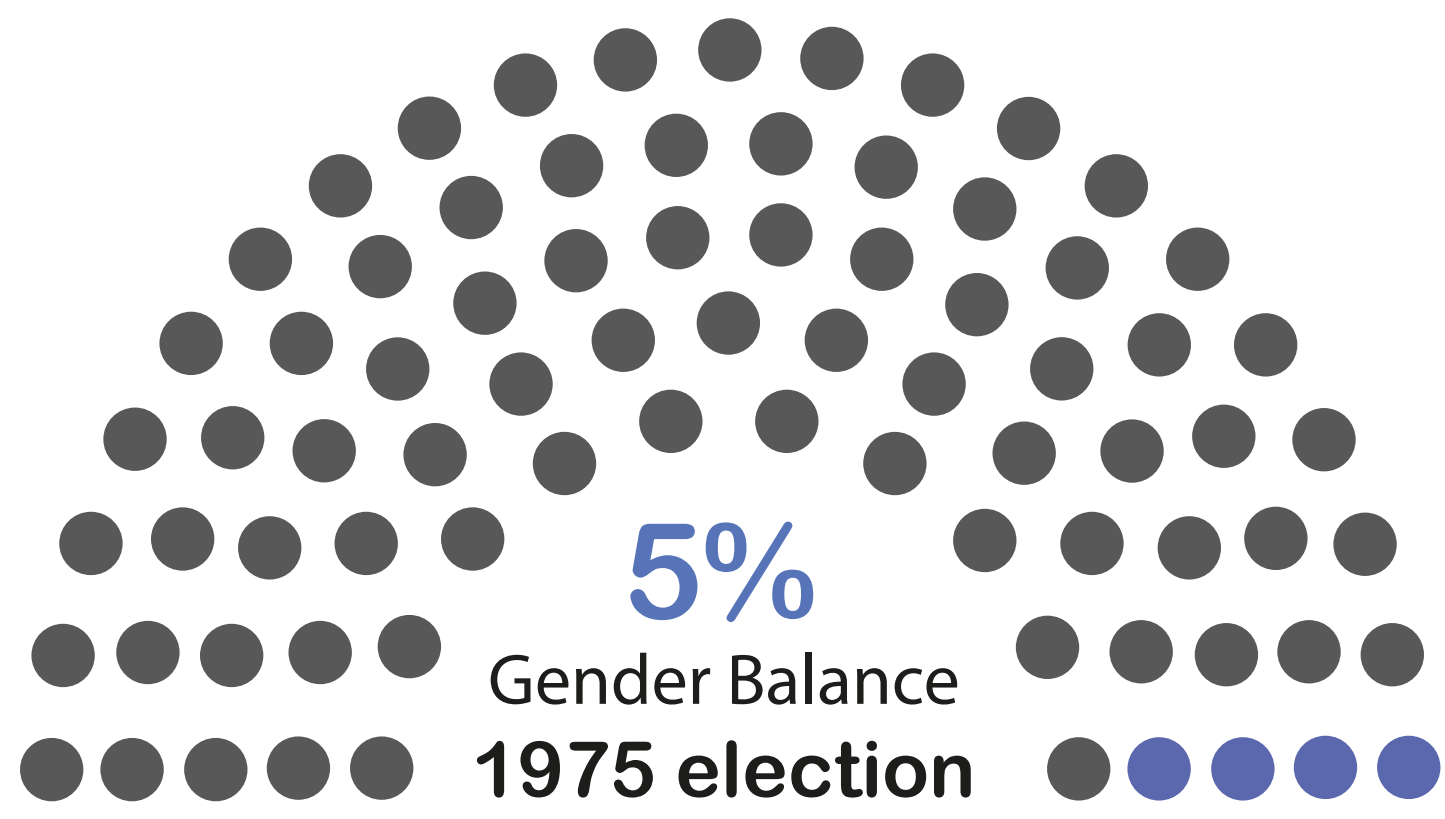


Image: Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Michelle O'Neill served as the first female Mayor of Dungannon and South Tyrone from 2010 to 2011. In 2007, she was elected as a Sinn Féin candidate to the Northern Ireland Assembly, representing Mid-Ulster. She served on the health and education committees and, in 2011, became Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development. In 2016, she was appointed Minister for Health. She became Vice-President of Sinn Féin in February 2018 and, following the restoration of devolution in 2020, was appointed deputy First Minister.

Women parliamentarians *of Northern Ireland*

First female party leaders



Anne Dickson



Image: Linen Hall Library

Anne Dickson was the first female leader of a major political party in Northern Ireland, leading the Unionist Party of Northern Ireland from 1976 to 1981. She initially represented the Ulster Unionist Party in the Parliament from 1969 until 1972 and was then an independent Unionist in the Assembly of 1973. She joined the Unionist Party of Northern Ireland in 1974 and was elected as a member of the Constitutional Convention from 1975 to 1976. She was the first chair of the Northern Ireland Consumer Council from 1985 to 1990 and was awarded a CBE in 1990.

Dawn Purvis



Image: Alamy

Dawn Purvis was the first female leader of the Progressive Unionist Party, succeeding the late David Ervine in 2007. She was co-opted to the Assembly that year and then re-elected. She served on the Public Accounts and Finance Committees as well as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Assembly Business Trust. After establishing a number of All Party Groups, she brought the Local Government (Disqualification) Bill to Final Stage. She then created and led the Ad Hoc Working Group on Educational Disadvantage which reported its findings in 2011.

Clare Bailey

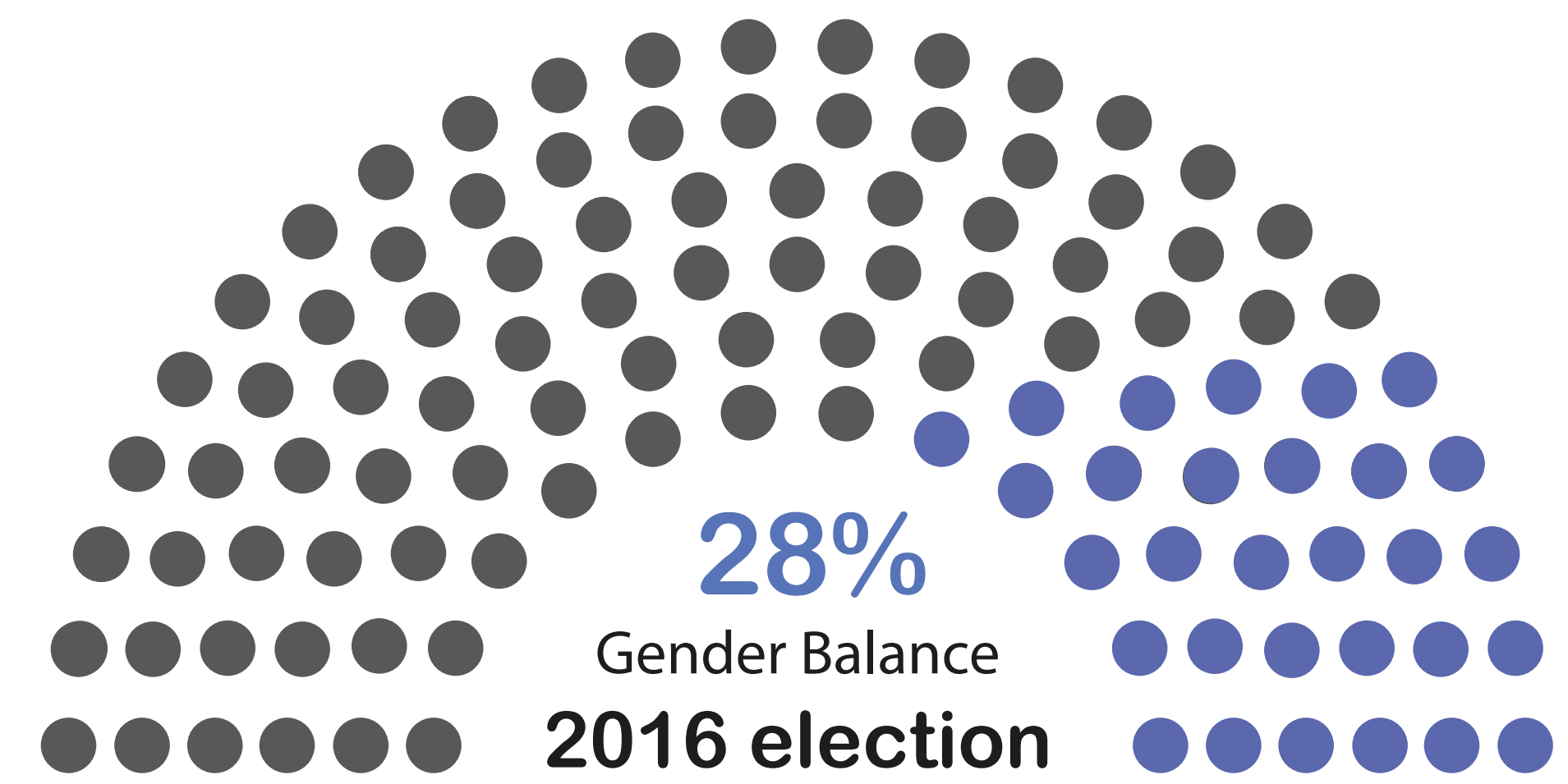
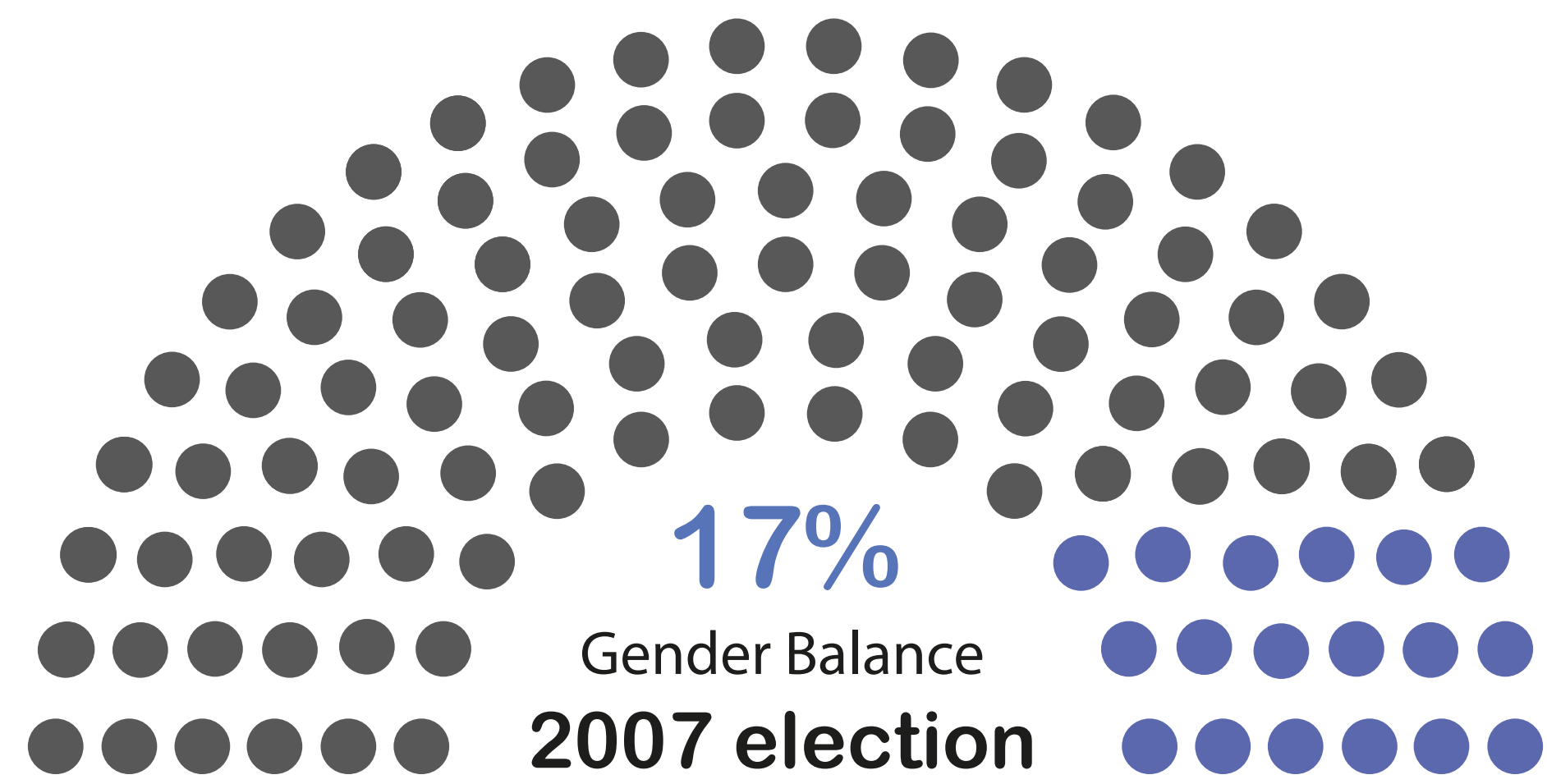


Image: Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Clare Bailey became the first female leader of Green Party Northern Ireland in 2018. She was first elected to the Assembly in 2016 and was appointed chair of the Assembly Women's Caucus in 2020. She has chaired the All Party Group on Arts and has served on various committees, including the Justice Committee, the Business Committee, the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response and the AERA Committee. In 2021, she brought forward a Climate Change Bill and the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill.

Women parliamentarians *of Northern Ireland*

First female party leaders



Margaret Ritchie



Image: House of Lords, used under a CC BY 3.0 licence

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick was the first female leader of the SDLP, serving in that role from 2010 to 2011. She was MLA for South Down from 2003 to 2012, and served as Minister for Social Development from 2007 to 2010. During her time in the Assembly, she served on the All Party Group on International Development, the Audit Committee and the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. She was twice elected as MP for South Down. In 2019, she was appointed to the House of Lords. She is Chair and Director of the Centre for Democracy and Peace Building and a member of the Board of Co-operation Ireland.

Naomi Long

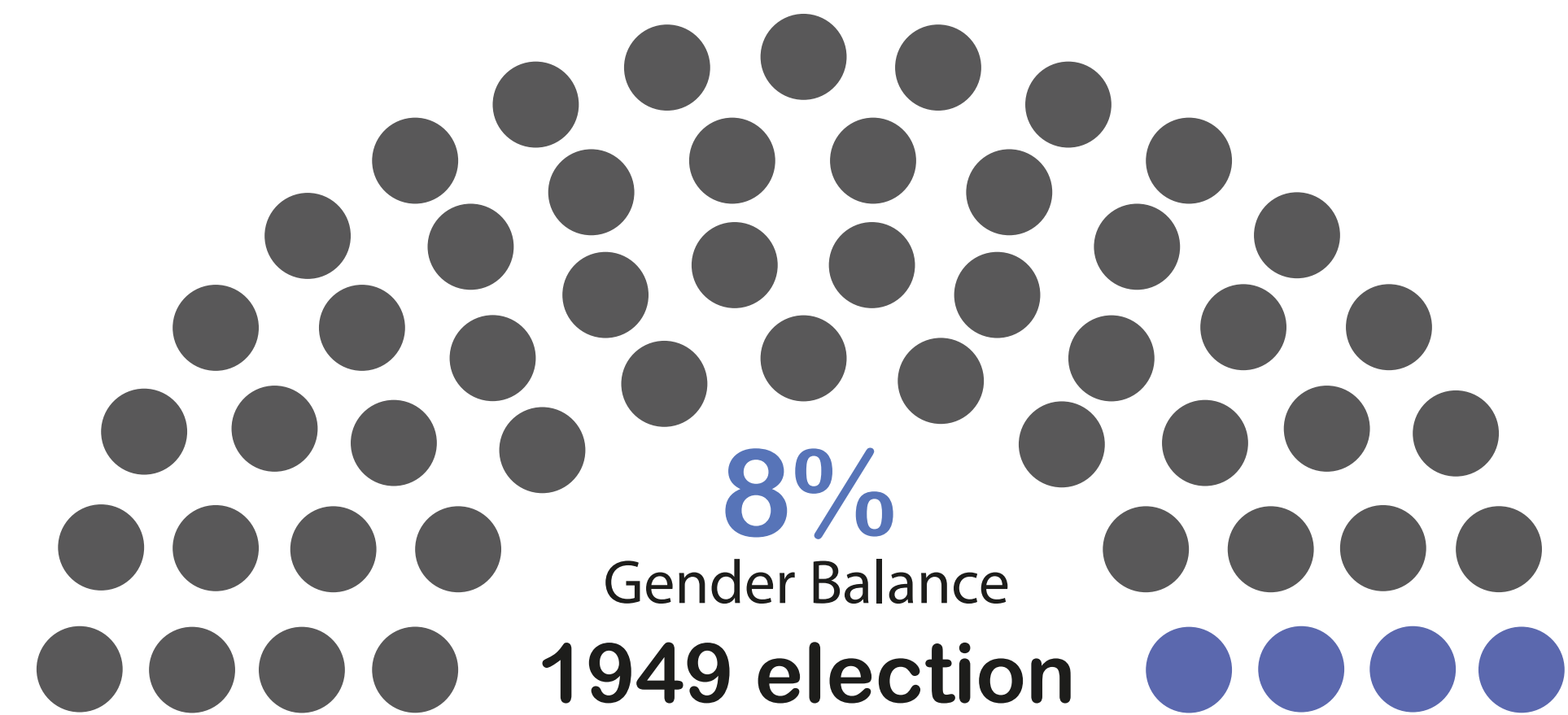
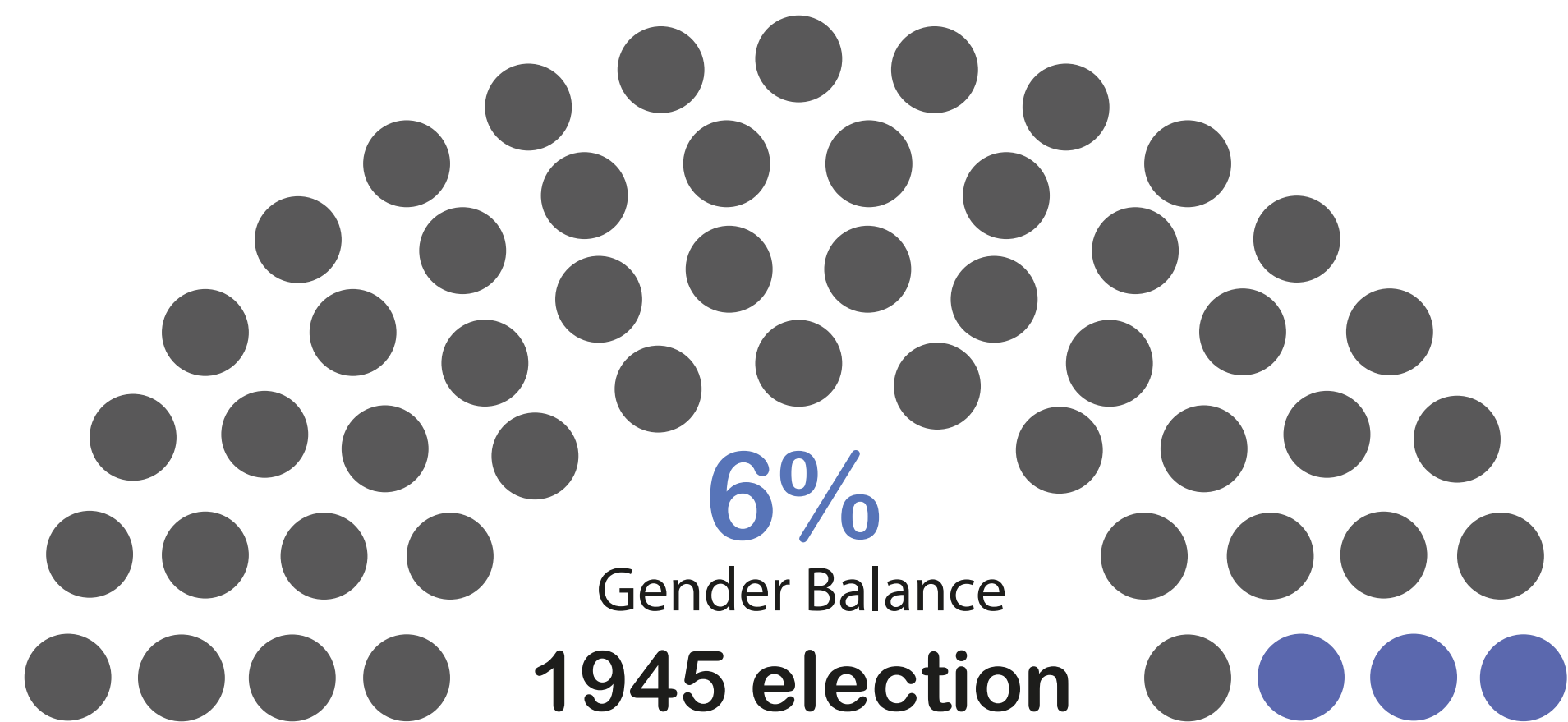


Image: used courtesy of the Alliance Party

First elected as an MLA in 2003, Naomi Long became the first female leader of the Alliance Party in 2016. She has previously served as Lord Mayor of Belfast, MP for East Belfast and Member of the European Parliament. During her time in the Assembly, she has served on the Committee for Communities and as Deputy Chair of the Committee for the Centre. Naomi Long has been the Minister of Justice since January 2020. During her tenure, she has brought forward the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill, making coercive control a criminal offence in Northern Ireland.

Women parliamentarians of Northern Ireland

Diverse voices



Irene Calvert

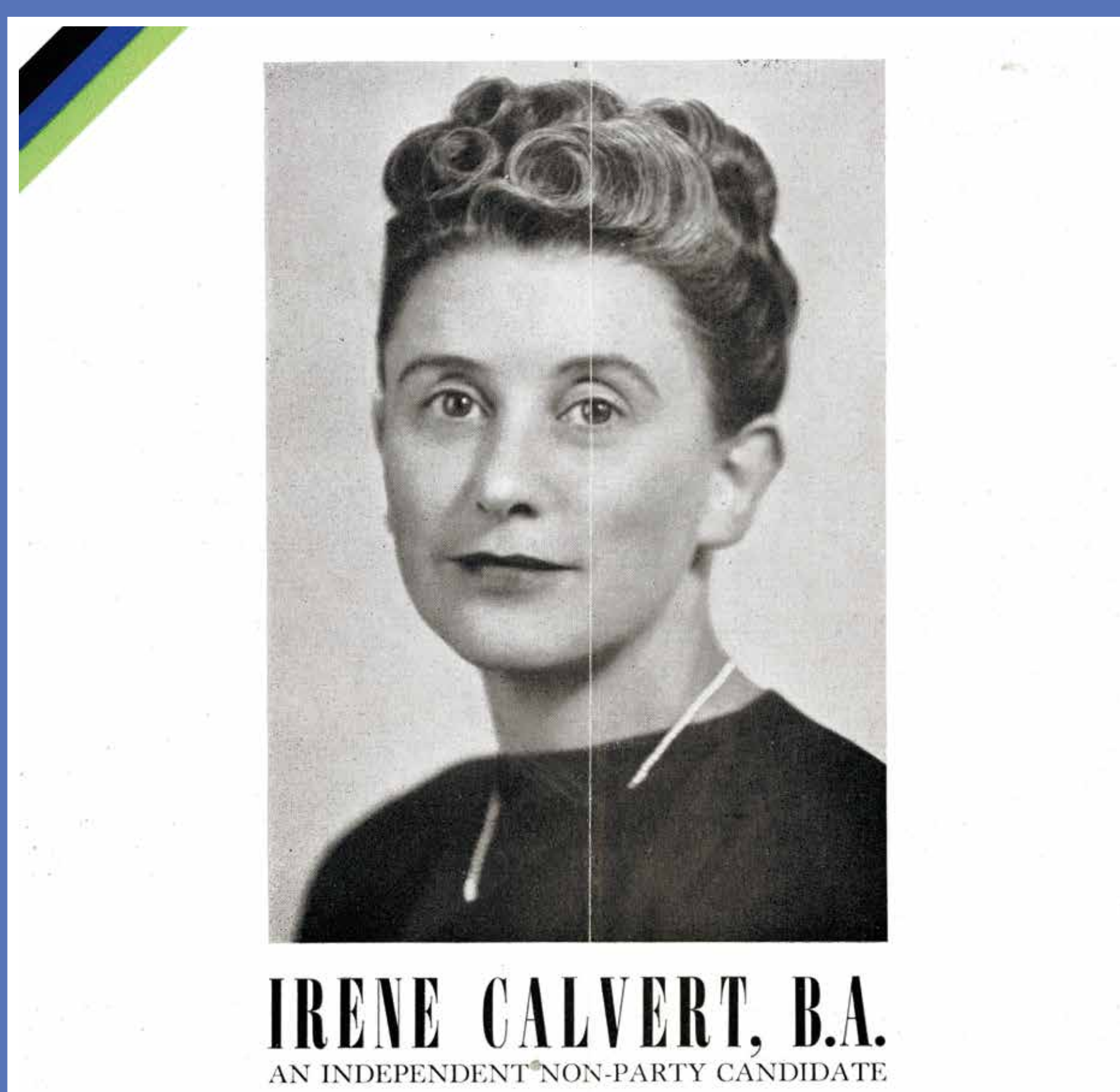


Image courtesy of the Linen Hall Library

Irene Calvert was an economist and had been a wartime Chief Welfare Officer for Northern Ireland. She resettled evacuated Gibraltarians in 1940 and managed the care of people following the Belfast Blitz in 1941. She was elected in 1945 to one of the four seats in the Queen's University of Belfast constituency, campaigning for reforms to education and child welfare legislation. She resigned in 1953 and became Managing Director of the Ulster Weaving Company and the first female President of the Belfast Chamber of Commerce. She also chaired the Standing Conference of Women's Organisations.

Eileen Hickey

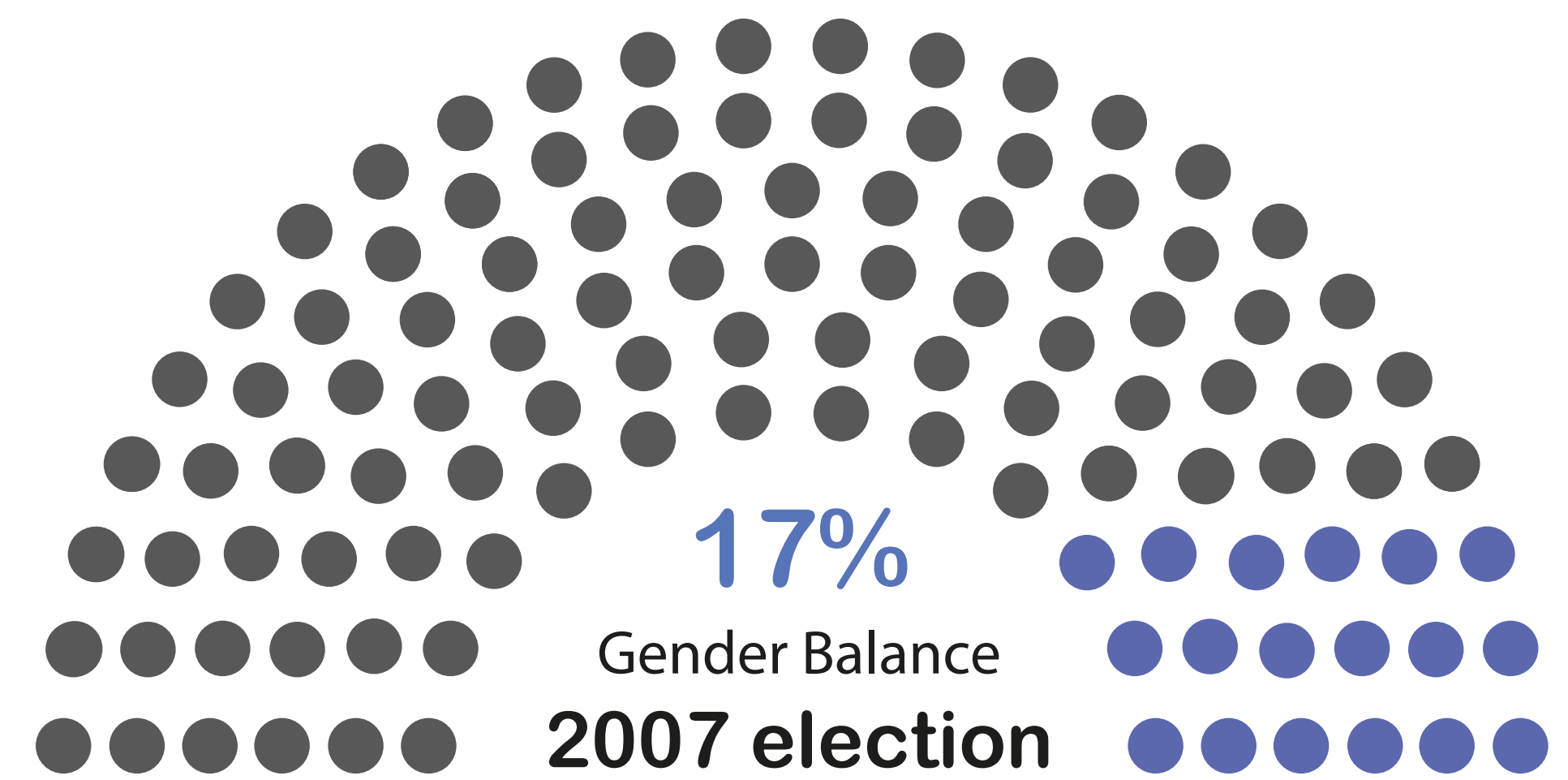
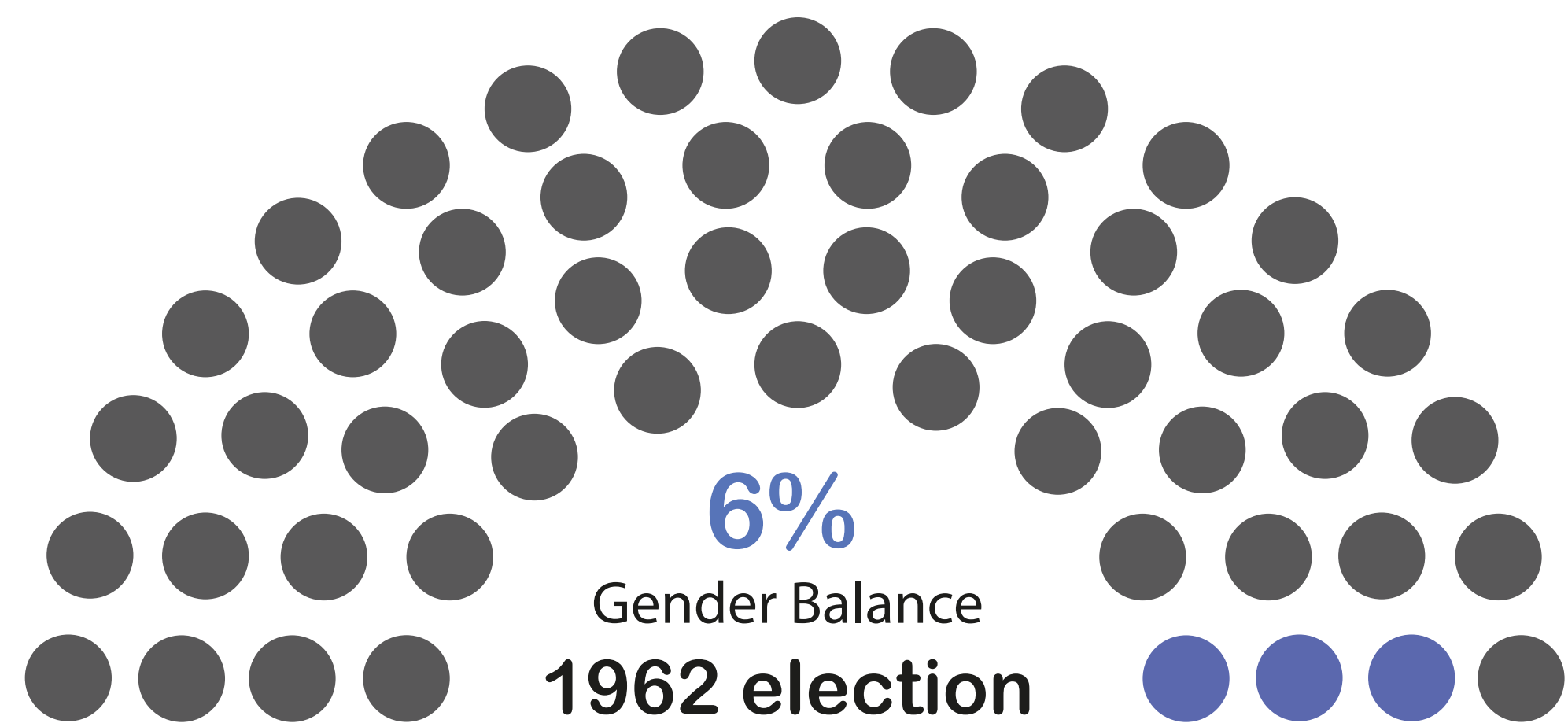


Image courtesy of the Linen Hall Library

Dr Eileen Hickey was a senior physician in the Mater Hospital, Belfast. In 1929, she was appointed clinical examiner in medicine for QUB, the first woman to hold the post. She was President of the Ulster Medical Society, a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and was a Member of the Board of Governors of the Mater Hospital. Eileen Hickey was first elected to the Parliament of Northern Ireland in 1949 to one of the four seats in the Queen's University of Belfast constituency. She served as an independent Member of Parliament until she stood down in 1958. She was awarded a gold medal of Medicine from QUB.

Women parliamentarians of Northern Ireland

Diverse voices



Sheelagh Murnaghan



Image: National Museums NI

From 1961 to 1969, the Ulster Liberal Party's one seat in the Parliament of Northern Ireland was held by Sheelagh Murnaghan. She was elected to one of the four seats in the Queen's University of Belfast constituency. While an MP, she campaigned to abolish the death penalty and for a bill of human rights. Prior to entering politics, she became one of the first female barristers to practise in Northern Ireland.

Anna Lo

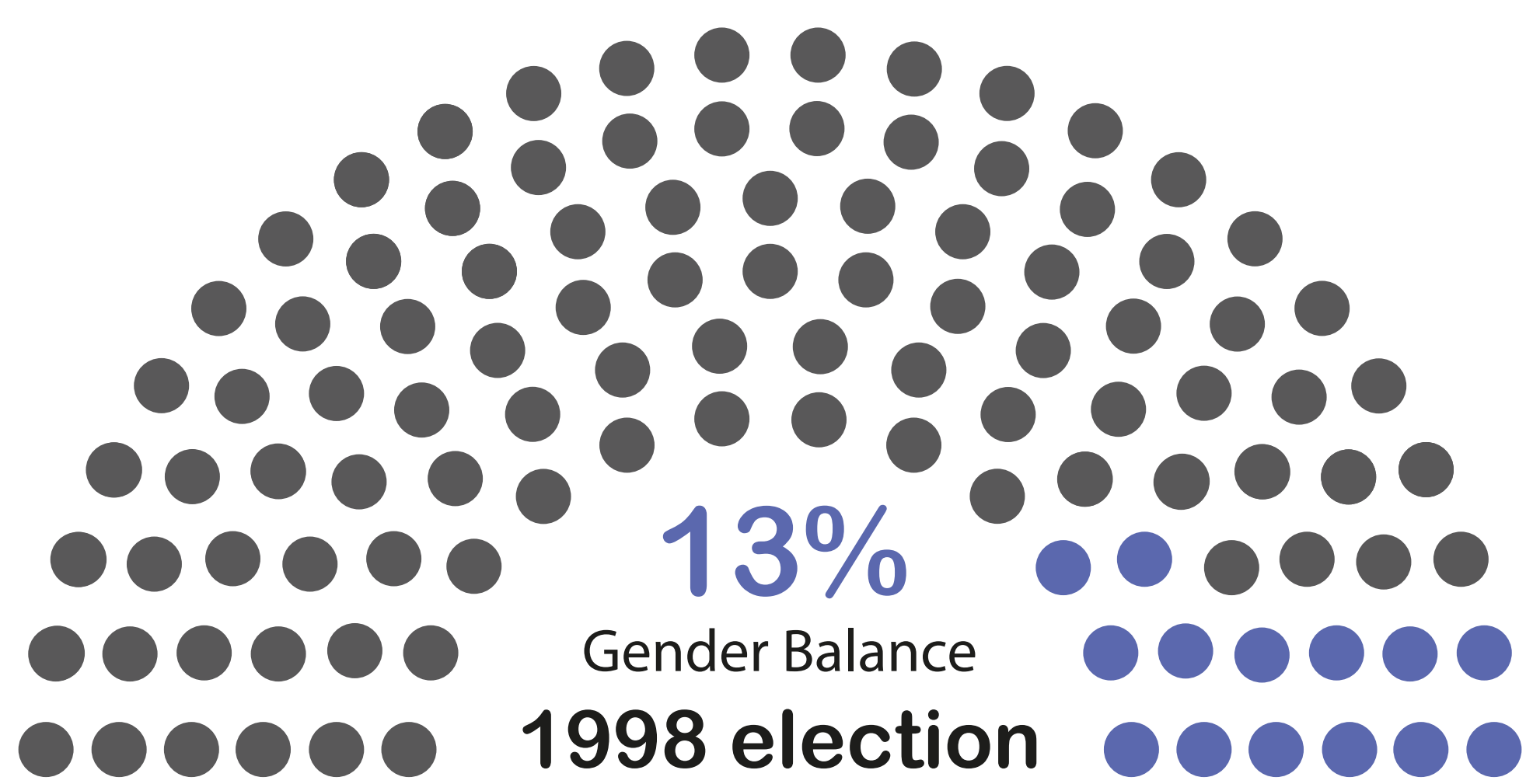


Image: Alamy

Anna Lo was elected as an MLA for South Belfast in 2007 and served until stepping down in 2016. She was President of the Alliance Party and became Chair of the Committee for the Environment in 2011. Anna Lo was born in North Point, Hong Kong and was the first politician of an ethnic minority background to be elected to the Assembly. She was the first person born in East Asia to be elected to any legislative body in the UK. She was Director of the Northern Ireland Chinese Welfare Association and was awarded an MBE in 1999 for Services to Ethnic Minorities.

Women parliamentarians *of Northern Ireland*

Northern Ireland Women's Coalition



Members of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition at a press conference at Castle Buildings following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, 10 April 1998 (image by Derek Speirs).

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) was formed in 1996, following denial of their request to the Northern Ireland

Office to require parties to submit gender balanced lists of representatives for the upcoming elections to the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue. Some academics have speculated that the NIWC's existence forced other party leaders to pay more attention to women's interests in their campaigning during elections. It has been argued that the main parties put forward higher numbers of women in response to the advent of the NIWC.

Due to a mechanism ensuring the representation of minority parties, founding members Monica McWilliams and Pearl Sagar were elected to two seats in the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue. The NIWC was the first single issue party in Northern Ireland. It did not take a stance on whether Northern Ireland should be part of the UK or Ireland. The party introduced proposals to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement regarding victims, integrated education, mixed housing and a civic forum.

In the Assembly election which followed, the NIWC secured 13,019 votes (1.6%) and Monica McWilliams (South Belfast) and Jane Morrice (North Down) were elected. Jane Morrice was appointed Deputy Speaker and Monica McWilliams would go on to be appointed Human Rights Commissioner for Northern Ireland.

Women parliamentarians of Northern Ireland

First female Speakers

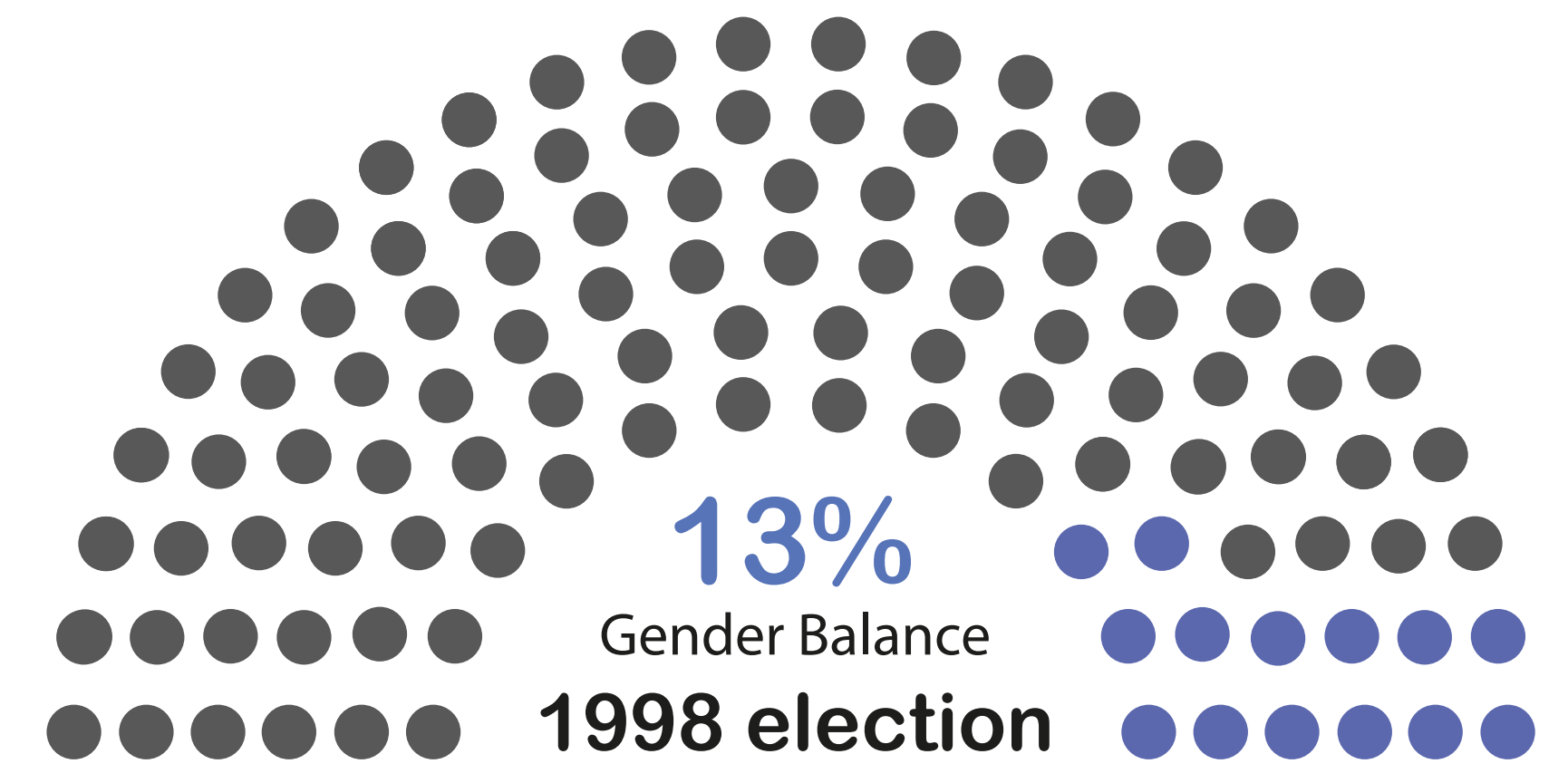
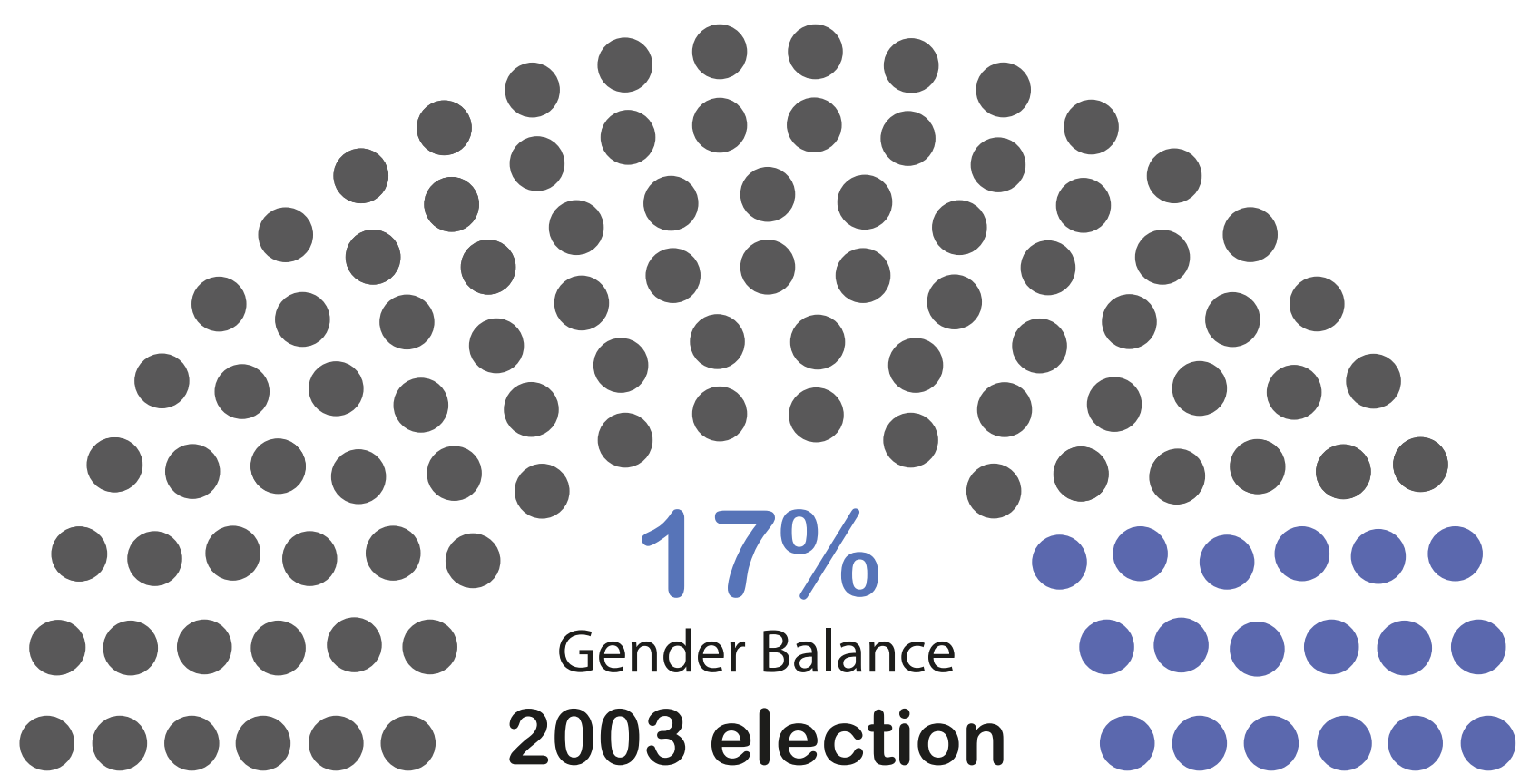


Image: Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Eileen Bell

Eileen Bell was a member of the Alliance Party, to which she was appointed General Secretary in 1986. She served as MLA for North Down from 1998 until 2007 and in 2006 became the first female Speaker of the Assembly. Eileen Bell had previously worked as a civil servant, a Welfare Officer for the Community of the Peace People and was Co-ordinator of the Peace Train Organisation. After leaving the Assembly, she became Vice-President and legislative advisor to the charity Autism NI, Vice-President for the Townswomen's Guilds for Northern Ireland, and a Board Member and Volunteer for the Training for Women Network.

Jane Morrice

Jane Morrice was a founding member of, and played a prominent role in, the NIWC. She was elected to the Assembly in 1998 for North Down and became Deputy Speaker in 2000. She went on to be Vice-President of the European Economic and Social Committee, Deputy Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission, a Director of the Integrated Education Fund, and Honorary (Hon) President of the European Movement NI.



Image courtesy of Hearts and Minds for Europe

Women parliamentarians of Northern Ireland

Social and legislative context



1918: Representation of the People Act allowed women over the age of 30 who met a property qualification to vote.

1928: Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act; all women over 21 can now vote – 52% of the electorate in Northern Ireland.

1920

1940

1918: Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act; for the first time, women are allowed to be MPs.

1930

1948: Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

1947: Education Act (Northern Ireland) prevents female teachers from being dismissed after marriage.

1975: NI Women's Rights Movement formed.

1970: Equal Pay Act (Northern Ireland).

1980

1960

1979: UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is founded.

1976: Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order.

1970

1968-69: Rioting and violence in Northern Ireland as the Troubles begin.

1950

2000

2006: OFMDFM launches Gender Equality Strategy.

1990

1993: UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women.

1998: the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement includes the right of women to 'full and equal political participation'.

2010

2020

2016: Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus established.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Women parliamentarians of Northern Ireland

We need your help!



A special debate in the Assembly Chamber to celebrate International Women's Day in 2019; the event included 70 young women from 28 schools and youth organisations (image: Northern Ireland Assembly Commission).



29 female MLAs of the Northern Ireland Assembly, photographed in June 2021 (image: Northern Ireland Assembly Commission).

The representation of women has come a long way since 1921 but, as the graph below highlights, has further to go. In support of the Assembly Women's Caucus Manifesto, we plan to continue to document and highlight the achievements of the women elected to the parliamentary institutions of Northern Ireland by gathering further sources and stories for our online exhibition. If you would like to help us tell the story of these women, please email us on wponi@niassembly.gov.uk.

