

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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Northern Ireland: Current political situation and
British Government attitudes

Results of recent elections

1. The 1979 General Election and the European election showed that the tribal divide in Northern Ireland remains generally constant: in both elections Loyalist/Unionist candidates obtained 59% of the vote. However, the elections have significantly strengthened the role of Paisley within the Protestant community. In the general election, while the DUP share of the vote (on a basis of only 4 constituencies) was 10.2% the party emerged the beneficiary of narrow Unionist voting splits in East Belfast (Robinson) and North Belfast (McQuade) and had three candidates returned. In the European elections however Paisley obtained a massive 29.8% of all 1st Preferences compared to 21.9% for the OUP. That this was not an exclusively personal vote is indicated by the fact that of Paisley's transfers approximately 45% went to Kilfedder, as against 33% for Taylor and 15% for West. Paisley's situation is therefore greatly enhanced by the practical gains of two Westminster seats and the moral gain of a European vote which, as he repeatedly emphasises, was greater than that of all other unionists combined. The Official Unionist party, having lost the Westminster influence it had due to a hung parliament, has failed dismally to assert a role in the face of Paisleyite pressure. Its newly elected leader, James Molyneaux, is generally respected in the unionist community as a hardworking and committed party manager, but is thought to lack any real leadership flair and has been closely identified with the Powell/integrationist faction. The OUP, while bereft of strong leadership and organisationally in a shambles, nevertheless probably still remains the fulcrum of unionist politics in Northern Ireland. The salient result of the elections is that any inclination the OUP might have had to face up to Paisleyism will be reduced even further and that party will continue to be a reactive rather than an initiating force in Northern Ireland politics.

2. On the minority side, the SDLP obtained 18.2% of the votes in the general election (or 19.7% if Austin Currie's vote is included). John Hume's European vote was 24.6% of 1st preferences.

This obviously contained a percentage of Alliance votes (the Alliance General Election vote of 11.9% dropped to 6.8% in the European Election). The overall picture on the minority side suggests that the SDLP retains a solid core vote of around 20%. The repeated predictions of British official spokesmen that their "green" line would cause the SDLP to lose support to Alliance and to the Republican clubs were clearly disproved by the elections. There were very marginal gains in the overall IIP/Frank Maguire vote, but, in contrast to the Unionist side, the division of forces in the nationalist-to-Alliance segment of the spectrum appears to have remained fairly constant in the general election.

British position

3. In terms of political progress the main positive factor to have emerged has been the election in Britain of a Government that has the necessary parliamentary base for action if it should be disposed to take it. Mr. Atkins has now had some discussions with all the main political parties in Northern Ireland. These talks appear to have been essentially listening exercises and have given no real indication of the direction of British Government thinking. While creating a reasonably favourable personal impression Mr. Atkins has also raised some doubts about the extent to which he has succeeded in mastering the intricacies of the Northern Ireland problem and about his weight in the decision-making process in the British cabinet. He has come in for criticism arising out of the resurgence of Provisional violence and appears in the present crisis to have been shunted aside somewhat by Mrs. Thatcher and the more influential members of the Cabinet.

4. Conservative Party policy on Northern Ireland was defined in the Tory election manifesto as (a) maintenance of the union; (b) restoration of law and order; (c) establishment of one or more regional councils; and (d) acceptance of the need for Government support for Northern Ireland industry. The Queen's speech (May 1979) while retaining points (a) and (b) in a slightly more guarded formulation than in the manifesto, showed much greater caution in relation to local government:

Politically, the Government's most urgent task is to find a way to restore to democratically elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland a substantial measure of control over their own affairs. As we all know, this will not be easy but it is an aim we must pursue."

5. The most detailed statement of British political thinking on Northern Ireland since the Queen's speech was perhaps a speech delivered privately by Mr. Atkins at the British Irish Association seminar in Cambridge last July. Mr. Atkins said then that while they could not predict the outcome of the process of discussions which he had just initiated he thought it useful to set down the parameters within which the consultations would take place. These were as follows:-

- (i) there would be no return to simple majority rule as it previously existed at Stormont
- (ii) Northern Ireland could not be completely integrated with the rest of the UK
- (iii) "there is no way in which it would be possible (even assuming, for the moment, that this was an objective of our policy) to make the re-unification of Ireland the be-all and end-all of our political activity"
- (iv) there would be no withdrawal of troops as a political gesture.

6. In working towards political progress the British will have to take account of the stated policies of the main political parties and the state of opinion within those parties:

(a) The SDLP: The formal SDLP position remains a motion passed at the 1978 Conference calling for quadripartite talks to prepare for eventual British withdrawal. In the run-up to this year's annual conference the perennial debate has again surfaced within the party as to whether they should strive to keep open the option of engaging in the search for an internal accommodation in Northern Ireland or alternatively devote their energies to securing progress through recognition of the Irish dimension and agreement between the Irish and British Governments. In previous years the leadership has managed to strike some balance between the two, although progressively increasing the emphasis on 'the Irish dimension' as the prospect of power-sharing receded. Internal

SDLP discussions on this continue but it appears likely that this year's SDLP Conference will follow the same pattern and that the leadership, while highlighting the Irish dimension, will avoid a total rejection of any internal compromise in Northern Ireland.

(b) The Alliance Party: The Alliance Party is somewhat discouraged at its failure to make the breakthrough it had hoped for in the general election and at its poor showing in the European election. Its policy remains one of power-sharing in a devolved government without the Irish dimension. Lord Dunleath has announced that he intends to seek a debate in the House of Lords to promote the idea of devolution by stages, beginning with a consultative assembly (broadly on the lines of the Mason five point plan).

(c) The OUP, in theory at least, still stands for a restoration of majority rule devolved government and/or the establishment of an upper tier of local government. The strong integrationist current in the party has tacitly abandoned the Convention report (Molyneux has rationalised this on a number of occasions, including earlier this month, by maintaining that the backbench committees for the minority envisaged in the Convention report would now be too generous). Because of the political vacuum in Northern Ireland the integrationist faction has the initiative in the party, and the emphasis in practice has tended to be on 'improving direct rule' through the creation of local government structures and changes such as the automatic application of British legislation to Northern Ireland. The discomfort which many unionists feel at the more turbulent and sectarian aspects of Paisleyism may well lead them in greater numbers to prefer what they see as the relative protection of direct rule to the uncertainty of a Paisley-dominated devolution.

(d) The DUP demand a new Convention to draw up by majority voting a blue-print for devolution to be decided upon in a referendum on the same basis as the Scottish devolution referendum (approval by a majority of not less than 40% of the electorate). It is likely that, as in the past, Paisley's most active concern will be with tactical issues which enable him to consolidate his powerbase

should have front-line responsibility for law and order. Attempts by the Army to reverse the policy decision of early 1977 to give primacy to the role of the police have led to the present compromise on coordination whereby Sir Maurice Oldfield is to be installed as security coordinator. Pressure from the security forces, and from public opinion, also led to the British Prime Minister putting forward certain demands for increased security cooperation at the meeting which she had with the Taoiseach on September 5th.

9. In relation to a political initiative the British tend to suggest that no initiative can hope to succeed without substantial improvements in the security situation and that the new cellular structure of the Provisional IRA makes it impossible to defeat them through political action. As against this, they are aware that the policy of containment has failed to come to grips with the IRA and that direct rule has not, as Mr. Mason predicted, hampered extremists such as Paisley or promoted 'moderates' (a description which in his case included the OUP, the Alliance Party and the Republican Clubs). The British Government are also very conscious of the attitude of the Irish Government and of Irish-American opinion. They have now signalled that they accept the need for an initiative, and will probably come forward with proposals fairly soon - perhaps in two or three months time. There is as yet no firm indication as to what form this will take. Civil service attitudes in Whitehall appear hostile to any attempt to concede unionists demands for majority-run local government councils, and, insofar as any pattern can be read into informal contacts, probably still follow broadly the lines of Mason's 'five point plan'. The Foreign Office is sensitive to the need for some political action on Northern Ireland, if only as an alibi. The British Army probably regard any political move as negative from the point of view of their own preference for a security-based approach with an enhanced role for the military (although Gen Creasey's successor may perhaps take a less simplistic view). The strong Tory reflexes of Mrs. Thatcher and her cabinet colleagues, as reflected in the Conservative Party manifesto, undoubtedly represent a point of departure more favourable to the unionist than the nationalist viewpoint but may also contain a potential radicalism in relation to the Northern Ireland problem. The indications are that while the need for an early initiative has been accepted no decision has

yet been made on the precise form such an initiative might take, and that Mrs. Thatcher's personal interest in Northern Ireland affairs since the Mountbatten killing has added to the uncertainties of the British administration in this regard.

The most recent British soundings with party leaders, including with Mr. Gerry Fitt last week, suggest that the most active formula being canvassed is that of a consultative assembly with limited powers operating by committee - broadly speaking on the lines of the Mason plan. It is not yet clear whether this represents the considered British position.

10. It is too early as yet to assess the extent to which the Pope's visit may have contributed to political movement in relation to Northern Ireland. Clearly, insofar as the Pope's Drogheda speech has any effect, this can be only in the direction of political progress through its highlighting the need for a cessation of violence and for those engaged in politics to ensure that the avenue of politics rather than that of violence could be identified as the path to progress. The initial reaction of the Provisional IRA, and their feeble ploy of questioning whether the Pope is adequately conversant with the theology of the 'just war' suggests some degree of difficulty and embarrassment on their part and a desire to play for time. In relation to the forthcoming meeting however it can clearly be urged that the combined effect of the recent statements both on the part of Irish Government spokesmen and the pleas for reconciliation of Pope John Paul II has considerably improved the climate for progress in Northern Ireland and therefore further emphasise the duty on the part of the British Government to come forward with a meaningful political initiative.

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