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Present Standing of the SDLP

The most recent electoral indication of the standing of the SDLP came in the May 1981 district council elections. The elections took place at a time when the SDLP position in relation to more hardline Nationalist groups should have been at a low point. Bobby Sands had been elected M.P. for Fermanagh-South Tyrone and had died (5th May) on hunger-strike. The Irish Independence Party (IIP) ran against the SDLP on a campaign of support for the hunger-strikers and the five demands.

Despite this situation and the emotional atmosphere generated by the H-Blocks issue the SDLP vote held up reasonably well and the hardening of position in the Unionist/Loyalist vote was not quite so much in evidence in the Nationalist vote. Approximately 63% of the SDLP candidates gained seats compared to almost 71% of their candidates in the 1977 election. They maintained a substantial number (104) of council seats (eight less than 1977). The SDLP's percentage of the first preference vote was down about 3% from 20.46% to 17.5%. Their major losses were in Fermanagh and Dungannon where they lost 3 seats in each and where 5 seats were gained by the IIP. Two seats were also lost in Belfast. Despite the above set backs the SDLP were compensated by gaining overall control for the first time of Newry and Mourne and Derry District Councils.

In general it could be said that the SDLP survived the May elections in a better position than might have been expected. Certainly there was a feeling of genuine relief in the SDLP leadership that the results had not been worse. However there are worrying signs which were evident in the May elections and now accentuated by the second debacle in Fermanagh-South Tyrone and the H-Blocks situation of a possibly progressive deterioration in the SDLP's position. The loss of Fitt and Devlin has seriously weakened the SDLP in Belfast. It would appear unlikely that Dr. Joe Hendron will be able to redress the balance in a situation where Provisional Sinn Fein are likely to contest future elections in West Belfast and to receive extensive support. The SDLP has lost much ground in Fermanagh and Mid-Ulster to more hardline nationalist representatives. Derry, Newry and Mourne and to a lesser extent Armagh remain SDLP strong points.

It is clear however that Provisional Sinn Fein has, as a result of H-Blocks and Carron's victory in Fermanagh-South Tyrone, launched itself on a campaign to assume political leadership of the Nationalist Community. Although this campaign may be less successful now that the hunger-strike has been called-off, it is interesting that Gerry Adams in an interview published on 5 October 1981 indicated that Provisional Sinn Fein would continue to participate more directly in political activity a process which, he said, had been "accelerated dramatically" by the hunger strikes.

The SDLP has moved in recent weeks to meet the challenge posed to them by Provisional Sinn Fein. A policy discussion (see report at Section 2) involving SDLP council members was held in Carrigart on 19/20 September. It was decided at that meeting among other policy aspects that a strong public challenge should be posed to the Provisional IRA and INLA in relation to their military and political strategies and this process has started with a series of statements from John Hume, Seamus Mallon and other party members.

Senior members of the SDLP have been prepared to admit privately that the party has lost ground as a result of the hunger-strike and the hardening of attitudes in the minority community. Seamus Mallon expressed the view privately in August 1981 that the 17.5% received by the SDLP in May had been an "act of faith" by the minority in the SDLP and was a last mandate to attempt to achieve a political solution which involved North and South in a new relationship. If the SDLP fails in this objective, Mr. Mallon felt that the mantle of leadership of the minority will pass from the SDLP to more hardline people who are already moving on to centre-stage.

Now that the hunger-strike has ended however and the possibility of political progress reemerges, the SDLP have an opportunity to regain the initiative in giving political leadership to the minority community. It will be useful therefore at this stage for the Government to hear the SDLP's detailed policy position.