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Northern Ireland Local Government elections:
general assessment

Introduction

1. The local Government elections of 18 May will represent an important test for each of the political parties and the outcome, especially in relation to the relative positions of the UUP and the DUP, could potentially have a significant bearing on the prospects for the resumption and outcome of political dialogue.

SDLP Position

2. The SDLP will have several main objectives in the elections:
 - To at least maintain the position relative to Sinn Féin achieved in the 1989 local Government elections [the SDLP obtained 21.2% of total first preference votes with 121 seats overall; Sinn Féin 11.3% with 43 seats].
 - To hold, if possible, the 70/30 SDLP/Sinn Féin split of the nationalist vote achieved in the 1992 General Election [the SDLP obtained 24.3% of the total vote, up from 21.1% in the 1987 election, with Sinn Féin obtaining 9.9%, a decline of 1.6% compared to 1987].
 - To maintain SDLP control of Derry and Newry/Mourne Councils as well as overall nationalist control in Omagh and Down.
 - To maintain the current SDLP position as the largest nationalist Party in all District Councils except Belfast and Omagh (there are 6 Sinn Féin to 5 SDLP seats in Omagh. Sinn Féin have at present a 9/7 seat plurality in Belfast City Council following a by-election gain of a UUP seat in the Oldpark electoral area in 1990 and the resignation of Cormac Boomer from the SDLP.)

- To make some gains in Strabane and Fermanagh Councils where a Nationalist majority was replaced by Unionist control in 1989. In Moyle, Limavady and Cookstown, Nationalist gains of 1-2 seats would probably produce evenly divided Councils.
 - To maintain at least the present balance and, if possible, achieve some gains in Councils at present fairly evenly divided between Nationalist and Unionists (Dungannon, Fermanagh, Magherafelt).
3. SDLP contacts privately feel it will be difficult for the Party to maintain the 24.3% overall share of the vote achieved in the 1992 General Election and some contacts calculate that there could be a slippage in the order of 1-3%. There are several possible reasons for this:
- The SDLP contested a record 13 Constituencies in the Westminster elections but has traditionally been more selective in the range of local Government electoral districts contested where there exists little realistic prospect of seats.
 - Sinn Féin Councillors tend to have a strong personal base and accrue some support for strong constituency work, a factor not reflected to the same extent in General Elections.
 - The large number of Independents contesting local elections tends to distort voting patterns and, on balance, affects the SDLP more adversely than Sinn Féin.
 - The SDLP's poor organisation in many areas is a more serious factor in local elections given the paucity of media coverage, in comparison to General Elections, as a compensating factor in maximising

the party vote.

- In any event, many SDLP voters (perhaps especially in middle class areas) tend to regard local elections with some indifference whereas the Sinn Féin vote is perceived as more "committed".
- 4. SDLP contacts point to particular difficulties on this occasion in fielding adequate numbers of candidates for the elections (partly due to organisational problems but also, at least in some measure, to the threat of Loyalist violence). As will be noted in the individual Council district assessments, local contacts believe that an inability to field sufficient candidates is a significant handicap for the Party and costs the Party a number of possible seats.

Sinn Féin

- 5. Sinn Féin's minimum objective will be to bring the Party above the 10% threshold in first preference votes (9.9% in the 1992 General Election as against 11.3% in the 1989 local elections). Beyond that, Sinn Féin will be seeking to maintain its narrow 9-7 seat plurality against the SDLP in Belfast City Council and increase its total in Councils such as Dungannon, Fermanagh, Strabane, Magherafelt, Derry and Omagh. Sinn Féin's narrow electoral base means it is especially susceptible to disproportionate seat losses if its overall vote slips. In 1989, for example, the Party lost only 0.5% of its overall vote in comparison to 1985 but this helped contribute to a net loss of 17 seats.
- 6. In the 1985 elections, Sinn Féin gained the largest number of Nationalist seats in Belfast, Omagh, Fermanagh and Cookstown and equalled the SDLP in Strabane, Magherafelt and Lisburn. Following the 1989 elections, the SDLP became the largest Nationalist Party in all

Council areas except Belfast and Omagh. Sinn Féin will be hoping to at least reverse some of its 1989 losses in these Councils.

7. The appeal on 14 April by Sinn Féin Chairman Mitchell McLaughlin for a "unified approach" between Nationalist Parties in the local elections and for the electorate to "vote for Nationalist candidates" is regarded by some SDLP contacts as an attempt by Sinn Féin to maximise the traditionally low transfer ratio from SDLP candidates. In reality, transfer ratios have not in the past proved a decisive factor for either party. More widely, McLaughlin's appeal may be an effort to widen Sinn Féin's base and seek to take advantage, for example, of Nationalist reaction to recent Loyalist violence.

UUP and DUP

8. In the 1989 local elections, the DUP obtained 17.8% of the vote and 110 seats as compared to 24.3% and 142 seats in 1985.
9. The UUP obtained 31.4% and 194 seats in the 1989 elections compared to 29.8% and 190 seats in 1985.
10. This decline in the DUP local election vote has been mirrored in general election results: the Party obtained 13% of the total vote in the 1992 election; 11.7% in 1987 and 20% in 1983. It should be noted that in 1987 the UUP and DUP ran agreed candidates in most constituencies whereas in 1992 there were alternative UUP-DUP candidates in several constituencies.
11. The DUP will be anxious to minimise any further slippage in their vote. Any drop below 15% of the overall vote and any significant decrease from their present 113 Council seats would provide confirmation that the Party may be in long term structural decline. In addition, the

DUP will be anxious to maintain its overall majority in Ballymena and Castlereagh and its position as the largest Unionist party in Cookstown and Moyle. Cookstown is especially politically sensitive for the Party as three of its five Councillors resigned last year (due to the Party's participation in the talks process) and the UUP is, according to local contacts, making strenuous efforts to take advantage of this disarray. The DUP is also in considerable disarray in Moyle.

12. One point stressed by contacts in many Unionist controlled Council districts is the apparently greater willingness of UUP Councillors, as compared to the DUP, to consider "power-sharing", at least to some degree, with the SDLP. In Ballymena, for example, contacts suggest that the UUP is likely to be more open to new arrangements if the DUP loses its majority. Likewise, Coleraine Council adopted last month an SDLP motion affirming a policy of "shared responsibility" in relation to Council matters (although what, if anything, this means remains to be seen).

13. Contacts suggest the UUP feels confident it can make further inroads into the DUP vote in many rural Councils and that the DUP is likely to seek to make its hardline position in the talks an electoral campaign issue as a way of consolidating its vote. It remains to be seen what limited impact the fielding of Conservative candidates will have relative to the major Unionist parties. The party polled 5.7% of the total poll in the 1992 General Election and, depending on the number of candidates nominated, can be expected to have an impact in North Down (where the model conservatives won 4 seats in 1989) and in areas of Antrim and Belfast.

Alliance

14. The Alliance Party obtained 6.8% of the vote and 37 Council seats in 1989, a marginal decline from its 7.1% (34 seats) in 1985. SDLP contacts believe that Alliance has adopted in recent months a deliberate tactical strategy of seeking to attract support in the Catholic Middle Class and that this explains the Party's somewhat acerbic anti-SDLP posture. Alliance had its strongest base in 1989 in the Belfast conurbation area and will be hoping to increase its vote above 10% in the Council region.

Council districts: assessment

15. The following is a general assessment of the position in Council districts based on recent conversations with local contacts. It should be stressed that judgements given are, necessarily, tentative in advance of the opening of the campaign and the final nomination of candidates.

Nationalist Controlled Councils

Derry

16. The 1989 results were: SDLP 15; SF 5; UUP 3; DUP 4; Independent Unionists 2; ULDP 1 (UDA political wing).
17. Contacts suggest the SDLP should emerge with 15-16 seats. The Cityside electoral area is now reduced from 6 to 5 seats (at present SF and the SDLP have 3 seats each) and this should result in a net loss to Sinn Féin of one seat. Mitchell McLaughlin, the SF leader in the Council, has, decided to minimise the risk to his own position by moving to Northlands, where there will be an increase from 6 to 7 seats. Mark Durkan, the SDLP Chairman, is contesting the Northlands area for the first time and is widely seen as likely to take a seat (although perhaps

without increasing the SDLP plurality to 5 of the 7 seats). In the Waterside, there will be an increase of seats from 6 to 7. There should now be two non-Unionist quotas in the area with the SDLP seen as certain to hold its present 1 seat. The second seat is too close to call between the SDLP and Sinn Féin.

18. Overall, the SDLP seem likely to hold their present 15 seats and with a prospect of obtaining one extra (to give an absolute voting majority in the Council).

Omagh

19. The 1989 results were: SDLP 6 (now 5); SF 6; UUP 5; DUP 3; others 1.
20. The SDLP locally is hopeful of gaining 1-2 seats: one in the mid-Tyrone area from either Sinn Féin or Independent Brian McGrath and the other in the West Tyrone area from the UUP.
21. The expectation is that Sinn Féin will hold most of its seats with the DUP in danger of losing 1 seat to the UUP.

Newry and Mourne

22. The 1989 results were: SDLP 17; SF 4; UUP 6; Independents 3.
23. The 1989 result was an excellent one for the SDLP when it regained overall control of the Council. This time, some contacts see a risk of the SDLP losing one of its three seats in the Sliev Gullion area and possibly one in the Fewes area to an Alliance candidate. The Party has a reasonable prospect, however, of gaining a seat in the Crotlieve area. The SDLP should, on the 1989 figures, have a possibility of increasing its total in Newry town from 4 to 5 seats but this is an outside chance.

24. Overall, Seamus Mallon feels the SDLP is likely to maintain its present strength but with an outside possibility of an extra seat.
Down
25. The 1989 results were: SDLP 12; UUP 8; DUP 2; Alliance 1; WP1.
26. Local contacts see the SDLP maintaining its present strength without any great difficulty and with Sinn Féin is unlikely to regain the seat it lost in 1989. The UUP will maintain its position relative to the DUP.

Evenly divided Councils

Dungannon

27. The 1989 results were: SDLP 5; SF 3; Ind. Nat. 2; WP 1; UUP 8 (now 9); DUP 3 (now 2).
28. The SDLP and the UUP have implemented a power sharing arrangement in the Council since 1987. Although Sinn Féin comfortably retained a by-election seat in November 1990, the SDLP now expects to more than hold its own. Even if the election results in an overall Nationalist majority, the SDLP and UUP intend continuing the power sharing arrangement.

Fermanagh

29. The 1989 results were: SDLP 5; SF 4; WP 1; UUP 10; DUP 2; Ind. Nat. 1.
30. Sinn Féin lost half their seats in the 1989 election giving the Unionists an effective narrow majority in the Council. The SDLP has experienced considerable difficulty in finding candidates but contacts feel there is an outside chance of gaining a seat in the Enniskillen area from Sinn Féin. In Erne, North, the SDLP was lucky to win two seats in 1989 and Sinn Féin will seek gain a

seat here. The UUP are making strong efforts to increase their total against the DUP. Overall, the SDLP locally feels that there is only an outside chance of regaining overall Nationalist control this time round and no significant change in seat strength is expected.

Magherafelt

31. The 1989 results were: SDLP 4; SF3; UUP 4; DUP 3; Ind. Nat. 1.
32. The balance of power in the Council has been held by Mrs. Mary McSorley, an independent but formerly SDLP. Mrs. McSorley, with UUP/DUP support, is outgoing Chairman of the Council and is not standing in the forthcoming elections.
33. SDLP local contacts are hopeful that the Party should gain an additional seat in Magherafelt town resulting from boundary changes. Mrs. McSorley's seat in the Sperrin area could revert back to the SDLP but there is a prospect for a narrow UUP gain. The Workers Party may also field a candidate (Francie Donnelly) and may have an outside chance of a seat.
34. Overall, the result is too close to call but with the odds slightly favouring nationalists regaining control.

Unionist Controlled Councils

Belfast

35. The 1989 results were: UUP 14 (now 13); DUP 8 (now 7); SDLP 8 (now 7); SF 8 (now 9); Alliance 6; WP 1; Ind. Unionists 6.
36. In West Belfast, the SDLP holds two seats in Lower Falls to Sinn Féin's three. Dr. Joe Hendron is not standing again and there is some concern locally that the SDLP may

loose one of its seats (in 1989, Mary Muldoon won by less than a hundred votes).

37. In Upper Falls, Sinn Féin gained 3 seats in 1989 to the SDLP's 2. This position is likely to be maintained although Cormac Boomer, formerly SDLP and now Independent, may narrowly hold the seat with a high personal vote. The likely outcome in West Belfast remains too close to call but with an outside possibility of a Sinn Fein gain.
38. In Laganbank, the SDLP locally feels there is a reasonable prospect of Alistair McDonnell bringing in a second seat for the Party (a gain from the DUP). In Castle, Alban Maginness will hold the SDLP's 1 seat but with a 40% chance of winning a seat (Jonathan Stephenson, former SDLP Press Officer) from Alliance.
39. Brian Feeney's decision to run is unlikely to adversely affect the SDLP vote in Oldpark but may diminish prospects for a second seat.
40. Sinn Féin will be anxious to at least maintain its position in West Belfast following Joe Hendron's victory. It has a chance of a gain in Lower Falls and possibly of a third seat in the Oldpark area (which has now gained Unity Flats following boundary changes) from Seamus Lynch of Democratic Left.
41. Local contacts feel the UUP may consolidate its position against the DUP but without any dramatic shift in seats. Alliance may gain 1 seat in Balmoral from the UUP and should hold its present overall position.
42. There is little SDLP confidence that an overall Nationalist majority in the Council can be achieved this time around despite the narrow 28-23 Unionist majority in

1989 and the internecine squabbling among the two Unionist Parties. The SDLP could add 1 or 2 seats to its total but it remains a toss up whether it can achieve seat parity with Sinn Féin or overtake it.

Antrim

43. The 1989 results were: UUP 10; DUP 4; SDLP 4; Alliance 1.
44. Local contacts believe there will be no dramatic change in the figures this time around. Donovan McClelland of the SDLP took the only Sinn Fein seat in 1989 by the narrowest of margins but believes constituency work may be enough to assure a more comfortable win. McClelland is worried, however, about a possible sympathy vote for Sinn Féin following the murder of local activist Peter Gallagher two weeks ago.
45. The UUP is making strong efforts to win the one Alliance seat. Alliance is running its General Secretary, David Forde, in an effort to maintain its base. Overall, no significant change is expected.

Armagh

46. The 1989 results were: UUP 11; DUP 2; SDLP 8; SF 1.
47. The SDLP increased their vote and took a seat from the DUP in 1989. This time, Seamus Mallon feels the Party will maintain its 8 seats with an outside chance of gaining a UUP seat in Keady. Sinn Féin will hold its 1 seat in Armagh City.

Ballymena

48. The 1989 results were: UUP 7; DUP 12; SDLP 1; Alliance 1; Ind. Unionists 2.

49. In this traditionally DUP stronghold, the Party lost 3 seats to the UUP in 1989 while maintaining control of the Council.
50. Local contacts believe there is now a prospect of the UUP taking a further 1-2 seats from the DUP and, if this happens, that the UUP could enter an informal pact with other parties.
51. P. J. McAvoy seems certain to hold the 1 SDLP seat with a slight chance Seamus Laverty could take a second.

Ballymoney

52. The 1989 results were: UUP 6; DUP 6; SDLP 3; others 1.
53. The SDLP gained Sinn Féin's only seat in 1989 and now seem likely to hold it (Sinn Féin will probably run Pierce McMahon, a former prisoner). The SDLP has a chance of gaining a seat (from the UUP) in Ballymoney town but the odds appear against it. The UUP are seeking to gain at least 1 seat from the DUP but the outcome on the Unionist side is unclear (especially if Alliance field a candidate in Ballymoney town).

Banbridge

54. The 1989 results were: UUP 9; DUP 2; SDLP 3; other Unionists 1.
55. Local contacts feel it is unlikely the SDLP will increase its seat strength although, with good organisation, there should be a second seat in Banbridge town. The UUP has recently been notably conciliatory to the SDLP with appointments as Chairmen of two Council Committees.

Coleraine

56. The 1989 results were: UUP 10; DUP 5; SDLP 2; Alliance 2; Indep. Nat. 1; Indep. Unionist 1.
57. The SDLP locally is confident of holding its two seats but does not envisage any real prospect of gains. The UUP has recently made conciliatory approaches to the SDLP and allowed adoption of a motion last month calling for "shared responsibility" in the Council. The UUP is making strong efforts to win at least one DUP seat.

Cookstown

58. The 1989 results were: UUP 3; DUP 5; SDLP 5; SF 2; Ind. Unionist 1.
59. This will be a closely watched election result in the light of internecine DUP feuding. Three of the Party Councillors resigned last year in protest at the Talks with only one of these now standing for election. Local contacts suggest the UUP now sees a chance of overtaking the DUP and gaining 1-2 seats. The wife of Rev. McCrea is standing for the DUP, a clear indication of alarm in the Party.
60. The SDLP is likely to hold its five seats with an outside chance of a gain from the UUP in the Drum Manor district. Sinn Féin will probably hold its two seats and will be seeking to regain a seat won by the SDLP in 1989 by eight votes won in Cookstown Central.
61. Overall, local SDLP contacts suggest that Nationalist control of the Council is not a probable scenario.

Craigavon

62. The 1989 results were: UUP 12; DUP 4; SDLP 6 ;SF 1; Alliance 2; WP 1.

63. Against expectations, the SDLP in 1989 took one of Sinn Féin's seats in the Nationalist area of Loughside. Sinn Féin also lost a seat in Portadown to Alliance.
64. Due to boundary changes, there is some risk that the SDLP seat held by Brid Rodgers (who is not standing for re-election) in the Lurgan area could be lost to the UUP. The SDLP should compensate for any loss by gaining a seat in Craigavon Central. Sean French of the Workers Party could lose his seat in Loughside with either the SDLP or Sinn Féin gaining it. Overall no significant change is expected.

Limavady

65. The 1989 results were: UUP 7; DUP 1; SDLP 6; SF 1.
66. The SDLP won a seat from both Sinn Féin and the UUP in 1989. The SDLP will be under strong pressure from Sinn Féin in maintaining this gain and, in the view of contacts, the result could go either way. The SDLP stands a fair chance of gaining a second seat in Limavady town.
67. Overall, the SDLP is hopeful that the Unionist one seat majority can be overturned to produce an evenly split Council.

Lisburn

68. The 1989 results were: UUP 14; DUP 6; SDLP 3; SF 2; Alliance 2; others 1.
69. The SDLP won a strategic seat in Dunmurray Cross (the Twinbrook and Poleglass area) from Alliance in 1989. This time, local SDLP contacts are hopeful the Party can maintain its 3-2 plurality over Sinn Féin and with an outside chance of gaining a UUP seat.

Moyle

70. The 1989 results were: UUP 1; DUP 4; SDLP 4; SF 1; Ind. Un. 2; others 3.
71. The SDLP is hopeful of gaining an additional seat in Ballycastle although this is a toss up and could remain with an Independent. In the Glens area, the Party could lose one seat to an Independent. Overall, the SDLP should maintain its present four seats and perhaps increase to five.
72. The DUP is in some disarray following the expulsion of 2 of its Councillors last year for meeting President Robinson (as part of a cross-community visit to the South). The UUP will now be hoping to make substantial gains against the DUP.
73. Overall, a gain of one seat by the SDLP should produce a Nationalist majority or, depending on Independents, an evenly split Council.

Newtownabbey

74. The 1989 results were: UUP 11; DUP 6; Alliance 4; SDLP 1; others 3.
75. The DUP suffered a serious decline here in 1989 with the loss of three seats to the UUP and Alliance. The SDLP remains confident of holding its 1 seat but the main focus of interest will be whether the UUP and Alliance can make further inroads against the DUP.

Strabane

76. The 1989 results were: UUP 3; DUP 3; SDLP 3; Alliance 1; SF 2; others 3.
77. Nationalist control of the Council was ended in 1989 with the election of an Alliance candidate holding the

deciding vote. The SDLP is hopeful of gaining the extra seat resulting from boundary changes in Strabane town and could perhaps regain the Alliance seat. Overall, it remains a toss-up whether Nationalists will regain overall control.

Other Councils

78. There are currently no Nationalists in 5 Councils: Ards, Carrickfergus, Castlereagh; Larne (excepting Fr. Pat Buckley) or North Down. The SDLP, as of writing, is not intending to nominate candidates in these Councils.

Conclusion

79. There is a notable confidence in the SDLP - especially in rural areas - that the Party will not experience any surprise inroads from Sinn Féin and should maintain its 1989 position.
80. That said, some contacts (including Mark Durkan, Chairman of the Party) believe that recent Loyalist violence and the political vacuum could work to Sinn Féin's benefit and ensure a fairly strong turnout of its supporters.
81. In relation to specific Councils, media focus is likely to concentrate on the Belfast results. Alex Attwood will be organising the SDLP campaign in the City and believes that, as of now, the SDLP position in West Belfast remains far from healthy. Any gains by Sinn Féin, either in West Belfast or in overall strength of the Council, will be presented by that Party as amounting to a reversal of the 1992 General Election defeat of Gerry Adams.
82. Overall, the most significant political outcome of the elections may relate to the DUP-UUP contest. Any substantial weakening of the DUP position could have the effect of hardening further the Party's position in

relation to political dialogue, just as it might have the effect of boosting UUP confidence and increasing willingness to take political risks. Alternatively, the DUP might decide to enter talks as a means of retrieving a degree of political respectability in the wake of a serious loss of ground. It remains to be seen over coming weeks the extent to which the DUP will seek to make the talks process an election issue in efforts to weaken the UUP position and consolidate its own base.

f. Co R. R.

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