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ccd Group 2

Meeting with Alasdair McDonnell

SDLP Assembly member for South Belfast

The SDLP Assembly member for South Belfast Alasdair McDonnell is determined to mount a successful challenge for the Westminister seat at the next election. I met him at his home in the Malone Road area of Belfast to discuss his plans. McDonnell was accompanied by his election campaign manager, Glyn Roberts. Roberts is a former Alliance candidate and a leading member of FAIT, the anti-terrorism group.

McDonnell said that the SDLP throughout the North is in very poor shape with a few notable exceptions, such as South Belfast. He felt that the leadership was worn out and there were no obvious successors to Hume and Mallon. The party organisation badly needs to be revitalised. McDonnell has been a well-known thorn in the side of the SDLP leadership for some time

He outlined the position in South Belfast. The Nationalist vote has risen from around 3,000 to about 13,000. However, there are still more Unionists voters in the constituency but the overall Unionist vote has fallen in almost every election. Demographic trends show that middle class Catholics are moving into the constituency from North and West Belfast while Protestants are moving out of the city to North Down.

McDonnell and Roberts believe that the next Westminster election will be very different from recent ones, with Unionism badly divided. It is likely that there

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will be several different Unionist candidates in the South Belfast contest, all actively competing against each other.

There is still no certainty about who will be the UUP candidate in South Belfast. The best possible option for McDonnell would be for Smyth to stand again for another term. The pro-Agreement Unionists would then have an option of either abstaining or voting for minor parties. McDonnell is hoping that in such circumstances a small number would support him. He added "I am not Alex Attwood, the bogeyman for the Unionists".

The DUP will be fielding Sammy Wilson who should manage to improve on the party's performance in the Assembly election of over 5,000 votes. McDonnell believes that every extra vote for Wilson will increase the possibility of an SDLP victory.

There is less likelihood of a splintering of the Nationalist vote since Sinn Féin is weak in South Belfast and some of their supporters may even switch to McDonnell in order to secure a Nationalist victory. Monica McWilliams represents a more difficult opponent should she decide to run. McWilliams' vote is strongly Nationalist and drawn from potential SDLP supporters. If she runs, she could hurt McDonnell but he is confident that much of her Assembly vote will revert to the SDLP in a Westminster election.

McDonnell believes that he must find 4,000 extra votes to be sure of winning. He hopes to do this by a combination of getting more voters out to vote and taking support from Alliance, Women's Coalition and Sinn Féin. He expects the Alliance vote to start to disappear in the next two years.

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The next election will be a crucial one for McDonnell and the SDLP in South Belfast. The constituency represents the only realistic chance that the party has of gaining another Westminster seat. With likely Sinn Féin gains in other areas, the South Belfast seat is needed if the party is to stay ahead as the leading Nationalist party. However, history is not on his side. No Nationalist has ever won a Westminster seat in the North in a constituency with a majority of Unionists.

For McDonnell personally, the next election may be his best opportunity to get to Westminister. With a SDLP failure to secure the seat, the Sinn Féin vote will begin to rise and the SDLP's chances of taking the seat destroyed.

Ray Bassett
Anglo-Irish Division
16 August 2000

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Draft [redacted]/8/2000

Fighting to Win

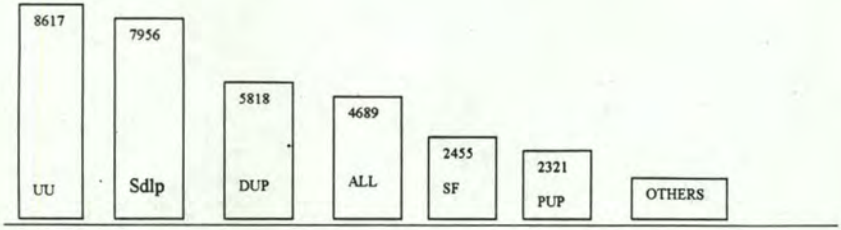
A Battle-Plan For the SDLP Winning South Belfast

Or

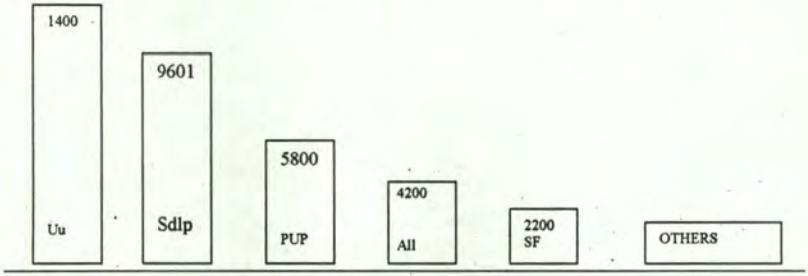
A simple strategy for an SDLP Victory in the Westminster Election 2001.

In order to win it is essential that we increase our 1997 South Belfast Westminster vote by at least 40%, there are many opportunities to do so.

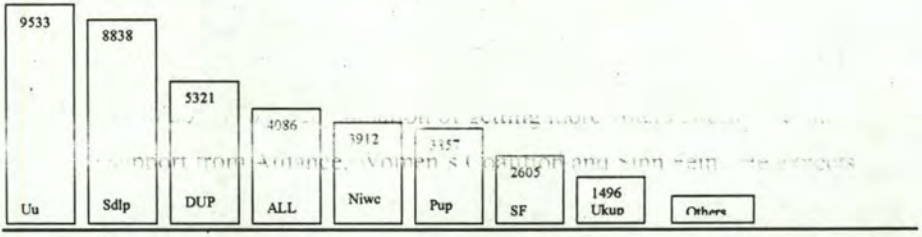
PREVIOUS RESULTS



1996



1997 SDLP 9,601 + (40%) 3,840 = 13,441 (in 2001)



1998 assembly

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Sett[redacted] the Context

The SDLP has grown steadily bigger in practically every South Belfast election in the last twenty years. Winning two council seats in Laganbank in 1993, a second council seat in Balmoral and first time seats in Castlereagh in 97 and winning two seats in the Assembly in 98.

Given the rapid decline of the Alliance party in South Belfast, to the great annoyance at the inactivity of the current MP (not to mention his obstructive position on the agreement and challenge to Trimble) and the steady growth in SDLP in South Belfast all present golden opportunities in 2001 for the party to win the seat at Westminster.

Smyth's 1997 majority was 4400 and falling, in 2001 a good SDLP Election machine getting all our votes out should beat Smyth or his successor if Smyth stands down.
In the May 1997 Parliamentary Election in South Belfast we recorded 9,601 votes but we are acutely aware that our campaign at that time did not fully penetrate vital parts of the constituency (like Finaghy and parts of Castlereagh). Even where we did penetrate we could have done better by perhaps another 10%. With adequate preparations our vote could be 13,000 or 14,000 next time out. Enough to beat the Ulster Unionist candidate.

South Belfast Constituency probably produced 13,000 SDLP votes for John Hume in the European Election in 1999.

Many of our supporters and ordinary people in the ground believe that with better organisation and hard work this level of vote is obtainable and that we are in a good position to take the South Belfast Westminster Seat for SDLP.

So how does the party go about this?

If we are to beat the Unionist candidate it will require every ounce of resources that we have, to mobilize all of our potential vote and get it out on the day. This can be done but we must start **NOW**.

1. **We must get our message across to our local members and supporters that this time it is for real.** The next Westminster election in South Belfast is not just about going through the motions of getting the highest vote, it is about winning, it's about bidding goodbye to **Martin Smyth**. If the local party members are fired up about this and are motivated, then this is a big step forward.

2. **Effective internal communication.** Canvassing in elections is not just about smiling, saying Hello and creating a token presence, it is about gaining as much information as possible about the voters intentions. There must be effective communication from all the canvassers of probable or wavering SDLP voters, to the election agent and this followed up with a target personal letter from the candidate. **Remember these wavers could make all the difference.**

3. **Harnessing the non - SDLP progressive elements in South Belfast.** The Alliance party, Women's Coalition, Sinn Fein and pro-agreement UUP voters are all potential SDLP voters in South Belfast. Getting the message across **that the SDLP will win the seat** and the AP, WC and SF cannot, could provide as many as 3-4000 extra votes. The SDLP must target these voters with either a personalized letter or targeted leaflet and if the Ulster Unionist party select Martin Smyth again, then this opens up an even bigger pool of new pro-agreement voters.

4. **Fighting on the real issues.** The establishment of the Assembly has forced a far greater attention on policy amongst the general public. The SDLP must fight on bread and butter issues and point to the responsible role in government that the party has played. A South Belfast Manifesto and tabloid style newssheet must be designed and distributed to get these messages across.

5. **Maximum use of Billboards.** Most people ignore small posters on lampposts, but if they are designed well, then billboards are hard to ignore. Monica McWilliams used billboards to great effect in the Assembly election.

6. **Good organization-** It goes without saying – Good organisation is essential!

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PUT SIMPLY !

There is no good reason if the South Belfast Branches of the SDLP are dedicated enough, why the party cannot win the seat at Westminster. The figures are there, the party needs to widen its base and become the leader of pro-agreement, progressive opinion, right across the divide.

The Agreement brings a high degree of political stability and will reduce the focus on the border and move it towards bread and butter policy issues such as the economy, health, transport and environment in the election campaign. With this dramatically improved political environment, there is more likelihood that Alliance, WC & SF voters may consider a move toward the SDLP if there is a good reason to, i.e. avoid four more years of Martin Smyth!

The party has played a sensible and constructive role in Government – this record should be promoted in the coming election as well.

However, the party will fail if it is just concentrating on getting the catholic/nationalist vote out on the day in South Belfast. In order to win, the party needs the votes of progressive people, votes of liberal protestants who may never have thought of voting SDLP before. Now is the time to get these people to come across.

This next election will have to be fought on an entirely different basis, to any ever before in South Belfast. The party, quite simply, must aim to win a majority of pro-agreement progressive voters in South Belfast if it has any hope to win the seat.

If the SDLP do win the seat, it will not only be a major turning point in politics for Northern Ireland but for the party as a whole.

PROBABLE CANDIDATES IN 2001		LIKELY VOTE
SDLP	?	(13,500)
UUP	Bob Stoker	(13,000)
DUP	Sammy Wilson	(7,500)
Alliance	?	(2,000)
Sinn Fein	?	(2,000)
NIWC	?Monica McWilliams	????

We must ask ourselves !!

- Where and how do we find the 4,000 more votes needed to win?

  -We can find a few in every street. Everywhere we have 25 votes we need to make it 35.

  -Across S. Belfast, we have 61 ballot boxes, we average 160 S.D.L.P. votes out of an average 630 votes cast in each box, out of a possible 1000 votes in each, in order to win we need to add 67 votes in each box and make that average 227 votes.

- How do we effectively erode votes from - Alliance
  WC
  Sinn Fein
  Soft Unionists
  Apathetic Voters?

- How do we mobilise some of the 24,000 non- voters who didn't vote in 1997?

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