

EUROPEAN ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS 1979: AN ASSESSMENTGENERAL:

1. The results of the European Assembly election in NI was a massive boost for Paisley and confirmed the signs of the increasing political polarisation that underlay the results of the general election. Taken as a whole, the overall party share of the vote reflected the normal sectarian voting pattern of NI elections. The Unionist bloc (DUP, UUP and Kilfedder) gained almost exactly the same as in previous general elections, whereas the non-Unionist vote (32%) increased slightly over past elections (28-29%) mainly at the expense of the Alliance Party which dipped from 12% to nearly 7%.
2. These results, however, tend to hide the positive shift towards the extremes within both the Unionist and non-Unionist blocs. For the first time, the UUP was forced to cede its position of dominance to the DUP which received nearly 30% of the 1st preference vote compared with the UUP's 22%. To this must be added Kilfedder's 1st preference vote of nearly 7%; his final total of over 72,500 votes on the final count indicated the broad level of support for his positive and firmly devolutionist campaign. The SDLP increased their share of the vote (24.5%) by nearly 5% compared with the general election. This was their best ever electoral performance and confirmed their claim to be the only major party representative of the minority community. Nevertheless, the degree of support for Bernadette McAliskey (nearly 6% of 1st preference votes) confirmed the existence of a protest vote which may reflect a growing disenchantment with the SDLP. The Alliance Party almost halved their share of the vote from roughly 12% in the general election to 6.8%. They clearly lost a certain amount of their Catholic support to John Hume. The election also confirmed the trend away from the minor parties which had become increasingly evident since the 1977 local government elections.
3. The election was significant in that as a PR election held on the basis of the Province being a single multi-member constituency it allowed candidates for the first time to canvass support throughout NI. With 13 candidates in the field reflecting almost the full political spectrum in NI - only Provisional Sinn Fein and the UUUP boycotted the election - it was seen as a test of real party strengths across the whole of the Province. Although European issues played a part in influencing voting trends, the election was fought mainly on normal party and sectarian lines. Faced with such a large number of candidates, NI voters tended to support the strongest representative of their political opinions and attitudes towards the EEC. Personalities therefore possibly played a greater part in this election than in others. Partly because of this, the turnout was unexpectedly high (at roughly 57%, only about 10% lower than the turnout in NI for the general election).

PARTY PERFORMANCESUnionists:

4. Paisley's election on the 1st count with an unexpectedly large

surplus of nearly 30,000 votes over the quota was a significant boost to the DUP. With almost 30% of the 1st preference votes, he exceeded the combined votes of all the other Unionist candidates in the field and lifted his party's performance from the overall 10.2% polled by the 5 DUP candidates in the general election. His campaign which his party machine had pressed vigorously across the whole Province had been deliberately geared to be a test of electoral strength with the UUP. He put himself forward as the only defender of the Protestant cause in a Catholic Europe, promising to "milk the EEC cow" whilst guarding against any EEC encroachment on British sovereignty, and he maintained a firm line on security and majority rule devolution. As a consequence, he undoubtedly gained support from the traditional Unionist voter who has always wanted a return to Stormont and from the large body of opinion in NI that has consistently opposed the EEC; in the 1975 referendum, roughly 48% had opposed entry into the EEC. The most acceptable interpretation of Paisley's high poll, therefore, is that the NI voter saw in him the most consistent defender of Loyalist values, and the strongest protector of the Protestant people of Ulster. Whilst Paisley's personal vote may to a certain extent have outstripped the DUP's real electoral strength in the Province, his electoral success plus the 3 seats in Westminster gained in the general election will have given him a position of greater influence in the Province and possibly in Parliament.

5. Paisley's success was a major blow to the confidence of the UUP, whose share of the vote dropped from 36.6% in the general election to 21.9%. For the first time, they were no longer the leading party and were relegated to third place in the pecking order. In particular, it was a humiliating personal defeat for Harry West as leader of the party since at no stage did he amass more votes (even on transfers) than John Taylor. On the first count, he could only manage to double his constituency vote in the February 1974 general election and he could only improve on his 1st preference performance by under 10,000 votes. Taylor's election on the sixth count against Kilfedder was hardly a victory, although obviously a personal success.

6. The UUP's failure may partly have been due to a lack of positive appeal in its policies. Party members attributed their poor showing to poor party organisation and the lack of personality in their party leader, but they undoubtedly suffered from their failure to come down firmly on one side or the other on EEC and constitutional issues. The party did not campaign during the EEC referendum mainly because of the differences of opinion within the party about membership. Their European election manifesto consequently stated their opposition to the EEC but promised to work within it. The difference in attitude was accentuated by the two candidates - West, previously anti-EEC, conducted a quiet campaign, whereas Taylor, a more ardent European, was more vigorous in his attacks on Paisley's negative attitude to the EEC. Voters may have been further confused by Enoch Powell's call for GB voters to support Labour candidates in the election because of Labour's opposition to the EEC. Similarly on constitutional issues, the UUP's policy of local government reform reflected poorly in comparison with Paisley's dogmatic assertion of majority-rule devolution.

7. This attitude amongst the NI electorate may also have accounted for Kilfedder's successful performance. Despite coming sixth

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on the first count with roughly the same number of 1st preferences as in the general election (38,000), he pulled up on transfers to be runner-up to Taylor with over 72,000 votes. It was undoubtedly the fact that he campaigned, as he has consistently done in the past, on an anti-EEC and firmly devolutionist platform, and Paisley's advice to his supporters to cast their second preference for Kilfedder, that enabled him to take the major share (45%) of Paisley's transfers.

#### Non-Unionists:

8. The SDLP were well pleased with their result. Hume's share of the vote (24.5%) was an increase of nearly 5% over the SDLP's showing in the general election and it was their best ever electoral performance. The SDLP had concentrated their campaign almost entirely on socio-economic issues and the advantages to be gained from EEC membership. John Hume undoubtedly benefited therefore from a pro-EEC as well as from a personality vote and clearly also attracted first preference votes from Catholic supporters of Alliance, plus a significant share (22%) of the second preference votes of the six smaller parties which were eliminated after the second count.

9. Hume's success therefore consolidated the SDLP's position of strength and lent substance to their claim to be the only party representative of the minority community. In the main, their rivals performed badly. Paddy Devlin attracted less support than in the local government elections in 1977 and the RC-WP, which was the only other party to field 2 candidates, saw their poor general election showing reduce to under 1%. The only threat to the SDLP came from Bernadette McAliskey. With the support of the IIP and Frank Maguire, and campaigning on an anti-repression ticket despite an active PSF boycott, her 6% share of the vote was probably an accurate reflection of the (possibly increasing) number of Catholic voters not prepared to support the SDLP because of their willingness to deal with the British government and yet less than complete supporters of the Provisional IRA. Even so, her total of roughly 34,000 1st preference votes was about 10,000 fewer than the total number of votes polled by Frank Maguire and IIP candidates in the general election.

#### Other Parties:

10. Napier's 6.8% was little more than half of the Alliance's share of the vote in the general election and his party was bitterly disappointed with this performance. His campaign had concentrated almost entirely on European issues and he had set himself up as the non-sectarian champion of the NI consumer. Yet despite PR Napier suffered from the general polarisation of voting patterns and his somewhat low-key campaign clearly failed in popular appeal. The minor parties also suffered from the swing away from the centre. UPNI saw their support fall to under 1% and there must now be serious doubts about the ability of the party to continue. The Liberal candidate failed to make any showing and only David Bleakley, fighting this time on a united community rather than an NILP ticket, managed to hold on to his relatively consistent personal poll of some 8-9000 votes.

Party Attitudes:

11. The DUP certainly are riding high and Paisley reflected this when immediately on election he sent a telegram to the Prime Minister demanding a meeting as the undisputed "leader of Ulster". Party workers commented that the Secretary of State would now have to listen to and respect the DUP's voice. It remains to be seen, however, how Paisley uses his electoral mandate. Always regarded as a negative politician in the past, more ready to criticise than to propose, for the first time he has been forced out into the open with full electoral backing. To that extent he is exposed and may be vulnerable. There have been various schools of thought about whether Paisley wants power and whether he would be prepared to obtain it by constructive statesmanship, or whether he would merely continue to build on his reputation as the defender of the Loyalist Protestant tradition ready to resist any sign of appeasement by the government of the day.

12. To pursue the latter, Paisley has merely to maintain his attack on the Government's security policy during this period of heightened Provisional IRA activity, and this appears to be the course that he has set. On the other hand, confident of the support of Kilfedder and Dunlop at Westminster, it may be that he will pursue the other plank of his party's electoral platform, a return to devolved government in Ulster. The tactics which he chooses to adopt will be a significant factor in determining the Secretary of State's posture towards Paisley. It is possible that his bombast will lead him to demand full majority rule devolution, and failing that, independence. To that extent, he would be taking on the British Government and Parliament's bipartisan commitment to the doctrine of acceptability and the Secretary of State's obvious course would be to expose him and weaken his position by a failure similar to the failure of the UUAC strike in 1977. The Government's position would be different if Paisley adopted a more reasonable approach on constitutional matters by indicating that he was prepared to consider a system of devolved government that had sufficient checks and balances to protect the position of the minority community. The DUP have shown themselves to be prepared to think in these terms to a certain extent, and Paisley is acknowledged to be a good constituency MP representing all his constituents in N.Antrim. The adoption of this tactic would have the advantage for him of giving him a cloak of respectability. The problem for the Government would remain that of achieving agreement, since Paisley's concessions would be insufficient to be even slightly attractive to the SDLP.

13. The SDLP, on the other hand, remain a significant and important factor in the political process. They consider that they have fought off the challenge of the RC-WP and Paddy Devlin, and also of the IIP although privately they may admit to some concern at the level of the anti-SDLP protest vote in certain areas. They believe that they have retained a dominant bargaining position as the majority party representative of the minority and that they therefore have a power of veto over any solution proposed by the Government which is not acceptable to them. They would certainly be prepared to resist, and have said so publicly, any attempt to

restore powers to district councils. They are confident in their ability to stimulate international pressure from the USA and the Republic of Ireland to prevent HMG from giving in to Paisley.

14. The SDLP's problem is that their electoral success does little for their ability to achieve their political aims. The moderates like Gerry Fitt (and this element within the party is growing smaller and less powerful) realise the difficulties posed by the election results, since it makes the SDLP's minimum demand of acceptable devolution based on power-sharing or partnership almost unattainable. Compromise becomes less possible, since the more that Paisley is to the fore, the more necessary, in SDLP eyes, will it be to have power-sharing and a position in Cabinet to prevent DUP discrimination. Paisley's success also undermines the position of the moderates within the party, who have argued in favour of acceptable devolution in preference to going all-out for immediate progress towards Irish reunification. They have for a long time been fighting a losing battle within a party that has been progressively more fearful of losing support within their community to the more radical nationalist and republican views of the IIP and PSF.

15. The green wing of the SDLP, epitomised by Seamus Mallon, are possibly less concerned by the outcome of the election. They have seen the SDLP's position of strength consolidated and the possibility of agreement on some form of compromise devolution reduced. They talk about HMG being forced off the fence and they would like to think that international pressure plus the 'naked sectarianism of Paisley will force the Secretary of State to come down on their side. The inevitability of British withdrawal, which the SDLP has always claimed, has in their view become that much nearer.

16. The SDLP is therefore probably divided between the moderates who will argue for a continuation of direct rule as the best immediate defence against Paisley and as the only option for the Secretary of State and the increasingly powerful green wing, which will undoubtedly seek to persuade the government of the Republic and the USA to increase their diplomatic pressure on HMG. It is probable that the SDLP will go further down the green spectrum. The onus has always been on the moderates to produce results and it is difficult to imagine that the SDLP rank and file will acquiesce in a steady continuation of direct rule, particularly as their conference in November draws closer. Undoubtedly therefore, the Secretary of State can expect greater pressure from the SDLP for some form of movement in their direction. They will not take kindly to a prolongation of the step-by-step approach.

17. The UUP is in disarray, at least temporarily. There can be no doubt but that their poor electoral performances was a blow to their confidence and this has been evident in Harry West's announcement that he wishes to resign from the leadership and in various other signs of discontent and open criticism of the party leadership from within party ranks. The party will clearly have to get over its leadership crisis, since although Harry West had been asked by the Council to stay on, it seems likely that the change will occur by the end of the year. The policies that the

UUP adopt to restore its appeal to the NI electorate will to a certain extent depend upon the choice of West's successors. The two obvious candidates, Molyneaux and Smyth, are perceived to have differing attitudes to the central constitutional issue with Molyneaux favouring local government reform and Smyth more on the devolutionary wing of the party.

18. Undoubtedly, however, the party will seek to reassess its position and try to correct its own difficulties. The party blamed its electoral failure partly on poor party organisation and partly on a lack of personality in the leadership. The party was in the process of reorganisation particularly at constituency and policy committee level before the elections and this process will clearly be speeded up. It is also likely that the party will try to attract younger blood and stimulate the young Unionist associations (particularly necessary given the age structure of the party membership - over 55% UUP supporters are over 50 years of age). On personalities, the party can do little, and indeed has always recognised its deficiencies and this may cause the leadership to attempt to put across the party's policies more positively. Yet, here they are on slightly weak ground. The party has never fully resolved the internal differences of view between the proponents of local government reform and devolution over the relative priorities to be accorded to their aims. In addition, the party will have to come to a decision on the degree to which it can compromise on the principle of majority rule.

19. It is likely therefore that the party leadership will try to keep the party on an even keel and to prevent internal divisions from coming to the fore. They will reorganise and reassess policy. In doing so, they will obviously have to pay regard to the evident popularity of Paisley's simple appeal to the electorate, but at the same time they may wish to look for a distinctive policy to differentiate the party from the DUP, without alienating their supporters. Whether the emphasis is on devolution or local government and on majority rule or the need for agreement with the minority may depend on their choice of leader. Undoubtedly there will be a period of retrenchment for the UUP who will be anxious for a period of relative calm to allow them to rally their supporters. To a certain extent, they have this already since there are no further elections until the local government elections in 1981 but it is probable that the party leadership will argue for a continuation of direct rule and against any new test of electoral opinion.

20. The Alliance Party will also have to reassess their position and rally their supporters. Like the UUP, they too lost support because of the personality vote in the election and the consequent polarisation. They failed to gain a seat in E.Belfast by a narrow margin, failed to do well in the European election and have ceded the office of Lord Mayor of Belfast. They need a platform, and will have to mount their own reorganisation campaign to prevent resignations (even at the higher levels of the party). They will also have to take the hard decision on whether to base their appeal firmly on the Protestant vote or whether to continue to attempt to attract cross-sectarian support.

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Prognosis

21. The result of the European Assembly elections reflected the depth of polarisation in the NI community with the DUP and SDLP having stronger claims to be regarded as representative of the two sides of the community. With the failure of the Alliance Party to hold their vote, the middle ground is less discernible and the immediate prospects for consensus politics more unrealistic. Even if the UUP were to retrieve some of their position, Paisley will be accorded a significantly more influential role in the affairs of the Province.

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