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WESTMINSTER GENERAL ELECTION: 1979

1. As promised in my minute of 24 April, I attach a detailed analysis of the background of the election campaign in each of the 12 NI constituencies. There is a record list of 64 candidates, 50% more than in the October 1974 elections. 11 parties have fielded candidates - the Alliance Party 12, the UUP 11, the SDLP 9 (plus Austin Currie who defied an executive decision not to stand and whose fate therefore is to be decided at the next party executive meeting), the RC-WP 7, the DUP 5, the IIP and NILP 4 each, UPNI 3, UUUP 2, ULP and L&TUCG 1 each. There are also 2 independent sitting members and 2 other fringe candidates. Parties and/or groups not standing are Provisional Sinn Fein who in April 1979 urged a boycott of the election by Catholic voters - they were supported in this by the PSF-backed Irish Civil Rights Association in Dublin; the UDA-backed NUPRG and the other groupings promoting negotiated independence, like the UIA and UNM; and the UVF backed IUG, who originally fielded 2 candidates (Smyth and Overend) but decided in April 1979 to withdraw.
2. The main difference in the party line up from the previous elections in 1974 is the break-down of the old hard-line unionist coalition - this time the UUP, DUP and UUUP are all fighting separately and not on a UUUC ticket (although the UUUP and DUP are not contesting the same seats); the attempt by the Alliance Party to fight all 12 seats - they only fielded 3 candidates in February 1974 and 5 in October 1974; the emergence of the IIP as a contender against the SDLP fighting 4 seats against the SDLP's 9 - in February 1974 the SDLP fielded 12 candidates and were opposed by only 2 Unity party candidates whereas in October 1974 they fielded 9 candidates with no nationalist opposition; and finally the increased effort of the RC-WP in fielding 7 candidates to their 5 in the 1974 elections.
3. The campaign in NI was characterised by the fact that most parties expected a general election in Autumn 1978, and many parties had taken their initial campaign decisions in February and March of that year. The Alliance Party announced that they would field 12 candidates and have fulfilled their promise. The UUP made a similar commitment but have withdrawn one (Turner from mid-Ulster) their only concession to counter the anti-unionist threat. The SDLP had nominated their 9 candidates by autumn 1978, with only Currie's unauthorised candidature coming as a surprise. The Clubs and the IIP were also early on the field.

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4. It was the attempt by the DUP and UUUP to negotiate some form of electoral pact that provided a certain amount of interest in the long run-up to the nomination day on Monday 23 April 1979. The United Ulster Unionist Coalition which had been formed in 1973 around the anti-White Paper contingent and which fought the February 1974 election against the pro-Assembly Faulkenites and the October election as a cohesive group began to break up in 1976 over the UUP-SDLP talks after the failure of the Convention and finally collapsed in 1977 over the UUAC stoppage. The increasing confidence of the UUP over its performance at Westminster, the reabsorption of Craig's VUP and its increasing estrangement from the DUP led to its early statement that it would be fighting all 12 seats and would not be taking part in electoral pacts.

5. Paisley made the first move in February 1978 offering to withhold candidates from 6 constituencies if they were given a free-run in E.Belfast and Armagh. This was firmly rejected by West, who caused some bitterness by revealing the contents of the offer. On 6 March 1978, West failed to turn up to a joint meeting of the DUP and UUUP convened in Lisburn to discuss electoral tactics. Relations grew sour enough for Paisley to threaten at his conference in early June to fight all 12 seats.

6. In August 1978, Jim Guy Secretary of the Apprentice Boys in Derry made his first appeal for unionist unity, and this was followed by a joint appeal from 4 Lisburn councillors - Ald William Belshaw and Cllr Ivan Davis of the DUP and Cllrs Jim Dillon and Ronnie Campbell of the UUP. Talks in both locations were arranged - in Lisburn involving the UUP/DUP/UUUP and in Londonderry the UUP/UUUP/UPNI/UDP, Paisley refusing to have anything to do with the latter because of the participation of UPNI. In the event, the Lisburn talks which concentrated more on the possibilities of an electoral arrangement collapsed quite quickly whereas the Londonderry talks, more concerned with policy issues, are still continuing. At no stage did Harry West show any particular sign of coming to terms with Baird or Paisley; and this came through very clearly at the UUP conference in Enniskillen in October 1978 when delegation took a particularly anti-DUP line, possibly because of the DUP's part in the Londonderry disturbances but also because of the growing antagonism between the 2 parties. Harry West instead appealed for fringe unionist groups to return to the traditional unionist party fold.

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7. The declaration of the election after the Government's defeat in the no-confidence vote on 28 March 1979 brought another flurry as the Apprentice Boys made another appeal to the parties to avoid a split unionist vote, the key constituencies being S.Down, mid-Ulster E.Belfast, Armagh and Fermanagh/S.Tyrone. No agreement was reached at the meeting held in Londonderry between West, Paisley and Baird, although it was rumoured that Baird had offered to pull out of E.Belfast and to withdraw Cecil Harvey in S.Down if Dunlop and he were given a free run in mid-Ulster/Fermanagh and S.Tyrone. Again West took a firm line and when Baird did transfer to Fermanagh and S.Tyrone, Ferguson was duly selected as a UUP candidate.

8. In the event, despite final appeals in April 1979 from the 4 Lisburn councillors and from Alistair Black, the UUUP's Lurgan mentor, the hoped-for agreement did not emerge. The only concession

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by the UUP was to withdraw Turner from mid-Ulster to give Dunlop a clear run. On the other side, the DUP and the UUUP did agree to support each other's candidates, and Baird withdrew Cecil Harvey from S.Down to give Powell a clear sight of election.

9. The DUP-UUP antagonism remained firm with Paisley fielding 4 candidates which could hurt the UUP - Calvert against McCusker in Armagh, Robinson against Craig in E.Belfast, McQuade against Walker in N.Belfast and Dickson against Passmore in W.Belfast. Moreover Paisley offered DUP support to Baird in Fermanagh and S.Tyrone and to Kilfedder in N.Down. The only UUP constituencies therefore which the DUP did not challenge were Molyneaux' in S.Antrim, Bradford's in S.Belfast and Ross's in Londonderry, the first probably because Molyneaux's majority is unassailable, the second because the DUP has no particular strength in the middle-class areas of S.Belfast and the third possibly also because the DUP is not strong enough in the area.

10. The main themes of the campaign have tended to concentrate on law and order and socio-economic issues, although the stark constitutional divide has never been far from the surface. Candidates from Belfast in particular have reported a degree of apathy that they have found difficult to counter.

Alan Huckle

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Division 3(B)
3 May 1979
3B/15320/MR

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