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① Mr Bell
② POL
26/5

cc: PS/Secretary of State (B and L) - M
PS/Ministers (B and L) - M
PS/PUS (B and L) - M
PS/Mr Bell ✓
Mr Blelloch
Mr Marshall (L) - M
Mr Moriarty (L) - M
Mr Ranson
Mr Burns (L) - M
Mr Buxton
Mr Harrington (L) - M
Mr Chesterton (L) - M
Mr Smartt

Mr Gilliland

Mr Wyatt

NORTHERN IRELAND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS: MAY 1981

1. This was an election in which the fights between parties on the same side of the sectarian divide were more important than the Unionists v Nationalists struggle. On the Unionist side Mr Paisley's attempts to stir up fears over the Anglo-Irish talks were the main issue; on the Nationalist side, the hunger strike. Its most significant result is the success of the DUP, which doubled its total of seats and on some estimates emerged as the largest party in terms of 1st preference votes. Even though the UUP retains marginally more seats, the result is a traumatic one for Molyneaux's party and, like the results of the 1979 European Elections (when Paisley got 29.8% of first preferences against 21.9% for the two UUP candidates), suggests that the DUP is effectively replacing the UUP as the majority Unionist grouping.

2. On the Nationalist side SDLP support held up well and the party is pleased to have seen off the challenge of the Irish Independence Party in an election where that party was well-placed to make a breakthrough. Although it lost 10 seats overall and did badly in Belfast, the SDLP gained absolute control of two local councils (Derry and Newry/Mourne) for the first time in its history.

3. The heaviest losers in the elections were Alliance - who lost half their seats - and the smaller parties: The Workers Party/Republican Clubs, UPNI, etc. The feuding between parties on the same side of the sectarian divide brought out the voters in considerable numbers - at 64.1%, valid turnout was nearly 10% up on 1977 - and the consequent rise in the quota (the votes required for a candidate to be certain of election) often meant that the middle-ground parties lost seats although their candidates' votes were not significantly down on 1977.

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4. As a result of the ambiguous party designations of some Unionist candidates there is dispute over the central issue of 1st preference totals: it will not be clear until the official returns are available from the Chief Electoral Officer in some weeks' time whether the DUP in fact succeeded in surpassing the UUP. The figures below should therefore be treated as provisional; however, there is no doubt that the two parties ran very close and that the DUP more than doubled its 1977 share of the vote.

5. The results compared with 1977, were:

	1977		1981	
	% 1st prefs	Seats	% 1st prefs [estimate]	Seats
DUP	12.7	74	26.57	142
UUP	29.6	178	26.56	151
SDLP	20.6	113	17.6	104
IIP	-	-	3.9	21
Alliance	14.4	70	8.9	38
WPRC	2.6	6	1.7	3
PD/IRSP	-	-	1.3	4
UPUP	-	-	1.3	4
UUUP	3.2	12	1.4	4
UPNI	2.4	6	1.1	2
NILP	0.8	1	0.7	1
NUPRG	-	-	0.45	1
Others	8.3	44	8.8	51
		<u>526</u>		<u>526</u>

[Note: percentages do not sum to 100% as some minor candidates are excluded.]

6. The make-up of the new Belfast City Council shows a considerable surge in DUP support in the city associated with the decline of UUP and Alliance, while the successes of the PD and IRSP candidates (who stood exclusively on a pro-hunger strike platform) damaged WPRC (and moderates like Gerry Fitt) as much as the SDLP:

Belfast City Council

	<u>1977</u>	<u>1981</u>
DUP	7	15
UUP	15	13
Alliance	13	7
SDLP	8	6
WPRC	3	--
UPNI	2	1
PUP	--	1
Ind (Unionist)	2	1
Ind (Nationalist)	1	1
NUPRG	--	1
PD/IRSP	--	4
Socialist	--	1

A worrying feature of the new City Council is the number of members with paramilitary backgrounds: the 4 PD/IRSP members and the independent Nationalist are all at least fellow-travellers of PIRA or the INLA while on the other side the Progressive Unionist and NUPRG members are well known to have links with the UVF and UDA respectively. The situation in Londonderry is somewhat different: although the DUP replaced the UUP as the largest Unionist grouping, and Alliance lost all their seats, the SDLP decisively defeated the challenge of the IIP and gained an absolute majority on the Council.

7. Some of the political consequences of these elections are reasonably clear:

- (i) Molyneaux's leadership of the UUP will come under close scrutiny and he could well be replaced by either McCusker or (more probably) John Taylor. This would be an important choice for the party: McCusker would carry the fight to Paisley, while Taylor would seek to make peace with him and tacitly accept DUP pre-eminence.
- (ii) The Provos and their supporters have been given a major fillip.

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- (iii) The atmosphere in councils where the DUP have made gains (in particular Belfast) will become more rancorous.
- (iv) The prospects for any new political initiative on traditional lines (ie acceptable role for the minority/no repercussions on constitutional status) have become much bleaker with the sudden increase in polarisation. A key question is what use Paisley will make of his enhanced position; past form does not inspire much confidence that he will put it to constructive use.

Blatherwick

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