

PAB/848/RE

Mr Wyatt

cc: PS/S of S (I&B) (M)  
 PS/Lord Gowrie (I&B)(M)  
 PS/PUS (I&B) (M)  
 PS/Mr Bell ✓  
 Mr Blelloch  
 Mr Marshall (M)  
 Mr Chesterton (M)  
 Mr Harrington (M)  
 Miss MacGlashan  
 Mr Evers, RID, FCO (M)  
 Mr Tatham, Dublin (M)

SDLP AND THE SOUTH ARMAGH BY-ELECTION

1. The by-election in South Armagh on 30 September - covering the villages of Crossmaglen, Forkhill and Camlough - resulted in an easy win for James McCreesh, father of dead hunger striker Raymond McCreesh, in a straight fight with the SDLP candidate (and former SDLP councillor) Jack McMahon. In a 65% turnout McCreesh polled 3,830 votes against McMahon's 2,017.
2. Given the strongly Republican tradition of S Armagh and the emotional appeal projected by McCreesh's candidature, the result came as no great surprise. In public, the SDLP have sought to suggest that their defeat is of no great significance. Privately, however, they are concerned. While Republicans have traditionally abstained from elections, PSF have recently acknowledged that only through elections can they hope to smash the SDLP; in the by-election Republicans were urged to use their votes against the SDLP candidate. The SDLP fear that the PSF, baffled by the hunger strike stalemate and encouraged by the gains anti-SDLP Republicans made in the May local elections and in Fermanagh/S Tyrone, may decide to continue down the electoral path, to the SDLP's cost.
3. The by-election was thus an interesting element in the current struggle between the SDLP and the anti-H-Block camp, a struggle which is in turn reflected in political arguments within the SDLP. It is perhaps worth drawing the strands together.
4. Several leading members of the SDLP (in particular Eddie McGrady, the Chief Whip, and Austin Currie), while acknowledging the great pressure of opinion during the early summer in favour of the hunger

strikers and their supporters, were dismayed at the Party's failure to contest the Fermanagh/S Tyrone by-elections and at the apparently ambiguous public stand taken by Hume until last month on the H-Block issue. They were concerned at the apparent growth of Republican fervour among party members. They believed that the Party needed sharply to define its identity against the PD/IIP/H-Blocker bandwagon and to run other political issues to outflank the H-Block question; and that a series of strategic retreats on the electoral front, while individually justifiable, were unlikely together to lead to victory.

5. Hume's own position on all this has been hard to define; he has played his cards close to his chest. He was certainly afraid earlier in the summer that under the stress of the hunger strike his party might break up or lose out to the greener parties entirely. It is likely that he shared the "moderates'" fears but waited to risk a move until he was surer of his ground. Dissent in the SDLP came to a head following Carron's electoral victory in late August. It coincided with a growth in anti-PIRA feeling among the Catholic community and an increasing conviction that the hunger strike was a cynical, pointless, immoral campaign. The Catholic Church made its condemnation of the hunger strike louder and clearer and gave Hume cover.

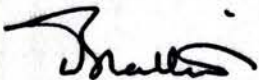
6. At the party meeting in Donegal on the weekend of 20-21 September the SDLP appear to have taken a number of decisions designed to take the initiative from the H-blockers (we have heard of a proposal for majority rule with strong North/South links and safeguards for the minority, for example). But the first "policy line" to be announced by Hume, on 21 September, was a straight attack on the H-Block movement in which he (correctly) asserted that PIRA and INLA were constituent parts of the NHAC.

7. The Provisionals responded by leaking and then publishing on 26 September details of "secret talks" between PIRA and Hume, Seamus Mallon (his deputy leader) and John McEvoy (Chairman of Newry/Mourne District Council). They aimed not only to tarnish the SDLP's reputation as a "respectable" party and cast doubts on Hume's personal credibility but (more important) to embarrass Hume in the eyes of his fiercely anti-Provo colleagues (eg Currie, O'Hanlon) and drive new wedges between the "green" and the "moderate" wings of the party.

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Hume has since replied by attacking the Provos again; and the Provos have in turn responded. They will be encouraged by the result of the by-election, which will doubtless be adduced by those Provos in favour of following the political (as well as the violent) path as evidence that they can clobber the SDLP through the ballot box.

8. My guess is that Hume has judged his timing right and ~~that~~ his party will stick together - barring further major surges of emotion on the hunger strike issue. Their problem is to show Catholics that politicians can produce results in a Province where local politics do not operate. It is in our interest to encourage and help them, not least because they are the only party in sight which can draw Catholic support away from the terrorists.



D E S BLATHERWICK  
Political Affairs Division  
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