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Mr Merifield

GENERAL ELECTION: NORTHERN IRISH PARTIES

I attach the second PAB paper on the electoral prospects of the main Northern Irish parties. The piece, which deals with the SDLP, should be read in conjunction with our earlier paper on Sinn Fein.

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THE GENERAL ELECTION: SDLP ELECTORAL PROSPECTS

This paper describes the battle facing the SDLP in the forthcoming election; looks at the issues on which they will base their campaign; examines their chances of success in the six key nationalist seats and attempts to provide a benchmark against which their performance can be judged.

Background

2. At both of the general elections held in 1974, the SDLP polled well over 150,000 votes and earned themselves more than 80% of the nationalist vote. A similar performance was achieved in the Convention elections of 1975. Four years later in 1979, the SDLP were opposed at the general election by the Irish Independence Party - which fought 4 of the 12 constituencies - and by the Independent Nationalist, Frank Maguire, in Fermanagh/South Tyrone. Their total vote fell to 126,000 but, with the support of nearly three-quarters of the nationalist electorate, they still retained their position as the major representatives of the minority community.

3. The District Council elections of 1981, fought in the highly charged atmosphere generated by the hunger-strike, saw a further decline in SDLP support. They polled only 115,000 votes while the combined nationalist opposition (including the IIP, Peoples Democracy, IRSP and various Anti H-Block candidates) amassed over 50,000 and reduced the SDLP's share of the nationalist vote to only 70%. This trend continued at last year's Assembly elections when, for the first time, the SDLP faced a united and determined challenge from Sinn Fein which contested 7 of the 12 constituencies. The SDLP ended up with less than two-thirds of the nationalist vote and were out-pollled in both West Belfast and Fermanagh. The morale of the party, which had already been shaken by the victories of Bobby Sands and Owen Carron in successive by-elections in Fermanagh/South Tyrone, was now seriously dented and bitter recriminations followed. Most people in the SDLP chose to lay the blame for their dwindling support at the Government's door, citing what they saw as the insensitive handling of the hunger-strike, the deliberate cooling of relations with Dublin and the establishment, against their advice, of an Assembly without guaranteed power-sharing as reasons for their poor showing at the polls. Others realised that their failure to

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oppose Bobby Sands and Owen Carron and their neglect of constituency work had been contributory factors. There were also complaints about electoral abuse on an unprecedented scale, especially in West Belfast and Londonderry. Whatever the reasons for their decline, it was apparent to most people in the Party that they had not only failed to bring out their own supporters but, in a number of key areas, they had lost votes to Sinn Fein. Some were prepared to admit that their inability to attract young, first-time voters had been crucial: everyone accepted that the next general election, whenever it came, would be vital to the survival of the Party as a credible political force.

PREPARATION FOR THE ELECTIONS

4. At their annual conference earlier this year, the SDLP took two important decisions which are likely to have a bearing on the outcome of the election. First, they agreed to field candidates in every one of the 17 new constituencies in an effort to maximise their support. Accepting that the challenge from Sinn Fein would make it difficult to win seats, they decided to concentrate on securing a clear majority of the nationalist vote. Despite Danny Morrison's offer of an electoral pact, the SDLP have held firm and, although they have yet to select all their candidates, there are no signs that they will go back on their conference decision. Second, the SDLP committed themselves to the idea of a 'nationalist conference' which has since led to the establishment of the New Ireland Forum. This ensured that the SDLP would, at least, have some sort of policy on which to fight the election. The first meeting of the Forum, which is scheduled to take place only a few days before the election, will be a major element in the Party's election propaganda.

ELECTORAL PROSPECTS

5. The SDLP are by no means out of the woods. The election has come too soon for them to do much about their shaky constituency organisation and they are understood to be short of funds. The Forum has so far failed to make a major impact and John Hume will find it hard to convince the electorate that a "talking shop" in Dublin will make any sort of contribution to Northern Ireland's current difficulties. By comparison with the Sinn Fein team, the SDLP candidates seem rather middle-class, middle-aged and out of touch with the community. Men like Joe Hendron will have to fit in their electioneering with busy professional commitments, a difficulty which is hardly faced by their opponents Sinn Fein. It is hard to escape the feeling that the SDLP are fighting a defensive campaign which is not going to capture the headlines: in effect, they are relying heavily

on the loyalty of their traditional support and are unlikely to win many new converts. Their major consolation is that they are far more united than at the time of the Assembly elections when the clear divisions within the Party cannot have helped their cause.

KEY CONSTITUENCIES

6. With the revised constituency boundaries there are now six seats with a potential majority of nationalist voters, the two urban constituencies of West Belfast and Foyle and the four border constituencies of South Down, Newry/Armagh, Fermanagh/South Tyrone and Mid Ulster. It is in these seats that the real battle between the SDLP and Sinn Fein will be fought. In West Belfast, the SDLP face an uphill battle if they are to prevent Gerry Adams from winning for Sinn Fein. At the Assembly elections, Adams and his running-mate polled nearly 2,000 more votes than their SDLP rivals. Sinn Fein can be expected to put considerable effort into winning this seat and it is hard to imagine the SDLP candidate, Joe Hendron, being able to close the gap. In Foyle, on the other hand, John Hume looks comfortably placed and it will take a considerable increase in Sinn Fein support to stop him from capturing the seat.

7. In the remaining nationalist seats, SDLP prospects depend almost entirely on the tactics adopted by the two main Unionist parties. In Mid Ulster, for example, an agreed unionist candidate would almost certainly win because the nationalist vote can be expected to divide more or less equally between the SDLP and Sinn Fein. In both Newry/Armagh and South Down, agreed unionists should be able to force the SDLP into second place while in Fermanagh/South Tyrone it is Sinn Fein who would suffer from a deal between the Official Unionists and the DUP. Assuming that the unionists do not split their vote, the SDLP task in Fermanagh/South Tyrone will be to secure the three or four thousand votes required to defeat the sitting MP, Owen Carron. (In the Assembly elections, only a small proportion of the SDLP vote transferred to Sinn Fein in this constituency, suggesting that their support is firm enough to ruin Carron's chances of re-election.)

8. Although, unionist tactics remain difficult to predict, it is likely that they will avoid splitting their vote in most, if not all of these constituencies. However, if local deals are not arranged, the SDLP would have a good chance of taking both South Down and Newry/Armagh while Sinn Fein would be the likely winners in Fermanagh/South Tyrone. Mid Ulster would be a marginal between the SDLP, Sinn Fein and the DUP.

9. In three constituencies, East Antrim, North Down and Strangford, the SDLP will be unopposed by Sinn Fein and will hope to pick up a few hundred votes. Elsewhere, the two parties will be fighting each other, not with any prospect of victory, but simply to bolster the size of their overall vote.

Summary

10. The general election will be a vital test for the SDLP. They are fighting every constituency in an effort to maximise their support and their aim must be to secure at least 60% of the nationalist vote. Their greatest fear is that the trend of recent elections will continue and that Sinn Fein will replace them as the largest nationalist party. Such a result could have dire consequences for the future of the SDLP. Their major electoral platform will be the Forum which they will present as the peaceful, nationalist alternative to Sinn Fein. It may however be difficult to persuade the electorate that this particular initiative offers much hope for the future. Despite the weakness of their local organisation, they are better prepared and more united than they were at the Assembly elections last year but, in the end, the party's fortunes will probably depend on the loyalty of their traditional support. Unless there is a dramatic slump in their vote, the SDLP should win Foyle: their chances elsewhere will be determined by the tactics of the two main unionist parties. If the DUP and UUP manage to reach agreement in Fermanagh, the SDLP will be hoping to win enough votes to unseat Owen Carron.