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FCO GREYBAND PAPER: THE EXTREME REPUBLICAN VOTE

*W* I attach a first try at a new version of this FCO Greyband paper, up-dated to take account of the district council elections. I am sure it could be improved with the help of colleagues who have an interest in this topic and I should be grateful if copy addressees would send any comments they have direct to you.

) none sent 7.1.

*S Hewitt*

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## NORTHERN IRELAND: THE SINN FEIN VOTE

1. The significance of electoral support for Sinn Fein has been greatly exaggerated by the media. It represents a strand of militant republicanism which has long been present. Their share of the vote in the 1985 Council elections was less than that achieved in the two previous elections held in Northern Ireland. Once again, Sinn Fein was clearly outpolled by the SDLP which won nearly twice as many seats. There is no evidence of a swing to extremism within the Roman Catholic community.

### Background

2. The existence of support for hardline republicanism has been a feature of Northern Ireland politics for a long time. In the UK general election of 1955, for example, Sinn Fein polled more than 150,000 votes and had members elected in two constituencies, Fermanagh/South Tyrone and Mid-Ulster. But the traditional abstentionism and physical-force policies of the IRA has meant that support for the republican point of view has not always been registered at the polls. Indeed, it was a dispute about participation in elections which led, in January 1970, to the break-up of the republican movement into Provisional and Official wings with Provisional Sinn Fein - the forerunner to today's party - refusing to contest elections and throwing their weight instead behind the terrorist campaign of the Provisional IRA. Thus, whilst support for republicanism undoubtedly existed throughout the 1970s it is only in the last few years that it has been recorded at the polls.

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## The Dual Strategy

3. Towards the end of the 1970s, as they sought to harness popular support for causes which complemented the terrorism of the Provisional IRA, Sinn Fein backed a number of candidates running in other colours. In 1979 Bernadette McAliskey (nee Devlin) got 5.9 per cent of the first preference votes in the elections to the European Parliament, when she ran with Sinn Fein support and the promise that should would raise the 'H block' protest in the European Parliament. 'H block' candidates with Sinn Fein support won 7.7 per cent of the first preference votes cast in the 1981 local government elections, and 1981 also saw successive by-election victories for the 'H block' parliamentary candidates, Bobby Sands and Owen Carron, in Fermanagh/South Tyrone (it was the same Carron who topped the poll there for Sinn Fein in the 1982 Assembly elections). Encouraged by these election successes, Sinn Fein at last decided to run under its own colours for the first time. The strategy was made acceptable to those members of Sinn Fein who still opposed the idea of even conditional participation in the electoral process by a continuing emphasis on the primary importance of the Provisional IRA's terrorist campaign. Spokesmen for Sinn Fein have made it clear that all their candidates must give unambiguous support for the Provisional IRA. In 1981, Sinn Fein's publicity director Danny Morrison told the annual conference that the republican movement would go forward with 'the ballot paper in one hand and the Armalite in the other'.

## Electoral Record

4. Since 1982, Sinn Fein has contested four elections in Northern Ireland as follows:

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<u>Date</u>	<u>Election</u>	<u>Votes</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
1982	Assembly	64,191	10.1
1983	UK General Election	102,601	13.4
1984	European	91,476	13.3
1985	District Council		11.8

From the above table it can be seen that, the district council elections of 1985 actually represented a set-back for Sinn Fein with its percentage share of the vote falling by two points. One possible explanation for this fall in support was the introduction of new legislation aimed at preventing personation or vote-stealing which had been widely practised by Sinn Fein at previous elections. The 1985 results therefore represent a much more realistic measure of support for Sinn Fein than previous figures.

5. Many observers have drawn the inference from the size of the Sinn Fein vote in recent elections that there has been a shift towards extremism within the Roman Catholic community. This is not borne out by the facts. Despite claims by Gerry Adams that Sinn Fein would quickly become the main representatives of the Catholic community, a clear majority of Catholics continue to vote for the main constitutional nationalist party, the SDLP. Since Sinn Fein began contesting elections, support for the SDLP has remained steady at around 18-20 per cent as the following table shows:-

<u>Date</u>	<u>Election</u>	<u>Votes</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
1982	Assembly	118,891	18.8
1983	UK General Election	137,012	17.9
1984	European	151,399	22.0
1985	District Council		17.8

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The SDLP's electoral performance in 1985 was therefore consistent with its previous record. The SDLP won 102 seats on the district councils compared with only 59 for Sinn Fein. There is no evidence that moderate nationalists committed to constitutional politics have switched their allegiance to the party which endorses terrorism. Sinn Fein has mobilised the latent republican vote; it has not eroded the SDLP vote.

## Use of Violence

6. Although Sinn Fein supports the use of violence to achieve their political ends, it would be a mistake to interpret the Sinn Fein vote solely as a vote for terrorism. During the last election the Provisional IRA maintained a low profile and Sinn Fein candidates stressed social and economic issues as well as their basic political philosophy of using physical force to secure 'British withdrawal'. To some extent, support for Sinn Fein arises from the frustration felt by many members of the minority community over the difficulty of achieving internal political developments which would allow them to play a part in the administration of the Province. As Lord Gowrie, a former Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office said in October 1982:

'Sinn Fein and what it stands for has been a feature of the political landscape throughout this century. there is nothing new, nothing in current circumstances particularly surprising, that it commands a core of support. That support has always been there although it has not always turned out to vote in elections. And that support will not wither until it feels free to express the cultural identity from which it springs. Our job is to see that that identity can pursue legitimate politics in legitimate ways'.

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Proscription

7. Following the district council elections, calls from Unionist politicians for the proscription of Sinn Fein have increased. Whilst the Government has made clear its total abhorrence of Sinn Fein's continuing support for violence, it does not believe it would be right to proscribe an organisation on account of the views it expresses; in a democratic society such proscription should only be used against organisations which are actively and primarily involved in the commission of terrorist acts. If Sinn Fein had been proscribed or were prevented from taking part in elections the degree of support for them in the community would have been just the same and would probably have been greatly exaggerated by its supporters. It is better to have that out in the open and to know that nearly 90% of those who voted oppose and condemn the use of violence for political ends. The Government is taking every step within the law to make its position on terrorism absolutely clear. In particular, so long as Sinn Fein continues to support the activities of the Provisional IRA there can be no question of Government Ministers meeting or talking to representatives of the party.

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