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-6 MAY 1992
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C G MACCABE
POLITICAL AFFAIRS DIVISION
6 MAY 1992

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- cc Mr Alston - B
- Mr Bell (B&L) - B
- Mr Watkins - B
- Mr D A Hill - B
- Mr D J R Hill (B&L) - B
- Mr Petch - B
- Mr Jardine PPRU
- Mr McConnell MBW - B
- Mr Fittall (Personal) - B

Mr Thomas (B&L) - B

RESEARCH INTO WEST BELFAST ELECTION RESULT

I attach a draft submission to PS/Secretary of State analysing the West Belfast election result in greater detail than hitherto and offering advice on the value of opinion polling in that constituency. The main body of the submission deals with West Belfast, and inevitably makes a number of fine judgments. I should welcome any comments/additions to this by Wednesday, 13 May. The part dealing with opinion polling is included as an Annex, and I should be particularly grateful for any comments Mr Jardine may have on it.

2. Mr Fittall suggested to Mr May that the Secretary of State perhaps envisaged a plan of action for West Belfast to demonstrate the advantages of having an MP who takes his seat and to emphasise to those who changed their voting intentions that they made the right decision. The attached submission suggests there were far fewer converts to the SDLP cause than might be supposed, but the Secretary of State may still wish to have a range of options put before him. There are, however, dangers in seeking to move beyond the MBW and TSN programmes already in place and, provided you and copy recipients are content, I suggest this area might most usefully be left for further exploration at any meeting the Secretary of State may wish to convene in the light of the submission.

(SIGNED)

C G MACCABE
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RG/14106/8019

C O N F I D E N T I A L

FROM: C G MACCABE
POLITICAL AFFAIRS DIVISION
MAY 1992

PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B

cc PS/Mr Mates (B&L) - B
PS/Mr Atkins (DOE, DED &L) -B
PS/Mr Hanley (B&L) - B
PS/Lord Arran (B&L) - B
PS/PUS (B&L) - B
PS/Mr Fell - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr Ledlie - B
Mr Alston - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr Steele - B
Mr Watkins - B
Mr Wood (B&L) - B
Mr D J R Hill - B
Mr Cooke - B
Mr D A Hill - B
Mr Petch - B
Mr Jardine, PPRU

RESEARCH INTO WEST BELFAST ELECTION RESULT

Your notes of 22 and 24 April requested detailed analysis of the West Belfast General Election result. Advice on the commissioning of further research into the factors which contributed to it is attached at Annex A. As statistical background I attach, at Annex B, the results from the constituency in the past three General Elections. The 1983 result is important because (as the figures show) Gerry Fitt received considerable Protestant support during his time as an MP, due to his obvious willingness to represent all his constituents.

Cross-community voting

2. Despite the reduction in the electorate in the overwhelmingly Protestant wards of the Shankill (9.7% down since 1987), it is not possible to explain the 2,800 fall in the Unionist candidate's vote by this alone. All sides agree a considerable number of Protestants voted for Dr Hendron, but figures vary according to the perspective from which the commentator views the election. Both the Unionists

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and Sinn Fein inflate the number claiming that between 3,000 and 3,500 Protestant votes went to Hendron, whilst the SDLP seek to minimise the effect talking about figures from 1,100 (John Hume) to 2,600+ (Brian Feeney - Belfast City Councillor). It is never going to be possible to offer a definitive answer, but our analysis suggests at least 2,000 Unionists voted for Hendron.

3. Dr Hendron secured Protestant votes for two main reasons. First, and most important, because Gerry Adams' continuation as MP brought disrepute upon the whole constituency. The Protestants voting for Hendron did so not because of any sympathy with SDLP policies (as is shown by their unwillingness to support Hendron in 1987) but because they were anxious to remove Adams and did not believe Hendron could do it without their help. Secondly, Hendron made gestures in the direction of the Protestant community conducting a token canvass in the Protestant Highfield area and leafletting the whole constituency. Additionally, a small number of influential figures on the Shankill were prepared to encourage people to vote for Hendron this time to get rid of Adams. The most notable (some would say notorious) was Alderman Elizabeth Seawright.

*Some
voted a
cheap
- to help*

notorious

4. The decision of Protestant voters to come out in such numbers for Dr Hendron surprised many people. The two Unionist leaders had been firm in their opposition to any such move, and had both canvassed in the constituency. Some within both Unionist parties would have been happier to see Adams, as an abstentionist MP and physical embodiment of the support for the 'unacceptable face of Nationalism' within the Catholic community, elected rather than a fourth MP for the SDLP who might gain increased credibility as a consequence. The Ulster Democratic Party (UDP), a tiny Unionist party with close UDA links, advocated that Loyalists in West Belfast should vote for Hendron (hence Sinn Fein leaflets arguing Hendron was the UDA candidate and, since the election, graffiti on the SDLP Andersonstown office to that effect,) and that Unionists should not stand a candidate. But this call is not thought to have had any significant effect on the result. Ironically, the decision of the Unionist parties to stand a candidate may have made it easier for Protestants to vote for Hendron as they could go to the polls with everyone assuming they would vote UUP, and in private make their own decision.

*Look at
Sinn Fein
UUP in
WB as
Protestant
voters*

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5. Dr Hendron cannot expect continued support from the Protestant community unless he, like Fitt, is able to demonstrate a willingness to work hard on constituency matters while avoiding statements, for example about the security situation, that might alienate that community. This is a particularly difficult path for Hendron to tread, as he is conscious of the need to be firm and active on security issues, given the fact that Sinn Fein will take every opportunity to criticise him on this front if he appears at all soft. The recent confrontation during a Sinn Fein-inspired demonstration on the Springfield Road, following the murder of Philomena Hanna, shows just what he is up against.

Workers' Party support

6. Before going on to consider the relative performances of Sinn Fein and the SDLP it is necessary to mention the other major change in the electoral result this time compared with 1987. This was the collapse of the Workers' Party vote because of the internal difficulties the Party faced shortly before the election. The Party's loss of over 1,000 votes is extremely significant in terms of explaining the overall West Belfast result; the SDLP believe they gained the majority of these votes and, even allowing for some abstentions this time around, 5-600 votes could well have been added to the SDLP total.

Sinn Fein

7. Sinn Fein actually did better in West Belfast in this election than ever before when one looks at their share of the poll. Adams lost only 36 votes although the electorate fell by over 4,000. These are sobering statistics. They reflect the great effort Sinn Fein put in to retain the seat, and the large body of support they continue to have in the area. Their claim to have won the Nationalist battle has some validity but, despite the pure mathematics of the poll, the loss of the seat is undoubtedly a big blow.

8. There was great concern on the part of the SDLP that Sinn Fein would undertake extensive electoral fraud, which, given the likely closeness of the two Parties' votes, might well have influenced the

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result. Dr Hendron and his agent were in constant contact with the Chief Electoral Officer and wrote to Ministers suggesting, in particular, ways of preventing personation by means of forged medical cards. The medical card is one of the 'specified documents' which must be produced before an elector is issued with a vote. Although it is possible to forge this card it has remained on the list because it is the only document available to all electors. During the poll Hendron even asked for polling stations to be closed because of the threat of personation.

9. In the 1987 General Election the Chief Electoral Officer believed that there were around 5-600 successful instances of personation using forged medical cards. He is not yet prepared to make any estimate this year, and is looking carefully at the performance of the system. But there is no reason to believe that there was not successful fraud on a similar scale. Twelve forgeries were positively identified during the poll and two arrests were made for personation in West Belfast, in both cases the challenges being made by Workers' Party election agents. The continued existence of voting fraud also points to the necessity to consider further the arrangements to prevent such fraud (in particular the specified documents system and postal votes) at future General Elections and the forthcoming local elections, and at possible Assembly elections where many seats would be finely balanced under the single transferable vote system.

*SF how
who
with
to how*

10. There is also clear evidence of the intimidatory nature of the Sinn Fein presence outside polling stations. We have heard convincing descriptions of groups of burly 'canvassers' who had to be negotiated by prospective voters at several stations. And on a tour of the constituency on polling day I saw for myself how menacing such groups can be. However, there was also a strong security forces presence at such stations and while, paradoxically, this could have worked to Sinn Fein's advantage, it is unlikely that many prospective SDLP voters were so afraid of the Sinn Fein supporters that they failed to cast their vote.

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11. Sinn Fein found it difficult to counter the SDLP arguments about the need for an MP who would represent his constituents at Westminster, that Sinn Fein does not attract jobs as SDLP MPs have done in their constituencies, not least via links with the United States, and that PIRA's actions resulted in the loss of jobs. This latter economic argument is clearly germane to the Secretary of State's question regarding the impact of Making Belfast Work (MBW) on voting intentions. It is not possible to ascribe changes in voting patterns to one initiative such as this, mainly because in the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland there is effectively no opportunity for the party introducing the initiative to benefit from it at the ballot box.

12. However, MBW has had an effect on those living in the West Belfast constituency. It has signalled the Government's determination to ameliorate the social and economic deprivation existing there and has demonstrated in some areas what can be achieved. It may therefore have brought home to the Unionist community in particular the need for a 'champion' to represent West Belfast internationally. ^{recent / on hand} MBW has had an effect on the Catholic community too but it is difficult to gauge from recent election results whether this has affected voting intentions. But we assess that Sinn Fein will not suffer the reverses that improved economic conditions should bring whilst there remains considerable hardship and unemployment in the constituency. If Dr Hendron could create links with the US as the other SDLP MPs have, and bring work to West Belfast, this would help his cause immensely in both communities, though the location of any jobs would be watched very closely.

SDLP

13. Given the scale of the estimated Unionist vote for Dr Hendron and the collapsed Workers' Party vote going to the SDLP, the result was, in one sense at least, not a great success for them. If they received say, 2,000, Unionist votes and say 500 from the Workers' Party then they would only have mobilized an extra 270 'new' votes in comparison with the 1987 figure.

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14. However, the falling population means the SDLP did marginally better than suggested above, not least because the movement of Catholics away from West Belfast mainly involves the middle class who find the environs of South Belfast more congenial. These people would tend to be predominantly SDLP voters. It may be no coincidence in this regard that the South Belfast SDLP vote rose by 2,000 over 1987 (although the Party's vote also rose by similar amounts in North Belfast, Lagan Valley and Upper Bann.)

15. Through solid, high-profile, constituency work, the SDLP will be hoping Dr Hendron can make the seat safe next time as Eddie McGrady and Seamus Mallon have done in their constituencies this time. This ought to be feasible as Hendron has plenty of Nationalists left to persuade.

Conclusion

16. The overall conclusion is that the SDLP failed to make any inroads into the Sinn Fein vote in West Belfast, or to improve substantially their vote-winning capacity among those who had not previously voted. It is difficult to argue, therefore, that that the SDLP did well in West Belfast or that Government initiatives had any real effect on voting intentions, or indeed that there was a greater 'vote against violence' among the Catholic population in the constituency. The real challenge in analysing the West Belfast result is to explain the reason why Protestants voted for Hendron this time, but not in the 1987 election. There may have been some increased willingness among Protestants to vote SDLP in order to enjoy the full fruits of economic regeneration, especially in terms of inward investment, but the predominant reason appears to have been simply to keep Adams and Sinn Fein out.

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OPINION POLLS

The Secretary of State has sought advice on the usefulness of opinion polls as a research tool in West Belfast.

2. The historic problem with opinion polls in Northern Ireland has been their inaccuracy, because people have generally not been willing to admit to pollsters whom they have never met before that they vote for one of the 'extreme' parties - that is Sinn Fein or the DUP. For example, an Irish News poll of West Belfast opinion published on 6 April forecast as follows:-

SDLP	28.75%	(43.6%)
SF	20.5%	(42.1%)
UUP	16.5%	(11.0%)
WP	3.0%	(1.9%)
Undecided	21.5%	
Non-Voters	9.5%	

whereas the actual proportion of the vote gained by each party is as shown in brackets.

3. Thus whilst one might have expected the poll not to pick up the intention of Unionists to vote SDLP, it demonstrates the tendency mentioned above of understating the Sinn Fein vote. The 'undecided' category merely emphasises what an unsatisfactory medium the opinion poll is in this context.

4. On the other hand, the Sunday Times MORI poll, which Mr Worcester sent to the Secretary of State on 14 April, looked at Northern Ireland as a whole, and came closer to getting the overall vote accurate, although it underestimated the Sinn Fein vote by 3% and the SDLP by 3.5% overall. The Sunday Times poll estimated a 3-4% swing against Adams in West Belfast. Given that that poll for all of Northern Ireland was 1,000, and the one for the Irish News was 955, one might have expected the Irish News poll to be more

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accurate. The basis for the Sunday Times view of the West Belfast poll appears to be based solely on an overall Belfast poll figure. Indeed, so far as one can tell the MORI sample size involved only 50 people in all of Belfast who were going to vote either Sinn Fein or SDLP. Once one disaggregates that to West Belfast the database is so small as to be highly unreliable. If MORI looked at overall figures for Sinn Fein and the SDLP to make their judgement, that is also highly suspect as voting patterns in Belfast are quite different from elsewhere and, as mentioned, above Sinn Fein is always understated (3% out of 10% overall is a bigger loss proportionately than the SDLP's 3.5% out of 23.5% overall).

5. Opinion polls do have some merit in determining preferences and work is done on a continuous basis using the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey (NISAS). In view of the conclusions in paragraph 16 of the submission, any research carried out post-election would need to concentrate on why people voted as they did rather than what made people change their minds. The former, of course, could only apply to Unionists if we really thought that they would admit to pollsters to voting SDLP in the election.

6. In place of NISAS this year, the organisation responsible, Social Community Planning and Research, is conducting an election survey for the UK which may cover the ground the Secretary of State is interested in. Results will, however, not be available for some time. In addition, further work is underway to look more specifically at the attitudes of the community to law and order. The value of opinion polls in an area such as West Belfast does however depend on the willingness of those interviewed to respond truthfully in order to allow an accurate picture to be built up. The danger is if Government bases its policies upon an inaccurate database - although a poll may of course offer some useful indicators even if not entirely accurate.

Conclusion and recommendation

7. The Secretary of State may wish to discuss with officials the concept of an opinion poll to assess voting attitudes in West Belfast, but my recommendation is that insufficient accurate

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information would be gleaned from such an exercise to justify the considerable expense involved.

8. I am returning Mr Worcester's letter and enclosure to you together with a short draft reply (Annex C).

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WEST BELFAST GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS

1992

Elec	55,280		%		% Poll	72.3
Hendron, J (SDLP)	17,415		43.6			
Adams, G (SF)	16,826		42.1			
Cobain, F (UUP)	4,766		11.0			
Lowry, J (WP)	750		1.9			
Kennedy M (NLP)	213		0.5			
SDLP Majority	589					

1987

Elec	59,400		%		% Poll	69.6
Adams, G (SF)	16,862		41.2			
Hendron, J (SDLP)	14,641		35.7			
Millar, F (UUP)	7,646		18.7			
McMahon, M (WP)	1,819		4.4			
SF Majority	2,221					

1983

Elec	59,750		%		% Poll	74.3
Adams, G (SF)	16,379		36.9			
Hendron, J (SDLP)	10,934		24.6			
Fitt, G (Ind)	10,326		23.3			
Passmore, T (UUP)	2,435		5.5			
Haffey, G A (DUP)	2,399		5.4			
McMahon, M (WP)	1,893		4.3			
SF Majority	5,445					

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ANNEX C

DRAFT REPLY FOR SECRETARY OF STATE TO SEND TO MR WORCESTER

R M Worcester Esq
MORI
32 Old Queen Street
London
SW1H 9HP

Thank you for your letter of 14 April enclosing the findings of the survey you conducted on political attitudes in Northern Ireland in the run-up to the General Election. As you said, the survey brings out a number of interesting points, some of which may well bear closer analysis. The question of the information about community attitudes at the disposal of Government is one in which I shall be taking a close interest the coming months.

I am also most grateful for your kind remarks about my appointment. The task ahead is certainly challenging, but I believe the political talks in which we are currently engaged offer a real opportunity for progress towards the stable and prosperous society which Northern Ireland has been denied for so long.

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