



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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SDLP - West Belfast

As anticipated, Joe Hendron has been selected to contest the West Belfast seat at the next Westminster election. His selection was almost unanimous (20 votes to 4), the only other candidate being Cormac Boomer who, as expected, received little support even from within his own Andersonstown Branch.

Of the potentially serious candidates for selection, Alex Attwood indicated at an early stage that he was not a candidate and that Hendron would have the support of his Lenadoon Branch. Alisdair McDonnell is reported to have made some soundings within the party, but once Hume indicated his public support for Hendron, McDonnell appears to have given up any thought of contesting the selection. There was some surprise that Brian Feeney did not enter the contest, given that he had contested the selection on the last occasion. Feeney's decision was clearly based on the fact that Hume had thrown his support to Hendron and Feeney saw little point in contesting the selection in those circumstances. As reported previously, Feeney is particularly bitter regarding Hume's action.

I understand from Hendron, that Feeney has pointedly refused to offer him any congratulations on his selection, and Hendron expects little activity from Feeney (or from Boomer) in the election campaign. Hendron had noted, with some resentment, Feeney's remarks in the Irish News which had made no reference to support for Hendron's candidacy and simply said that he (Feeney) would be keeping his options open "pointing out that he was still young enough to consider being a candidate after the next Westminster election".

The SDLP have set up a strategy committee to oversee the Westminster election - particularly in West Belfast, which is accepted as the only constituency where the party stands any realistic chance of gaining an extra seat. The committee is chaired by the General Secretary, Patsy McGlone, and includes experienced party managers -viz- Pat Brannigan (South Armagh), Hugh Carr (South Down) and Mark Durcan (Derry). Given the chaotic party organisation in West Belfast, it will fall to that Committee to supervise the establishment of the two constituency offices planned for West Belfast. The full-time field officers appointed to these offices will report to the committee and I understand from McGlone that it is the intention to keep these offices out of the hands of the local party Councilors and firmly under the control of the party's strategy committee.

Comment:

The selection of Hendron at this early stage eliminates any uncertainty and, whatever doubts may exist in certain quarters regarding Hendron's political drive and determination, it is clear that, by establishing at least two constituency offices, the party are set to make a determined effort to capture the seat on the next occasion.

In 1987, the margin of victory for Sinn Féin was relatively tight - only 2,221 votes ahead of the SDLP. Attached are the figures for the 1983 and 1987 elections which show the trends in the constituency. There has been no change in the Sinn Féin vote which amounted to about 16,500 on both occasions and the Workers Party vote was constant at 1,800. It is clear that in 1987, Hendron failed to capture a sufficient proportion of Gerry Fitt's vote in the '83 election (Hendron appears to have captured only 35% of that vote) and SDLP fortunes may well have been adversely affected by the drop of about 4,000 votes in the poll, many of whom could well have been former supporters of Fitt.

SDLP strategy for the next election is based on the assumption that the Sinn Féin vote will remain more or less constant at 16-17,000, with SDLP efforts largely devoted to getting out those who failed to vote on the last occasion. Another factor of which Hendron is conscious (though one which is never openly mentioned by party activists) is the possibility of tactical voting by some of the 7,000 loyalists in the Shankill. There is absolutely no chance of a Unionist seat in West Belfast with the result that, in the right circumstances, there might be a real temptation for loyalists to indulge in tactical voting for the SDLP in order to oust Gerry Adams. If this were to occur, even to a marginal degree, it could have a real impact.

Overall, the figures would indicate that the Sinn Féin seat in West Belfast is vulnerable to a determined campaign by the SDLP and current indications are that the party intend to mount such a campaign, and will have funds available to do it from the Lawlor Foundation. Part of their campaign will be to convince people both inside and outside the constituency that they have a real chance of winning. There is a perceptible tendency in journalistic circles to write off the West Belfast constituency as the "Provo Heartland" and to dismiss SDLP efforts as a waste of time (eg: the two major articles in the Irish Times this week). To a considerable extent this perception tends to be shared within the NIO and Patsy McGlone is particularly anxious to overcome this problem and asked for our help in the matter. In particular, he is anxious that as soon as it is up and running, the NIO give the same consideration and attention to correspondence and representations from the West Belfast constituency office as they give to representations from the offices of elected M.P.s, and that they be kept briefed by the NIO on plans and projects (eg: the development of the Mackies site) for the West Belfast area.

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Brendan McMahon
Anglo/Irish Division
15 March 1990

cc A/Sec Gallagher
Counsellors A.I.
Secretariat
Box

BELFAST WEST

June 1983

Jan 1987

Electorate: 59,750

Electorate: 59,400

Valid Poll: 44,363

Valid Poll: 40,968

Turnout: 74.3%

Turnout: 69.5%

<u>Party</u>	<u>Candidate</u>	<u>Votes cast</u>
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PSF	Gerry Adams	16,379
SDLP	Joe Hendron	10,930
Ind	Gerry Fitt	10,326
OUP	T. Passmore	2,435
DUP	G.A. Haffey	2,399
WP	Mary McMahon	1,893

<u>Party</u>	<u>Candidate</u>	<u>Votes Cast</u>
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PSF	Gerry Adams	16,862
SDLP	Joe Hendron	14,641
OUP	Frank Millar	7,646
WP	Mary McMahon	1,819