



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Note

Upper Bann by-election, 17 May, 1990.

1. As expected, David Trimble easily retained the Upper Bann seat for the UUP in the by-election on 17 May. His majority was some 3500 down on that achieved by his predecessor, the late Harold McCusker, in 1987 but he was still a very comfortable 13,849 votes ahead of the second-placed candidate, Brid Rodgers of the SDLP.
2. The results were as follows (1987 figures in brackets).

Electorate	:	66377	(64596)
Valid poll	:	35620	(42625)
% turnout	:	53.66%	(66.4%)

Party votes in
1987

David Trimble (UUP)	:	20547	(26037)
Brid Rodgers (SDLP)	:	6698	(8676)
Sheena Campbell (Sinn Fein)	:	2033	(3126)
Hugh Ross (Ind. Ulster Group)	:	1534	
Tom French (WP)	:	1083	(2004)
Collette Jones (Conservative)	:	1038	
William Ramsey (Alliance)	:	948	(2487)
Gary McMichael (UDP)	:	600	
Peter Doran (Greens)	:	576	
Erskine Holmes (Campaign for Labour)	:	235	
Alistair Dunn (SDP)	:	154	

All except Trimble, Rodgers and Campbell lost their deposits.

UUP

3. While the turnout was well down (16.4%) on 1987, the UUP vote held up well and as a percentage of the valid poll was down only 4.4% on Harold McCusker's rating in 1987. Whether this is a tribute to the quality of Trimble's campaign or the loyalty of the party faithful in Upper Bann is a moot

point; either way the party has some cause for satisfaction at the outcome, particularly as there was concern beforehand about (a) possible apathy among supporters on the basis that the result was a foregone conclusion, (b) the extent to which Harold McCusker's vote was a personal one and might not transfer and (c) the impact which the Conservatives would have.

Conservatives

4. The "story" of the result was undoubtedly the very poor performance of the Conservatives in this their first Westminster election in Northern Ireland. Their campaign was beset by difficulties from the outset. The local Association was only granted Central Office affiliation some 3 weeks before polling day and consequently the party had little or no organisational structure in place in the Constituency by the time the campaign got underway. The candidate, Mrs. Jones, is Welsh and had no previous involvement or experience in politics.
5. There will be question marks also about the nature of the Conservatives' campaign, with high profile appearances in the constituency at various times of leading party figures such as Chairman Kenneth Baker, Environment Minister Chris Patten, MP Sir George Young (a former junior Environment and Health Minister) and NIO Ministers John Cope and Richard Needham. There were also "messages of support" for Mrs. Jones from Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Brooke. In the event, therefore, a vote of 1038 out of a total electorate of 64,956 (1.6%) must be regarded as bordering on humiliation.
6. Commenting to us on Mrs. Jones' result, Brid Rodgers said that all the Northern Ireland candidates were "united in their detestation" of the Tories and how they had run their campaign. She personally had been canvassed by Mrs. Jones and had to enlighten her as to her identity! Mrs. Rodgers'

husband received a postal request for financial assistance from the Tories! She felt that the profile of the NIO Ministers was very "unwise"; she recalled Richard Needham claiming to Seamus Mallon before the election that the Conservatives would achieve 20% of the total poll. She believed that they had now left themselves wide open to the charge that they had "gone before the people and been rejected".

7. Regarding where the Conservatives' votes came from, the evidence suggests that they were largely Alliance. The latter dropped from 2487 in 1987 to 948, a loss of 1539. (Clearly this is a worrying development for Alliance but they will probably seek to put the result down to apathy as much as to defections to the Conservatives).
8. The campaign also highlighted the many incongruities associated with the Conservatives decision to organise in Northern Ireland. Eyebrows were certainly raised, for instance, at the sight of NIO Ministers Richard Needham (particularly) and John Cope launching strongly critical attacks on the Unionist parties in Upper Bann, while at the same time Mr. Brooke was conducting delicate talks with the leaders of those parties about the future of Northern Ireland. Also in sharp relief was the old difficulty about the impetus for Conservative involvement in Northern Ireland coming from a desire for integration while at the same time Conservative Government policy remained devolution.
9. The Upper Bann campaign will undoubtedly have provided the Conservatives with considerable food for thought. It will no doubt be argued that Upper Bann was never likely to be fertile ground for them and that they will do better further east and north. But that argument already appears to concede that a marginal role and impact is the best that can be hoped for. If that proves to be the case, the end result

of the exercise may be the precise opposite of what the pioneers of the idea hoped to achieve - conclusive evidence that there is no significant demand for integration and that in British terms Northern Ireland is a place apart.

Certainly as matters stand, those in the party who opposed the idea of organising in Northern Ireland are having their worst fears confirmed. (In that regard, it was notable that Mr. Brooke, who as Party Chairman, had strongly opposed the move, remained aloof from the campaign, confining himself to a written "message of support" for Mrs. Jones).

SDLP

10. Brid Rodgers vote was almost 2000 down on her 1987 result. In absolute terms this was a drop of 22%, but in terms of percentage of the valid poll the decrease was only 6%. She told us that she was well satisfied with the outcome, against the background of a campaign that had been fought on a "shoe-string" and at short notice. She put the drop in her vote down to "by-election apathy", noting that those who had not voted came largely from SDLP strongholds. The outcome was not, therefore, an accurate reflection of the party's support at present, she felt. She said that John Hume had commented to her that the ratio of SDLP to Sinn Féin support has gone from 2½ : 1 in 1987 to 3½ : 1 at present.

Sinn Féin

11. The Sinn Féin vote dropped from 3126 in 1987 to 2033, a decrease of 35% in absolute terms and 18.5% in terms of percentage of the valid poll. Brid Rodgers said that Sinn Féin's result is an accurate reflection of the party's strength at present, since they ran an active campaign and had the usual "mustering" operation (going around the housing estates and providing transport to polling stations) on polling day.

12. Whatever the reason for the drop in their vote, it was another poor result for Sinn Féin and must increase concern within the party about how - if at all - their continuing electoral decline can be arrested. The Upper Bann result will however, have provided them with one small (if, in their terms, sweet) consolation - their vote was almost twice that of the British Government party.

Anglo-Irish Section

May, 1990.