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

GENERAL ELECTION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

In this paper PAB attempts a thorough analysis of the election results in Northern Ireland, what they mean for the parties, and how the public have reacted to them.

Unionists

For the second time in eighteen months the Unionists have lost a seat to the SDLP. In addition, their total vote has fallen from 436,696 in 1983 to 400,430 in 1987, despite there being an additional 50,000 people, of whom at least half may be expected to be unionists, eligible to vote. This must be a reflection of the dissatisfaction and disillusionment amongst the Unionist community with the behaviour of the leadership, and an unwillingness to vote for candidates who had not attended the House of Commons for eighteen months. It seems clear that the doorstep reaction to Unionist canvassers will have strengthened their view that their new MPs must return to Westminster if their support is not to suffer further.

PAB's paper of 5 June suggested that the Unionist leadership would be looking for a total vote of about 450,000 in order to argue that their position of strength was unaltered. That they are some 12% below that target is a cause for considerable disappointment in Unionist ranks. The performance of individual candidates is analysed on the separate sheets accompanying this paper.

SDLP

The SDLP's joy at McGrady's success in unseating Powell in South Down will be tempered by their disappointment at their failure to oust Adams in West Belfast. Hume and Mallon had impressive

CONFIDENTIAL

results, and Denis Haughey did well in Mid Ulster to push the Sinn Fein candidate into third place. The SDLP's total vote is up by 17,075 (12.5%) on their performance in 1983, and their share of the poll from 17.9% to 21.1%. In terms of their share of the nationalist vote (total votes polled by Sinn Fein and the SDLP) the SDLP's position has strengthened from 57.2% in 1983 (when hunger strikes were still fresh in the mind) to 64.9% in 1987.

Although the result is generally encouraging for the party, and McGrady's success is a major boost for their morale as well as a 50% increase in their Parliamentary representation, they have by no means dealt Sinn Fein a body blow, for although their vote has increased they have not achieved that increase simply by securing votes from Sinn Fein (see below). Indeed, it is only in those seats where neither nationalist candidate could possibly hope to win that the SDLP have scored significantly at the expense of Sinn Fein.

Sinn Fein

Sinn Fein's major success was in holding West Belfast, where Adams increased his vote by nearly 500 and where his share of the vote rose from 36.9% to 41.2%. Overall the Province-wide Sinn Fein vote fell by nearly 20,000 (18.8%) from its 1983 level, and their share of the total vote from 13.4% to 11.42%. They are unlikely to be too distressed by this. Their total vote of 102,701 in 1983 certainly included a significant number of personated votes, (in fact it has been estimated that some 2,000 votes were personated in West Belfast alone). It can thus be argued that their total in 1987 has been reduced only by the number of illegal votes cast in 1983, achieved by the introduction of the identification requirement. Indeed if Adams' genuine level of support in 1983 was 20% below the number of actual votes he polled, then he has increased his vote by the same 20% this time.

Nevertheless Sinn Fein will be disappointed that their share of the nationalist vote has fallen from 42.8% in 1983 to 35.1% in 1987.

It is clear that their claims of 1983 that in due course they would overtake the SDLP and become the major nationalist party in Northern Ireland are never likely to be fulfilled. Nevertheless the results indicate that between the committed supporters of the two parties, who always vote the same way, there is only a relatively small number of 'floating voters' whose allegiance may change from one election to the next. There is no doubt, and this was acknowledged by Hume in a television interview over the weekend, that there is a hard core of Sinn Fein support in West Belfast and West of the Bann which even the best efforts of the SDLP is unlikely to convert. The 1987 results suggest that this hard core has perhaps been reached.

Alliance Party

The Alliance Party's performance was patchy, but their overall share of the vote rose from 8.0% in 1983 to 9.9% in 1987. John Alderdice's result in East Belfast was particularly impressive since he did significantly better than Oliver Napier had done in either 1983 or 1986. Cushnahan was predictably squeezed out of it by the two Unionist candidates in North Down where his share of the vote fell from 22.1% in 1983 to 19.4% in 1987 and he finished a poor third. The party failed to make an impression in the rural areas of the Province and lost deposits in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Foyle, Mid Ulster, Newry and Armagh and in South Down.

Workers' Party


Because of the apparently misleading nature of statistics, the Workers' Party figures make the most impressive reading, since their total vote rose by a colossal 31.7%. However, that represents only 4,644 votes! Their share of the total poll rose only from 1.9% to 2.64% and they saved their deposit in only one (Seamus Lynch in North Belfast) of the fourteen seats they contested. Having lost £6,500, the party will now be faced with major financial problems.

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Public reaction

There has been quite widespread irritation at the apparent cosiness and complacency of Molyneaux, Paisley and Hume in television appearances on Friday evening. Hume was at his most sanctimonious, repeating that he was ready to talk to anyone, but embarrassed when challenged by Paisley that he had not even got round to arranging a meeting with his 'co-religionist' Cushnahan. Hume responded that arrangements for the two to meet had been made, and Cushnahan concurred, but we understand privately that his concurrence was designed solely to rescue Hume and that the only arrangements made are for the two to have dinner together before long. Molyneaux behaved with little more animation than a puppet, while Paisley emphasised that no talks could take place while the cage of the Anglo-Irish Agreement still existed, yet suggested that an all-Party Conference called by the Prime Minister, and possibly chaired by one of her Ministers, might not receive an entirely unfavourable response from the Unionist leadership. That said, both Paisley and Molyneaux refused to take part in any studio discussion with Mr Scott.

There is a general feeling amongst the people of Northern Ireland that the election is at last out of the way, and that perhaps there is now an opportunity for some sensible political progress to take place. How the politicians respond remains to be seen, but a return to Westminster by the Unionists seems now a certainty, and one which will be universally welcomed.



J E McCONNELL
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