

Confidential

Meeting with Jonathan Stephenson

Chairman, SDLP

I met with Jonathan Stephenson, Chairman of the SDLP, at his request at SDLP Headquarters in Belfast. Eamon Hanna, the former SDLP Secretary-General, was also present for some of the period. Hanna appears to have mended his fences with party leader John Hume since his appointment to the Board of the IFI. Stephenson requested the meeting to discuss the SDLP prospects at the May elections.

The following is a summary of the discussion

- The SDLP will contest all eighteen seats which means that in the some constituencies east of the Bann, the Alliance vote will be adversely affected. This will be apparent in constituencies such as East Antrim, North Down, East Belfast etc. In East Belfast the SDLP presence could contribute to the Alliance party losing a potential second seat to the UUP.
- The electoral system would appear to ensure that there will be no Unionist elected for West Belfast. It is likely that SF will take 3 of the 5 seats in this constituency.
- The relatively strong showing by Independent Nationalists in western areas could have an effect on the relative distribution of seats between the SDLP and SF in constituencies such as West Tyrone, Mid Ulster and Fermanagh South Tyrone.
- The formation of a women's political party will attract votes from the Alliance party. While most activist women's groups in the North are based in working class areas, experience in other elections indicate that support for a women's party will come in middle class areas.
- Since the election is primarily a gateway to get all-party talks off the ground, there is a likelihood of independents polling poorly.

Detailed examination of the constituencies

While the full details of the individual lists are not available and there is always the possibility that the campaign itself could alter the situation, the following prediction on a constituency basis was agreed.

1. Belfast North

This constituency was traditionally overwhelmingly Unionist. During Assembly elections in the mid 70s, it returned five Unionists and one Nationalist (SDLP leader Gerry Fitt). The UUP have been the dominant force in North Belfast although the party lost the seat in the 1979 Westminster election to John McQuaide of the DUP. However Cecil Walker regained it for the UUP in 1983 and he has held it ever since.

At the last election Walker was the single Unionist candidate and secured just under half the votes cast. (In addition the Conservative party received some support). The UUP have 6 councillors in Belfast city council for the North Belfast area compared to the DUP's 2.

Boundary and demographic changes have altered the nature of the constituency over the years and it is now the most religiously mixed of the four Westminster seats in Belfast. However, the non Unionist side of the electorate have traditionally split between SDLP, SF and Alliance. In addition, Seamus Lynch as a leading figure in the WP, had a strong personal following. That support fell heavily in the wake of the split in the WP and the formation of the Democratic Left.

In the last three elections the SDLP have moved well ahead of the other non Unionist parties going from a support level of 14% in 1983 to 15.7% in 1987 and 21.2% in 1992. The Alliance party vote has fallen and SF has remained constant at around 13% despite an increasing Nationalist % in the electorate.

The new boundaries of the constituency have brought in around 12,000 voters from East Antrim which should restore the Unionist majority. The SDLP will struggle to increase its level of support in the new constituency.

Likely outcome : The first four seats are very predictable, 2UUP, 1DUP and 1SDLP. The final seat on previous voting patterns should be won by SF. There is however a distant chance of the SDLP taking the last seat if it can improve on its performance at the last Westminster elections.

2. Belfast South

This constituency has throughout its existence been an UUP stronghold and the party remains the dominant force among the Unionist section of the electorate. South Belfast is also good Alliance territory but the party's share of the vote has fallen in recent elections because of a strong rise in SDLP support.

South Belfast has never returned a Nationalist at an Assembly type election. However, the SDLP has now a strong base of local councillors in the area and at the last election was the second largest party in the constituency. Its share of the vote has risen from 8.6% in 1983 to 13.0% in 1987 and 18.7% in 1992.

The new boundary revision should help to slow down the demographic changes in the

constituency as almost 12,000 new voters have been added from Strangford.

Likely outcome: Again the first four seats are very predictable - 2UUP, 1SDLP and 1Alliance seat. The final seat should go to the DUP which should be strong enough to hold off the third UUP candidate.

3. Belfast East

This constituency has in recent years returned Peter Robinson of the DUP to Westminster though the DUP dominance is much less pronounced at local Government level. Relations between the two main Unionist parties are strained in this area with the UUP's Jim Rogers claiming that his party will field a candidate at the next general election. The DUP have countered that this could allow an Alliance candidate to be elected. (This would appear to be an extremely implausible scenario in a prospective general election).

This constituency has a strong level of support for Alliance but that support has dropped off in the most recent Westminster election. On the last Westminster election figures, Alliance could take 2 seats in the constituency.. However, this is unlikely as the presence of the SDLP will reduce the Alliance vote somewhat and the changes to the constituency will further strengthen the overall Unionist vote. The SDLP feel that there is some support for the party in the constituency if they could be prevailed upon to vote. The SDLP candidates will be Peter Prendeville and QUB student officer Brian Hedding. They hope to get 3,000 votes but are more likely to get just over 1,000.

Likely outcome : 2DUP 2UUP and 1 Alliance

4. Belfast West

This constituency is the most Nationalist in Northern Ireland. It probably has enough Unionist voters to win 1 seat but the nature of the election will mean that this vote will be fragmented with no Unionist returned. The constituency has been altered by the addition of Nationalist areas from the Lisburn Council area (Poleglass, Colin Glen Kilwee and Twinbrook). The local election results from 1992 show that 10 SF councillors were returned to 5 SDLP. The SF vote was more than double the SDLP. It would appear clear that SF will benefit from the split Unionist vote and take 3 seats in this constituency.

Likely outcome: 3SF and 2SDLP

5. Antrim East

This constituency was carved out of the old North Antrim constituency in 1983 and the two main Unionist parties were very evenly balanced in terms of popular support. Former DUP councillor Roy Beggs won the seat for UUP in 1983 very narrowly from

his old party. He has strengthened his party's position in the subsequent elections and the UUP are also much stronger than the DUP at local Government level.

This is a good constituency for the Alliance party which takes about 25% of the vote. However the Alliance party's chances of taking a second seat which were difficult in any event will be further eroded by the presence of the SDLP on the ballot paper. There is a Nationalist pocket of support in the North of the constituency where the southern end of the Glens of Antrim come into the Larne district council area. The SDLP will be aiming at taking in excess of 5% of the vote with an aim of securing some extra Council seats at the next local election.

Likely outcome: 3UUP 1DUP and 1 Alliance.

6. Antrim North

This is the home constituency of Ian Paisley who regularly takes over 50% of the vote. This constituency has been a major disappointment for the SDLP in recent elections where its vote has failed to rise as it has in other parts of Northern Ireland. At local level the SDLP has made progress but this has not been reflected in Westminster elections because of a poor turnout of Nationalist voters. However, the SDLP have a strong base of support at around 14% of the vote which will ensure that it takes 1 seat in the election. The Alliance and SF party support appears too weak to challenge for seats in the election.

Likely outcome: 3DUP 1UUP and 1 SDLP

7. Antrim South

This is a strong UUP area which holds the Westminster seat and also is the largest Unionist party at local Government level. The DUP are also strong in the constituency taking 28% of the vote the last time the party stood for election in 1983. Although the DUP vote has fallen somewhat since that election the DUP would be sure of 1 seat and would be in the running for a second seat.

The Alliance was traditionally the leading non Unionist party in this constituency but have been overtaken recently by the SDLP which has seen its vote rise as demographic changes occur particularly in the Antrim District council area. The SDLP has been strengthening its electoral position at local government level in the Newtownabbey end of the constituency where Tommy McTeague has his base. The SDLP lead over the Alliance party is likely to have strengthened since the last election. In an STV-PR type election the Alliance party would have high hopes of overcoming the SDLP lead on first preferences by transfers but under the proposed arrangements for the election the 1 non Unionist seat will probably go to the SDLP.

Likely outcome : 3UUP 1DUP and 1SDLP

8. Lagan Valley

This constituency is the home of James Molyneux who had a huge personal vote. The UUP also dominate at local Government level and would appear to have 3 safe seats in the constituency.

The old Lagan Valley constituency had a sizable Nationalist minority and the SDLP would have been hopeful of taking a seat. However, the removal of the Nationalist wards into nearby West Belfast means that there is now only a negligible Nationalist vote in Lagan Valley. This means that the 1 non Unionist seat will go to the Alliance party which had almost 13% at the last Westminster election.

Likely outcome : 3UUP 1DUP and 1 Alliance

9. South Down

The South Down constituency has undergone major demographic change in recent years. The changes have greatly strengthened the Nationalist element. At the last local elections Unionist parties only managed to take 34% of the vote. Demographic changes allied to the boundary changes which have taken almost 10,000 mainly Unionist voters out of the constituency have strongly reinforced the Nationalist majority. If there is any further erosion of the Unionist vote, the Unionists would have difficulty securing a second seat.

On the Nationalist side this is one of the strongest areas for the SDLP (especially the Down District Council area) which should have no difficulty in securing 3 seats.

Likely outcome: 3SDLP and 2UUP

10. North Down

This is a "maverick" constituency which has a tradition of electing Unionist independents. Robert McCartney's UK Unionist party will have high hopes of securing 1 definite and possibly a second seat. The UUP will expect to have 2 seats here. The DUP is very weak in this predominantly Protestant constituency.

The Alliance party is the largest single party on North Down District Council but have been the third force in recent Westminster elections. The party's vote has dropped in the last three Westminster elections.

While the SDLP will not gain a seat the party organisation in North Down has grown and will be anxious to see the extent of its electoral support in the area. A recent funding raising event for the SDLP attracted a crowd of almost 100 in Bangor.

Likely outcome: 2 UK Unionists 2UUP and 1 Alliance

11. Strangford

The constituency was considerably altered in the last boundary changes. It remains strongly Unionist in character but there is a significantly higher % of Catholics within the new electoral area. The UUP is the major force in Strangford and should capture 3 seats without too much difficulty. The DUP have just over a quota and the Alliance party on past performances should take the final seat.

The SDLP believe that their presence on the ballot paper will impact on the Alliance vote. The party believes that the constituency could in the long term produce an SDLP seat. There are strong Catholic areas in the Lower Ards where the SDLP have not organised in the past. The local Independent Nationalist councillor James McMullen has applied for membership of the SDLP which should strengthen the party's local base around Portaferry. In addition there has been a considerable movement of Catholics into the Carryduff area which will assist the party. There is considerable interest in the party about a possible nomination for Strangford. Laurence Moffat of the party executive has been asked to stand.

Likely outcome: 3UUP, 1DUP and 1 Alliance

12. Newry and Armagh

This is a strong SDLP constituency. It has only marginally changed in the boundary revision. The local MP Seamus Mallon has steadily increased the SDLP % in each election. There is considerable friction in the party locally about the order of the list for the forthcoming election with several strong contenders all demanding inclusion in the top 3 positions. The SF vote at the last election was marginally too small to obtain a seat but a small increase in their vote would secure the party a seat.

The UUP is by far the strongest of the Unionist parties at District Council level where the DUP support base is low. The UUP will secure the two Unionist seats with some ease. While the Unionist vote has fallen in nearby South Down, the Unionist vote in this constituency has held up very well in Westminster elections.

The last seat will be a close call between the SDLP and the SF. On the basis of the last election the SDLP should just about shade it.

Likely outcome : 3SDLP and 2UUP.

13. Upper Bann

The 1991 census showed that this constituency is about 60% Protestant and 40% Catholic. However, the election returns produce a much larger Unionist majority. Like North Antrim there appears a much lower turnout of Nationalist voters relative to Unionist. The UUP under David Trimble are by far the larger of the Unionist parties. At District Council level the UUP has twice as many councillors as the DUP.

The SDLP have been strengthening their position in the constituency though the overall Nationalist vote is still disappointing. The SDLP vote has risen from 17.9% in 1983 to 20.5% in 1987 and 23.4% in 1992. The SF vote on the other hand has fallen from 9.4% to 6.1% over the same period. This constituency had a strong base of support for the WP. The party's one councillor Peter Smyth was elected in this area but the party's support has halved in Upper Bann since the split with the Democratic Left.

The likely outcome: There are three safe Unionist seats and one safe Nationalist seat. The fifth seat could be won by any of the four largest parties. The SDLP believe that they have a reasonable chance of taking a second seat. However on the basis of previous poor performances by the party in the area, the likelihood is that the Unionist parties will win 4 seats.

Likely outcome: 3UUP 1DUP and 1SDLP.

14. East Derry

The new constituency has lost wards from Magherafelt District Council area. The effect of this loss is to strengthen the Unionist position in the constituency. There is a strong DUP presence in the Coleraine area but the UUP is the larger of the two Unionist parties.

The loss of the Magherafelt wards will lower the SDLP and SF vote. The SDLP vote in Limavady has been growing in recent local elections and should be enough to secure the party a comfortable 1 seat. SF's vote was mainly concentrated in Magherafelt and will be quite small in the new constituency.

Likely outcome: 3UUP 1DUP and 1SDLP

15 Foyle

The Foyle constituency is now confined to the Derry City Council area. This is strong SDLP territory which benefits greatly from the presence of SDLP leader John Hume. The party has an overall majority on the Council and will take 3 seats. SF have enough support for 1 seat. There is some criticism in the SDLP about the state of the party's organisation in Foyle. This constituency has in recent elections had the lowest turnout of any of the constituency west of the Bann.

The Unionist vote in Foyle has fallen in the last three elections and now is around 26%. This would only give 1 seat in the election. The DUP are the stronger of the Unionist parties in Foyle with 5 councillors to the UUP's 2. It is clear therefore that the Unionist seat will go to the DUP.

Likely outcome :3SDLP 1SF and 1DUP

16. West Tyrone

This is the only completely new constituency after the recent Boundary Commission revision. The census shows a large Nationalist voting majority of around 15,000. At the last local elections the SDLP was the single largest party in the new seat (27.3%) followed by SF (21.1%), DUP (19.9%) and UUP (19.9%). There is however a large independent Nationalist vote at District Council level (5.4%).

There is clearly three Nationalist and two Unionist seats in the constituency. The four main parties will definitely win one seat each. The final seat on paper should be captured by the SDLP but the presence of a large and undetermined independent vote could swing the seat to SF. The SDLP are worried by the high profile of the Chairperson of Omagh District Council, Anne Gormley of Alliance. While she will not win a seat herself Mrs Gormley will take a few % points off the SDLP. Mrs Gormley is described locally as a "green Alliance" candidate as she appeals to members of the Catholic community in Omagh.

Likely outcome 2 SDLP 1 SF 1DUP and UUP.

17. Mid Ulster

This constituency is similar to West Tyrone and also has a strong Nationalist majority. At the last local elections, the SDLP was the strongest party in the area (30.3%) followed by the SF (25.5%), UUP (22.2%), and the DUP (16.3%). The situation is less complicated by the presence of a independent Nationalist vote (only around 2.6%) which would not be capable of overturning the SDLP lead over SF and thus deciding the allocation of the fifth seat.

The likely outcome : 2SDLP 1 SF 1DUP and 1UUP.

18. Fermanagh South Tyrone

According to the census this constituency has a reasonable sized Catholic majority. However the effect of a split Nationalist vote in Westminster elections has lead to apathy among Nationalist votes and has also effected the turnout at local elections. The main question mark in relation to the forthcoming election is whether this dormant Nationalist vote in the constituency which the local SDLP believe is supportive of Republican SF will come out to vote. (RSF has already begun to campaign for a boycott of the election). If the trend of recent elections is repeated then the Unionists will benefit and capture 3 out of the 5 seats. There was a sizable Nationalist independent vote (8.4%) at the last local elections which is difficult to allocate between SDLP and SF in a straight vote between the parties. However the presence of Nationalist independents is likely to harm SF more than SDLP.

On the Unionist side the UUP is by far the largest of the two parties (It has 10 councillors in Fermanagh to 2 for the DUP).

Likely outcome: Unless there is a reversal of the recent trend towards absentsionism in this constituency among Nationalists the split between the parties is likely to be 2 UUP 1 DUP 1 SDLP and 1 SF.

Footnote

On the question of the two SDLP seats which will be allocated to the party after the election, Stephenson said that they should be allocated to the two minorities in the SDLP, women and Protestants. Stephenson who is a Protestant, clearly believes that he should be given one of them.

RP

Ray Bassett
Anglo-Irish Division
30 April 1996

Constit	UUP	DUP	SDLP	SF	Alliance	Others
Antrim E	3	1	-	-	1	-
Antrim N	1	3	1	-	-	-
Antrim S	3	1	1	-	-	-
Belfast E	2	2	-	-	1	-
Belfast N	2	1	1	1	-	-
Belfast S	2	1	1	-	1	-
Belfast W	-	-	2	3	-	-
Down N	2	-	-	-	1	2
Down S	2	-	3	-	-	-
Ferman/ST	2	1	1	1	-	-
Foyle	-	1	3	1	-	-
Lagan V	3	1	-	-	1	-
L'derry E	3	1	1	-	-	-
Newry/A	2	-	3	-	-	-
Strangford	3	1	-	-	1	-
Tyrone W	1	1	2	1	-	-
Ulster M	1	1	2	1	-	-
Upper Bann	3	1	1	-	-	-
Total	35	17	22	8	6	2