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Mr Wood (B&L) - O
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1997 GENERAL ELECTION IN NORTHERN IRELAND: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The attached paper outlines the Election results in Northern Ireland, and gives a preliminary (and necessarily broad-brush) analysis of their significance. The results in the individual constituencies are detailed in the Annex.

(Signed)

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RESTRICTED**1997 GENERAL ELECTION IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

The principal results of the General Election in Northern Ireland were -

UUP - 10 seats and 33% of the vote, an increase of one seat on 1992, and 9% on last year's Forum election;

SDLP - 3 seats and 24% of the vote, a loss of one seat, but an increase of almost 2.6% on last year's contest;

DUP - 2 seats and 14% of the vote, a loss of one seat and a decline of 4% from last year;

Sinn Fein - 2 seats and 16% of the vote, an increase of 2 seats and around 0.5% on their Forum election vote.

Four main points emerge -

- (i) the capture by Sinn Fein of 2 seats, one each from the SDLP and DUP, has given the Party an enormous political and psychological boost;
- (ii) despite losing a seat, the SDLP vote overall has held up against the Sinn Fein challenge better than was anticipated;
- (iii) the UUP have reversed the trend of losing votes to the DUP, and (besides gaining a seat) their support has climbed back to pre-Forum election levels;
- (iv) the DUP have little to be happy about, having lost both a seat and part of the Unionist vote.

THE PARTIES**Sinn Fein**

Sinn Fein will be delighted with the gains of West Belfast and mid-Ulster, the two seats which they most hoped to win. They will also be pleased with their performance in West Tyrone, where their candidate (Pat Doherty) finished very close behind Joe Byrne, a well known local SDLP candidate. Sinn Fein put less effort into West Tyrone than West Belfast and mid-Ulster, but can be expected to

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make much greater efforts in future elections. The Party finished with 16% of the vote, up just $\frac{1}{2}\%$ on their Forum result, but up 6% on their 1992 General Election result. While this does represent a record for the Party, their vote fell in a number of constituencies (Newry and Armagh, South Down and Upper Bann), and only just held up in North Belfast and against John Hume in Foyle.

The overall pattern of results suggests that Sinn Fein did well principally where they ran high profile candidates and where there were particular local factors favouring their performance, for example the key position of Gerry Adams and the Nationalist desire to remove Willie McCrea. Where these factors did not apply the Party generally lost out to the SDLP, either losing votes or failing to benefit from the increased Nationalist vote. In particular, Adams' success in West Belfast was not mirrored by Gerry Kelly in North Belfast and the Party failed to make any headway against the other three SDLP MPs, all of whom increased their votes considerably. The Party's success will strengthen their demand to be included in the Talks; it remains to be seen what effect it will have on the possibility of a renewed ceasefire.

SDLP

Overall, the SDLP will not be happy with this election, although their results varied considerably across Northern Ireland. The loss of West Belfast to Gerry Adams, and the poor showing of Denis Haughey against Martin McGuinness in mid-Ulster, will cause them considerable concern. Although the Party may conclude that the mid-Ulster result owes much to the overwhelming desire of Nationalists to oust Willie McCrea, the size of Sinn Fein's lead over the SDLP there (9,000), and in West Belfast (8,000), suggests an inherent SDLP weakness in contests against prominent Sinn Fein candidates.

In other areas the Party did well: Seamus Mallon (Newry and Armagh), Eddie McGrady (South Down) and Brid Rogers (Upper Bann) increased their votes considerably at Sinn Fein's expense. John Hume also increased his vote in Foyle, though Sinn Fein's Mitchel McLaughlin gained almost the same number of votes he

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polled in the Forum election. The Party ran neck and neck with Sinn Fein in North Belfast, where Alban McGuinness polled slightly higher than Gerry Kelly (reversing the 1996 result); while Joe Byrne finished slightly in front of Pat Doherty in the new seat of West Tyrone.

The SDLP will be pleased that they have increased their percentage share of the vote by 2.6% over the Forum result to 24%. This restores their 1992 General Election position. The Party will, however be concerned that Sinn Fein's 15.5% vote in the Forum election has increased, albeit only to 16%. Overall, the result may well have the effect of increasing the tension between Hume and other senior members of the Party.

UUP

Of the two main Unionist party leaders, David Trimble will be the happier this evening. The UUP vote held up in most constituencies, and the winning of West Tyrone has boosted the Party's overall level of representation. The failure of Reg Empey to give Peter Robinson as close a contest as many commentators expected in East Belfast can be seen as a disappointment; and the Party analysts will be pondering the wisdom of not running a higher profile candidate against Robert McCartney in North Down. Similar considerations may apply in the case of James Leslie's attempt to contest Paisley's dominance in North Antrim. Against that, William Thompson gaining the West Tyrone seat will be regarded as a bonus, and justification of the Party's decision not to give way to the DUP in that constituency; and Ken Maginnis has some justification for claiming that Fermanagh and South Tyrone is now a Unionist seat, rather than a Nationalist seat on loan to the Unionists. In most of the other constituencies, the margins of victory were maintained at levels the Party will see as endorsement of their "principled" approach to the Talks.

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DUP

The belligerence of Dr Paisley at the count in North Antrim was indicative of his realisation that the tactic of attacking the UUP for being weak on the Union had not paid off. Besides Paisley's personal victory, the only positive point for the Party was Peter Robinson's comfortably seeing off Reg Empey's challenge in East Belfast. Willie McCrea did all that could have been expected to mobilise the Unionist vote in mid-Ulster - and the fact that he took pains to deny the allegation that the Billy Wright incident had harmed his standing with moderate Protestants was an indication of his sensitivity to the charge. He is probably right in claiming that the redrawn constituency is now likely to remain a Nationalist one.

All in all the underlying failure was probably the Party's inability to persuade the Unionist electorate that the Union is under serious threat.

Other parties

Alliance will have taken comfort from the good showing of Jim Hendron in East Belfast, Seamus Close in Lagan Valley and Sean Neeson in East Antrim. The PUP will be very encouraged by the performance of David Ervine in South Belfast and Hugh Smyth in South Antrim. The Women's Coalition, fighting their first General Election, should not be disappointed with their results. In South Belfast, Annie Campbell polled 1,204 votes to finish a respectable sixth, while Bronagh Hinds picked up 580 votes in North Antrim. Given that smaller parties are usually severely squeezed in General Elections, these results, and the heightened profile gained by the Party from competing in the Election, will greatly assist them in their attempt to gain seats in the local government elections. The Conservative Party ran in seven constituencies, but failed to make a significant impact. Their highest poll was the 1,810 votes gained by Leonard Fee in North Down.

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Comment

What all this means for the Talks and the political process is difficult to say. Sinn Fein will claim that their new mandate and two Westminster seats makes their continued exclusion even more indefensible; and the SDLP will wish to give some thought to their future attitude to the cause of their Republican opponents. The UUP will probably feel that their approach to the Talks has been vindicated, and it remains to be seen whether their good performance will lead to greater flexibility. For the DUP (and UKUP), political instinct will probably dictate that the perceived threat to the Union is played up to even greater heights.

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