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Political Affairs Division
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	Mr Leach	- O
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	Mr Ray	- O
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	Mr Hill	- O
	Mr Brooker	- O
	Mr Beeton	- O
	Mr Priestly	- O
	Mr Lavery	- O
	Mr McMinnis, DOE	- O
	Mr Lamont, RID	- O
	HMA, Dublin	- F
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	Mr Alexander, NIB	- F
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PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - O

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTION: 21 MAY 1997

Introduction

All the results of the election held on Wednesday 21 May have now been declared. This note looks at the implications of the vote for the Councils, and for the political parties, and attempts to draw some conclusions about what they might mean for both local government and the wider political process. Annex A lists the results on a Council-by-Council basis, comparing in each case the membership of the new Council with that being replaced; while at

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Annex B is a summary of the same information as it relates to each party, in terms of seats won, first preference votes gained, and overall percentage of the votes aggregated across all 26 Councils, again on a basis of comparison with the results in the election in 1993. A word of caution, however: due to roundings some of the final percentage figures may differ slightly from those quoted. If they do we will issue a revised table next week.

Overview

2. The story revealed by these results is generally as predicted in PAB's analysis issued at the beginning of the week. In terms of majority status in Councils, Unionists dominate 13, non-Unionists 10, and a balance exists in 3. With regard to party dominance in those Councils where a clear majority exists, the UUP are the largest party in 13, the SDLP in 5, the DUP in 2, Sinn Fein in 1, and Alliance in 1. From **this** perspective, the UUP and SDLP will be reasonably happy with their performance, and the extent to which they have been able to keep their rivals at bay. The results in a number of key Councils are analysed later in this note.

3. Perhaps more significant, however, are the overall votes of the main parties. Here the two largest parties have less reason to be satisfied. The **Sinn Fein** bandwagon continued to roll, particularly in the west of the province, with the Republican vote (16.9%) consolidated 1% above the result achieved in the General Election. To the extent that the **SDLP** failed to claw back the share of their vote which was allegedly "loaned" to Sinn Fein in the Entry to Negotiations election last year, the Party will be disappointed, although some comfort may be derived from the fact that their vote share of 20.7% - down from 22.0% in 1993 - was not eroded further in the face of Sinn Fein's acknowledged momentum. The **UUP** have been reasonably successful in maintaining their overall share of the vote - at 27.8% only slightly down from the 1993 figure of 29.4%. Given the efforts devoted by

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the **DUP** to maximising their appeal the Party will be disappointed with their 15.6%, down from 17.3% in 1993.

4. Among the smaller parties, **Alliance** on 6.6% will have been satisfied to remain close to the 7.6% the Party generated in 1993; the **PUP** (6 seats) and **UDP** (4 seats) will regard their performance as a significant breakthrough; while the success of the **Women's Coalition** in gaining a seat in their first Council contest will be applauded by many. The modest ambitions of the **UKUP** will probably be satisfied with the 4 seats they obtained.
5. A number of reasons have already been advanced for these trends. On the Unionist side, the thesis initially presented by Sammy Wilson of the **DUP** seems to be gaining ground. This is to the effect that the Unionist electorate is so disillusioned and alienated by the remorseless promotion of the Nationalist/Republican agenda, and the willing collusion of HMG in the project, that they now regard the exercise of the franchise as a waste of time. The fact that the Secretary of State met residents' groups, and officials met Sinn Fein representatives, on polling day has been cited as evidence of this predisposition by the NIO to favour an anti-Unionist agenda. A more objective analysis being advanced is that the Unionist cause has fragmented, with no less than five parties chasing the same vote. This has led to a situation where there is no coherent vision of what Unionism stands for, and no single leader capable of promoting a focused mission statement comparable to that offered on the Republican side. So far, only a few Unionist pundits have been prepared to acknowledge that Sinn Fein have the most efficient election machine of any Northern Ireland party, and that their elected representatives do a superb job on the ground.
6. On the Nationalist/Republican side, the results confirmed the trend already seen in the Entry to Negotiations election and the recent General Election, of SDLP voters shifting to Sinn Fein. Taking the three results together, it is clear that Sinn Fein now enjoy about 40% of the Nationalist vote

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and that this share is gradually increasing. In the General Election, the SDLP were able to regain some ground in areas other than West Belfast, Mid-Ulster and West Tyrone, but it appears from these latest results that Sinn Fein has more than recovered such losses.

7. The Prime Minister's authorisation of officials to meet Sinn Fein created a considerable surge of optimism in Nationalist areas, and heavy media coverage of the meeting itself on polling day probably gained Sinn Fein some votes. But the main factors in Sinn Fein's increased share of the Nationalist vote seem to be, in descending order of importance:

- their increased credibility as a democratic party, gained since the IRA's 1994 ceasefire, and their success in convincing the electorate that they prefer politics to violence, encapsulated in Mitchel McLaughlin's verdict on Thursday night: "a good day for the peace process";
- excellent organisation, particularly at local level: even election workers from other parties are impressed at the efficiency with which they handle details such as ensuring an even distribution of votes among their candidates, which can be crucial in an STV election;
- the fact that a large number of Sinn Fein Councillors (being unemployed) are in a position to carry out their duties on a full-time basis, and are adept at operating the system to afford maximum benefit to their constituents;
- the failure of the SDLP to produce an agenda for Nationalist voters comparable to Sinn Fein's "peace project";
- division within the SDLP leadership, in particular the perception that John Hume is prepared to put peace before Party.

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8. The combined effect of these factors not only attracted more first preference votes to Sinn Fein, but convinced a much larger proportion of SDLP voters than ever before to put Sinn Fein second on their ballot papers. Sinn Fein benefited heavily from this, gaining some 35% of SDLP transfers, whereas in the past SDLP transfers have tended to go to the Alliance Party. (The figure for Sinn Fein transfers to the SDLP was 38% and this is in line with previous elections). The change in the destination of SDLP transfers demonstrates the extent to which SDLP voters now find Sinn Fein acceptable.

9. The transfer figures will greatly encourage Sinn Fein, who will interpret them as a sign that the Nationalist population favours 'pan-Nationalist' solidarity: more cynically, the party will hope that an SDLP voter prepared to include Sinn Fein on a STV ballot paper today is a Sinn Fein voter of tomorrow. Given the consistency of Sinn Fein's results in recent elections they may well be right.

Prospects for Talks

10. With regard to the prospects for Talks, it is difficult to be optimistic. Sinn Fein's advances seem destined to increase the pressure on the SDLP to re-unite the Nationalist consensus, and if an IRA ceasefire were to be declared, that pressure could become irresistible. There is considerable evidence to suggest that, under such conditions, a rapprochement would be extremely popular with the Nationalist electorate. Taken in conjunction with the Government's declared aim of injecting new dynamism into the Talks process, it seems unlikely that the SDLP will re-enter Talks in a mood to delay progress while the Unionist parties come to terms with the new situation.

11. The other side of that coin, of course, is that the Unionist community feels even more nervous and vulnerable than when the Talks adjourned in March. External developments, such as continuing discussions between Sinn Fein and NIO officials and further confrontations over parades, will increase

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their sense of insecurity, and it is difficult to imagine that when the UUP team turns up at Castle Buildings on 3 June they will be in a mood to take difficult and courageous decisions.

Prospects for co-operation in Councils

12. The implications for responsibility-sharing are not easy to see. The loss of Unionist control in Belfast has been hailed by Nationalists and the Alliance Party as an opportunity to develop true partnership in the City Hall, with all that such an initiative implies in symbolic terms for local government elsewhere. However, opportunities to settle old scores against the Belfast Unionists will be difficult to resist; and the SDLP's fine-sounding rhetoric about developing a four-year plan for a fully co-operative approach to the Council's functions may not necessarily ensure a smooth transition to the anticipated Utopia.
13. Outside Belfast, Councils with a Nationalist majority are likely to continue the policy of responsibility-sharing. Those, such as Fermanagh and Strabane, which have now passed into Nationalist control, will probably be prepared to implement (or in Fermanagh's case extend) the concept. But there may be exceptions - in Magherafelt, the UUP/SDLP bloc has now been replaced by a DUP/SF dominance, and there is little expectation that co-operation will flourish.
14. In Unionist majority Councils which previously operated some form of responsibility-sharing, it is less easy to predict what will happen now. In Craigavon, for instance, the personalities of those elected will ensure high levels of confrontation and a general disposition to translate the tensions of Portadown into the Council chamber. In other areas, the general nervousness likely to obtain in the coming months will not promote conspicuous displays of political generosity.

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15. Sinn Fein's increased share of the Nationalist vote will heighten their ambition to be recognised in Council chambers in the same footing as any other party. Attempts to exclude them from responsibility-sharing will therefore be more bitterly resented than before.

The Parties

16. The **UUP** will be disappointed with the 184 seats the Party has won, down 13 from their 1993 total; and by their failure to capitalise on the promising display of support which was generated in the General Election. Apart from Ken Maginnis' fulminations against the Secretary of State, the Party leadership has so far failed to offer any explanation of their relative lack of success. Some satisfaction will, however, be derived from the fact that the gap between the UUP and DUP in terms of the overall vote has remained static.

17. As mentioned above, the **DUP** seem concerned to seek external scapegoats for their relative lack of success. The loss of 14 seats (from 103 to 89), coming on top of an indifferent performance in the General Election, will not have improved Party morale. One notable feature of the voting patterns is that, despite Paisley's rhetoric about the untrustworthiness of the UUP, some 48% of DUP second preferences went to the UUP (as opposed to the 24% of UUP second preferences which transferred to the DUP).

18. The **SDLP** won 121 seats, a loss of 6 compared to their 1993 result. Almost all went to Sinn Fein. They will have expected some reverses but will nevertheless be disappointed. Claims that votes had been "loaned" to Sinn Fein for the Entry to Negotiations election were proved wrong, although the Party did regain votes in some areas. This, and the Party's emphasis on the effects of personation and NIO officials' meeting with Sinn Fein, have created the impression of a Party on the defensive, seeking to pin the blame for their failures on external factors.

19. The Party can take some small comfort from a few individual results. They succeeded in gaining the first ever seats for Nationalists in Castlereagh - reflecting demographic and boundary changes - and for the Party in Larne, Ards and in the Balmoral electoral area in Belfast. They also gained seats held by independents in Strabane and in Omagh, joining Sinn Fein as the largest party in Omagh.

20. Once again, **Sinn Fein** will be delighted at this result - 23 more seats than in 1993. They are now the largest Party in Cookstown and Fermanagh, first equal with the UUP in Belfast and hold the same number of seats as the SDLP in Magherafelt and Omagh.

Conclusion

21. Apart from the two small Loyalist Parties, the only party which will be happy with these results are Sinn Fein. The others will lick their wounds, and look around for excuses to explain their under-performance; but many of their members will acknowledge, if only privately, that a fundamental shift may have taken place in the balance of political forces in Northern Ireland. The continued rise in the levels of support for Sinn Fein may be a product of disenchantment with the offerings of old-style Nationalism, but it must also owe something to the attractiveness of the package which Republicanism can now put forward.

22. The failure of the main Unionist political machines to develop effective counter-measures to this advance, and the resulting sense of uneasiness which now prevades the Unionist community, might, on a strictly rational analysis, indicate a need to undertake some serious re-thinking of the approach which has been adopted to date. Experience suggests, however, that this is unlikely to happen. The presence of more Sinn Fein members in Council chambers is a demonstration of a wider political reality, but it is one

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which is likely to be met with the traditional Unionist response of stubborn resistance to change, rather than any attempt to peacefully manage the transition. This, combined with the possibility of another difficult marching season, creates the spectre of a period of political turbulence.

23. If a paradigm is required for the overall result, it lies in the fact that in Craigavon, the uncompromising Brendan McKenna of the Garvaghy Road Residents' Coalition was returned on the first count, while in Derry, Alistair Simpson of the Apprentice Boys failed to secure election. The victory of David Tweed in Ballymena (to the tuneless accompaniment of "The Sash") provides its own comment on the significance of such results.

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