

Analysis

Only by an end to abstentionism and a complete abandonment of violence can Sinn Féin hope for an electoral pact with the SDLP, says John Hume

Vote for a voice or a vacuum

VIOLENCE does not constitute the basis for a viable political strategy. Despite the mayhem and disappointment of recent days, the SDLP has stood firm. As a party we have always known the scale of our task, yet we have never been daunted by it. We stood the test of bigotry, discrimination and State violence and yet have never been tempted by revenge.

We have been hurt, misrepresented and hampered by the violence of others but we have kept faith with our non-violence. We have and will always face the electorate on our record, underlined by these values.

All of the commentators who have speculated about the possibility of electoral pacts or arrangements between the SDLP and Sinn Féin in the coming Westminster elections have missed the main point at issue, which is the gross unfairness of the British electoral system. Since the foundation of the Northern Ireland State, the nationalist community in Northern Ireland has been consistently underrepresented at Westminster. In fact, whole decades have gone by in the past in which not a single nationalist voice was heard in the House of Commons.

The single member constituency system, with a "first past the post" voting system, is completely unsuited to the circumstances of Northern Ireland. Every British Government in recent times has recognised that fact, and has used PR for local government elections, assembly style elections and European elections. Yet they have adamantly refused to change the voting system for Westminster elections in Northern Ireland because of their fear of the PR lobby in Great Britain.

This refusal to correct a gross injustice to the nationalist community makes a mockery of the commitment, which they made in the "Framework Document," to administer the affairs of Northern Ireland "with rigorous impartiality. It is also a grave disservice to democracy in a society with such deep divisions and so many political parties.

Time after time, the British electoral system has resulted in a number of constituencies, with large nationalist majorities, being represented at Westminster by Unionist MPs, sometimes of the most extreme views, who represent only a minority of the voters.

The fact that the nationalist case has been under-represented at Westminster all down the years has distorted the approach to Northern Ireland, indeed the over-representation of Unionists at Westminster has frequently distorted the whole policy of the British government towards Northern Ireland.

The minority Coalition administration even entered into a parliamentary pact with the Ulster Unionist Party in the seventies. And there is every suspicion that the present behaviour of the present government in respect of the peace process is a consequence of Mr. Major's desire to maintain UUP support.

The distortion of British policy towards Northern Ireland, because of the gross over-representation of Unionism at Westminster, is the most compelling argument for achieving the fullest possible nationalist representation there. The four SDLP MPs have shown what can be done in the national case, representing the interests of their constituents, and leading the struggle for economic development.

There are seven seats which could be won by nationalist candidates. Consider that advancing the nationalist cause and countering the Unionist blackmail of the British government. If those seven seats were represented by nationalist MPs, then Mr. Trimble's party would be reduced to seven or eight seats, and there would be a Labour Government, in a tight political and military situation, pact with the UUP.

HE transparent reality and importance of these question-marked constituencies call into question the position of those who would advocate that we abstain from the House of Commons, or by "agreed candidates" of no clear political views or commitment. What exactly is the motivation of those who insist on fighting for seats in a parliament they do not recognise — seats which they would refuse to take if they won them? How does a policy



SDLP LEADER JOHN HUME, standing firm against violence and bigotry. Photo: Brian Farrell

of neutralising representation rather than maximising it, fit into a strategy of seeking a negotiated settlement through the democratic political process?

Is their concern really to maximise nationalist representation, or is it rather to win partisan advantage within the nationalist community by exploiting nationalist nationalism? There is a very strong feeling within the SDLP that we have behaved dishonestly towards the Republic's government. We have done this by insisting on a purely political mission to a purely political mission, and to the political process. We have done this without thought of our own partisan interests or electoral strategy.

Ruth Dudley Edwards writes an open letter to Dick Spring page 24

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