

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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Political Situation in Northern Ireland

1. The political situation in the minority community in Northern Ireland has changed considerably in the past two years. British insensitivity in the handling of the H-blocks hunger-strike and the failure of successive initiatives gave Sinn Féin the opportunity to pursue a political campaign side by side with continued violence and terrorist activity. In the October 1982 Assembly elections Sinn Féin obtained 35% of the Nationalist vote (10% of the overall vote) and 43% of the Nationalist vote (13.4% of the overall vote) in the June 1983 Westminster elections. The party is well organised with numerous advice centres and party activists (many in receipt of British unemployment benefit). Sinn Féin is hoping that with the continued lack of political progress in N.I. and extremely active constituency work in minority areas it can in the 1985 local elections topple the SDLP from its position of leadership of the minority. The SDLP on the other hand have struggled to maintain their position holding approximately 18% of the vote in recent elections. The SDLP has found its successive initiatives frustrated over the past 10 years and felt unable to participate in the Northern Ireland Assembly because it was clear from the entrenched negative positions of both Unionist parties that neither power-sharing nor a meaningful Irish dimension would be available and also because of the disillusioned state of minority opinion. This situation is compounded by a disastrous economic climate which particularly affects the minority and which has produced male unemployment figures along the following lines: Strabane 46.2%, Cookstown 37.9%, Dungannon 39%, Newry 37.7% and Derry 33.6%.

2. In this situation the SDLP proposed in their September 1982 manifesto the establishment of a Council for a New Ireland. After discussion among the parties in the South and the SDLP the New Ireland Forum was established in March 1983 in order to have consultations on the manner in which lasting peace and stability can be achieved in a new Ireland through the democratic process. It is generally felt among the SDLP that the situation in Northern Ireland has changed and hardened to such a degree that power-sharing alone even if available would no longer be enough to bring about peace and stability. Some new and tangible Irish dimension is required to meet the needs and aspirations of the Nationalist Community in Northern Ireland.

3. The Official Unionist Party (OUP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) both participated in Prior's Assembly with different degrees of enthusiasm. Paisley (DUP) has been quite positive about the Assembly partly because it provides a role and platform for his party even if devolved government is never achieved. The majority of the OUP are in favour of staying in the Assembly although the leadership is much keener on greater integration and increased local government powers. It is possible that the OUP might bring down the Assembly at some future date in order to try and achieve the policy objective of the leadership i.e. total integration. Both parties remain implacably opposed to any form of power-sharing or Irish dimension.

4. The Alliance Party continues to lose support (only 8% in the June 1983 Westminster election) as the middle ground contracts and its main policy platform of power-sharing looks increasingly unrealistic.

5. The security situation in Northern Ireland remains relatively good although the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in a conversation with the Minister for Foreign Affairs on 19 October 1983 said that he was far from complacent on this question and indicated that as quickly as one group of terrorists were imprisoned other younger people were recruited to replace them. The supergrass phenomenon has resulted in a large number of people being imprisoned but the long term usefulness of this tactic must be questioned in the light of recent events (escape and rearrest of Robert Lean followed by the dropping of charges against many of the people arrested on the basis of his evidence) and the possible further erosion of respect for the rule of law and administration of justice in Northern Ireland.

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