

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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District Council Elections 1985

1. The 566 seats on the District Councils, elected on 15 May last, are divided as follows:-

	1985	1981	1977
OUP	190	151	178
DUP	142	142	74
SDLP	101	104	112
PSF	59	-	-
Alliance	34	38	70
IIP	4	21	-
WP	4	3	6
Others	32	67	86
TOTAL	566	526	526

2. The total first preference vote cast for the main parties is attached. The SDLP vote (113,967), while it was down on Hume's 1984 European election vote (151,399) and on the 1983 Westminster election (137,500) compares reasonably with the District Council elections in 1981 (118,891) and in 1977 (113,900). The Sinn Fein vote (75,685) is down on the European elections (91,476) and on the Westminster election (102,700) though it does show an increase on their vote for 1982 Assembly (64,191). The SDLP has therefore maintained its support. The Sinn fein "core vote" is likely to remain somewhere between 75/85,000 unless significant moves are made which would remove the causes of alienation. Their support could increase significantly if constitutional politics are further eroded.

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3. The OUP vote (188,174) is up on their performance in the 1981 district council elections (176,342), while the DUP

(155,353) is down on their 1981 performance (176,816) but up on their 1982 Assembly results (145,478) and their 1983 Westminster results (151,749). It is of course down on Paisley's personal result in the 1984 European Parliament election (230,251)

4. Leaving aside the European elections, where Alliance do badly, the performance of that party has declined consistently since 1977, from 79,265 to 45,394 votes.
5. The 1985 election left the following 8 councils under nationalist control:- Derry, Down, Fermanagh, Magherafelt, Moyle, Newry and Mourne, Omagh and Strabane. Fermanagh had been unionist controlled while Omagh and Moyle had been split. Dungannon, now split, was unionist controlled. The remaining 17 Councils are unionist controlled.
6. The results for the SDLP are mixed. They can point out that overall they lost but 2 seats and that their vote held up in what for them are difficult political circumstances (Chequers and no clear result to the Anglo-Irish process). They gained a seat in Banbridge and for the first time ever have a seat in Ballymena. On the other hand they are in a slightly weaker position in Derry where they now have 14 seats out of 30 against 13 out of 27, in Down where they have 10 out of 23 against 9 out of 20 and in Newry-Mourne where they lost control of the Council and now have 14 seats out of 30.
7. In terms of percentage of nationalist votes and share of nationalist seats Sinn Fein did best in the Westminster Constituencies of Mid Ulster (Omagh, Strabane, Magherafelt and Cookstown) and Fermanagh-South Tyrone. They are the largest nationalist party in Omagh and Fermanagh (nationalist controlled), Belfast, Cookstown (unionist controlled) and have the same number of seats as the SDLP

in Strabane and Magherafelt (nationalist controlled), and Lisburn (unionist controlled). They have significant representation in Derry, Dungannon, Moyle, Newry and Mourne. They did not do particularly well in South Armagh which is divided between Newry and Mourne and Armagh.

8. One significant factor is that Sinn Fein carefully and cleverly maximised their vote. A striking example is the city ward of Derry where they headed the poll 1,2,3, with few votes between the first and the third.
9. Following the election the OUP and the DUP announced the conclusion of a pact, the purpose of which is to offer opposition to Sinn Fein in the Councils. It seems clear that they are headed for a policy of confrontation.
10. It is understood that the SDLP, at their meeting of district councillors on 28 May decided to leave it up to the SDLP group on each district council to determine how they would handle the Sinn Fein issue. All of those SDLP members to whom we have spoken have said that they could not be seen to give their support to unionists, e.g. in elections to the chair, at the expense of nationalists. They have also said that, much as they dislike the support Sinn Fein gives to violence they will oppose the exclusion of Sinn Fein from councils as to do so would in effect, disenfranchise those who voted for Sinn Fein.
11. Two councils have met so far on which Sinn Fein is represented.

(a) Omagh met for the first time on 28 May. SDLP, DUP and Sinn Fein put forward candidates for the Chair. OUP and 2 DUP members abstained and Kerr (Sinn Fein) was elected with seven votes (6 PSF and 1 IIP) because of a reduced quota. One SDLP member was absent from the meeting.

(b) Craigavon met for the first time on 29 May. This is a hardline unionist council with a unionist majority on which there are 5 SDLP, 2 Sinn Fein and 2 W.P. The W.P. were absent from the first part of the district council sitting when a motion excluding Sinn Fein was passed. The SDLP voted against it, but remained in the Chamber. Later the W.P. came to the Chamber, and walked out. Some time later motions were passed, with the SDLP voting against, establishing a Committee of the whole council, composed of the OUP, DUP, SDLP and W.P. parties, to deal with all business of the Council except those specific matters which have to be dealt with by full councils and directing that council officials should deal only with council committees (from all of which Sinn Fein has been excluded) and not with the full council.

12. British Ministers have re-iterated that they will refuse to meet members of Sinn Fein, including delegations on which there are Sinn Fein members.
13. There are implications for us in that it is possible that at future meetings of cross-border councils attended by Ministers or officials, Sinn Fein representatives may be included. The Taoiseach has instructed that the practice in this regard should remain unchanged, i.e. that no Minister or official should meet a delegation on which is included a Sinn Fein representative.
14. The following tentative and necessarily incomplete conclusions may be drawn:
 - what is most important is not the Sinn Fein vote but the implications which follow from the fact that they have begun to participate in politics. (Some would say that this may lead to further politicisation and to a lessening of the support for the so-called armed struggle).

- A stage now exists on the district councils where, for the first time, unionists and republicans may engage in continuing confrontation. On some councils the

unionists may try to exclude Sinn Fein. (e.g. Craigavon), on others they may seek continuing confrontation (e.g. Mrs. Hume has told us that the unionists are now likely to return to Derry City Council).

- In the circumstances there is a danger, and unionists see this as an advantage to themselves, that the problem of Northern Ireland will be seen as a struggle between the majority and a terrorist minority (IRA and Sinn Fein) to the detriment of constitutional nationalism. This could have important consequences for public perception, especially in Britain, of the nature of the problem.

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- The SDLP, in circumstances of uncompromising and hardline unionism, could find itself in a position where it ended up supporting Sinn Fein initiatives. The effects on the perception of the SDLP in Britain, and perhaps here, could be significant.
- The Sinn Fein vote emphasises the alienation within the minority community. That vote and the behaviour of unionist politicians indicate how deep the polarisation has become between the two communities. The urgency for action to deal with the problem is now greater than heretofore.
- There are fears that councillors could be