

**CONFIDENTIAL**

① Sir Edis  
② for Election File 18/5  
141/5

E.R. 25 84  
PAB/1418/RE

- cc: PS/S of S (B)
- PS/Lord Gowrie (L&B)
- PS/PUS (L&B)
- Mr Brennan
- Mr Bourn
- Mr Angel
- Miss Davies ✓
- Mr Abbott
- Mr Boys Smith
- Mr Edis

Mr Merifield

GENERAL ELECTION: NORTHERN IRISH PARTIES

1. As background to the impending General Election, PAB will be producing short papers on the electoral prospects of each of the main Northern Irish parties. I enclose the first paper in this series which looks at the prospects for Sinn Fein.

2. I hope that we will be in a position to issue the other studies during the course of the next week.

*R S Reeve*

R S REEVE  
Political Affairs Division

11 May 1983

*agree 11/5*  
Mr. J. Brennan  
The book is very well  
- written - no need for  
papers. If of course,  
with of course the book to  
and his name to be  
included in it.

*Miss Davies*  
Thank you. I have  
spoken to Mr Reeve. I  
have returned a copy of  
this paper  
*agree 14/5*

*9.*  
*11/5*



**CONFIDENTIAL**

SINN FEIN ELECTORAL PROSPECTS

As always in Northern Ireland, interest in the coming general election will centre on the fights within rather than between the two communities. The emergence of Sinn Fein as a major political force at last year's Assembly elections means that the battle for support within the minority community will be particularly important. There is now very little prospect of an electoral pact between the two main nationalist parties: the SDLP show no sign of going back on their conference decision to fight every seat whilst Sinn Fein announced last week that they intend to field a total of 14 candidates. On the nationalist side therefore, the Westminster election will be more about vote totals and percentages than about winning seats. This note examines the electoral challenge facing Sinn fein and looks at their chances of success.

Total Vote

2. At the Assembly elections, Sinn Fein polled just over sixty thousand votes. Their first target in the general election will be to improve on this total. Their decision to contest all but three of the new constituencies means that they stand a very good chance of doing so: recent election results show how this might be possible. In North Antrim, for example, there are nearly nine thousand potential nationalist votes most of which went to the SDLP in the Assembly elections because they were the only nationalist party to contest the seat. In the last general election, however, this vote was split fairly evenly between the SDLP and the IIP. At the coming general election, Sinn Fein can expect to attract most, if not all, of this former IIP support. A similar pattern is likely in other constituencies which Sinn Fein are contesting for the first time. Overall, they might be able to pick up an additional 10 or 15 thousand votes, increasing their total to 70 or even 75 thousand, without actually producing any major shift of opinion within the minority community. They have also been active in registering young, first time voters. It is impossible to quantify the additional boost this will give to the Party.

Share of the Vote

3. Sinn Fein's second target is to increase their share of the Nationalist vote which, in the Assembly elections, stood at a little over one third. Whether or not they will do so depends not only on their ability to tap potential hard-line nationalist support but also on the success which the SDLP have in persuading their own supporters to come out and vote. The SDLP believe that because they chose to boycott the Assembly many of their traditional supporters decided to abstain in the Assembly elections. They also believe that their more positive attitude to the Westminster elections and the existence of the Forum (which will meet for the first time only ten days before polling day) will ensure that a much higher proportion of their supporters will vote this time. If this analysis is correct, it might be possible for the SDLP to poll as well in the general election as they did last October despite losing some of their votes to Sinn Fein. The net effect would be that Sinn Fein would be unlikely to increase their share of the nationalist vote beyond about 40% but even on this calculation they could win at least half of the nationalist vote in Belfast. If, on the other hand, the SDLP fail to achieve a high turn out or lose more votes to Sinn Fein than previous results would suggest is likely, then Sinn Fein support could edge dangerously close to 50% of the nationalist vote.

Seats

4. An electoral pact between the SDLP and Sinn Fein could enable the two parties to share up to six of the seventeen new seats. No such deal is expected, having already been firmly rejected by leading SDLP spokesmen. Nevertheless, capturing seats remains important and Sinn Fein will be particularly keen to take West Belfast. On the basis of the Assembly election results, Mr Adams is the front runner in this former SDLP stronghold. His election would be a major propaganda success for Sinn Fein which they would use, whatever the results in other constituencies, as evidence that the tide was turning in their favour.

5. Elsewhere their chances of success are not so good. It would take a fairly dramatic swing away from the SDLP to prevent John Hume winning in Foyle, while their prospects of taking either Mid Ulster or Fermanagh and South Tyrone will be ruined if the unionists avoid splitting their vote. The Assembly election results suggest that they have too much ground to make up in South Down and Newry/Armagh to stand a realistic chance of winning either seat. But their intervention in these constituencies will have the bonus of reducing the SDLP's chances.

Summary

6. Previous election results suggest that there is sufficient hard-line nationalist support in Northern Ireland for Sinn Fein to increase both their total vote and their share of the vote at the coming general election. It would take a fairly dramatic collapse of SDLP support for Sinn Fein to win more than half of the nationalist vote but they could increase their share from one third to about 40%. Sinn Fein should take West Belfast and this will be a major propaganda and psychological boost to them. Unless the unionist parties split their vote in Mid Ulster and Fermanagh Sinn Fein are not expected to take any other seats.

7. The attached annex gives details of the nationalist vote in the last three elections in Northern Ireland.

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