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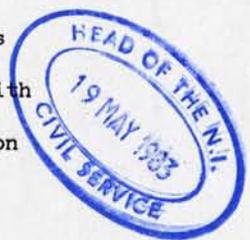
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PAB/1565/RE

Mr Merifield

(1) *de Stuart 11/5*
(2) *Election Folio*

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



GENERAL ELECTION: ELECTORAL PROSPECTS

1. I attach the last of our series of reviews of the prospects of the major parties.
2. The prospects of the smaller parties - the Workers Party etc - will be covered in our weekly round-up of the campaign.

R. B. Reeve

R. B. REEVE
Political Affairs Division

19 May 1983

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THE GENERAL ELECTION: ELECTORAL PROSPECTS OF THE UNIONIST PARTIESIntroduction

1. At recent elections in Northern Ireland, unionist candidates have won about 60 per cent of the total vote. The squeezing out of the smaller unionist parties such as UPNI and UUUP means that at the coming election nearly all this vote will be shared between Mr Molyneaux's Official Unionist Party (OUP) and Mr Paisley's Ulster Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). The number of seats which each of the main unionist parties win, will depend upon the way the unionist vote splits between them and whether they can reach any agreement about the fielding of candidates in the six "nationalist" constituencies.

Relative strengths

2. Since the last general election the DUP has grown in strength and has been challenging the position of the OUP as the major unionist party. At the European elections in 1979, for example, Mr Paisley won the support of more than half of the unionist electorate and two years later, at the District Council elections of 1981, his party did slightly better, in terms of votes, than the OUP. At the Assembly elections, however, support for the DUP fell slightly and the Official Unionists re-established themselves as the largest unionist party. It is impossible to say with any certainty how the vote will split this time but it would be surprising if there were more than a few thousand votes between the two parties at the end of the campaign.

Issues

3. Recent exchanges between the DUP and OUP inside the Assembly suggest that, on the unionist side, this is likely to be a bitter and hard-fought campaign. Both parties will try to present themselves as the authentic voice of Ulster unionism, absolutely opposed to power-sharing and determined to resist interference by Dublin in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland. On the doorstep, OUP candidates will face some difficult questions about the apparent disunity within their ranks but they will emphasise their commitment to what Mr Molyneaux calls "real devolution" - that is, devolution based on majority rule - and will appeal to the loyalty of their traditional supporters. They will also stress the unreliability

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and unpredictability of the DUP leadership. For their part, the DUP will lay more emphasis on social and economic factors, especially in the Belfast constituencies, and will point to their constructive and hard-working approach to the Assembly. Security will undoubtedly be raised and there is the chance that prison segregation will become an issue.

Electoral Deal

4. On the unionist side, this election is as much about winning seats as it is about securing a large overall vote. In fact, the two main unionist parties could share as many as 14 of the new constituencies if they refrain from splitting their vote in the key "nationalist" seats. As yet no agreement has been reached and talks between the party leaders continue. In addition to the bitterness of recent exchanges between the parties, which is bound to make agreement difficult to achieve, local factors will also play a part. The DUP make no secret of their dislike for Mr Powell and a number of local party members would very much like to field a candidate in South Down in an effort to unseat him. At the same time, William McCrea, who has been selected to contest Mid Ulster for the DUP, is highly unpopular with local Official Unionists and is not their idea of an agreed candidate. Nevertheless, the pressures on both parties to work together to prevent nationalist victories, especially Sinn Fein victories, is enormous and some sort of deal is still likely to emerge. The DUP will probably end up with Foyle, West Belfast and Mid Ulster leaving the UUP to contest Fermanagh and South Tyrone, South Down and Newry and Armagh

"Unionist" Seats

5. There are 11 seats with a majority of unionist voters and all of them except North Down (where James Kilfedder of UUP is front-runner) are expected to return either UUP or DUP candidates. Much depends upon the relative strength of UUP and DUP support but, on the basis of the Assembly election results, the Official Unionists look set to win South Antrim, South Belfast, East Londonderry and Lagan Valley while the DUP have their best chance in North Antrim and East Belfast. Strangford, Upper Bann, North Belfast and East Antrim are all marginals where the parties are expected to run neck and neck. Only the Alliance Party is capable of upsetting these calculations but they would need to make a major breakthrough to win a seat; they do, however, have at least an outside chance in North Down, South Belfast and East Belfast.

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"Nationalist" Seats

6. The six seats with a majority of nationalist voters are Foyle, West Belfast, Mid Ulster, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, South Down and Newry and Armagh. Of these, the first two are probably beyond the reach of even an agreed unionist candidate. If, however, the DUP and UUP can avoid splitting their vote in the other four, unionist candidates would have a good chance of being elected. The DUP are unlikely to intervene in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, leaving Ken Maginnis with a clear run against the sitting MP, Owen Carron. The result will probably depend on how many votes the SDLP can win: they need at least three thousand to be sure of unseating Mr Carron. In Mid Ulster, the nationalist vote is expected to divide fairly evenly between the SDLP and Sinn Fein so that the DUP should be able to win the seat, provided they are unopposed by the UUP. In South Down, Mr Powell's chances would be ruined if the DUP insist on standing, while in Newry and Armagh, the SDLP would face a tough fight against a single unionist candidate.

Summary

7. It is hard to say just how this vote will divide but the most recent electoral evidence suggests that the UUP are likely to emerge with a small but distinct lead. Assuming this is so, the "unionist" seats will probably split about 6/4 in favour of the UUP with Mr Kilfedder taking North Down for his own small party, UPUP. If an electoral pact can be arranged in the "nationalist" seats, both parties would probably take at least one more seat and the UUP would also have a good chance in Fermanagh and Newry.

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