E.R.

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DRAFT LETTER TO THE PRIME MINISTER
FOR SIGNATURE BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE

NORTHERN IRELAND DISTRICT COUNCIL ELECTIONS: 15 MAY 1985

1. I am writing to give you my preliminary reactions to the results (and their implications) of the local elections on 15 May.

The results

2. There were no major surprises, despite initial media concentration on Sinn Fein results. The turnout was low, between 60 and 61%, (compared with 65.0% in 1981 and 55.4% in 1977: and 61.7% in the Assembly, 72.8% in the General, and 64.3% in the European elections). Voting trends were very similar to those of recent elections, especially the 1982 Assembly election. The main casualties were the smaller parties and various independents on both sides of the political divide. The Alliance Party also declined and is supported now almost exclusively in Belfast and its surrounds. The final results were as follows:-

Party	% Vote	Seats	Gain/Loss*
UUP	29.8	190	+33
DUP	24.3	142	+ 2
SDLP	17.8	102	- 1
Sinn Fein	11.8	59	+55
Alliance	7.1	34	- 4
IIP	1.2	4	-17
Others	8.0	36	-28
TOTAL	100.0	566	+40

(*The gains and losses apply not to the 1981 results but to the seats held by each party immediately before the elections.)

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3. The UUP have reasserted their dominance over the DUP throughout Northern Ireland, benefiting from the increased number of seats and the continued decline of small unionist parties. But the difference between them is one of style rather than substance. They had virtually the same electoral programme and similar slogans: they also encouraged their supporters to transfer their votes between unionist candidates. Devolution was not an election issue but nevertheless the results may be interpreted to some extent as an anti-Assembly vote. Mr Molyncaux and Dr Paisley have declared that the two parties will ostracise and work together to frustrate Sinn Fein council activities. They are portraying the results as a vote in favour of the Union and firmly against Anglo-Irish agreements.

4. The SDLP held its ground, retaining its share of the total vote, but with 40 more seats to win, did not increase its share. It was unaffected by the Sinn Fein vote, outpolling Sinn Fein in the ratio of 3:2. The turnout figures, particularly in areas where Sinn Fein did best, suggest a lack of enthusiasm on the part of SDLP supporters. Sinn Fein, as expected, polled less well than in either of the last two elections. On a lower turnout they won only 77,000 first preferences, compared with 102,000 votes in 1983 and 91,000 last year. They contested only 17 of the 26 district council areas and their vote was probably hit by the new anti-personation legislation. Their haul of seats is higher than might have been expected because of the complete collapse of support for the Irish Independent Party; they won 17 of the latter's 21 seats.

The new electoral legislation

5. It seems that, despite the medical card difficulties, the new requirement for voters to produce a specified document for identification did not cause serious problems. Although the unionist parties, in particular Dr Paisley, have suggested that about 7% of the electorate might have been disfranchised, the SDLP and Alliance party said that the system worked relatively smoothly. The turnout, though low, was not unusual. The fact that more than 80% of the electorate voted in several areas in

the rural West suggests that the new rules had only a marginal effect. Most importantly they seemed to have had the desired effect of reducing personation, which the turnout also reflects. The Irish News the following day announced that "The age old problem of personation was well and truly buried yesterday as new anti-vote stealing laws swung into action". I shall be reviewing the effectiveness of the legislation and, in particular, the usefulness of the specified documents.

Presentation

6. At first the media concentrated in sensational terms on Sinn Fein results. But by Friday they were beginning to be placed in their proper context. Broadcasts and interviews by Nick Scott - which repeated the Government's rejection of Sinn Fein - and official press briefing ensured that this continued. Coverage in the Sunday press was minimal and balanced. Interest has died down for the moment but will probably reawaken when the councils begin to meet, with attendant discord.

Conclusion

7. Sinn Fein's success has been exaggerated but the party's impact on district councils has probably not. There will be friction with the SDLP and loud disagreement with the unionists. However, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that, privately at least, some may be less disappointed with the results than they say. Dr FitzGerald and Mr Hume will claim that votes won by Sinn Fein are clear proof of nationalist alienation and the best possible argument in favour of radical new solutions. Dr Paisley and Mr Molyneaux will use the results to emphasise the impracticality of power sharing and the need for firm measures to protect the Union. They have already adopted a united front against "the common enemy", a move which is designed to show that, as far as the Anglo-Irish process is concerned, the two parties stand together.