

VI The Political SituationSinn Fein

- 6.1 Catholic West Belfast is an area in which Sinn Fein is comfortably the leading political party. Gerry Adams is the MP for West Belfast (1987 West Belfast Parliamentary Election: Adams G (SF) 16,862, Hendron J (SDLP) 14,641, Millar (OUP) 7,646 McMahon (WP) 1,819: Majority 2,221) and in the Lower and Upper Falls District Electoral Areas (which cover the area identified in para 1.2) Sinn Fein gained 55% of the first preference vote in the 1989 local council elections. West Belfast is Sinn Fein's strongest area. It is also the area they cultivate most strongly, with 3 full-time advice centres ready to respond to any requests for help in sorting out problems. It is for the Northern Ireland Departments to consider how they might improve the Government's institutionalised advice capabilities to stop Sinn Fein from having such a clear run.
- 6.2 Sinn Fein representatives are among the most conscientious of Councillors (they have 8 on the Belfast City Council - six of whom come from the Lower and Upper Falls District Electoral Areas), and they are generally extremely successful in ensuring that their constituents concerns are dealt with promptly and efficiently. The civil representatives, social services representatives and the Housing Executive frequently get calls from Sinn Fein representatives asking for assistance. The relationship (or non-relationship) of Ministers with Sinn Fein is an area that may come increasingly under scrutiny in the coming months if the Republican Movement continue to show the signs of political flexibility they have recently.

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6.3 The abstentionist policy of Sinn Fein above council level seems to matter little one way or the other to the rank and file, but in one sense it must add to the sense of alienation from authority that the people of CWB have no representative in any administrative forum outside Belfast City Council. Those voting for Sinn Fein do not necessarily support PIRA. Sinn Fein gain support through their efforts on the ground, their ability to get things done, and their willingness to pursue areas of concern. In effect they perform a social welfare function. It is part of the strategy aimed at offering an alternative government and ensuring the local community knows that it is they who have secured any benefits that may accrue.

6.4 Sinn Fein's defence of constituents and provision of support facilities stretch as far as the provision of social services for families of those imprisoned whilst working for PIRA. In addition to providing funds, buses are run by paramilitary organisations to the various prisons to make visiting easy - and the alternative of public transport is less attractive because it costs money, it is less reliable and inevitably it does not meet everyone's needs. There may however be more that can be done to encourage families not to use paramilitary-provided transport. This is yet another area where the paramilitaries act in a quasi-governmental fashion, providing services which the public, or parts of them, require. Perhaps the agencies of government should be making more of an effort to exert influence in areas hitherto left to the paramilitaries.

SDLP

6.5 The SDLP have not been strong in West Belfast since Gerry Fitt was the MP for the area. The current prospective

parliamentary candidate, Dr Joe Hendron, a middle class doctor from South Belfast whose constituency activity does not approach that of Sinn Fein, is not felt to be representative of the people of West Belfast in the same way as Sinn Fein's leading figures there including Gerry Adams. In general the SDLP's present organisation is weak - they have only one full-time advice centre and their constituency office, due to open shortly, is a new departure. The recent injection of new funds will help their candidate but will not be sufficient in itself to counter the good community service Sinn Fein provide. It is only by matching Sinn Fein's advice network that the SDLP can win. Some influential figures in the SDLP argue it is only through specific governmental support that this would be possible but the contrary view which seems to be gaining ground is that if the SDLP are too closely associated with HMG then that will prove counter-productive. It is considered relatively unlikely that the SDLP will be able to overturn Gerry Adams' majority at the next general election and Sinn Fein will certainly be determined to ensure that he is re-elected.

- 6.6 There is additionally a view which questions how much the SDLP really want to win the seat. The three sitting MPs all possess their own local power-bases, and if West Belfast were to become a fourth that might disrupt the fragile equilibrium that exists within the party, which does not possess the same shared sense of purpose as Sinn Fein. That said there are the first signs of a more determined campaign to win the seat back.

The Catholic Church

- 6.7 The Church as an institution plays little overt role in politics but there can be no doubt that individuals, such as Cahal Daly and Father Faul are important players in the

wider political debate. The impact of leading figures is still strong as can be seen from the controversy over Cardinal O'Fiaich's recent comments. Insofar as it takes a position it would be broadly in line with the SDLP, purely because of that party's adherence to peaceful means. Local priests frequently denounce violence, although there are a few notable exceptions to this general rule, such as Father Des Wilson. This is indicative of the fact that "the Church" does not speak with one voice - thus making the Church's position somewhat ambiguous on the legitimacy of government institutions on the one hand and militant republicanism on the other.

Direct Rule

- 6.8 Direct Rule, insofar as it impinges on the lives of those in West Belfast, is not particularly welcome. It is seen as marginally better than the Stormont administration, but that is balanced by a view that the senior civil servants running the machinery of government in Northern Ireland are generally from a Protestant middle-class background, or worse still an English one. This is added to by the perception of NIO Ministers as (with one exception) people who know little about Northern Ireland prior to taking office, and often with little interest in the place after they have finished their job.

Devolution

- 6.9 Those in CWB would have severe reservations about any new arrangements for the government of Northern Ireland restoring greater power to the people of Northern Ireland, as they fear a return to the Stormont administration or the majority misrule that they associate with it. Even a power-sharing system would be viewed by many with grave suspicion. However their apathy towards participation in

the structures of government is more generally based on a recognition of their inability to influence substantially the administration of their own lives. This is one of the roots of the alienation described earlier.

The Agreement

- 6.10 The Anglo-Irish Agreement is not perceived to have made any significant improvement. Irish interest in West Belfast covers two main areas: the interface between the security forces and the public; and the economic regeneration programme. However, their interventions have generally been limited to the seeking of information, and individual areas of concern such as RUC accompaniment of the UDR on main arterial routes to West Belfast. To some extent this must be a consequence of the SDLP's weak position there.

Conservative Party in Northern Ireland

- 6.11 The emergence of the Tories in Northern Ireland will make little or no difference, as it is extremely unlikely that they will gain any significant support in West Belfast. The mobilisation of other mainland parties is still some way off, and is going to affect areas like CWB last if at all. For the foreseeable future, politics in West Belfast will continue to be based on a contest between constitutional nationalism and paramilitary republicanism, embodied by the SDLP and Sinn Fein, rather than by the class-based politics characteristic of other European societies.

Belfast City Council

- 6.12 Belfast City Council has not followed the good example of some other District Councils in Northern Ireland in working on non-sectarian and cooperative lines. Generally meetings

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are characterised by bickering, inflammatory motions, and other sectarian paraphernalia. The Council, even allowing for its limited powers, has control over various important aspects of life in West Belfast. Significantly there is a feeling that as Belfast City Council is forced to cut back on leisure centres and other areas for which it is responsible, so it is projects in West Belfast that suffer first. This is believed by the local community to be a reflection of the sectarian composition of the Council, and once more goes to heighten the feelings of alienation felt by those in West Belfast.

- 6.13 One argument put forward was to split up the city council into smaller, more homogenous areas which would be easier to control and potentially less liable to discrimination. This would be similar to the dismantling of the GLC in the mid 1980s. The difficulty with any such arrangement, in addition to deciding the boundaries of control, would be the formation of local government areas according to tribal areas. It would be seen by some as an acknowledgement of the failure to get the two traditions to cooperate and in West Belfast it might create a structure in which Sinn Fein would be able to tighten their control on the area.

Looking Ahead

- 6.14 All in all there is little immediate prospect for great political change in West Belfast. The best development, from the HMG's point of view, would be an increased effort and better organisation by the SDLP with the long-term aim of capturing Gerry Adams' seat. Political progress in Northern Ireland more widely, whatever form it took, would have little effect in the short-term on CWB.