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POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND: APRIL TO JUNE 1997

Summary

It was inevitable, in a period which saw two elections and a change of Government, that political activity was at a high level as the various parties sought to define their positions to their respective electorates. The prospects of an IRA ceasefire and Sinn Fein gaining entry to the Talks process played a large part in informing such definitions. The results of both the Westminster and Local Government elections confirmed that Sinn Fein's identification with the peace process continued to

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grow in Nationalist minds; and moves by the new Prime Minister and Secretary of State to inject life into the political process reflected that reality. A constant undercurrent to all political activity was the awareness that a re-run of last year's events at Drumcree was an increasing possibility.

The General Election and the parties

2. While possible alterations to the balance of power between the various Unionist parties attracted some attention, most commentators believed that the main message which would emerge from the results of the General Election on 30 April, taken in conjunction with the Local Government elections on 21 May, would be the extent of Sinn Fein's success in marketing itself as a party of peace.

The Unionist parties

3. For their part, the failure of the two main Unionist parties to agree on the seats where one or other would be given a free run, was an expression of the need both felt to maximise their share of the vote. The DUP manifesto launched on 7 April was constructed around a central premise that the UUP's performance in the Talks had demonstrated that they were unfit to be trusted with preserving the Union. Although the temptation to reply in kind to allegations of duplicity was largely resisted, the UUP fought the election in a state of some confusion as to who was the real enemy. After a series of meetings between David Trimble and Ian Paisley, the UUP finally agreed not to run a candidate against William McCrea in Mid-Ulster (in return for the field being left to Ken Maginnis in Fermanagh and South Tyrone); but their insistence on putting up Reg Empey against Peter Robinson in East Belfast was regarded by the DUP as a less than generous response to the latter's withdrawing candidates from West Tyrone and North Belfast. Robert McCartney added fuel to the flames when, a week before the General Election, he produced an old UUP policy document 'Democratic Realism' and claimed that its ideas formed the intellectual template for the Framework Document.

SDLP

4. The SDLP attempted to campaign on a basis which emphasised the distinction between Republicanism and constitutional Nationalism, but the posture of the Party leader was not helpful in getting that message across. Comments made by Seamus Mallon in mid-April, to the effect that Nationalist voters had been duped by Sinn Fein promises of peace, were angrily rebutted by Martin McGuinness who claimed that, with the exception of Hume, the SDLP did not understand the Nationalist people. After his defeat in West Belfast, Joe Hendron specifically criticised the Sinn Fein tactic of using Hume to further their electoral strategy. At the end of June, when Lord Fitt claimed that it was Hume's decision in 1988 to commence dialogue with Adams which had "set the SDLP on the road to oblivion", there were few SDLP voices raised in denial.

Sinn Fein

5. Despite strong evidence on the ground to the contrary, Sinn Fein met the expectations of many optimists by publishing an election manifesto entitled 'A New Opportunity for Peace', and by angrily repudiating the Taoiseach's claim that a vote for Sinn Fein was a vote for the IRA. At the beginning of April, Martin McGuinness referred to the forthcoming contest as "the most important election to be fought in the North since partition". Gerry Adams, taking the unusual step of writing in the News Letter's 'Election Platform' series, emphasised the potential of the electoral contest as an opportunity to promote peace and accommodation. The atmosphere was summed up by the Irish News headline on 1 May - "Peace the Prize as Voters go to the Polls".

Results

6. The results saw Sinn Fein take two seats, at the expense of the SDLP and the DUP, while the UUP gained the new seat of West Tyrone. Compared with the Election to Negotiations results of May 1996, the UUP vote rose by 8% and the DUP's fell by 5%. On the Nationalist side, both the SDLP and Sinn Fein increased their votes slightly (by 3% and 0.5% respectively); but it was clear that the record high of 15.5% achieved by Sinn Fein in the Negotiations elections could no longer be regarded as being due to votes "borrowed" from the SDLP.

The Local Government elections

7. The scenes of triumphalism which attended Sinn Fein's General Election victories in West Belfast and Mid-Ulster were evidence of the Party's belief that a strong tide was running in its favour. In the period leading up to the Local Government elections, the momentum was sustained by the prominence given to speculation about Sinn Fein's possible admission into the Talks process; as well as by expertly executed stunts such as when Adams and McGuinness turned up at the Palace of Westminster to be refused the facilities of an institution neither professed to recognise; and when McGuinness visited the still-imprisoned Roisin McAliskey and claimed that her treatment was "crucially important" to the peace process. Even the willingness of the Secretary of State to meet and talk to various residents' groups on the parades issue was perceived - at least by Unionists - as a further boost to Sinn Fein's status.

8. The Local Government elections results saw all of the main parties, except Sinn Fein, record lower shares of the vote than they had achieved in 1993. The 16.9% share of the vote and 71 seats reached by Sinn Fein were the highest ever; while for Unionists, their loss of control in Belfast, Cookstown, Fermanagh and Strabane exemplified a failure to mobilise their electorate, or provide a united and clearly articulated message identifying what Unionism stood for. The inter-party tensions generated by the election (with Sinn Fein's support) of Alban Maginness as the first Nationalist Lord Mayor of Belfast, were read by many as symbolising the wider political realities which Unionism would be increasingly required to face.

9. In the circumstances, it was unsurprising that when politicians from most of the Northern Ireland parties met in South Africa at the end of May to learn about political mediation techniques, the DUP made much of their insistence on being segregated from Sinn Fein (although I have it on good authority that photographs of social occasions circulating amongst some of the participants show things were rather different in practice!). At the end of the conference, President Mandela said it was significant that the politicians had felt able to get together at all; but wisely avoided predicting what might be the ultimate outcome of the encounter.

Political development

10. The electoral success of Sinn Fein was gained despite confusion over the real intentions of the Republican movement. The shooting of a policewoman in Londonderry in mid-April was followed by a spate of bombs in Great Britain which brought chaos to transport and industry, as well as the cancellation of the Grand National. None of this dampened media speculation that another ceasefire was imminent, although attempts to bomb Sinn Fein offices in Londonderry, West Belfast and the New Lodge Road implied that some Loyalists, at least, were unpersuaded.

11. Predictions that the new Northern Ireland Ministerial team would kick-start the political process seemed justified when the Prime Minister's carefully-balanced speech in Belfast on 16 May attracted plaudits from Hume ("the best speech by a British Prime Minister in 25 years, indeed this century"), Bertie Ahern ("the Bruton administration is now lagging behind the British"), President Clinton, and even Trimble (who was reported to have "purred contentedly" while listening to the speech). Only Paisley, who took great exception to the Prime Minister's commitment to the Frameworks Document, and Martin McGuinness, demurred.

12. The main themes implicit in the Prime Minister's speech were gradually fleshed out in the succeeding weeks. The timetable for entry by Sinn Fein into Talks in the event of a believable IRA ceasefire, the duration of the Talks process, and proposals for decommissioning and confidence-building measures were extensively trailed - in Dublin and Washington, as well as domestically - before being finally revealed by the Prime Minister in a Parliamentary statement on 25 June. Somewhat surprisingly, Unionist reaction to the proposals, including a six-weeks probationary period for Sinn Fein's entry to the Talks, was muted; and most attention focused instead on the decommissioning proposals which had been jointly developed by the two Governments.

13. The first of the two encounters between Sinn Fein and NIO officials to remove misunderstandings about the terms of entry to Talks took place on 20 May in Stormont Castle, and was agreed by both sides to have been useful; and although the second meeting at the end of the month was deemed by Sinn Fein to be disappointing, there was support from both Dublin and Washington (if not from the Unionists) for HMG's broad strategy. When the details of the

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proposals were finally made known in the Prime Minister's Statement on 25 June, it was clear that considerable progress had been made towards meeting Sinn Fein's requirements in the areas they themselves had identified as crucial.

14. In view of this, the murders by the IRA of Constables Graham and Johnston in Lurgan on 16 June was, from the political perspective, inexplicable. Adams admitted to being shocked "at a personal and human level", but avoided condemnation of the incident. The atrocity not only led to an instant slamming of doors on Sinn Fein by London, Dublin and Washington, but also attracted condemnation from even such traditionally staunch supporters as the Andersonstown News and Niall O'Dowd, both on the theme of "Nationalist voters betrayed". Beyond that, the murders also led to questioning of whether such acts of violence were intended by Republican hard-liners to block Sinn Fein from entering a Talks process in which they could not hope to achieve their ultimate objectives; and inevitably strengthened the hand of those - like Trimble - who urged that the time had now come to drive forward the political process without further delay to accommodate Sinn Fein. On the other hand, Hume's refusal to rule out further contact with Adams attracted a lot of criticism, even from within his own Party.

15. A leaked copy of a draft of the joint decommissioning paper appeared in two Dublin-based papers immediately before the Prime Minister's statement. Paisley denounced it as "a surrender document", and a statement from the UUP Talks team was issued to banish speculation that Trimble's failure to undertake similar condemnation was tantamount to endorsement. In a move to appear flexible, however, Trimble floated the idea of pigeonholing decommissioning for the present, while the Talks (minus Sinn Fein) moved on to the consideration of substantive issues. Nevertheless, by the end of June, there appeared to be a general recognition that the Prime Minister's principled approach to political development - even his refusal to declare Sinn Fein complete political outcasts - was the best strategy for maximising pressure for a verifiable ceasefire. That, however, did not stop the growth of an equally widespread sense of pessimism that the events at Drumcree and other Orange marches could once again work to get Republicanism off the hook.

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Parades

16. The community tensions which gave such intensity to the parades dispute were illustrated in the statistics that, by mid-April, 48 places of worship had been attacked in the preceding 16 months; with five Roman Catholic and two Protestant churches suffering (along with two Orange Halls) in the previous fortnight. Such incidents inevitably had a bearing on whether or not an IRA ceasefire would be called (or the CLMC ceasefire further breached); and a further political dimension was added by the rumour that a "deal" at Drumcree which was favourable to the Orange Order would have a knock-on effect in helping Unionists - particularly Trimble - to judge favourably some of the Talks-related issues with which they were being presented.

17. There was no shortage of voices warning of the consequences of another Drumcree. In late April, the tourist industry reported a heavy downturn in bookings in July and August while, at the same time, bookings on flights and sailings out of Northern Ireland for the early July period were reported to be at record levels. A few weeks later, Lord Eames, in his address to the General Synod of the Church of Ireland, warned of the consequences of another period of mob-rule; and at the end of May, the G7 group of business leaders gave strong support to the idea of mediation on the parades issue. All these interests, and the Secretary of State and the Chief Constable, publicly supported the joint initiative put forward by the News Letter and Irish News in mid-June, proposing a parade along Garvaghy Road on alternate years.

18. The newspapers' compromise was supported by over 30,000 phone callers, but significant evidence of moderation was otherwise difficult to find. Paisley, at a "Right to March" rally in Portadown in the first week of April, unequivocally declared the unalienable right of Orangemen to parade traditional routes without the humiliation of having to negotiate such passage. A few nights later, several hundred Orangemen at Cloughmills in County Antrim, prompted by the Spirit of Drumcree group, overturned a tentative agreement drawn up between the Loyal Orders and residents in Dunloy, and forbade the further involvement of the Mediation Network in their affairs. The murder of Sean Brown by Loyalists at Bellaghy in mid-May added to the tensions caused by the parades stand-off in that village. Further evidence of the same mood came at the end of June, when with the Loyalist protest at Harryville continuing (and 30 policemen having been injured in

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disturbances on 7 June) the local parish priest cancelled Saturday night mass for the following two months. Undeterred, the protesters continued to mount their demonstration, after briefly considering transferring their attentions to another church.

19. It was entirely in keeping with such atmospherics that the Garvaghy Road Residents' Coalition (GRRC) should take the time publicly to quash a speculative comment by Trimble that the 1995 compromise deal might still be acceptable. In the latter part of May, Robert Saulters, the Head of the Orange Order, became involved in "a misunderstanding", promoted by Hume, which suggested that he would talk to Brendan McKenna and the GRRC. Even when the County Armagh Grand Lodge took the step of issuing an open letter to the residents of the Garvaghy Road estates in early June, the GRRC was quick to dismiss it as "insincere" and "a PR gesture". At the end of June, the Coalition accepted an invitation to proximity talks at Hillsborough, but complained that the encounter was eleven months too late. It was unsurprising that these talks, with the two sides "feet away but a world apart", ended inconclusively.

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BULLETIN DIARY: APRIL - JUNE 1997

- 1 May General Election.
- 3 May The newly-appointed Secretary of State visited Northern Ireland for a walkabout in Belfast City Centre.
- 14 May The Speaker ruled that the facilities of the House of Commons would not be open for use by Members who had not taken their seats by swearing or by affirmation. This followed the stated intention of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness to set up a Westminster Office.
- 16 May The Prime Minister visited Northern Ireland.
- 21 May Local Government Election.
- 29 May President Clinton met the Prime Minister in Downing Street and addressed the Cabinet.
- 30 May Politicians from Northern Ireland departed for a conference in South Africa which aimed to explain how that country had surmounted its political difficulties.
- 2 June Alban Maginness appointed first Nationalist Lord Mayor of Belfast.
- 3 June Talks resumed in Castle Buildings after being adjourned during the elections.
- 6 June Republic of Ireland General Election.
- First meeting of the new session of the Forum and the 33rd since its inception.
- 16 June The Government ended contacts with Sinn Fein after the IRA murdered two RUC Constables in Lurgan.
- 27 June The Secretary of State held proximity talks at Hillsborough Castle with the Orange Order and the Garvaghy Road Residents' Coalition.

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