

The 2005 Westminster and District Council Elections in Northern Ireland

Devolution Briefings

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Key Points

- The DUP continued its rise to a position of electoral dominance within the unionist community, topping the poll in both local and Westminster elections, almost wiping out the UUP at Westminster
- Sinn Fein's quest for a similar position in the nationalist community met with stiffer resistance from the SDLP, though it has maintained the size of its lead among nationalist voters
- The growth in DUP support reflects a number of factors, including the perception that it is a more resolute bulwark against nationalism, the damaged credibility of the UUP and, conceivably, an acceptance of direct rule as preferable to devolution
- The new Secretary of State, Peter Hain, faces a daunting task in creating the conditions to restore devolution, though Gerry Adams' call for the IRA to pursue its goals by 'purely political and democratic activity' does create some prospect for a workable, if loveless administration led jointly by DUP and SF
- The electoral middle ground has eroded sufficiently for the UUP and SDLP to have the prospect of only junior partnership in any renewed Northern Ireland Executive

As Jeremiah, or perhaps Eeyore, may have asked: 'Why make life difficult when, with a bit more effort, it can be made to seem impossible?' Such a resigned response seems merited given the outcomes of the 2005 elections: against the backdrop of the results the prospect of the restoration of devolution has receded.

The Ascendancy of the DUP

Within the unionist electorate the current ascendancy of the DUP is inescapable. It took two-thirds (66%) of the combined DUP-UUP vote at the Westminster elections— matching its share of the vote achieved at the 2004 European Parliamentary election—and 62% of the combined vote at the district council elections. The DUP saw nine¹ of its candidates returned as MPs, a net gain of four

¹ The DUP held its five seats, viz, Ian Paisley (North Antrim), Peter Robinson (Belfast East), Nigel Dodds (Belfast North), Gregory Campbell (Londonderry East), and Iris Robinson (Strangford). The DUP's four gains were: Sammy Wilson (East Antrim), William McCrea (South Antrim), David

since 2001, and increased its number of councillors by 52, to 182 out of a total of 582. Needless to say, the DUP topped the poll in both contests, taking 34% of the vote share at the Parliamentary elections and just under 30% of first preferences in the district council poll.

Not only was it the DUP's best ever performance at local and parliamentary elections; it succeeded where the Liberal Democrats failed in competition with the Conservative Party in England, *viz*, in 'decapitating' the leadership of its immediate competitor, the UUP. David Trimble was soundly defeated in Upper Bann, hastening the end of what was already a faltering career. From 10 MPs in 1997, and a 32.7% vote share, the UUP has been reduced to one MP, Lady Sylvia Hermon, and a vote share of 17.7%—a spectacular decline in its fortunes. The UUP's share of the DUP-UUP vote, at 34%, corresponds broadly to the proportion of unionists who still remain doggedly attached to the Belfast Agreement of 1998, as disclosed by recent *Life and Times* surveys, suggesting that there is a core of unionist support for the template struck seven years ago. But what one may describe rather loosely as 'New Testament' unionism is at bay, cowed by the more earthy and unforgiving Old Testament unionism of the DUP.

The upward trend in the DUP's share of the total vote at successive elections since 1997 is clear (see Table 1). It has more than doubled from 13.6% at the Westminster election in 1997 to its current level of 33.7%, although in 1997 it only fielded nine parliamentary candidates. A more revealing comparison is that between the 1997 and 2005 district council elections: during that period its share of first preference votes has almost doubled, increasing from 15.8% to 29.6%.

Table 1: Votes (N) and Vote Shares (%) in Elections in Northern Ireland 1997-2005

Election	DUP		UUP		SDLP		SF	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1997 Westminster	107348	13.6	258349	32.7	190814	24.1	126921	16.1
1997 Local	99651	15.8	175036	27.9	130387	22.6	106934	16.9
1998 Assembly	145917	18.0	172225	21.3	177963	21.9	142858	17.6
2001 Westminster	181999	22.5	216839	26.8	169865	20.9	175392	21.7
2001 Local	169477	21.4	181336	22.9	153424	19.4	163269	20.6
2003 Assembly	177944	25.7	156931	22.7	117547	16.9	162758	23.5
2005 Westminster	241856	33.7	127314	17.7	125626	17.5	174530	24.3
2005 Local	208278	29.6	126317	18.0	121991	17.4	163205	23.2

The Nationalist Vote

The victory of the DUP was matched, albeit in significantly less stark terms, by Sinn Féin. Whilst it did gain one seat from the SDLP—that of the former SDLP deputy leader and Deputy First Minister, Seamus Mallon—it did not eclipse its ethnic competitor, the SDLP. The latter's retention of Foyle by the current party leader, Mark Durkan, was a signal accomplishment and did not rely upon tactical votes from unionists and others. But the SDLP's capture of South Belfast from the UUP is likely only to be temporary, and was accomplished by means of a divided unionist vote: if the UUP and DUP can come to some sort of electoral pact at the next Westminster

Simpson (Upper Bann) and Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley). Mr Donaldson had defected to the DUP in January 2004.

election, which they failed to do on this occasion, then the seat should revert to unionism. Such a pact would almost certainly also wrest Fermanagh and South Tyrone from SF, a seat it retained with an increased majority in May. The sectarian ‘rationality’ of this, however, could founder on the rock of intra-unionist bitterness.

In terms of overall vote share, Sinn Féin has consolidated the electoral lead over the SDLP it established in 2001. However, its share of the combined SF-SDLP vote at the parliamentary and local elections remained at around 58%, the same proportion it achieved at the 2003 Assembly election, suggesting that its vote share within the nationalist electorate may have stabilised, as also appears to have happened in the Republic of Ireland.

This is conjecture, of course. It is not yet clear whether the recent growth in electoral support for SF is in part a product of realignment or dealignment among nationalist voters. What is clearer is the success it has achieved in mobilising first time Catholic electors and in delivering those who previously would have abstained from voting. Moreover, it has become part of conventional political wisdom that some nationalist voters had ‘lent’ their votes to SF candidates as encouragement to the wider republican movement to adopt exclusively peaceful and democratic means of prosecuting its goal of Irish unification. If that is the case, then the votes, or some of them, appear to be on permanent loan, given the steady and now seemingly stable vote share achieved by SF.

Explaining the Rise of the DUP

There are a number of ways to interpret the growth of the DUP’s support. One is that it is a defensive reaction by unionist voters in the face of what they perceive as the remorseless growth in support for SF. That, as the prospect of Irish unity seems to draw nearer (2016 is SF’s ‘target’ date), unionists feel the need to begin the construction of an electoral redoubt from which they can repulse and frustrate the realisation of this ambition. This makes only limited strategic sense. The 1998 Agreement, its enabling legislation, and the consequential amendment of the Irish Constitution, all underwrite the consent principle: there can be no change in Northern Ireland’s constitutional status unless and until there is a majority for unification. On this reading, support for the DUP may then be understood as a form of both insurance and reassurance—a kind of ‘belt and braces’ defensive response, or in rugby parlance ‘getting one’s retaliation in first’.

Equally, it can be construed as a means of ensuring that the republican movement does the decent—and long overdue—thing, *viz* disarms, completely, verifiably and transparently, disbands, abandons criminality and commits itself to a purely political path in pursuit of unification. Unsurprisingly, this is a fate which the former SF minister Martin McGuinness has rejected, reaffirming the movement’s self-appointed role as the last-resort ‘defence’ of Catholic neighbourhoods. In that sense, the DUP is regarded by unionist voters as being more resolute than the UUP, and thereby a surer guarantor of a new and fair deal that is acceptable to both unionists and nationalists—not one that is viewed as biased in favour of the latter, as the 1998 Agreement has increasingly been perceived by the majority of unionists. In that respect, the enhanced support for the DUP represents an article of political faith, in some measure informed

by the unshakeable Biblical literalism expressed in its Free Presbyterian values as expounded by Dr Paisley—and not mindful that any political recovery for unionists is interpreted as an equal and opposite loss for nationalists in this constitutional zero-sum game.

Of course, the DUP's growth could also be interpreted as a protest vote against the UUP. This would imply that the unionist electorate hasn't realigned, but rather has dealigned from its previous support for the UUP under the leadership of Mr Trimble. On this reading, legions of unionist voters may be returned to the UUP fold once it has acquired a new leader and repositioned itself in relation to the DUP. But this is highly problematic. Does the party, under a new leader, seek

- to outflank and outbid the DUP as a vehicle for unbridled unionist ethnic politics or, conversely,
- pursue a more centrist, liberal strategy, aiming for some notional middle-ground currently inhabited by a beleaguered minority?

The first option is extremely high risk: why should voters settle for 'unionism-lite' when they can have 'the real thing'? Dr Paisley and the DUP's leadership have cornered the market on what they style as 'traditional' unionism and trying to prove to be more diehard does not suit the temper of the UUP's core supporters, or at least those who remain committed to the principles of the 1998 Agreement. There is a view that around a third of the UUP's supporters fall into the latter category, and that the remainder divide into two more or less equal camps: one implacably opposed to the inclusive Trimble strategy and the other which was ambivalent about that strategy. To win the latter back is the more immediate goal.

The second option is equally risky—recall the fate of the break-away Unionist Party of Northern Ireland, formed by Brian Faulkner, in the wake of Sunningdale. It implies that the UUP will remain the junior unionist player, unless and until the DUP's apparent intransigence is more widely perceived as a block to progress. This relies on the DUP proving to be lacking in any sense of pragmatism, not a charge one can level at some of its leading players. After all, if we are to believe that it was only the refusal of the IRA to permit a pre-nuptial photograph of a major decommissioning event (though it quickly became apparent after the putative deal collapsed that there were substantial other difficulties), then the path to the return of devolution would have been set in December 2004—assuming, of course, that neither the Northern Bank robbery nor the murder of Robert McCartney had subsequently taken place.

A third alternative could be a renewed inter-unionist agreement, including an electoral pact, an option favoured by, among others, one of the UUP's electoral casualties, David Burnside. That would redouble the efforts to secure a voluntary coalition involving the DUP, some remnants of the UUP and the SDLP, but this is an option that the latter has until now refused to countenance. This would leave the pro-Agreement faction within the current UUP on the margins of debate and potentially homeless.

A Vote for Direct Rule?

A further and perhaps final motive behind the DUP's vote should not be discounted, *viz*, that it is less a vote for a new agreement and more one for the continuation of direct rule. Among unionists, direct rule has been the preferred default position since it was first imposed in 1972. The final collapse of the first Assembly in October 2002 has not been accompanied by a clamant demand for the restoration of devolution among unionists, notwithstanding the DUP's essaying of three models for the return of self-government, each of which would have including power-sharing with nationalists in a more or less attenuated form. This is not to suggest that direct rule is popular—more that it is acceptable and certainly infinitely preferable to a mandatory coalition that includes 'SF/IRA'.

Over the past two and a half years, the Northern Ireland Office has interpreted direct rule in a proactive way. It has forged ahead with controversial policies, including the looming introduction of water service charges, a new capital-value based rating system, confrontations with the education boards over budgets, the extension of top-up fees to Northern Ireland and the planned abandonment of the transfer test (the Northern Ireland version of the old '11+'). This has both enabled the government to pursue its wider 'modernise and reform' agenda largely unhindered and allowed the regional parties to engage in what some believe they do best: opposition. It is, in effect, a licence for them to exercise some power but without any responsibility. In this context, the shorter-run task, at least for the DUP, is to try to secure the *parliamentary* means of improving the accountability of direct rule ministers.

What next? Can the Assembly be Restored?

The new Secretary of State, Peter Hain—the fifth since 1997—and his team², are faced with a daunting task. Yet the terms of a deal are perceivable. Six months ago, the purported 'Comprehensive Agreement' essayed a timetable for the return of devolution, and a series of reforms that enabled the DUP on the one hand to represent it as a 'new' agreement, while SF on the other could proclaim it as the means of implementing the 1998 Agreement in full. The context has, however, changed, as has the political landscape. Gerry Adams' call at the outset of the election campaign for the IRA to pursue its goal of Irish unity by 'purely political and democratic activity' will no doubt secure a positive response.

Whether that response will be both necessary and sufficient to put the political institutions back in place is moot. Even if it was, there would have to be an as yet undefined period during which the authenticity of the IRA's ending of paramilitary and criminal activities would be tested. If the DUP and the wider population were

² There was an almost total change in the junior ministerial ranks of the NIO. Barry Gardiner and Ian Pearson were moved to junior jobs in London, whilst John Spellar was retired to the backbenches. Angela Smith remains in the NIO as a Parliamentary Under Secretary, but with a changed portfolio: she now has responsibility for Education, Employment and Learning and Enterprise, Trade and Investment. She is joined by two new Ministers of State, Lord Rooker and David Hanson. The former assumes responsibility for the Office of First and Deputy First Minister, Finance and Personnel, Agriculture and Rural Development and the Environment. Mr Hanson will assist the Secretary of State with Political Development and be responsible for Criminal Justice, Social Development and Culture, Arts and Leisure. The final new face is Shaun Woodward, the former Conservative MP, who as Parliamentary Under-Secretary will administer Security, Health, Social Services and Personal Safety and Regional Development.

then satisfied, this would likely be the prelude to a third Assembly election and the return of self-government, headed by a DUP first and an SF deputy first minister. Such an arranged marriage would be a loveless, but potentially workable one: what is more remarkable is that such an arrangement is now thinkable. Whether it could in any recognisable sense be called power-sharing—as against the ‘balkanisation’ of Northern Ireland into two conflicting clienteles, against which Mr Mallon warned on his exit from parliamentary life—is another matter.

Prior to a third Assembly election, the UUP will have a new leader even if only on an interim basis. He (the only potential female candidate, Lady Hermon, has declined to stand) will face a long haul back to a position where the party could conceivably mount a credible challenge to the DUP and, progressively, regain the leadership of unionism. But for the foreseeable future, and on the basis of recent and current electoral results, the UUP and SDLP would be junior partners in any governing coalition in the short to medium term. The moment when they might have constructed an alliance on the ‘centre ground’ is long since past. Moreover, the centre ground has been narrowed such that it is more persuasive now to talk of ‘common ground’, at least in relation to a number of public policies, perhaps most obviously water charges and the change in the basis upon which domestic rates will be calculated. But this is a thin and negative basis upon which any durable trust can begin to be developed between and among the major parties.

In his classic text on power-sharing³, Timothy Sisk concluded: ‘A necessary condition for the mitigation of conflict in deeply divided societies is the existence, or creation, of a centrist core of moderates—drawn both from elites and from the broader civil society—that adheres to rules and norms or pragmatic coexistence with other groups and can withstand the pressures of extremist outbidders that seek to mobilize on divisive themes for their own power-seeking aims.’ In Northern Ireland, the ‘centrist core’ is weak and fragmented, and in civil society many of its potential supporters have become disengaged, while the ‘extremist outbidders’ are now free to pursue their ‘power-seeking aims’. The paradox remains that their inability to share power may deny them its fruits—and see, other things being equal, direct rule prolonged.

³ Sisk, Timothy (1996), *Power Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace), p115