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Possible Outcome of Northern Elections: An Initial Assessment

Summary

1. The outcome of the elections to be held in Northern Ireland on 30 May is to some degree unpredictable, for a number of reasons:
 - it is hard to predict the likely turnout, both overall and within the two communities - it is not yet even known if both the SDLP and SF will run;
 - the relative standings of the main parties within each of the communities will no doubt be affected by the dynamics of the campaign and by the broader political situation, including whether or not the IRA ceasefire is restored;
 - whether the novel electoral system will lead to a significant departure from usual voting patterns in constituency-based elections is incalculable;
 - the precise method of seat allocation selected will have a bearing on the relative fortunes of the larger and the smaller parties
 - there will be strong competition for the final places among the top ten parties eligible for additional seats.

2. However, we have felt it useful, as an exercise in analysis, to prepare an initial assessment, on a speculative and tentative basis. Our methodology and assumptions are described below: in essence, we have largely based our calculations on the 1992 Westminster election results, modified where appropriate by reference to the 1993 local election results. We believe that these constituency-based elections, with their wider spread of candidates and higher turnout, are a better basis for calculation than the 1994 European elections, the returns from which are not in any event disaggregated on a constituency basis. We have also discussed each constituency.

3. Accordingly, our initial estimate of the likely outcome, assuming all major parties run, is as follows:

Party	Constituency Seats	Top-up	Total	% of seats –
UUP	31-35	2	33-37	30.0-33.6
SDLP	21-23	2	23-25	20.9-22.7
DUP	17-18	2	19-20	17.3-18.2
SF	7-9	2	9-11	8.2-10.0
Alliance	7-9	2	9-11	8.2-10.0
UKU (McCartney)	2	2	4	3.6
Workers' Party	0	2	2	1.8
Conservatives	0	2	2	1.8
PUP ¹	0	2	2	1.8
UDP	0	2	2	1.8

Total Unionist Seats	62-66
Total Nationalist Seats	33-35
Others (Alliance, WP)	11-13

Methodology/General Considerations

Vote Share

3. There are two principal variables to be considered: the parties' likely voting strengths, and the system chosen for the allocation of seats.
4. We have for the most part based our calculations of each party's likely share of the

¹But see paragraph 9 below, and the discussion of West Belfast (para. 26)

vote on the outcome of the 1992 Westminster elections, which were held on a constituency basis, were focussed mainly on constitutional rather than on issues, and had a larger turn-out than either the 1993 local elections or the 1994 European elections. In the case of North Down we have relied on the 1995 by-election.—

5. However, we have used the local election returns as a guide to the likely impact of constituency changes resulting from the re-drawing of the boundaries in 1995: of the 18 constituencies, one (Tyrone West) is new, while only Antrim North and Upper Bann are entirely unchanged from 1992.
6. We have also used the local election results to determine the likely breakdown of the total Unionist vote as between the DUP and the UUP in those constituencies (the majority) where candidates did not run against one another in 1992.
7. On all available indications the Conservative vote (5.7% in 1992) has sharply declined. We have (conservatively!) estimated that it will be halved, and have allocated the remainder mainly to the UUP, with a residue to the Alliance Party. Fresh data is available for North Down, the Conservatives' best seat in 1992.
8. Local factors are examined on a constituency-by-constituency basis (paras. 20-37)
9. The last five of the top ten parties eligible for the two-seat top-up are not easily predicted. Robert McCartney's own vote (perhaps 2% of the NI-wide total) should make his United Kingdom Unionists secure. On the basis of the local and European elections, both the Conservatives (even in decline) and the Workers' Party should take the seventh and eighth places (they have averaged 1.25% and 0.7% respectively). In the local elections Democratic Left (0.4%) marginally out-pollled both of the loyalist parties, of which the PUP seems slightly stronger. In addition, it is possible that some other grouping (eg Green Party) or strong individual (an Independent Nationalist in Fermanagh/South Tyrone?) could squeeze in. It is thus conceivable that one, or even

both, of the loyalist parties could be excluded. We have assumed, however, that each will have enjoyed a sufficient post-ceasefire boost to overtake DL². Opinion polls support this assumption, but it is by no means certain, and this should be borne in mind when considering the continued usefulness of observer status as envisaged in the groundrules paper.

10. As the constituency-by-constituency discussion makes clear, our predictions should in most cases be robust enough to withstand limited shifts in voting strength either between the unionist and nationalist blocs (as a function of turn-out) or between parties in those blocs. However, there are some cases where marginal changes could be important, above all as between Sinn Fein and the SDLP (eg Belfast West, Mid-Ulster, Tyrone West).
11. Likewise, the system of seat allocation chosen will also have a certain effect. The impact of the voting system is unpredictable, in particular if prominent party figures are not included on local lists but are placed on the top-up lists, as the British seem to envisage.
12. It is obvious that wider political developments, and the dynamic of the election campaign, will also have an impact: how will the SDLP do against SF and the UUP against the DUP? Will Alliance be squeezed? Will nationalist turnout stand up given the negative view both parties are taking of the elective process?

Seat Allocation

13. In a list system, there are four principal ways of allocating seats. Two of these are of the *largest remainder* type: Hare and Droop (also known as Hagenbach-Bischoff).. The other two are of the *highest average* type: d'Hondt and Sainte-Lague. In

² The one DL councillor elected in 1993, Davy Kettles (Fermanagh) has since left the party

essence, the Hare largest remainder system, and the Sainte-Lague highest average system, are relatively more helpful to smaller parties.

14. In *largest remainder* systems, a quota is established. Where there are five seats, the Hare quota is 20%, the Droop 16.7% (as in our PR-STV system). The first seats are allocated to parties exceeding the quota. The quota is then subtracted from their totals. The next seat goes to the party with the "largest remainder": the quota is then subtracted from its vote. This proceeds until the allocation of the fifth and final seat. The larger the quota, the lower the remainders of the bigger parties which win the early seats, thus giving a greater chance to smaller parties, in particular in relation to the last seat.
15. In *highest average* systems, the first seat is allocated to the party with the highest vote. Its total is then divided: in the case of the d'Hondt system, by $n+1$ (where n is the number of seats won), viz. 2, in the case of Sainte-Lague by $2n+1$, viz. 3. The next seat is given to the party with the largest outstanding vote. Its vote is divided in the same way, and so the allocation continues. Where a party has won two or more seats, its vote is divided by $n+1$ (d'Hondt - i.e. by 3, 4, 5....) or by $2n+1$ (Sainte-Lague - i.e. by 5, 7, 9....). Again, the larger the divisor, the lower the average of the larger parties, to the benefit of the small parties.
16. While it is understood that the NIO may be thinking of using the *Droop largest remainder system*, no definitive position has been revealed. Our calculations indicate that in Northern Ireland the different systems would operate in textbook fashion: thus the UUP, in particular, and the SDLP to a lesser degree, would do best under the Droop and d'Hondt systems, while Alliance and Sinn Féin would do best under Hare or Sainte-Lague. The latter two systems would increase the (albeit slight) chance of a small party or individual candidate (other than McCartney) winning a seat. However, the impact upon the parties of the electoral system, and the method of seat allocation chosen, should not be exaggerated. Counter-intuitively, the absence of

transfers does not seem likely to hurt Alliance, if it can maintain its first preference vote.

17. There are certain critical points at which the differences between the systems can make an impact. A party with 45% of the vote in a constituency will probably win 3 seats under Droop and d'Hondt, but might need 50% under the other two systems. With a vote total of 50% or more, a big party is hurt more by Sainte-Lague than by Hare: with a vote of less than 50%, the reverse applies. Likewise, the minimum vote on which a party could win a seat might drop from about 12/13% under Droop and d'Hondt to around 10/11% under Hare and Sainte-Lague, less in freakish circumstances: we calculate that if the 1992 vote in Upper Bann were to be exactly replicated, with a 3:1 UUP/DUP breakdown, Sinn Féin could under the Hare system win the final seat on a vote of 6.5%.
18. The differential effects of the various systems, when applied to the same voting figures, are set out below:

Seat Allocation System	UUP	DUP	SDLP	SF	Alliance	UKU
Largest Remainder (Hare)	31	18	21	9	9	2
Largest Remainder (Droop)	35	17	22	7	7	2
d'Hondt Highest Average	34	17	23	7	7	2
Sainte-Lague Highest Average	34	17	21	8	8	2

Constituency Analysis

19. A table setting out the possible result on a constituency basis is annexed.
20. **Antrim East** seems likely under any system to yield 3 UUP, 1 DUP, and 1 Alliance.

There is a slight chance of a second Alliance seat at the expense of the UUP.

21. Dr Paisley's stronghold of **Antrim North** looks like resulting in 3 DUP, 1 UUP, 1 SDLP.
22. In **Antrim South**, the UUP look certain to take 2, the DUP and SDLP 1 each. Under the Hare or Sainte-Lague systems, Alliance have a chance of taking the third UUP seat.
23. **Belfast East** should end up with 2 DUP, 2 Alliance and 1 UUP. However, should the voting system reduce either the Robinson or the Alderdice factors, the UUP could take the second seat from either the DUP or Alliance. This was a seat with a strong Conservative vote in 1992.
24. **Belfast North** should return 2 UUP, 1 DUP, 1 SDLP and 1 SF. It is now a stronger Unionist seat than in 1992.
25. **Belfast South** looks predictable: 2 UUP, 1 DUP, 1 SDLP, 1 Alliance.
26. **Belfast West** is unpredictable in various ways. Under the d'Hondt highest average system, no Unionist would be returned, and there would be 3 seats for one of the nationalist parties (the SDLP by a whisker, on the 1992 evidence - though conventional wisdom has Sinn Féin ahead here), and 2 for the other. Under the other systems, there should be a place for 1 Unionist, with 2 each for the SDLP and SF, but only if there is no significant split in the Unionist vote. We have ascribed this seat to the UUP, but there have been rumours that it could be left to Hugh Smyth of the PUP. On the nationalist side, it will not matter whether the SDLP or SF come first if the Unionists vote as a bloc - and if the d'Hondt system is not used.
27. **North Down** should yield 2 seats for McCartney's UK Unionists, 2 for the UUP and

- 1 for Alliance. The Conservatives might have a very slim chance of taking a seat from the UUP.
28. **South Down** will yield 3 SDLP and, probably, 2 UUP: under the Hare system the DUP could win the second Unionist seat.
29. Boundary changes in **Fermanagh/South Tyrone** should strengthen the Unionist position, leading to 2 safe UUP, 1 DUP, 1 SDLP and 1 SF. On past history, this is one constituency which might return an independent nationalist.
30. In **Foyle** 3 SDLP, 1 SF and 1 DUP should be elected, unless SF make significant gains at the SDLP's expense.
31. **Lagan Valley** looks like 3 UUP, 1 DUP and 1 Alliance. The SDLP would have a very slim chance of taking the Alliance seat.
32. **Derry East** will be more solidly Unionist with the removal of the Magherafelt wards to Mid-Ulster. The result should be 3 UUP, 1 DUP and 1 SDLP.
33. **Newry and Armagh** should result in 2 SDLP and 2 UUP. The destination of the third and final nationalist seat will depend on the method of seat allocation chosen: under d'Hondt and Droop it should go to the SDLP, while Hare and Sainte-Lague would favour SF.
34. **Strangford** should end up as 3 UUP, 1 DUP and 1 Alliance.
35. The key issue in **Tyrone West** will be the SDLP/SF breakdown. If the SDLP maintain their slight lead, as in the local elections, they will win 2 seats and SF 1, but a small swing would reverse matters. The UUP and the DUP should pick up 1 seat each.

36. The situation in **Mid-Ulster** is analogous to that in Tyrone West. It should end up as SDLP 2, SF 1, UUP 1 and DUP 1.

37. **Upper Bann** (David Trimble's constituency) should return 3 UUP, 1 DUP and 1 SDLP. Strictly arithmetically, use of the *Hare* system could lead to the return of 1 SF representative in place of the third UUP candidate. On the other hand, the SDLP vote has been rising and SF's declining since 1983: there is an outside chance of a second SDLP seat (ahead of the UUP).

R. Bassett/E. Downes/R. Montgomery

25 March 1996

Annex

Constituency	UUP	DUP	SDLP	SF	Alliance	UKU
Antrim E	3	1			1	
Antrim S	2-3	1	1		0-1	
Antrim N	1	3	1			
Belfast E	1	2			2	
Belfast N	2	1	1	1		
Belfast S	2	1	1		1	
Belfast W	0-1		2-3	2-3		
Down N	2				1	2
Down S	1	1	3			
Fermanagh & S Tyrone	2	1	1	1		
Foyle		1	3	1		
Lagan Valley	3	1			1	
Derry E	2-3	1	1		0-1	
Newry & Armagh	2		2-3	0-1		
Strangford	3	1			1	
Tyrone W	1	1	2	1		
Mid Ulster	1	1	2	1		
Upper Bann	2-3	1	1	0-1		
TOTAL	31-35	17-18	21-23	7-9 ³	7-9	2

³ The maximum estimated is 9, not 10, because the extra seat winnable seat in West Belfast under the d'Hondt system would be cancelled out by the negative effects of this system on SF's chances in Newry & Armagh