

Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly take place tomorrow

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Voters go to the polls Thursday, June 25 to elect the Northern Ireland Assembly. A total of 292 candidates will vie for the 108 seats in the new Assembly, established by the Good Friday Agreement.

In total 14 parties are contesting seats. Only the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), and the Alliance Party are contesting all 18 constituencies. Sinn Fein is standing in 17 constituencies, and the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) in 10.

The UUP has 48 candidates; the DUP, 34, United Kingdom Unionist, 13; Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), 12; Ulster Democratic Party, 9, Conservative, 6, Ulster Independence, 2. Five candidates call themselves simply 'unionist'.

The nationalist SDLP is fielding 38 candidates; Sinn Fein, 37.

The non-sectarian Alliance Party is fielding 22 candidates; the Natural Law Party, 16; Labour, 10, Workers' Party, 9; Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, 8; Green, 3; Independent, 3 and the Socialist Party (formerly Militant Labour), 3.

The election is being held to return six representatives for each of the North's 18 Westminster parliamentary constituencies. Unlike elections to the British Parliament, the Assembly election is being held under a form of proportional representation. Once a party secures enough votes to have its candidate(s) elected in a given constituency, its 'surplus' votes can be 'transferred' to other parties according to the preferences indicated by electors at the poll.

This complex system of voting makes the outcome of the election difficult to predict. Parties are not just fighting to secure their own vote in each constituency, but also to gain the 'transfers' of votes from other parties.

The week after the election the Assembly meets to appoint an 'interim presiding officer, First Minister and

Deputy First Minister designate'. The formation of a ministerial team will depend on negotiations between the parties represented in the Assembly. Various joint North-South bodies will come into operation following the elections and with the agreement of the Assembly.

Public reaction to the elections indicates once again the broad-based desire to bring an end to conflict in the North. A poll by the *Irish Times* shows 79 percent of voters backing pro-Agreement parties. The most important issue involved is still seen as 'peace,' which is up to 45 percent from a previous figure of 28 percent. The Unionist parties have sought to raise the issue of decommissioning of arms by the IRA to centre stage, but its importance for voters has fallen from 28 percent to 19 percent.

The focus on attempting to make the Agreement a success is also expressed in the apparently growing acceptance of tactical voting. The SDLP rejected a call for a nationalist pact, offered by Sinn Fein, in favour of calling on its voters to transfer their votes to any of the pro-Agreement parties, UUP and PUP as well as Sinn Fein.

The UUP's official line is for votes to be transferred to unionist parties, but the party's senior negotiator Reg Empey said in his personal view UUP voters should transfer to the SDLP. This has met a response. According to the same poll, 12 percent will vote for only one candidate, 66 percent will transfer and 28 percent will vote for parties they have not voted for before.

The DUP led the opposition to the Agreement, but in recent weeks its leader Ian Paisley has been replaced in the public eye by Peter Robinson, who wants to work in the new Assembly to oppose any further cross-border co-operation with the Republic.

The Agreement does not provide a basis for overcoming sectarian divisions, however. Its structures define the political process in the North in terms of essentially

hostile communities--Protestant and Catholic, Unionist and Nationalist/Republican. The passage of legislation in the Assembly will require majority support by the nationalist and unionist parties, with all members of the Assembly designated as nationalist, unionist or other.

It is this that determines the political agenda on which these elections are being fought. The contending parties all portray themselves as the best defenders of their respective 'communities' in the new political framework established by the Agreement.

Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams made the clearest statement of this new form of sectarian politics while on a visit to the US earlier this month. In a speech to the Irish Historical Institute in New York he insisted that under the new arrangements, 'Equality as between Catholics and Protestants is of course necessary and right. But so too is equality between nationalists and unionists. Nationalists, on a basis of equality, must be represented at all, including the highest levels of decision taking, implementation and review. And there must be equality everywhere. In the political institutions. In the judiciary. In the civil service. In public bodies. In a new policing service.'

Sinn Fein is seeking to become an integral part of the new methods of political rule in the North of Ireland. Whilst encouraging the belief that they represent the interests of all Catholics, they will work to defend the interests of big business and a thin layer of the middle class that will staff the new government administration. A recent article in the southern-based *Sunday Business Post* identified the social layers towards which Sinn Fein is oriented. It noted that the 'most significant demographic change in the north in the last decade is the increase in the young, traditionally nationalist population coming onto the voting register.' The article went on, 'In the next decade, a new highly-educated, sophisticated and self-confident generation of northern nationalists will emerge. Their traditional demand for Irish unity as a political objective may well be fuelled by an important new consideration, their desire to share and be part of the Celtic Tiger effect.'

Adams's comments were made just prior to a visit to the New York Stock Exchange in the company of NYSE President William Johnston. He later said of his mingling with the corporate speculators and asset strippers, 'on a visit to Wall Street I especially found an enormous heightened awareness of the efforts for peace in Ireland and a desire to help.' He called currency speculator George Soros, whom he met, 'a multibillionaire

Hungarian ... philanthropist.' In Washington Adams and the other Sinn Fein delegates held top-level talks with Clinton and leading White House officials on how to encourage US investment into the North.

The unionist parties are courting business interests with equal vigour. As the election campaign got under way, Reg Empey of the UUP called for competitive tax breaks to match those in the Irish Republic 'in an attempt to fight more effectively for inward investment.' The campaign for a 'Yes' vote in the referendum was centred on the promise that the Agreement would bring not only peace, but also prosperity based on emulating the successes of the Irish Republic in attracting foreign corporations to the island.

At present, one in every five US dollars invested in Western Europe goes to the Republic of Ireland. In contrast nearly half the working population in the North is still employed in the public sector. This is an enormous 'employment subsidy' which the British state is anxious to cut, along with expensive welfare provisions. Overseas investment in the North is up by 50 percent since the 1994 IRA cease-fire. Once the Assembly is in place, it will be the responsibility of the First Minister and his colleagues to force through cuts in spending and wages in order to drive down costs for industry.

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