

British general election: Northern Ireland vote deepens instability

Robert Stevens**12 June 2001**

The June 7 general election saw a sharp polarisation in the vote between the more extreme pro-British unionist and Irish republican parties in Northern Ireland.

The main casualty was the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) led by David Trimble, First Minister in the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly's. The extreme right wing Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)—which is opposed to power-sharing with the Irish nationalist Sinn Fein in the Assembly established through the 1997 Good Friday Agreement—was the main beneficiary of the collapse in the UUP vote. The DUP made gains against the UUP in every constituency it contested.

In total, 810,383 people voted in Northern Ireland to return 18 Members of Parliament to Westminster. Overall turnout was 68 percent, a 0.9 point increase compared with the 1997 general election. Trimble's UUP, which previously held 10 seats, gained one and lost five, leaving it with six MPs. The UUP received 26.8 percent of all votes cast in Northern Ireland, a decline of nearly six percent. There was a recount in Trimble's own constituency of Upper Bann before he was declared the winner. Trimble, who is widely regarded as the central unionist pillar of the Agreement, saw his own vote fall by 10.1 percent, as his 15,000 majority in 1997 was slashed to just over 2,000. David Simpson, the DUP candidate contesting the Upper Bann seat, saw his vote increase by 18 percent. During his victory speech, Trimble was heckled and booed by DUP supporters, and he was jostled outside the counting hall, requiring a police escort as he left the building.

On June 10, immediately following the election, Trimble insisted that he would not resign the UUP leadership but stated that if any member wanted to challenge his position, then they were free to do so. He said that the issue of the UUP leadership would be discussed at its Annual General Meeting within the next two weeks. The pro-unionist London-based *Daily Telegraph* quoted one Trimble opponent within the UUP who said, "To lose Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Strangford and East Londonderry is an incredible defeat and the knives are out. People smell

blood." Any challenge to Trimble's leadership would probably include Jeffrey Donaldson, the MP for Lagan Valley who is opposed to the Good Friday Agreement and is seen as a strong candidate to replace him.

The DUP, which is led by the Reverend Ian Paisley, won a further two seats, taking its total to five. The party's share of the popular vote was 22.5 percent, an increase of nearly nine percent, the largest increase of all the participating parties, and represents the DUP's best ever showing in a general election.

Paisley proclaimed the election result as a vindication of his party's opposition to the Good Friday Agreement and Sinn Fein being allowed into the devolved government institutions before the Irish Republican Army (IRA) had decommissioned its weapons. Paisley said, "The message is for Mr Trimble to quit: he has destroyed our country by making concession after concession to the IRA."

In the republican/nationalist camp, Sinn Fein doubled its seat tally from two to four, overtaking the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), which retained its three seats. Sinn Fein is now the largest republican party in Northern Ireland, with 21.7 percent of the vote—an increase of 5.6 percent. The SDLP's share decreased by 3.1 percent to 21 percent.

Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams won his West Belfast seat and increased his majority against the SDLP's Alex Attwood whose vote fell by 10,000 compared with 1997. In Mid-Ulster, Martin McGuinness, the Sinn Fein Education Secretary in the Northern Ireland Assembly increased his majority by 5,000, while the SDLP vote decreased by about 3,000.

SDLP leader John Hume managed to hold his own seat for the Foyle constituency, which includes Northern Ireland's second largest city of Derry, but saw his lead over Sinn Fein cut. Deputy leader Seamus Mallon also retained his seat, but his majority was reduced substantially by the increased vote for Sinn Fein candidate Conor Murphy.

The two new seats that Sinn Fein won—West Tyrone and Fermanagh & South Tyrone—were both at the expense of the Ulster Unionist Party. Ken Maginnis, the former Ulster

Unionist MP and security spokesman, had held the Fermanagh & South Tyrone seat for the previous 18 years, but lost to Sinn Fein by only 53 votes after a recount.

UUP candidate James Cooper said that he would contest the election of the successful Sinn Fein candidate Michelle Gildernew, because there had been “clear and irrefutable evidence of electoral malpractice.”

Traditionally, Sinn Fein candidates elected to Westminster do not take up their seats.

There are similarities between the increased vote for the DUP and Sinn Fein, but there are also important differences. Both parties have benefited from the way in which the Northern Ireland Agreement made sectarian divisions the basis for the functioning of the Assembly and its supporting structures. Policy making within the Assembly requires a majority of votes from parties designated as either “Unionist/Protestant” or “Republican/Catholic”. The votes of any parties designated as “other”—i.e. which do not openly accept such sectarian labels—are largely inconsequential. Portrayed as a means of overcoming traditional hostilities through balance and compromise, the Good Friday agreement has ensured that political life continues to be characterised by the division of the working class along religious lines.

This was a central aim of the British, Irish and US governments. They wanted to end armed conflict on the streets, but did not want a united movement of working people to emerge, so that no effective challenge would be mounted to their efforts to reshape the economy of Northern Ireland as a profitable investment location for the major transnational corporations, hoping to emulate the economic successes of the southern Irish Republic.

Relying on keeping sectarian tensions within a more manageable framework, without addressing any of the historical and social issues that gave rise to them, was never a viable basis for political stability. Though the IRA has demonstrated a reluctance to decommission its weapons, the Agreement's efforts to incorporate Sinn Fein into the new governmental structures in Northern Ireland have been largely successful, with the organisation enjoying two ministerial posts in the all-party Executive under First Minister Trimble. Sinn Fein continues to exploit the legitimate grievances of Catholic workers, who face routine discrimination in all spheres of life as well as repression by the British armed forces and the largely Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary. But they are fully behind the Agreement, because it gives them the possibility of achieving the power and privilege hitherto denied them. Speaking on the election results, Martin McGuinness, Sinn Fein MP for Mid Ulster and Education Minister in the Assembly, called on all the parties to work together. He said,

“I think many of the difficulties and problems that are out there, whether it be the need to bring about a new beginning to policing, the issue of demilitarisation and how we get armed groups to put weapons beyond use can be resolved. I think all of these difficulties, if there is a will, can be resolved”.

The DUP's increased vote at the expense of the UUP is by far the most problematic for ruling circles in Britain, Ireland and the US. It confirms the growing disaffection amongst a section of northern Protestants since the Assembly was set up. The DUP has made the accusation that the IRA has failed to disarm central to its propaganda, accusing the UUP of “selling out to the terrorists”. But it also exploits fears amongst Protestant workers who face declining living standards and the fact that the growing numerical and political strength of Catholic-based parties will further undermine their own social position. Should Trimble fall and the UUP be plunged into a leadership contest, it is difficult to see how the Agreement could be preserved.

The day the election results were announced, British Prime Minister Tony Blair telephoned the Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern to discuss a crisis meeting at the upcoming European summit in Gothenburg in Sweden this week. The implementation of the Good Friday Agreement has a deadline of July 1, by which date all paramilitary weapons are to be decommissioned. Trimble is on record as saying that if IRA decommissioning does not take place by that date, then he would resign as First Minister. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, John Reid, is to contact all of the main parties this week in order to arrange new talks.



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