

Northern Ireland elections: Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein gain support

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Elections for the suspended Northern Ireland Assembly resulted in predicted gains in support for the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein.

The DUP has become the largest party in the Assembly should its one-year suspension by the British government be reversed. It is opposed to the power-sharing arrangements with Sinn Fein that are essential to the operation of the constitutional arrangements established under the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

The party led by the right-wing demagogue, Reverend Ian Paisley, increased its share of the 108 seats in the Assembly from 20 to 30, taking seats from the minority unionist parties such as the UK Unionist Party and the Progressive Unionist Party. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) led by current First Minister of the Assembly David Trimble lost one seat, retaining 27. In percentages the DUP took 25.7 percent against the UUP's 22.6 percent. But the swing to the anti-Agreement faction of the Protestant bourgeoisie is greater than this suggests. Around six UUP Assembly members led by Jeffrey Donaldson also oppose power sharing and the participation of Sinn Fein in the Assembly and have called for closer relations between the UUP and the DUP.

Sinn Fein won 24 seats, an increase of six, all taken from the catholic-based Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), making Sinn Fein the largest Irish republican nationalist party. The SDLP held only 18 seats as Sinn Fein won 23.5 percent of the vote against the SDLP's 17 percent.

Also significant was the loss of support for smaller pro-Agreement parties such as the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, who lost both their seats, while the Alliance Party made no gains. Both advance themselves as non-sectarian and dedicated to bridging the gap between Protestants and Catholics.

Turnout was 63.8 percent, higher than anticipated but still down.

Overall the parties perceived as the most aggressive defenders of nationalist and unionist "communities" triumphed. While Sinn Fein's pro-Agreement and business oriented policies are all but indistinguishable from the SDLP's, its use of left-wing rhetoric and militant history allowed it to win an unprecedented level of support amongst nationalists and Catholics who saw it as a more aggressive advocate of their interests. The anti-Agreement DUP was able to win support from sections of Protestants and unionists by claiming that the Agreement had unfairly benefited Catholics. Besides defending the Orange Order's right to march and bemoaning the "destruction" of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the DUP nodded towards social concerns such as health and education sloganeering that "its time for a fair deal".

Success for both parties has come at the expense of the UUP and SDLP, considered by the British government to be its most reliable allies in Northern Ireland. Under the terms of the Agreement, Paisley should replace Trimble as First Minister of Northern Ireland while Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams should be the Deputy First Minister.

In reality, Northern Ireland will continue to be ruled directly from London as an extended bout of horse trading takes place behind the backs of the working class so that the British, Irish and US governments can press for some form of accommodation between the DUP and Sinn Fein. The British government minister responsible for Northern Ireland, Paul Murphy, announced he intended to talk to leaders of the four major parties as soon as possible to explore possibilities.

These will not prove quick or easy as the DUP fought

the election on the basis of denouncing the Agreement and Sinn Fein. During the two-day count, Paisley grabbed a reporter by his lapels and shouted, “No, I’m not talking to Sinn Fein and the party’s not talking to Sinn Fein.” His son, Ian Paisley junior, reiterated the message that the Agreement was “dead in the water”.

Nevertheless, while the DUP is led by Paisley who has built his political career on naked unionist demagoguery he is hardly immune from political inducements, bribery and threats. And sections of his party are keen to find an arrangement to allow the Assembly and some version of the Agreement to be revived. Figures such as Paisley’s deputy, Peter Robinson, and Nigel Dodds, a barrister and former mayor of Belfast, have attracted praise from the business press, and are seen as more pliable than the 77-year-old Paisley. For all the DUP’s denunciation of the Agreement, both Dodds and Robinson served as ministers in the Assembly’s fitful existence—Dodds as the Minister for Social Development, Robinson as the Minister for Regional Development. Moves are likely to be attempted to sideline Paisley senior.



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