

Sinn Féin no Shoe-in – for First Ministry



Fissiparous DUP may give it a run for its money in May election

By Anton McCabe

A SINN FÉIN First Minister is by no means certain after the Northern Assembly election in May. It is most probable Sinn Féin will be the largest party in terms of votes. In the last Assembly election, it was only 1,000 behind the DUP. However, there is a precedent for the largest party in votes not being the largest party in seats.

In the first Assembly election of 1998, the SDLP received the largest vote. It was over 5,700 votes ahead of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). However, the UUP was four seats ahead.

At time of writing, the latest opinion polls put Sinn Féin on 23.2%. That is 3.8% ahead of the second-placed DUP.

There are two warnings.

The poll is three months before the election.

And just as importantly, the election takes place across 18 bitterly fought constituencies.

Sinn Féin currently stands on 27 seats. The DUP is on 28. For Michelle O'Neill to become First Minister requires Sinn Féin to hold 27, and the DUP to lose at least one seat. That is because, according to the St Andrews Agreement, if the two largest parties have an equal number of seats, the one with the largest vote gets the First Ministership.

Currently, it is difficult to see where Sinn Féin can take any extra seats. Seat numbers seem maximised. In 2017 the party benefited from a perfect storm. The Assembly had been reduced from 108 seats to 90. That meant five, rather than six, members per constituency. Sinn Féin's Assembly representation was only reduced by one seat. It lost two and gained one.

At the other end of the storm the DUP suffered a perfect disaster in 2017. It lost 10 seats. This time the only seat in apparent serious danger for the party is the third seat in Strangford. This was held by 225 votes ahead of the SDLP five years ago.

However, the SDLP has historically always been close there, but never close enough. The SDLP has also lost the momentum which it took from the 2019 Westminster election.

On the surface, the latest polls look good for Alliance. It is in joint third place with the UUP. However, it has limited opportunities for gains. Currently the eight Alliance Assembly members are either in Belfast, or in constituencies bordering it. Party leader Naomi Long is an able politician. Otherwise, for a party perceived as drawing from the middle-classes, it is strangely low on talent. Its most realistic chances of extra seats are in North Belfast, where it was close to the second Sinn Féin candidate; in South Down, where it was close to the second SDLP candidate; and possibly in North Antrim, where it polled well in the 2019 Westminster election. Taking one of these three would be doing well.

Alliance has traditionally benefited well from transfers. However, the reduction in Assembly members has increased the number of votes necessary to reach quotas.

Contrary to Alliance, the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) is transfer-unfriendly. The latest opinion poll puts the TUV on 6%. Five-seat constituencies put the TUV at a disadvantage. Its candidates would have to be at or close to quota on the first count to have a chance. Beyond party leader Jim Allister, the party lacks known candidates. On a bad day for the DUP, TUV transfers would save some of its seats.

Meanwhile all is turmoil in this dysfunctional

polity. It is too early to say if the UUP's Doug Beattie has done major damage with his foolish tweets. At best, rather than going forward he has been bogged down in damage limitation. He is also suffering from miscalculating in West Tyrone. He removed a popular local candidate and imposed an outsider, again attracting negative publicity.

Meanwhile DUP leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson has made his sixth threat in five months to collapse the Assembly over the Northern Ireland Protocol. This shows poor negotiating strategy and confusing supporters. Edwin Poots is beavering feaverishly away seeking to break the law on agricultural inspections for EU imports.

And Sinn Féin isn't necessarily more dignified. After the controversy over the Beattie tweets, Radio Ulster's Nolan Show decided to examine tweets from other parties. At the time of writing, 11% of Sinn Féin Assembly members have been found to have posted inappropriate tweets.

DUP First Minister Paul Givan has resigned in protest at the Protocol. This seems to have largely satisfied the DUP faithful. They had been restless at threats that were not followed through. However, the DUP clearly intends to go back into the Assembly. Party leader Jeffrey Donaldson may well have trouble selling that to the base, as it is very unlikely the Protocol will be removed.

All forecasts, of course, could be thrown into the air if the irreconcilable differences in the DUP erupt into schism before the election. In the North things remain in a nasty flux. **L**



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