THE RESULT OF THE BALLOT

It is the same old faces with the same old arguments.
It never worked before so why should it work now?

Ulster housewife to reporter

Only one party leader, Gerry Fitt of the SDLP, noted any symbolism in the date set for the Convention election, 1 May, the internationally celebrated day of trade union and working class solidarity. And no party leader publicized that the date was symbolic in another sense as well: May Day in Morse code is an internationally recognized symbol of distress. In the final week of the campaign, six Ulstermen were killed in four separate shooting and bombing incidents; the dead included the leader of the Official IRA in Belfast, Billy McMillan, shot in what appeared to be an episode of the IRA/IRSP factional feud. The day before polling, a spokesman for the paramilitary Protestant Action Group claimed that its members had murdered seven Roman Catholics in the previous two weeks. Polling day was relatively uneventful: no one was killed, but the homes or automobiles of two candidates were bombed, Republican Club election workers were shot at in the Lower Falls area of Belfast, and policemen taking away ballot boxes to the count were stoned by hundreds of demonstrators in the Creggan area of Londonderry.

Turnout and Boycott

The overall turnout for the Convention election was 65.8 percent, a decline of 6.5 percentage points from the turnout at the 1973 Assembly election, and of 1.9 percentage points from the October
1974 Westminster ballot in the Province. This was the third lowest turnout for any of the fourteen elections for Ulster representative assemblies that have taken place in the last half-century. The low turnout occurred in spite of the fact that the qualification for postal voting is more liberal than in Great Britain. This was intended to encourage people to vote at home, if they feared intimidation or violence at polling stations.\(^1\) In the Convention election, 8.0 percent of the total electorate voted by post, including 20.8 percent of the voters in Mid-Ulster and 20.2 percent of the voters in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, both rural constituencies where the Republicans are relatively strong; nearly one in every eight ballots counted was a postal ballot.

The hope of Provisional Sinn Fein to secure a massive boycott of the Convention election was not realized. Some nonvoting is inevitable, because the electoral register is compiled only once a year, in the autumn; it necessarily includes the names of people who have died or left the troubled Province by the time of a May election. When turnout approaches 100 percent of the registered electorate, the likelihood rises that impersonation or fraud has occurred. An indicator of the effect of the Provisional boycott is, ironically, the tabulation of spoiled ballots. This traditional Sinn Fein tactic prevents anyone else from impersonating the voter, as well as providing an official tally of protest votes. In 1973, spoiled ballots were cast by 1.6 percent of the total electorate; in 1975, the total was 2.7 percent. The largest proportion of spoiled votes was in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, 3.0 percent, which also had the highest turnout of any constituency, 78.4 percent. Overall, there was a very high correlation between the proportion of Catholics in a constituency and the number of spoiled ballots. If spoiled ballot papers were overwhelmingly protest votes by Republicans, and if an equal number of Catholics abstained completely from marking ballot papers, then about 3 percent of the electorate supported the Republicans in ways that do not show up in the subsequent tabulation of valid votes cast for political parties.

Because of the importance of the issues and the relative clarity of the parties' positions, the choice offered the Northern Ireland electorate in the Convention election was the most clear-cut since the Stormont ballot of 1965. The answer given by the voters was also clear-cut: a majority voted for candidates of the Loyalist United

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\(^1\)Postal voting also makes intimidation or corruption easier. In the words of Conor O’Clery, in “Dossier for Secretary of State Cites ‘Postal Vote Factory’ at Work,” *Irish Times*, 21 April 1975, the liberal provision of postal ballots meant: “The Ulster dead have become more sophisticated. They can mark the ballot papers in the privacy of their own graves.”