

Electoral Shirkers: Contested Elections in Council Areas Highlighted by the Civil Rights Movement

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Electoral Shirkers

A report by the Electoral Reform Society (ERS) studied nominations for the English local government elections which were about to be held in May 2019. “148 seats will see candidates handed councillor roles without any electoral challenge, meaning that for many, next month’s local elections are effectively cancelled”¹. In certain areas, the number of nominees did not exceed the number of councillors to be elected. Some 148 councillors would be elected unopposed.

The ERS mourned the fact that a party or individual could be guaranteed a seat in so many wards. We do, however, have to see this in context. The Local Government Association conducted a survey of all English councillors in 2018. It reckoned that there were 17,770 of them². However, only 8410 of those seats were up for election in 2019³. Thus around 1.76% of council seats were uncontested. To the ERS, the glass was two per cent empty.

The fact that the glass was 98% full does rather suggest that, in England, there is no significant tradition of avoiding elections in which a party’s candidates have no genuine chance of winning. It is the norm for some parties to contest elections where defeat is almost inevitable. There is therefore likely to be little tolerance of electoral shirkers, major parties who only contest elections where victory is likely. Uncontested elections are still rare enough to be considered slightly shocking by English observers.

Avoiding Elections

In England there is what is normally called a first-past-the-post system in elections to local authorities. As many wards elect multiple members, it could more accurately be described as first-n-past-the-post system where “n” is the number of councillors to be elected. Each elector can vote for up to n candidates. This same system was in operation within Northern Ireland between the proportional representation local elections which were held in 1920 and 1973.

In Northern Ireland, however, there was a quite different attitude towards uncontested seats. Frank Gallagher, writing in 1957, estimated that the average percentages of unopposed candidates in different types of local elections were as follows:

Table 1: Uncontested Council Seats ⁴

Type of Local Election	Average % of Uncontested Seats
Urban Areas 1923-1955	59.6
Rural Areas 1924-1955	94.9
County Councils 1924-1955	94.4

The tradition was that Nationalists and Unionists did not put up candidates against each other. The lower percentage of uncontested seats in urban areas is largely because Labour candidates of various flavours tended to stand for at least some of the wards in the towns.

Both Nationalists and Unionists were large scale electoral shirkers, refusing to put up candidates where they thought they were not likely to win. But there is another respect in which they were different. Nationalists complained that they did not have a reasonable opportunity to win enough elections. Unionists usually did not. Because Nationalists spent the very minimum of effort in contesting elections, they were in danger of attracting little sympathy from an English audience which had minimal tolerance of electoral shirkers. For the most part, however, English observers were unaware of the extent of shirking.

Nationalists were playing a clever game which, in retrospect, left them open to a charge of dishonesty. They had a secret. In the key towns which were subject to complaints by the “civil rights” movement, Nationalists were really not as good at attracting the Catholic vote as they said they were. The relative absence of local government electoral contests did, to some extent, tend to conceal this fact ⁵.

To divert attention from this weakness, they came up with a subtle argument. It went something like this: “Here is an analysis showing the number of Catholics and Protestants on the electoral register. All those Catholics vote Nationalist, so there is a Nationalist majority. Don’t bother your pretty little head looking for any election results to test this claim. Just take our word for it”. Looking back on this era, it is embarrassing to think just how successful this argument was.

It was even accepted by the Cameron Commission in the late 1960s at a time when “civil rights” activists were, in effect, saying “This movement is not about Irish Nationalism. People are looking for a different kind of politics”. Many people believed that. Under such circumstances, it was puzzling that they often simultaneously believed that all Catholics voted for Nationalist candidates.

More recent analyses of local election results in places like Londonderry and Omagh have shown that Catholic voters were much more likely to defect to Labour than were Protestant voters, who provided solid support for Unionist candidates ⁶. The alleged large Nationalist majorities on paper turned out to be not so large in the real world.

This was confirmed in 1973, when a number of changes to electoral arrangements, including the introduction of proportional representation, should have brought large

scale benefits to Nationalists. In fact, Nationalism and Republicanism struggled to win a slender majority of seats in Londonderry and would have lost a first-n-past-the-post election ⁷. In the Omagh Town District Electoral Area (DEA), Nationalists could not win a majority of seats until years later ⁸.

The Extent of Electoral Shirking

In 1920 and 1973, Northern Ireland had local government elections based on the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system of Proportional Representation (PR). Between those dates, elections were on a first-n-past-the-post basis. So just how bad was Nationalist electoral shirking during that period in some of the areas deemed to be the most contentious by the “civil rights” movement?

Some Labour candidates and Independents forced elections in Nationalist wards, but the most interesting case is where Nationalists challenged Unionists. This is a true test of how hard Nationalists tried to increase their representation. The following table shows the number of candidates nominated by Nationalists for contested elections in Unionist-held and marginal wards from 1923/1924 to 1967. These were the contests held between the PR elections in 1920 and 1973.

Table 2: Nationalist Enthusiasm for Challenging Unionists 1923/1924 to 1967 ⁹

Local Authority	Number of Nationalist Candidates Who Contested Unionist-Held or Marginal Wards/Divisions
Armagh Urban District/Armagh City	0
Dungannon Urban District	0
Londonderry County Borough	1
Omagh Urban District	0
Omagh Rural District	4
Fermanagh County Council	11
Tyrone County Council	0

It can be seen from Table 2 that Nationalists’ attempts to increase their representation by challenging Unionists were minimal or non-existent. Here are a few more details.

Armagh Urban District Council/Armagh City

In 1923, Nationalists controlled two out of the three Armagh wards. They had no interest in fighting the Unionist St Mark's Ward (later to be renamed the East Ward) and there were no contests at all in Armagh during that year ¹⁰. This situation was repeated in 1926, except that this time the two Catholic wards were represented by a Labour and Nationalist coalition ¹¹.

Labour disappeared from the scene by the time of the 1929 elections, which were again uncontested ¹². In 1932 there was the unusual sight of a candidate who did not want to be elected. Seven Nationalists appeared on the ballot paper for the six seats in the North Ward. Joseph McKenna tried to withdraw, but he missed the official deadline for withdrawal and hence ended up on the ballot paper. In spite of saying, in effect, "Don't vote for me", he did receive 212 votes, but he was spared the embarrassment of winning a seat ¹³.

In 1934, before the next local election was due, Armagh became mired in corruption and maladministration. A commissioner was appointed to run the council and there were to be no more elections until 1946.

In that year there was a proposal to extend the Armagh City boundary so that its 384 acres of land would become 1340 acres. A public inquiry was held by Armagh County Council. The City Planning Officer, Mr.G.P.Bell, told the inquiry that there was "lack of space for new houses by local authorities; general dilapidation and decay of existing houses; certain troubles with road circulation; and complete lack of public open spaces. There was serious overcrowding both as to the number of people in the houses and, in some cases, as to the houses themselves...Whole sections of the town should be pulled down and rebuilt as soon as houses could be got to which people could be moved. A thousand new houses were required for the area of the proposed enlarged city" ¹⁴.

The expanded City merited a five ward system, and the commissioner announced in July 1946 that the Ministry was to reconstitute the Armagh Urban District Council. Elections would be held to return it to the control of elected representatives. Far from being keen to celebrate the return of electoral politics, Armagh Nationalists chose to boycott the elections in September 1946 ¹⁵. Various kinds of Labour candidates filled the void in taking the seats in the two wards with Catholic majorities (South-West and North-West). In the three Unionist areas, the only contest was generated by an Independent Labour candidate who stood unsuccessfully in the North-East Ward.

The Nationalist boycott continued in 1949, when there were no contests at all. Irish Labour Party candidates took the seats unopposed in the North-West Ward. In the South-West Ward, such was the fever pitch interest in the election that only two nominations were received for the four seats (from Independents) ¹⁶.

In 1952, councillors in the Unionist wards were elected unopposed. Nationalists continued their boycott and seats in the two Catholic wards were fought over by Independents and the Irish Labour Party ¹⁷. The next election in 1955 again saw the

Unionists elected unopposed while the seats in the other two wards were shared between Independents and the Armagh Labour Party ¹⁸.

1958 saw the usual pattern in the three Unionist wards while Independents of a Nationalist persuasion swept the board in contested elections against Labour candidates in the North-West and South-West Wards ¹⁹. In 1961, there were no contested elections ²⁰.

Three years later, there was a bit more excitement as Ratepayers and Citizen Ratepayers candidates forced some contests. The presence of a Protestant standing (successfully) as a Ratepayer in the Nationalist South-West Ward, and a Catholic Citizens Ratepayer (unsuccessfully) contesting the Unionist South Ward, did not quite qualify as a Nationalist-Unionist battle, but it was as close as Armagh came. The Nationalist Party had only recently set up an official branch in Armagh, but the election did not go well for them. Ratepayers and Citizen Ratepayers took six seats in the two Nationalist wards, but all their candidates were defeated by Unionists in the other three divisions ²¹. In 1967 only 19 candidates were nominated for the 20 seats when a Ratepayers councillor decided not to stand again ²².

The fact that Nationalists did not challenge any of the Unionist councillors in over 50 years would be considered mildly shocking by an English audience unused to such a high degree of electoral shirking.

Dungannon Urban District

In Dungannon Urban District there were three wards, each returning seven councillors. The Central and East Wards would normally be Unionist, and the West Ward Nationalist. In 1923 the Dungannon Nationalists boycotted the elections and the Unionists took all 21 seats ²³.

In 1926, the elections generated a little more interest. The Nationalists returned to the fray, but restricted themselves to nominating just seven candidates in the West Ward. Independent candidates from a Unionist background stood against the official Unionist candidates in the other two wards, winning five seats to the Unionists nine ²⁴. Some of these were retiring Unionist councillors who had not been reselected. The Independents then caused considerable controversy by entering into a pact with the Nationalists to elect an Independent Chairman of the Council, and a Nationalist Vice-Chairman ²⁵.

What would be considered normal business was resumed in 1929 with the Independent challenge disappearing. Most of the former Independent councillors were returned unopposed as Unionists. There were no contested seats, and the Council consisted of 14 Unionists and seven Nationalists ²⁶.

This pattern was repeated in 1932 ²⁷, 1936 ²⁸ (when the triennial elections were delayed by a year because of a general change in the urban election date from January to May), and 1939 ²⁹.

In the 1946 election, the Unionists were, as usual elected unopposed in the Central and East Wards. In the Catholic West Ward, the two Labour candidates were successful, compared with five of the six Nationalist candidates³⁰. This demonstrated, in microcosm, the tendency of many Catholic votes to defect to Labour. At the same time, putting up Labour candidates in wards with Protestant majorities West of the Bann was universally unsuccessful and often considered not worth the effort.

Three years later, the Nationalists in the West Ward avoided a contest by nominating only five candidates, leaving two Labour candidates to be elected unopposed. The usual pattern of 14 Unionists being elected without a contest was broken when a single Independent from a Unionist background unsuccessfully challenged the seven official Unionists in the Central Ward³¹.

In 1952 there was something that was unique in the history of Dungannon in that all 21 sitting councillors were returned, naturally unopposed. This meant the Nationalists' arrangement with the two Labour councillors in the West Ward continued³².

The next election in 1955 did not produce any contests either, but it did generate a point of interest for the election aficionado. The Nationalists originally had eight nominations for the seven seats in the West Ward. Two of the candidates withdrew, leaving them one nominee short. There was a rule at that time that if there were no nominees in a single member ward, the outgoing councillor could be deemed re-elected. This happened quite often in rural districts. It was very unusual in a town. The Town Clerk resolved the problem by ruling that all five retiring Nationalist councillors who were not seeking re-election were eligible to be deemed re-elected. A ballot was conducted to select one of them, Joseph Campbell, and he agreed to be the seventh councillor³³.

The 1958 election again ended up with 14 Unionists and seven Nationalists being elected unopposed. However, the Nationalists initially once again had a problem with having too many candidates. Ten people had been nominated for the seven West Ward seats, and it was only minutes before the deadline for withdrawals that frantic negotiations persuaded three Nationalist candidates to drop out³⁴.

At the next election, there were eventually just seven candidates in the West Ward, but only after Joseph Stewart, the MP for East Tyrone, and leader of the Nationalist group at Stormont, had dropped out. This was most significant. By 1961 there was growing discontent with the Nationalist Party among Dungannon Catholics. Although all seven had a similar attitude on the question of a united Ireland, only three of the councillors returned for the West Ward described themselves as Nationalist. Others were described as Independent, Labour, or Independent Labour³⁵. This discontent would, within a few years, develop into a coherent alternative opposition inspired by the Catholic pressure group, the Campaign for Social Justice. The East Ward Unionists were elected unopposed while, in the Central Ward, the seven Unionists easily defeated the single Independent Ex-Serviceman candidate, Malachy Sweeney.

The *Dungannon Observer* complained about “the pro-British slant of his [Sweeney’s] election manifesto”³⁶.

The normal method of selecting “official” Nationalist candidates was to call a meeting of Catholic representatives of different parishes, typically chaired by the parish priest. In 1961 there were said to be 48 people at this meeting³⁷. In 1964, the *Dungannon Observer* thought there were about 600 people at the equivalent meeting, which passed a vote of no confidence in all but one of the retiring Nationalist representatives³⁸. It was in Dungannon that the emergence of a more confrontational “civil rights” flavour of Catholic politics first filtered through into the electoral process. They were inspired by the Dungannon-based Campaign for Social Justice (CSJ). In its electoral manifestation, its leader was probably seen as Patricia McCluskey.

The Catholic community meeting endorsed seven candidates for the West Ward from the Campaign for Social Justice. McCluskey said they would make “an honest attempt to draw the two communities in Dungannon closer together and to work sincerely with friendly disposed Councillors for the good of all”³⁹. To local Unionists this would have sounded implausible. Non-violent confrontation was to be prioritised by the CSJ over the development of friendly relations.

In terms of this paper’s central theme of electoral shirking, the CSJ’s battle with the old Nationalist Party made no difference at all. It confined its election interventions to the West Ward. There was no attempt to win the votes of Protestants in the other two wards. This was a purely Catholic initiative.

In the West Ward, the Nationalists fought their corner, in spite of being technically deselected by a Catholic community meeting. Four Independent (CSJ) candidates were elected, along with two Nationalists and an Independent Labour candidate⁴⁰. Jim Corrigan, one of the successful CSJ candidates claimed that the Unionist minority in the West Ward had voted Nationalist⁴¹.

Billy Boyd, Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) MP for Woodvale, stated that “Orangemen came into the West Ward to tell Protestant people to vote Nationalist in order to keep Labour out”⁴². The NILP’s two candidates in the West Ward were defeated. The reason for Protestant tactical voting was, of course, that the NILP was becoming too closely associated with “civil rights” agitation against Unionism. Protestants preferred Nationalists who were more committed to developing a working relationship with their Unionist neighbours. We shall see the same phenomenon in the Omagh Urban District.

In the East Ward, seven Unionist candidates fended off the three NILP challengers. Similarly, in the Central Ward, seven Unionists were elected and the two NILP candidates were unsuccessful. Having elections in all three wards made for much more interesting politics, but there was still no Unionist-Nationalist contest in sight.

In 1967, the Unionists defeated two NILP candidates in the East Ward, and its standard bearers were all elected unopposed in the Central Ward. There was something of an oddity in the West Ward. The Catholic community meeting was this

time convened by the National Registration Association, which would normally have been concerned with making sure as many Catholics as possible were registered to vote. The meeting was chaired by Paddy Duffy, a solicitor.

To some people's surprise it was attended by a Protestant, Jack Hassard, who was about to be selected as an NILP candidate. In the meeting, 136 people cast votes and chose seven people to endorse, one of whom was Hassard ⁴³. He was obviously deemed to be sufficiently close to CSJ policy to be worthy of support.

The endorsement of the Catholic community meeting was crucial. Similarly, the support of the CSJ ⁴⁴. Jack Hassard and Noel Abernethy both stood as NILP candidates in the West Ward, but whereas Hassard received 747 votes and was elected, Abernethy, who did not have official Catholic community or CSJ backing, won just 298 votes and was defeated. Five Independents (CSJ) and one Nationalist were the other winners ⁴⁵.

It did mean that traditional Nationalists and the CSJ had between them gone over 50 years without ever putting up even a single candidate in a Unionist controlled ward.

Londonderry County Borough Council (Londonderry Corporation)

When PR was abolished, Londonderry simply went back to the five ward system operating since 1896. Nationalists boycotted the Londonderry Corporation elections in 1923. There were no nominations in the West and South Wards and those seats were left vacant ⁴⁶. Councillor William Logue, who was on the Socialist wing of Nationalism, did subsequently allow himself to be "deemed re-elected" for one of these vacant seats, even though he had not submitted nomination papers.

There were normally triennial elections in local government (elections every three years), but councils could opt to switch to annual elections, with a third of councillors retiring each year. The Londonderry Corporation decided to go down this route from 1926.

From the elections in 1926 until the Nationalist boycott ended in 1931, Labour candidates filled the void in the West and South Wards, areas with a predominantly Catholic electorate. Unionists held the North, East and Waterside Wards. In 1926, the Unionist Party and Labour both contested all five wards ⁴⁷. This would never happen again. Later in 1926, the Unionist candidate beat his Labour opponent in a North Ward by-election ⁴⁸.

In 1927, two Labour candidates in each of the West and South Wards were returned unopposed, as were two Unionists in the North, East and Waterside Wards. The next year followed a similar pattern, but an Independent Unionist challenged two official Unionist candidates in the North Ward ⁴⁹. He was unsuccessful. There were no contests in 1929 or 1930 with Labour and the Unionist Party sharing the seats ⁵⁰.

From 1931, the Nationalist ended their boycott of Londonderry Corporation elections. In 1931, 1932 and 1933 there were contests for the council in the South Ward, where

two Nationalists were challenged by Frank Callaghan, representing Labour. In the first two years, the margin of victory was narrow and getting narrower⁵¹. In 1932, an Independent Unionist defeated the official Unionist candidate for an alderman's seat in the Waterside Ward⁵².

In 1933, the Nationalists tried to choreograph a deal whereby they would put forward only one candidate for the two South Ward seats, leaving a place for Frank Callaghan of Labour to be elected unopposed alongside the Nationalist. This plan was upset when a sitting Labour councillor, Charles McGahey, stood under the Independent Labour banner. Callaghan topped the poll, with McGahey, a Protestant, running the Nationalist close for the second seat⁵³.

Somewhat surprisingly, after this strong performance, Labour fielded no candidates in the 1934 elections. Nationalist and Unionist councillors were returned unopposed in their respective wards⁵⁴. Because the date of urban local government elections changed from January to May, the next elections were delayed until 1936.

In that year, there were no Labour candidates again. The only contest was in the North Ward, where two Unionists won the two seats, defeating a single Nationalist candidate. This was a historic occasion because it was the only time between the PR elections in 1920 and 1973 when a Nationalist stood in a Unionist-held ward⁵⁵.

In March that year, the Corporation had proposed a new three ward scheme. Among other problems, the North Ward had become much bigger than the other wards, and when its boundaries were drawn, no account had been taken of the community of interest principle so valued by the modern Local Government Boundary Commission in England. A public inquiry into this scheme led to the Ministry of Home Affairs approving a revised three ward scheme. There would be North, South and Waterside Wards⁵⁶.

The local elections due in May 1937 were postponed due to the coronation of King George VI. In 1938, Labour candidates re-entered the fray, unsuccessfully challenging the Unionists in the North Ward, and the Nationalists, standing as Anti-Partition candidates, in the South Ward. In a rarely contested election for the Aldermen in the South Ward, the two Anti-Partition candidates fought off the challenge of an Independent Nationalist and a Labour representative⁵⁷. By this time, Frank Callaghan had departed for Belfast.

The Second World War meant there were no scheduled elections until 1946. By this time the Stormont Parliament had passed legislation removing the option to hold annual elections with one third of councillors retiring each year. Henceforth the Londonderry Corporation was compelled to hold triennial elections (elections for the whole Council every three years).

In 1946, four Northern Ireland Labour Party candidates were unsuccessful in their challenge to the Unionists in the North Ward. In the South Ward, the Anti-Partition group formed a coalition with Nationalist-Labour candidates to share the seats. They defeated candidates of the NILP⁵⁸.

By 1949 the Irish Labour Party had taken over as the Socialist standard bearer. It stood against the Unionists in the Waterside Ward, and the Anti-Partition candidates in the South Ward, but again without success ⁵⁹.

There was then a lull in electoral activity until 1966, when there was a by-election in the North Ward. The Unionist candidate, Jack Allen, triumphed over a Protestant solicitor called Claude Wilton, standing as an Independent, but only by 2462 votes to 2021 ⁶⁰. This was against the background of discontent over Londonderry not being chosen as the main campus for what was to become the New University of Ulster ⁶¹.

By the following year, which saw the triennial elections, the situation had returned to something approaching its normal pattern. The Northern Ireland Labour Party contested all three wards, but its candidates were defeated by the Nationalists in the South Ward, and the Unionists in the North and Waterside Wards ⁶².

Omagh Urban District Council

The story of the Omagh Urban District elections in the 1920s and 1930s is told more fully elsewhere ⁶³. The rest of the story is uneventful. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Omagh's West Ward was Nationalist, the North Ward was Unionist and the South Ward was highly marginal. Each returned seven councillors. The marginal nature of the South Ward encouraged both parties to contest it, but this pattern of Unionist-Nationalist electoral confrontations stopped after the formation of the Northern Ireland state.

Nationalist took control of the Omagh Urban District Council in 1920 and instituted a public sector housebuilding programme, primarily in the Fairmount area of the South Ward. The Nationalist controlled council had a policy of allocating two-thirds of these houses to Catholics, although local Unionists were sceptical that Protestants were given even one-third. The effect of this was to create extra Nationalist voters in the South Ward, thus making it no longer marginal. Unionists stopped contesting elections in that ward.

In 1923 there were no contested elections, but in 1926 nine Unionists competed for seven seats in the North Ward. Two deselected candidates were successful ⁶⁴. In 1929 it was back to completely uncontested elections, while in 1932 four Independent Nationalists were defeated by the official nominees in the West Ward ⁶⁵.

A ward revision in 1934 addressed the issue of the South Ward being bigger than the other wards, and not being based on the community of interest principle. The effect was to return control to the Unionists. Six councillors were returned by Unionists in each of the North and South Wards, and nine by the Nationalists in the West Ward. Never again did Nationalists contest the two new wards which were held by the Unionists. More details about how the wards were revised are set out elsewhere ⁶⁶.

In 1936, 1939, 1946, 1949, and 1952 no candidates faced any opposition. The sequence was broken in 1955 when a single Independent Unionist was unsuccessful in

challenging six official Unionist candidates in the North Ward ⁶⁷. It was business as usual in 1958 with no contested elections.

By 1961, two Labour candidates were nominated in each of the three wards to create a little electoral excitement. They were all unsuccessful ⁶⁸. In 1964, two Labour candidates again stood in each of the North and South Wards ⁶⁹, but this time four of them challenged the Nationalists in the West Ward ⁷⁰. None of the Labour candidates won a seat.

Finally, in 1967 Labour candidates gave up on challenging in the Unionist wards. Protestants had been voting solidly for the Unionist candidates. They did however nominate five candidates in the West Ward, and a Republican Labour man also put his name forward. The Nationalists won all nine seats ⁷¹.

We saw earlier that there was probably some Protestant tactical voting for Nationalists in the Dungannon Urban District where there was no Unionist candidate in the West Ward. The same phenomenon was seen in Omagh's West Ward in 1967. The local Unionist paper, the *Tyrone Constitution*, wrote before the election:

“Unionist candidates who have been returned unopposed are certain to take more than a mere passing interest in the election, because those elected will be their colleagues at the meetings in the Town Hall for the next three years and, as the Nationalist representatives of the past have been reasonably co-operative, it naturally follows that they would prefer members that they know to members that they know little or nothing about....The Unionist Local Government vote in the West Ward is about 350, or about one-sixth of the total, and should these come out to support the Nationalist Party their votes could prove a determining factor in the contest.” ⁷²

After the election, the Republican Labour Party candidate complained to the *Ulster Herald*, “The Nationalists were claiming a victory, but they owed that victory to the fact that over 300 Unionist voters in the West Ward had come out in support of the Nationalist candidates” ⁷³. Unionists tended once more to prefer Nationalists with whom they had a working relationship, rather than more confrontational Labour candidates identified too much with the complaints of the “civil rights” movement.

In spite of this flurry of contested elections in the 1960s, Omagh Urban District did not see any Nationalist-Unionist contests in 50 years. Such dramatic examples of electoral shirking were not widely known to people in Great Britain. If they had been, then perhaps there would have been less sympathy for stories claiming that Nationalists were electorally disadvantaged.

Omagh Rural District Council

As we move on from the urban areas to a rural district, and then two of the county councils, we see an absence of Labour candidates. There is a fall in the number of contests. Omagh Rural District Council elections were spectacularly uneventful. Since 1924 the council had 39 single member wards electing councillors every three years.

Of these, 21 would normally return a Unionist. That provided quite a few opportunities for Nationalists to challenge their opponents. Although there were contests between two Unionists in 1927⁷⁴, between three pairs of Nationalists in 1930⁷⁵, and another two Nationalists in 1952⁷⁶, the only Unionist-Nationalist confrontation was in 1949. A Nationalist candidate stood in each of four Unionist divisions (Bencran, Gortin, Mayne and Moyle). The Unionists held all four seats⁷⁷. There were no contests thereafter. One attempt to displace 20% of the Unionist councillors in over 40 years is not an impressive effort.

Fermanagh County Council

In comparison with the other local authorities described in this paper, it does seem that Fermanagh County Council was the subject of frantic electoral activity, providing evidence of 11 Nationalist-Unionist contests. This activity was, however, restricted to three marginal electoral divisions out of a total of 20. The enthusiasm for a Nationalist-Unionist contest in a particular division lasted for only three or four consecutive elections before the parties relapsed into lethargy.

Enniskillen was one of these marginal seats. A Nationalist candidate beat his Unionist opponent here by 67 votes in 1930⁷⁸; 57 votes in 1933⁷⁹; 60 votes in 1936⁸⁰; and 9 votes in 1939⁸¹. After that, the Nationalists simply gave up and a Unionist was elected unopposed from 1946.

The second marginal seat was Monea. An Independent standing with Nationalist support beat a Unionist in 1930 by 91 votes⁸²; by 10 votes in 1933⁸³; and a Unionist won the seat back by 172 votes in 1936⁸⁴. Thereafter, contested elections in this electoral division stopped.

Lastly, there was a brief flurry of contests in Newtownbutler after the Second World War. In 1946, the Nationalists won with a majority of 17⁸⁵; in 1949, the seat changed hands with a Unionist majority of 24⁸⁶; 1952 saw the seat change back to the Nationalists with a majority of two⁸⁷; and the final contest was in 1955 when the Unionists regained the seat by 29⁸⁸. After that there were no more contested elections in Newtownbutler.

That exhausted the Nationalist-Unionist confrontations, but there were some other contests. In 1927 Farmers Union candidates lost to a Nationalist in Holywell and to a Unionist in Monea. In Irvinestown, a Unionist was beaten by an Independent Unionist⁸⁹. In 1930, a Nationalist defeated an Independent Nationalist in Crum⁹⁰. After that, there were none of such miscellaneous confrontations until 1967.

In that year, the district councils in Fermanagh closed down and transferred all their functions to a new 50 seat County Council. In Irvinestown, an Independent took one of the two seats from the Unionists; in Enniskillen North, Independents won two of the four seats from the Nationalists; in Doon an Independent Nationalist won one of two seats from the Nationalists; and in Rosslea, two Nationalist defeated the challenge of an Independent Nationalist⁹¹.

Although the number of contests for Fermanagh County Council seats was slightly higher than in some of the councils we have been looking at, it still remained remarkably low by English standards. Nationalists and Unionists were only encouraged to stand against each other when electoral divisions were extremely marginal. In Enniskillen, Monea and Newtownbutler, Nationalists tended to give up rather easily when the seats fell into Unionist hands.

Tyrone County Council

After the excitement of our electoral visit to Fermanagh, Tyrone County Council unfortunately cannot hold our interest for long. There are no examples of Nationalist-Unionist contests.

Local government electors were very rarely called to go the polls in Tyrone to elect its 27 councillors. In 1927, a Unionist beat a Ratepayers Association candidate in Fintona; and another Unionist defeated a Farmers Union hopeful in Aughnacloy ⁹². In 1930, two Unionists competed for one seat in Castlecaulfield, and two Nationalists did the same in Coalisland ⁹³.

The pattern was repeated in 1933 with two Unionists fighting for the Clogher division, and two Nationalists competed in Killeter ⁹⁴. There was then something of a lull until 1949 when two Nationalists stood against each other in Plumbridge ⁹⁵. A long drought without any contests was ended in 1967 when a Nationalist and an Independent competed in Strabane ⁹⁶.

Conclusion

The report of the Cameron Commission stated that there were “ward areas in which Unionist representatives were returned by small majorities, whereas Non-Unionist [Nationalist] representatives were returned by very large majorities” ⁹⁷. Now that we have completed our review of contested elections in a number of key councils which were the subject of complaints by the “civil rights” movement, it poses an important question. How did the Cameron Commission find enough local government election results to justify its statement? The answer is that it did not. It accepted an argument based on religious analyses of electoral registers.

Both Nationalists and Unionists appointed registration agents who carefully analysed electoral registers to classify voters as Catholic or Protestant. Nationalists frequently published these analyses, making claims such as “We have a majority of x hundred in this council area”. They meant by this that there were more Catholics than Protestants on a particular part of the electoral register. It certainly did not mean that Nationalists had won a majority in an actual election. We have seen that there were, in fact, very few local elections which involved contests with Unionists. It involved an implicit claim that religious analyses of electoral registers were a reliable indication of actual election results.

Subsequent research showed this to be substantially a smoke and mirrors argument. Very significant numbers of Catholics in the towns West of the Bann tended to vote Labour, whereas Protestants in the same region did not⁹⁸. This meant that arguments based on analyses of electoral registers substantially overestimated the extent of electoral support for Nationalist candidates. The statement of the Cameron Report that there were “ward areas in which Unionist representatives were returned by small majorities, whereas Non-Unionist [Nationalist] representatives were returned by very large majorities” was simply false. We have seen that, because of extensive electoral shirking, there simply was not the electoral evidence to support this claim. Electoral shirking concealed the fact that Nationalist candidates often had a very patchy record in attracting the support of Catholic voters, as was shown when Labour candidates stood against Nationalists. It opened the door for deceitful people to argue that a paper majority of Catholics on an electoral register was the same as an actual majority in a contested election.

The Electoral Reform Society’s shock and outrage that 2% of English council seats were uncontested reveals an important fact about English political culture. There is little tolerance of electoral shirkers. There is a belief, in the common parlance, that if you are not in, you cannot win. For Nationalists to complain that electoral arrangements were unfair, and then be unable to present any significant body of electoral evidence to justify this assertion, tends to undermine their case.

But the level of English knowledge about Nationalist non-participation and self-exclusion was low. As research reveals the extent of these phenomena, perhaps it will create opportunities to reassess Nationalist claims of unfairness.

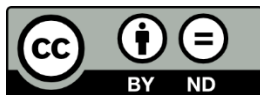
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