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SIR EWART BELL

① Dr Ewart Bell  
② POL 14/7

NOTE OF A MEETING BETWEEN THE SECRETARY OF STATE AND THE SDLP  
IN STORMONT CASTLE ON 11 JULY 1983

The Secretary of State and Mr Scott met an SDLP delegation led by Mr John Hume on 11 July to discuss the conduct of elections in Northern Ireland.

Those present were:

Secretary of State	Mr Hume
Mr Scott	Mr Mallon
Mr Abbott	Dr Hendron
Mr Blackwell	Mr Haughey
Mr Templeton	Mr McIlvenna
Mr Lyon	Mr Feeney
	Mr Brannigan
	Mr Maguire

The Secretary of State said that he would welcome the SDLP's views on the conduct of the General Election, in particular the degree of personation which occurred. He would welcome also their views about this serious problem.

Mr Hume said that personation had been a normal part of the electoral system in Northern Ireland for some time. But it had tended to cancel itself out. The new factor was that Sinn Fein were organising personation on a very extensive and effective scale. Against such organisation, the presiding officers could do little. The Party were, therefore, convinced that some new form of identification needed to be introduced. Their present preference was that voters should be required to produce some form of identity, but not for a separate identity card, since this might lead to widespread abstentions from voting. The Party was concerned also about continuing with the present electoral system for general elections. It should be replaced by a system of proportional representation as existed for other elections in Northern Ireland.

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Mr Mallon said that the present system required their best agents to be present in polling stations during the election, rather than concentrating on getting out their vote. Given the effectiveness of the personators, the temptation was to adopt such methods themselves. He was strongly critical of the shortcomings of the Chief Electoral Officer in his conduct of the election.

Dr Hendron said that the extent of personation in West Belfast was such that he did not himself wish to be further involved in elections in the area. He had found the Deputy Electoral Officer unhelpful.

In discussion of identifying voters, the SDLP delegation expressed interest in the possibility of marking voters thumbs with an invisible but indelible mark. They hoped that an antidote for the marking agent could not easily be found. They considered that the procedure would not be too objectionable and was not too redolent of branding voters. They were doubtful about the practicability and acceptability of separate identity cards. Many voters would not bother to apply for them. Some suggested that the Electoral Registration Officer should send out cards to all voters, who would then be left to provide their own photographs, but others pointed out that these cards might still be intercepted before they reached the registered voter. Another possibility suggested was for each card to have a private serial number known only to the registrar and the voter, but there was still the problem of interception. The system of enabling voters to show one of a number of identity documents was thought more acceptable, although Mr Hume emphasised that he was concerned that some poor and unemployed people might find it difficult to produce any of the documents. He pointed out also that an Irish passport should be an acceptable identification document.

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In discussion of the conduct of the recent general election, the delegation made the following points:

- i) the electoral register was inaccurate and out of date. Election registration assistants were part-timers and many had failed adequately to follow up claims and complaints in compiling the register. It also included whole areas which were derelict or vacant.
- ii) a significant number of poll cards were intercepted before delivery. It was suggested that some postal workers might be responsible.
- iii) the Chief Electoral Officer had unfairly penalised teachers from a controlled school who were on a school journey at the time of the election by refusing to grant them a postal vote. Yet others claiming to be self employed people got postal votes without challenge.
- iv) some Presiding Officers were alleged to be Sinn Fein sympathisers.
- v) Presiding Officers failed adequately to control some urban polling stations, partly because too many stations were located in the same room. In one place there were eight polling stations together in one school assembly hall.
- vi) Not all Presiding Officers required voters to state their names and addresses, despite the instructions set out in Mr Cornick's letter of 13 May to Mrs Rodgers of the SDLP. It was suggested that the Chief Electoral Officer had condoned this.

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- vii) there had not been any uniform procedure for controlling tally-men outside the polling station. This had been exploited by Sinn Fein.

In discussion of what further action might be taken to prevent electoral abuse, members of the delegation suggested:

- a) voters should be required to give their date of birth before being given a voting slip.
- b) only officials and the voter might be permitted in the polling station.
- c) polling agents from the parties should be allowed to question the would-be voter.
- d) agents should be allowed to challenge any box within a room where polling stations were combined in the same area.
- e) the appointment of sub-agents should be allowed in the borough constituencies.
- f) in rural areas a polling station might be split between more than one site.
- g) Presiding Officers should not be appointed for the areas in which they lived, particularly in rural areas.
- h) the electoral register should be computerised and should be regularly up-dated from a single data base.

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- i) parties should not be given lists of postal voters.

The Secretary of State, summing up the discussion, said that he was grateful for the proposals which the delegation had made. They would be carefully considered. He could give no undertaking, however, about the introduction of proportional representation. There was no support for this among the major parties at Westminster, and it did not seem a practical proposition at this time. He had noted the comments made about the Chief Electoral Officer. He wished to make clear that he considered the CEO had a very difficult job. It was often understandably hard to find people of the right calibre to act as Presiding Officers. He accepted that electoral registers were often out-of-date and that this gave scope for abuse. He would wish to consider what might be done to improve the accuracy of the register. The main problem which the delegation had agreed on, however, was the need to take urgent action to reduce the scope for personation. Any of the methods discussed would require primary legislation. He would consider further which methods might be most effective, and the answer might be some combination. It might be possible to leave the precise methods to be introduced by Order. He could give no undertaking that it would be possible to legislate in time for the European Assembly Elections in 1984. It would be difficult to find the necessary time in the present legislative programme. He would, however, now urgently consult his Ministerial colleagues and would keep the SDLP informed of pro

*J. M. Lyon*

J M LYON  
Private Secretary

12<sup>th</sup> July 1983

PS/SofS (L&B)  
PS/Ministers (L&B)  
PS/PUS (L&B)  
~~PS/Sir Ewart Bell~~  
Mr Brennan  
Mr Bourn  
Mr Buxton  
Mr Gilliland  
Mr Doyne Ditmas  
Mr Angel  
Mr Merifield  
Mr Carvill  
Mr Reeve  
Mr Boys Smith  
Mr Edis  
Mr Wood  
Mr Blackwell