

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Reference Code: | 2006/133/677 |
| Creation Date(s): | March 1976 |
| Extent and medium: | 3 pages |
| Creator(s): | Department of the Taoiseach |
| Access Conditions: | Open |
| Copyright: | National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives. |

Northern Ireland District Councils

1. Northern Ireland has 26 District Councils, with 526 Councillors, elected in May 1973. The Councils assumed their responsibilities on 1 October 1973, following the local government reorganisation based on the Macrory recommendations. These responsibilities were extremely circumscribed. Apart from a limited power of nominations to other bodies, the Councils are responsible for cleansing and sanitation, abattoirs, cemeteries, environment, entertainment, sport and recreation, markets and fairs, gas supply, consumer protection, promotion of tourist development schemes and enforcement of building recommendations.

2. After the 1973 elections, Loyalists had majorities on 17 out of the 26 Councils. The SDLP was the largest party on 3 Councils: there was a non-Loyalist majority on 4. On 5 Councils there was no clear majority.

3. The experience and the operation of the District Councils since 1973 has, in general, reflected the above results. The following is the general position:-

- (a) most Councils with Loyalist majorities have continued to operate in a sectarian manner;
- (b) some Councils with Loyalist majorities seem to have functioned in a non-controversial fashion, although this may merely indicate a general low level of activity;
- (c) Councils with non-Loyalist majorities or with finely-balanced Loyalist/non-Loyalist membership have succeeded in introducing elements of power-sharing. It is suspected that such power-sharing is conditional on the absence of a Loyalist majority.

There is also the special case of Fermanagh which returned 10 Loyalists and 10 non-Loyalists in 1973. However, on a number of occasions in 1975, 2 UPNI Councillors voted with the non-Loyalists

4. Five Councils - all with non-Loyalist majorities - have succeeded in reaching a basis for agreed co-operation with regard to filling Council posts, representation on committees, delegations and various bodies and with regard to their functions generally. These Councils are Derry, Down, Newry and Mourne, Omagh and Strabane. Magherafelt District Council has also adopted a power-sharing arrangement, although the SDLP has retained the chairmanship since 1973. The most striking success in this category has been Derry City Council where Councillors have, by and large, succeeded in working in harmony on behalf of the community. There is considerable doubt, however, on the part of SDLP members in Down, Newry and Omagh as to the degree of genuine power-sharing that exists. Mr. McGrady, Chairman of the SDLP Sub-Committee on Local Government, points out that in Down (as in Newry and Omagh) power-sharing is a one-sided arrangement which creates an unreal situation: it exists only because the Loyalists are in a minority.

5. By contrast, Councils such as Armagh, Ballymena, Banbridge, Coleraine, Cookstown, Craigavon, Larne and Limavady have maintained the sectarian attitudes and practices of the former local authorities, in spite of the innocuous nature of their present powers and functions. In these Loyalist-dominated Councils, the posts of chairman and vice-chairman are retained by the majority and non-Loyalist Councillors are generally totally excluded from representation on committees, delegations, area boards and other statutory bodies. They also execute their functions in a biased manner, banning the use of Council facilities on Sunday, for example, seeking to influence staff appointments, or discriminating against the minority in the allocation of Council funds. Politically divisive resolutions are adopted, e.g., condemning power-sharing and the Council of Ireland, calling on the British Government not to suspend firearms certificates. The main impetus for the return of the former local authority powers also comes from the Loyalist Councils. A number of such Councils - Ards, Ballymoney, Belfast - have succeeded in avoiding internal political dissension and in permitting minority representation on sub-committees, etc., whilst retaining the positions of chairman and vice-chairman and overall control in the Council. Indications are, however, that given a return of major functions, such as those sought by the Association of Local Authorities, most, if not all, of the 17 Loyalist-dominated Councils would revert to their former discriminatory ways.

6. The most recent election to the 13-member Executive of the Association of Local Authorities (a non-statutory body consisting of representatives of all 26 District Councils) resulted in the three former SDLP seats being filled by Loyalists. Alliance, with 67 Councillors, has now two representatives on the Executive, whereas the SDLP, with 85 Councillors, has none. Another significant development has been that the Housing Council, which is seeking further powers in relation to housing, no longer elects an SDLP representative to the Housing Executive. (In December 1975 the 85 SDLP Councillors formed a separate District Councillors' Association, with which Alliance and UPNI Councillors could liaise. While denying that the new body was set up as a rival to the main Association, the SDLP sees it as a necessary means of making their views known on local government questions with political connotations.)

7. Since 1974 there has been a strong Loyalist campaign to return substantial powers to the local authorities. Although those Councillors with non-Loyalist majorities have also experienced the frustration of the limited powers of the District Councils, the SDLP has adamantly opposed the return of powers to the Councils because of the fear that power would continue to be used in a biased way. The Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office, Mr. Moyle, has indicated that District Councils are to get increased responsibility in the fields of sport and community relations.

8. Some recent examples of the abuse of a majority position by individual District Councils are listed in an appendix.