

MANN SPEAKS First Thoughts on the 2001 General Election to the House of Keys in the Isle of Man

St. John Bates

Elections to the House of Keys, the directly elected first branch of the Isle of Man Parliament, Tynwald, took place on 22 November.

Even for what is reputed to be the oldest parliament in the world in continuous existence, the election process is a stately one. The House of Keys was dissolved on 18 October and nomination papers were submitted by 46 candidates on 29 October. The elected members will be sworn in at a sitting of the House on 27 November. On 4 December, Tynwald (House of Keys and the second branch, the Legislative Council) will sit to nominate a Chief Minister.

Many may see this as an excessive time-scale for an election, largely devoid of party politics, on an island of 221 square miles with an electorate of a little over 47,000. Yet there remains quite a strong tradition of direct individual contact between candidate and constituent. And, in addition to the personal visits to the homes of constituents which this still often entails, there is a series of structured round table discussions on the local commercial radio station for each of the 15 constituencies with all the candidates in each constituency participating, and the possibility of a "requisition meeting" called in a constituency at local request for the electorate to hear and question their candidates.

The 2001 election was in many respects a quiet one; there did not seem to many Island-wide issues which concerned the electorate. One constituency -- Middle -- is to be the home of the Island incinerator and looks likely to be the home of a new Island prison; and in a couple of other constituencies there appeared to be strong candidates standing against incumbents. In these constituencies the turn-out was up, but the general trend was a drop in turnout, with the average being approximately 60%.

The results were rather quiet too. Twenty-two of the twenty-four members of the previous House stood for re-election. Sir Miles Walker, the first Chief Minister -- who had been a Member for twenty-five years and Chief Minister from 1986 to 1996, and David North, who had latterly been Minister for Trade and Industry, did not stand. Of the twenty-two who did stand, twenty were re-elected, four of them unopposed. The loss of their seats by Walter Gilbey (who had been Minister for Local Government and the Environment) and Geoff Cannell (a well-known local radio journalist who had come in on a by-election) is not likely to be seen as of general political consequence. The four new Members elected are two farmers with business interests, a social worker and a local bank manager.

Quiet or not, it is at this time that analysts normally seek to find the political implications of the election outcome. In the Isle of Man this is always difficult.

Most candidates stand as independents, although there is a small Manx Labour Party (which historically returns a small number of Members -- this time, two) and a rather looser confederation, the Alliance for Progressive Government (which in recent elections, including this one, has also returned Members, but they essentially stand as independents). The manifestos of candidates vary considerably, but often focus as much on local constituency issues as the wider policy issues which are of increasing importance to a small island, with significant legislative and executive autonomy, which is somewhat dependent on its role as an off-shore finance centre in an increasingly interdependent and global market-place.

For the elector, the result is that it is not possible to determine the policy of the next Island government before casting a vote. Although assumptions can be made, the elector does not know on election day who is likely to emerge as the next Chief Minister. Some potential contenders may not be re-elected, and of those who are it is only when they offer their policies to Tynwald in the process of nominating a Chief Minister that the elector will have information that it would have been useful to have before going into the voting booth. Indeed, it will only be some time after the nomination on 4 December, when the Chief Minister chooses Ministers from the membership of Tynwald, and predominantly from the Houser of Keys, that the likely policy of the next administration will emerge. So, despite the effort put into the election over many weeks, there is this "democratic black hole" at the centre of the process. Whether, external political pressures will eventually lead to the political agendas of individual parliamentarians being transformed into more systematised policies presented to the electorate remains to be seen. Certainly, Manx politicians at present display very limited enthusiasm for the notion that party politics should be a feature of the Isle of Man.

Meanwhile, peering into the "democratic black hole", if the present Chief Minister, Donald Gelling, does not offer himself for re-nomination (which is the word among the chattering classes) the front runner as his likely successor appears to be the present Treasury Minister, Richard Corkill. Looking at the election results, and the likely candidates for Chief Minister, Isle of Man Government policy is likely to remain much as it has been in the five years since the last election -- although domestic social pressures, such as a shortage of housing, and international political and pressures, particularly as they bear on the finance sector, will continue to require an inventive but measured response.

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