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Local & National

Protestants mostly opposed to inquiries into the Troubles

Thursday, June 21, 2007

By Chris Thornton

Protestants and Catholics are deeply divided over dealing with Northern Ireland's troubled past, a private poll conducted for the NIO has revealed.

The poll - released to the Belfast Telegraph under the Freedom of Information Act - indicates that Protestants are overwhelmingly opposed to more inquiries and other investigations into the Troubles.

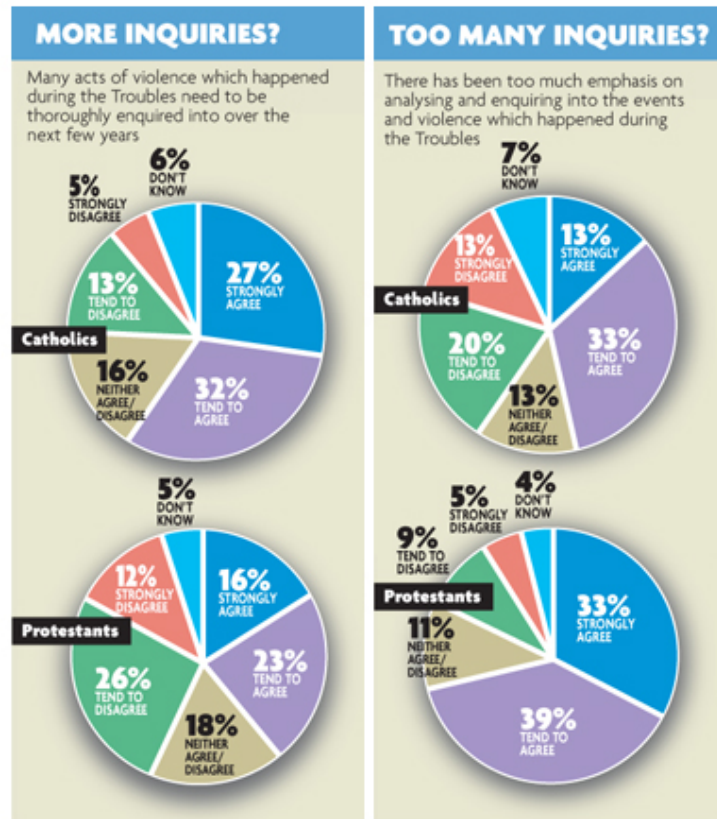
But Catholics are largely in favour of thorough investigations to find out what happened in many acts of violence.

The poll, which was conducted among voters after they cast ballots in the March Assembly election, is believed to have informed Peter Hain's thinking as he decided to set up a commission to review the Troubles.

An announcement on the panel - reportedly chaired by Lord Eames and former Policing Board vice chairman Pat Bradley - is believed to be imminent.

The NIO's exit poll - which was presented to ministers on the morning that counting began - accurately predicted the outcome of the recent Assembly contest.

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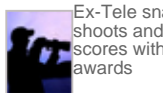


It also explored thinking on a number of other issues, including crucial questions about dealing with the

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past.

A number of prominent figures - including former senior civil servant Maurice Hayes, outgoing Oversight Commissioner Al Hutchinson, and former Presbyterian moderator John Dunlop - have recently criticised continuing calls for investigations into the past.

Some of the criticism has been based on spending, with the bill for four public inquiries currently topping £213 million.

In the poll, voters were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the idea that "there has been too much emphasis on analysing and enquiring into the events and violence which happened during the Troubles".

Nearly three-quarters of Protestants - 72% - agreed with the statement, compared to 46% of Catholics.

They were then asked their views on the idea that "many acts of violence which happened during the Troubles need to be thoroughly enquired into over the next few years".

A majority of Catholics - 59% - agreed with the second statement, compared to 39% of Protestants.

However, the polling did cause some confusion, since it is clear from the totals that some respondents agreed with both statements - say there has been too much emphasis on the past and a need to thoroughly inquire into it.

The poll also showed that DUP and Sinn Fein supporters were more likely to be loyal to their parties, giving second and third preference votes to the same party that got their first.

In releasing the poll, the NIO refused to disclose the cost or the interpretation given to ministers by the pollsters.

The NIO's exit poll was carried out by Millward Brown Ulster at 72 randomly selected polling points covering all 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland, between the hours of 7am and 10pm on March 7, 2007.

1,072 voters exiting from polling stations were randomly selected for interview and results were provided by 9am on March 8.

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