



FORUM: NORTHERN IRELAND

Devolution and the State of the Northern Ireland Peace Process

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About the Poll

This research was undertaken by Dr. Colin Irwin of the Centre for the Study of Ethnic Conflict in the School of Politics at Queen's University Belfast. The project was independently funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. The public opinion survey work was conducted by Market Research Northern Ireland between January 31st and February 6th to produce 1000 'face to face' interviews that represented a cross section of the adult population of Northern Ireland in terms of age, gender, social class, religious affiliation and geographical area. In all respects the poll was undertaken within the guidelines set out by the Market Research Society (UK) and in accordance with their code of conduct. This poll is the ninth in a series published by the *Belfast Telegraph*. They are reviewed in the author's book *The People's Peace Process in Northern Ireland* (Palgrave 2002) with full statistical reports available at <http://www.peacepolls.org>.

The Collapse of Middle Ground Politics?

The interviews for this poll seem to have been undertaken at a politically sensitive time. The 17% refusal rate for the political support question is the highest recorded (Table 1). If, as has happened in the past, Sinn Féin and DUP supporters are less inclined to declare their party of choice then Sinn Féin at 17% could be 'neck and neck' with the SDLP at 19% and the DUP at 16% could be closing on the UUP at 21%. A poll undertaken for the BBC *Hearts and Minds* programme last October put Sinn Féin ahead of the SDLP. That poll also placed Alliance at an all time low of just 3%. Their situation has not improved and the PUP are down from 4 to 2% and Women's Coalition down from 2 to 1%. The UUP and SDLP may be feeling 'the squeeze' from the DUP and Sinn Féin but so too are all the smaller pro-Agreement parties. The people of Northern Ireland appear to be moving away from the voices of moderation and accommodation and back into their separate political camps.

Table 1. Which ONE of these Northern Ireland political parties do you support?

| % support - February 2003 | |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| UUP/Ulster Unionist Party | 21 |
| SDLP/Social Democratic Labour Party | 19 |
| DUP/Democratic Unionist Party | 16 |
| Sinn Féin | 17 |
| Alliance | 3 |
| UKUP/United Kingdom Unionist Party | * |
| PUP/Progressive Unionist Party | 2 |
| Northern Ireland Women's Coalition | 1 |
| Other | 4 |
| Refused | 17 |

* Less than 0.5%

Support for the Agreement at All Time Low

Pollsters get nervous when they have to ask the people of Northern Ireland how they voted in the May 1998 referendum because the result will reveal any fundamental flaws in the quality of their research. On this occasion the response was 'spot on' at 71% 'Yes' (Table 2). But that is as far as the positive results for this poll and the fortunes of the Belfast Agreement go. Support for the Agreement has reached an all time low of 62%

with only 36% of Protestants saying they would still vote for it (Table 3). Catholic support, however, remains high at 90%. Protestant support for the Agreement hit its high point in May 2000 just after the IRA said they would 'completely and verifiably put their arms beyond use'. Could the IRA 'save' the Agreement again? Perhaps, but bringing back the Protestant pro-Agreement vote from a low of 36% will not be an easy task without 'Acts of Completion'.

Table 2. How did you vote in the referendum for the Belfast Agreement?

| | All of NI | Protestant | Catholic | DUP | UUP | PUP | Alliance | SDLP | Sinn Fein |
|-----|-----------|------------|----------|-----|-----|-----|----------|------|-----------|
| Yes | 71 | 53 | 90 | 20 | 73 | 69 | 85 | 95 | 87 |
| No | 29 | 47 | 10 | 80 | 27 | 31 | 15 | 5 | 13 |

Table 3. And if the Referendum was held today how would you vote?

| | All of NI | Protestant | Catholic | DUP | UUP | PUP | Alliance | SDLP | Sinn Fein |
|-----|-----------|------------|----------|-----|-----|-----|----------|------|-----------|
| Yes | 62 | 36 | 90 | 11 | 49 | 18 | 81 | 94 | 89 |
| No | 38 | 64 | 10 | 89 | 51 | 82 | 19 | 6 | 11 |

| | Date | All NI | Protestant | Catholic |
|--|---------------|--------|------------|----------|
| Referendum for Belfast Agreement | May 1998 | 71 | • | • |
| Would still vote for Belfast Agreement | October 1999 | 65 | 49 | 88 |
| Would still vote for Belfast Agreement | May 2000 | 74 | 55 | 94 |
| Would still vote for Belfast Agreement | October 2000 | 69 | 47 | 94 |
| Would still vote for Belfast Agreement | November 2002 | 61 | 43 | 85 |
| Would still vote for Belfast Agreement | February 2003 | 62 | 36 | 90 |

But unprecedented movement to full implementation of the Belfast Agreement could still restore confidence. Although the percentage of those wishing to see the Belfast Agreement work is also at an all time low of 75%, down from a maximum of 93% four years ago, a majority of Protestants, 60%, are still willing to lend their support to the peace process providing, of course, the pro-Agreement parties and two governments can make it work (Table 4).

Table 4. Do you want the Belfast Agreement to work?

| | All of NI | Protestant | Catholic | DUP | UUP | PUP | Alliance | SDLP | Sinn Fein |
|-----|-----------|------------|----------|-----|-----|-----|----------|------|-----------|
| Yes | 75 | 60 | 92 | 29 | 75 | 53 | 96 | 95 | 91 |
| No | 22 | 37 | 5 | 67 | 22 | 47 | 0 | 4 | 6 |

| | Date | All NI | Protestant | Catholic |
|--------------------------------|---------------|--------|------------|----------|
| Want Belfast Agreement to work | February 1999 | 93 | 89 | 97 |
| Want Belfast Agreement to work | October 1999 | 83 | 72 | 98 |
| Want Belfast Agreement to work | May 2000 | 85 | 74 | 98 |
| Want Belfast Agreement to work | February 2003 | 75 | 60 | 92 |

Decommissioning back at the top of everyone's 'To Do Lists'

In October 1999, May 2000 and February 2003 the people of Northern Ireland were asked to pass judgement on the different parts of the Belfast Agreement and say which ones they were 'Very satisfied' with, 'Satisfied' with, 'Only just satisfied' with, 'Not satisfied' with or 'Not satisfied with at all'. It will come as no surprise that the level of dissatisfaction for the Protestant community has risen to an all time average high of 62%



'Not satisfied' or 'Not satisfied at all' (Table 5). But for Catholics the picture is very different. Their level of dissatisfaction has fallen steadily across all three polls from an average of 51% 'Not satisfied' or 'Not satisfied at all' in 1999 to 44% in 2000 and 42% in the most recent poll. Why? The explanation is simple. For Protestants 'Decommissioning of paramilitary weapons' was always at the top of their 'to do list' and that item has not begun to be addressed to their satisfaction. For Catholics, however, many of the top items on their 'to do list' are getting dealt with. Police reform, for example, has moved from being their number one priority in May 2000 down to number eight. Decommissioning was their main concern in October 1999 at 63% 'Not satisfied' or 'Not satisfied at all'. It fell to a low of only 38% in May 2000 after the IRA pronouncements but it is back up to 60% in this poll. Sinn Féin are skilled negotiators and many would say they have served their community well in recent years but perhaps, with decommissioning back at the top of both communities' 'to do lists' they are now running the risk of over playing their hand. It should also be noted, however, that a new item introduced for this poll, 'The stability of the institutions of government', is number two on the Catholic list and number three on the Protestants'. Political instability is clearly, almost universally, unpopular.

Table 5. Dissatisfaction with implementation of the Belfast Agreement

| | Protestant % not satisfied* | Oct. 1999 | May 2000 | Feb. 2003 | | Catholic % not satisfied* | Oct. 1999 | May 2000 | Feb. 2003 |
|----|---|--------------|-------------|--------------|----|---|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| 1 | Decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. | 88 | 74 | 84 | 1 | Decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. | 63 | 38 | 60 |
| 2 | The reform of policing. | 69 | 69 | 74 | 2 | The stability of the institutions of government. | - | - | 55 |
| 3 | The stability of the institutions of government. | - | - | 70 | 3 | The full implementation of all parts of the Agreement together. | 56 | 47 | 54 |
| 4 | The reform of the criminal justice system. | 65 | 65 | 70 | 4 | Demilitarisation and Normalisation. | 59 | 56 | 53 |
| 5 | Demilitarisation and Normalisation. | 66 | 59 | 70 | 5 | Support for victims of the 'Troubles'. | 48 | 41 | 49 |
| 6 | The North/South Ministerial Council. | 52 | 49 | 68 | 6 | Obligations to non-violence, peace and democracy. | 52 | 43 | 48 |
| 7 | The British/Irish Council. | 55 | 51 | 67 | 7 | The present status of Northern Ireland as part of the UK. | 42 | 50 | 47 |
| 8 | Support for victims of the 'Troubles'. | 74 | 66 | 65 | 8 | The reform of policing. | 61 | 61 | 44 |
| 9 | Obligations to non-violence, peace and democracy. | 74 | 65 | 65 | 9 | The reform of the criminal justice system. | 56 | 61 | 44 |
| 10 | The full implementation of all parts of the Agreement together. | 63 | 57 | 63 | 10 | Reconciliation and improved community relations. | - | - | 44 |
| 11 | The Civic Forum. | 52 | 51 | 62 | 11 | The Northern Ireland Executive. | 57 | 44 | 40 |
| 12 | The Northern Ireland Assembly. | 30 | 52 | 61 | 12 | The Northern Ireland Assembly. | 49 | 41 | 38 |
| 13 | The Northern Ireland Executive. | 58 | 56 | 61 | 13 | A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. | 52 | 38 | 38 |
| 14 | Reconciliation and improved community relations. | - | - | 61 | 14 | The Principle of Consent of NI people to decide their Status. | 40 | 34 | 36 |
| 15 | The Equality Commission. | 47 | 49 | 58 | 15 | The Civic Forum. | 47 | 39 | 35 |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----|---|----|----|----|----|---|----|----|----|
| 16 | A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. | 50 | 50 | 57 | 16 | The British/Irish Council. | 49 | 42 | 35 |
| 17 | Cultural and language rights. | 50 | 50 | 55 | 17 | The Equality Commission. | 45 | 40 | 34 |
| 18 | The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. | 47 | 49 | 54 | 18 | The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. | 45 | 39 | 34 |
| 19 | Social and economic programs. | - | - | 52 | 19 | Cultural and language rights. | 50 | 46 | 34 |
| 20 | The Principle of Consent of NI people to decide their Status. | 53 | 49 | 51 | 20 | Social and economic programs. | - | - | 32 |
| 21 | North/South implementation bodies. | 56 | 51 | 50 | 21 | The North/South Ministerial Council. | 48 | 36 | 31 |
| 22 | The present status of Northern Ireland as part of the UK. | 43 | 39 | 40 | 22 | North/South implementation bodies. | 49 | 38 | 31 |
| | Average | 58 | 55 | 62 | | Average | 51 | 44 | 42 |

*'Not satisfied' or 'Not satisfied at all'

The Northern Ireland Blame Game

One of the most popular cross community activities in Northern Ireland is playing the 'Blame Game'. It is difficult to understand why when matches nearly always seem to end in a draw. In this poll, 61% of the people of Northern Ireland thought it 'very probable' or 'probable' that the Belfast Agreement and peace process will collapse if 'Devolved Government is not restored to Northern Ireland or if Sinn Féin are excluded from holding Ministerial posts in the Executive' (Table 6). Sixty one% believed this would happen 'because Unionists will not work the Agreement in good faith' and 61% thought it was the fault of the Republicans. These figures rose to 84% of Sinn Féin supporters blaming Unionists and 82% of DUP supporters blaming Republicans. SDLP supporters thought the UUP could have done more to work with them while UUP supporters thought the SDLP had not done enough. But everyone was quite even handed when it came to blaming the two governments at 58% for Protestants, 56% for Catholics, 55% for DUP supporters, 60% for the UUP, 51% for the SDLP and 60% for Sinn Féin.

Table 6. The Belfast Agreement and peace process will collapse...

| Reason | All of NI | Protestant | Catholic | DUP | UUP | SDLP | Sinn Féin |
|---|-----------|------------|----------|-----|-----|------|-----------|
| Because Unionists will not work the Agreement in good faith. | 61 | 44 | 82 | 45 | 46 | 85 | 84 |
| Because Republicans will not work the Agreement in good faith. | 61 | 73 | 48 | 82 | 71 | 62 | 26 |
| Because the SDLP have not done everything they could to work with the UUP. | 42 | 53 | 31 | 58 | 55 | 30 | 29 |
| Because the UUP have not done everything they could to work with the SDLP. | 51 | 41 | 64 | 43 | 39 | 63 | 72 |
| Because of the lack of co-operation and determined commitment by the two governments. | 57 | 58 | 56 | 55 | 60 | 51 | 60 |

When the question of 'blame' is looked at over time, like so many other statistics reported in this poll, the level of 'blame' is up from the lows of May 2000. But so too, more seriously, are fears about increased paramilitary activity - particularly Loyalist paramilitary activity. Seventy two% of UUP supporters now think it 'Very probable' or 'Probable' that 'Dissident Loyalist paramilitary groups will become more active' compared to 59% in May 2000 and 83% of Sinn Féin supporters share this view compared to 61% in May 2000 (Table 7). Concerns about Dissident Republicans remain unchanged for



Ulster Unionists at 68% but it is on the rise for Sinn Féin supporters from 45% in May 2000 to 53% for this poll.

Table 7. Blame and fear

| % - 'Very probable' or 'probable' | UUP March 99 | UUP Oct. 99 | UUP May 2000 | UUP Feb. 2003 |
|--|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| The Belfast Agreement and peace process will collapse because Unionists will not work the Agreement in good faith. | 23 | 59 | 38 | 46 |
| The Belfast Agreement and peace process will collapse because Republicans will not work the Agreement in good faith. | 49 | 78 | 59 | 71 |
| Dissident Republican paramilitary groups will become more active. | 69 | 85 | 68 | 68 |
| The IRA and other Republican groups will break their cease-fires and return to war. | 66 | 84 | 64 | 65 |
| Dissident Loyalist paramilitary groups will become more active. | 65 | 79 | 59 | 72 |
| The UVF, UFF and other Loyalist groups will break their cease-fires and return to war. | 57 | 71 | 56 | 69 |

| % - 'Very probable' or 'probable' | Sinn Féin March 99 | Sinn Féin Oct. 99 | Sinn Féin May 2000 | Sinn Féin Feb. 2003 |
|--|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| The Belfast Agreement and peace process will collapse because Unionists will not work the Agreement in good faith. | 83 | 88 | 61 | 84 |
| The Belfast Agreement and peace process will collapse because Republicans will not work the Agreement in good faith. | 44 | 19 | 13 | 26 |
| Dissident Republican paramilitary groups will become more active. | 72 | 40 | 45 | 53 |
| The IRA and other Republican groups will break their cease-fires and return to war. | 39 | 27 | 14 | 35 |
| Dissident Loyalist paramilitary groups will become more active. | 81 | 76 | 61 | 83 |
| The UVF, UFF and other Loyalist groups will break their cease-fires and return to war. | 61 | 64 | 52 | 75 |

Trust in 'Free Fall'

Starting with the poll done for the Mitchell Review in October 1999 people were asked to indicate which of the governments and parties who agreed to the terms of the Belfast Agreement they: 'Trust a lot', 'Trust a little', are 'Not sure about', 'Do not trust' or 'Do not trust at all'. The same question was asked again in May 2000 and in this poll. Trust, quite simply, is in 'free fall' for all the pro-Agreement parties, and for the British and Irish governments, in both the Protestant and Catholic communities. For Protestants 'Trust a lot' or 'Trust a little' has fallen from 37% on average in 1999 to 30% in 2000 and 17% in 2003 (Table 8). For Catholics, the average has fallen from 48% in 1999 and 2000 to 34% in 2003.

Table 8. Trust and the Belfast Agreement

| Protestant – % – 'Trust a lot' or 'Trust a little' | Oct. 1999 | May 2000 | Feb. 2003 |
|--|-----------|----------|-----------|
| The British Government. | 48 | 42 | 27 |
| The Irish Government. | 35 | 27 | 9 |
| The Ulster Unionist Party. | 60 | 51 | 33 |
| The Progressive Unionist Party. | 49 | 37 | 26 |
| The Alliance Party. | 40 | 28 | 14 |
| The Women's Coalition. | 30 | 23 | 14 |
| The SDLP. | 30 | 26 | 11 |
| Sinn Féin. | 5 | 8 | 3 |
| Average | 37 | 30 | 17 |

| Catholic – % – 'Trust a lot' or 'Trust a little' | Oct. 1999 | May 2000 | Feb. 2003 |
|--|-----------|----------|-----------|
| The British Government. | 48 | 42 | 26 |
| The Irish Government. | 48 | 68 | 39 |
| The Ulster Unionist Party. | 29 | 28 | 12 |
| The Progressive Unionist Party. | 27 | 20 | 11 |
| The Alliance Party. | 46 | 36 | 32 |
| The Women's Coalition. | 55 | 45 | 44 |
| The SDLP. | 77 | 78 | 62 |
| Sinn Féin. | 51 | 69 | 48 |
| Average | 48 | 48 | 34 |

Still the 'Government and Guns' Problem

People from different communities often hold very different views about the causes of continued conflict in Northern Ireland and suspension of the Assembly. From a list of eighteen frequently referred to sources of failure people were asked to indicate which ones they considered to be 'Very Significant', 'Significant', 'Of Some Significance', 'Of Little Significance' or 'Of No Significance' at all. These causes of political failure are listed in the table in their order of significance. Although both Protestants and Catholics now place Decommissioning at the top of their 'to do lists' they clearly see this issue in very different terms as problems (Table 9). For Protestants, the failure of Republicans to abandon violence comes first at 42% 'Very significant' followed by the failure to put Sinn Féin out of the Executive at 36% and Loyalist violence at 27%. For Catholics the threat of suspension comes first at 43% 'Very significant' followed by the UUP threat to 'walk out' and no penalty for doing so at 38%. For Catholics these political failures are the causes of continued violence coming in fourth at 37% 'Very significant'. This same item is eighth on the Protestant list at only 20%. But isn't this just the 'Government and Guns' problem looked at in a slightly different way? Surely by now the political leaders in each community understand this dynamic very well. It has to be fixed. It is destroying the peace process.

Table 9. Protestant and Catholic perceptions of the causes of political failure

| | Protestant, % | Very Significant | Catholic, % | Very Significant |
|----|--|------------------|--|------------------|
| 1 | The failure of Republicans to abandon violence. | 42 | The peace process is threatened by suspension. | 43 |
| 2 | The failure to exclude Sinn Féin from the Executive. | 36 | The UUP threat to 'walk out'. | 38 |
| 3 | The failure of Loyalists to abandon violence. | 27 | No political penalty for withdrawing Ministers. | 38 |
| 4 | The British have failed to honour their commitments. | 22 | The failure to create a political environment to end violence. | 37 |
| 5 | The Irish have failed to honour their commitments. | 21 | The failure of the Executive to work together and lead. | 36 |
| 6 | The peace process is threatened by suspension. | 21 | The failure of Loyalists to abandon violence. | 36 |
| 7 | The failure of the Executive to work together and lead. | 20 | The DUP are not behind the Belfast Agreement. | 33 |
| 8 | The failure to create a political environment to end violence. | 20 | Community leaders failure to deal with sectarianism. | 32 |
| 9 | Police reform has gone too far. | 20 | Government failure to deal with sectarianism. | 30 |
| 10 | The DUP are not behind the Belfast Agreement. | 18 | The Security Services failure to abandon illegal methods. | 29 |
| 11 | Government failure to deal with sectarianism. | 17 | The British have failed to honour their commitments. | 27 |
| 12 | Community leaders failure to deal with sectarianism. | 17 | The failure of Republicans to abandon violence. | 25 |
| 13 | No political penalty for withdrawing Ministers. | 14 | Police reform has not gone far enough. | 25 |



| | | | | |
|----|--|----|--|----|
| 14 | The Security Services failure to abandon illegal methods. | 13 | The failure to exclude Sinn Féin from the Executive. | 18 |
| 15 | Loyalists excluded from the political process. | 13 | The Irish have failed to honour their commitments. | 18 |
| 16 | Nationalist and Unionist blocks of votes maintain divisions. | 13 | Nationalist and Unionist blocks of votes maintain divisions. | 15 |
| 17 | The UUP threat to 'walk out'. | 12 | Loyalists excluded from the political process. | 12 |
| 18 | Police reform has not gone far enough. | 12 | Police reform has gone too far. | 6 |

Who Wants Devolution and Accountable Democracy?

The two governments have set the pro-Agreement parties a task. Come up with a plan for full implementation of the Belfast Agreement by March 3rd and then have Assembly elections on May 1st. But even if a deal can be struck do the people of Northern Ireland still want one or has this experiment in devolution and accountable democracy run its course?

With these points in mind people were asked, 'Do you think Direct Rule or Devolved Government is best for Northern Ireland?' 66% said 'yes' to devolved government and 31% 'no' (the remaining 3% were non-responses). But only a narrow majority of Protestants said 'yes', 49% to 47% 'no'. Catholics came in at 84% 'yes', SDLP 88%, Sinn Féin 82%, Alliance 76%, PUP 53%, UUP 50% and DUP 34%. In general people do want Devolution but, at present, Protestants could 'take it or leave it', or so it would seem (Table 10).

Table 10. Is Direct Rule or Devolved Government best for Northern Ireland?

| | All of NI | Protestant | Catholic | DUP | UUP | PUP | Alliance | SDLP | Sinn Fein |
|---------------------|-----------|------------|----------|-----|-----|-----|----------|------|-----------|
| Direct Rule | 31 | 47 | 13 | 63 | 46 | 47 | 24 | 10 | 14 |
| Devolved Government | 66 | 49 | 84 | 34 | 50 | 53 | 76 | 88 | 82 |

With regard to elections three different options were put to the people of Northern Ireland and they were invited to say which ones they considered to be 'Essential', 'Desirable', 'Acceptable', 'Tolerable' or 'Unacceptable'. 'Elections only when agreement is reached and devolution restored...' was the least popular option at 50% 'Essential' or 'Desirable' (Table 11). Then came elections instead of suspension at 53% and elections on the agreed date next May at 60%. There was very little difference between the two communities and various parties on this issue. People would prefer to exercise their democratic rights in accordance with the law. But none of the options were strongly opposed with large percentages of 'Unacceptable'.

Table 11. Election preferences

| All Northern Ireland, % | Essential | Desirable | Acceptable | Tolerable | Unacceptable |
|--|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|--------------|
| Elections should only be held when agreement is reached and devolved powers are restored to the Northern Ireland Assembly. | 25 | 25 | 27 | 9 | 14 |
| Elections should be held on the agreed date next May. | 31 | 29 | 26 | 8 | 6 |
| Elections should be held instead of suspension. | 27 | 26 | 30 | 6 | 11 |

The outcome of a May election is too close to call. The gap between the UUP and DUP is closing and the gap between the SDLP and Sinn Féin may have already closed. But people want greater political certainty in their lives and with this point in mind they were asked which combination of First and Deputy First Minister they thought would produce the greatest stability for Northern Ireland? The results are unambiguous (Table 12). Forty

three% thought a UUP/SDLP 'ticket' would be best with the DUP/SDLP coming in second at 11% followed by a UUP/SF 'ticket' at 9% and lastly the DUP and Sinn Féin sharing power at just 2%. Sixty eight% of UUP supporters and 76% of SDLP supporters thought the UUP/SDLP 'ticket' was a good idea. Party strategists may wish to give this result some thought.

Table 12. First and Deputy First Minister and political stability

| Ticket | All of NI | Protestant | Catholic | DUP | UUP | SDLP | Sinn Fein |
|--------------|-----------|------------|----------|-----|-----|------|-----------|
| UUP – SDLP | 43 | 44 | 44 | 20 | 68 | 76 | 20 |
| UUP – SF | 9 | 1 | 17 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 37 |
| DUP – SDLP | 11 | 16 | 7 | 40 | 4 | 8 | 5 |
| DUP – SF | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| None of them | 34 | 35 | 27 | 33 | 24 | 10 | 31 |

Steps Towards a Lasting Peace and Political Stability

People from different communities often hold very different views about the steps that need to be taken in order to secure a lasting peace and political stability in Northern Ireland. For every problem dealt with in this poll, solutions were also tested by asking everyone interviewed which ones they considered to be 'Essential', 'Desirable', 'Acceptable', 'Tolerable' or 'Unacceptable'.

With regard to the Belfast Agreement and institutional stability a clear majority of the people of Northern Ireland still think it is a good idea to fully implement the Belfast Agreement at 33% 'Essential', 22% 'Desirable', 17% 'Acceptable', 11% 'Tolerable' and 16% 'Unacceptable' (Table 13). Of those strongly opposed to the Agreement they were 60% 'Unacceptable' for the DUP, 29% for Protestants and 15% for the UUP. New measures introduced to help improve stability were even more acceptable across both communities. Implementation reports were 81% 'Essential', 'Desirable' or 'Acceptable'; commitments to stability 84%; exclusion for threatening stability 86% and exclusion for not adhering to exclusively peaceful means 84%. Only 16% of Sinn Féin supporters found this option 'Unacceptable'.

Table 13. Implementation of the Belfast Agreement

| Aspect of Implementation | Essential | Desirable | Acceptable | Tolerable | Unacceptable |
|--|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|--------------|
| Fully implement all aspects of the Belfast Agreement. | 33 | 22 | 17 | 11 | 16 |
| The Implementation Committee should report regularly to the people of Northern Ireland. | 34 | 27 | 20 | 11 | 9 |
| All Assembly parties should make a commitment to the stability of all the institutions and exclusively democratic and peaceful means. | 40 | 25 | 19 | 10 | 6 |
| The Government and Parties should clearly say when a party can be excluded from the Executive for threatening the stability of the institutions. | 38 | 30 | 18 | 7 | 7 |
| The Government and Parties should clearly say when a party can be excluded from the Executive for not adhering to exclusively democratic and peaceful means. | 39 | 27 | 18 | 8 | 7 |

More people now think making changes to the Belfast Agreement to ensure its political stability (53% 'Essential' or 'Desirable') would be a better course of action than making no changes at all (37% 'Essential' or 'Desirable'). Policies for increasing the representation of women in government comes in at 50% 'Essential' or 'Desirable' while opinions on changing the Unionist and Nationalist system of block votes and rotating



Ministerial posts with smaller parties has less support at 39% and 42% respectively. Views are 'mixed' on these issues (Table 14).

Table 14. Changes to the Belfast Agreement

| Proposed Change | Essential | Desirable | Acceptable | Tolerable | Unacceptable |
|---|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|--------------|
| Make appropriate changes to the Belfast Agreement to ensure political stability. | 27 | 26 | 21 | 10 | 16 |
| Voting should not be exclusively organised around Unionist and Nationalist blocks. | 17 | 22 | 34 | 14 | 12 |
| Some Ministerial and senior Committee posts should be rotated between the smaller Assembly parties. | 17 | 24 | 32 | 12 | 14 |
| Policies should be put in place to increase the representation of women in government. | 22 | 28 | 28 | 16 | 6 |
| Or make no changes to the Belfast Agreement at all. | 18 | 19 | 20 | 17 | 25 |

But there is a strong consensus when it comes to putting in place new policies to deal with the problems of community relations. Establishing an Assembly Committee to monitor the management of community relations, equality and Human Rights is 28% 'Essential', 34% 'Desirable', 25% 'Acceptable', 8% 'Tolerable' and only 4% 'Unacceptable' (Table 15). More effective policies to deal with the problems of community division and integration are likewise strongly supported and it is difficult to understand, given this consensus, why such a committee and policies have not been put into action.

Table 15. Community relations

| Community Relations Policy | Essential | Desirable | Acceptable | Tolerable | Unacceptable |
|--|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|--------------|
| Establish an Assembly Committee to monitor the management of community relations, equality and Human Rights. | 28 | 34 | 25 | 8 | 4 |
| All government policies should be screened for their impact on community divisions. | 31 | 36 | 21 | 9 | 2 |
| It should be the duty of all government departments and agencies to provide opportunities for community integration. | 33 | 35 | 22 | 8 | 2 |

When it comes to questions of justice and reconciliation the consensus is even stronger. Seventy two% of the people of Northern Ireland believe it is 'Essential' or 'Desirable' for the two governments and all the parties to the conflict to make an honest and full accounting of any past misdeeds and abuses (Table 16). Similarly 79% want them to stop blaming others and say what role they played in the Troubles and 80% want them to co-operate with all relevant public inquiries.

Table 16. The two governments and all the parties to the conflict should:

| Government Policy | Essential | Desirable | Acceptable | Tolerable | Unacceptable |
|---|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|--------------|
| Make an honest and full accounting of any past misdeeds and abuses. | 48 | 26 | 15 | 7 | 4 |
| Stop simply blaming others and say what role they played in the Troubles. | 53 | 26 | 11 | 7 | 3 |
| Fully co-operate with all relevant public inquiries. | 54 | 26 | 12 | 6 | 3 |

Not unexpectedly this consensus breaks down when it comes to the politically difficult issues of justice and policing. Thirty six% of Protestants consider it 'Unacceptable' to complete the process of police reform rising to 62% for DUP supporters but falling to 29% for the UUP (Table 17). Similarly 38% of Protestants do not want Sinn Féin on the Policing Board rising to 72% of DUP supporters but falling to 24% for the UUP. However, in this case, 30% of Sinn Féin supporters also consider having their party take up their seats on the Policing Board to be 'Unacceptable'. This is a sensitive issue for everyone but having responsibility for justice and policing devolved to the Assembly is less problematic with only 14% of the people of Northern Ireland rejecting such a move as 'Unacceptable'.

Table 17. Justice and policing

| Proposed Policy | All of NI | Protestant | Catholic | DUP | UUP | SDLP | Sinn Fein |
|--|-----------|------------|----------|-----|-----|------|-----------|
| The reform of the PSNI should be completed. | 20 | 36 | 2 | 62 | 29 | 2 | 4 |
| All parties with seats on the Policing Board should take up their posts including Sinn Féin. | 27 | 38 | 14 | 72 | 24 | 1 | 30 |
| Responsibility for Justice and Policing should be devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. | 14 | 17 | 11 | 31 | 10 | 7 | 20 |

The people of Northern Ireland, particularly the Protestant community, do not like the idea of offenders being set free or given amnesty, they never did. But if paramilitaries allow exiled persons to 'come home' then only 42% of Protestants would consider making a deal on paramilitary fugitives, or 'On the Runs' (OTRs), to be 'Unacceptable' (Table 18). If paramilitaries could also secure public confidence in a lasting peace then so much the better at 39% 'Unacceptable'. However, it is interesting to note that this Protestant resistance to dealing with offenders drops to just 29% 'Unacceptable' when members of the State Security Services are included. This, of course, is largely a matter for the British Government and if any dealing is done on this issue it will probably be done behind closed doors. But in the absence of an end to all paramilitary activity no one can reasonably expect Unionist politicians to accept any changes to the status of OTRs without the strongest of complaints.

Table 18. 'On the Runs'

| Proposed Policy | All of NI | Protestant | Catholic | DUP | UUP | SDLP | Sinn Fein |
|---|-----------|------------|----------|-----|-----|------|-----------|
| Paramilitaries should allow all exiled persons to 'come home' before the question of their fugitives is dealt with. | 31 | 42 | 20 | 49 | 51 | 30 | 9 |
| Paramilitaries should complete all necessary steps to secure public confidence in a lasting peace before the question of their fugitives is dealt with. | 28 | 39 | 17 | 45 | 46 | 22 | 17 |
| Paramilitary fugitives should be given amnesty. | 44 | 59 | 29 | 66 | 66 | 41 | 12 |



| | | | | | | | |
|--|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Paramilitary fugitives should only be given amnesty after they have given an account of their activities to the authorities. | 39 | 49 | 29 | 54 | 57 | 26 | 35 |
| Paramilitary fugitives should be processed through the courts and then 'released on license'. | 37 | 43 | 32 | 47 | 52 | 29 | 40 |
| Security Service and other state offenders should be treated the same as paramilitary offenders. | 23 | 29 | 18 | 33 | 32 | 23 | 15 |

Needless to say almost everyone wants an end to all paramilitary activity. So the very practical question that must be answered here is where the points of least and greatest difficulty lies for those paramilitaries. The Ulster Democratic Party is no more and the PUP are not as large a party as they once were, so this poll is not able to provide much reliable information on Loyalist thinking beyond saying that most PUP supporters interviewed did not oppose an end to paramilitary activity as 'Unacceptable'. The statistics for Sinn Féin, however, are far more reliable. When it comes to ending any involvement in organised crime, targeting, paramilitary attacks, punishment beatings and intelligence gathering operations there does not seem to be a problem, with only between 2 and 5% of Sinn Féin supporters opposing such policies as 'Unacceptable' (Table 19). But 21% consider decommissioning all paramilitary weapons to be 'Unacceptable' and 27% are similarly opposed to disbanding their organisation while 28% are opposed to 'Standing Down'.

Table 19. The IRA and Loyalist paramilitaries should:

| Proposal | All of NI | Protestant | Catholic | DUP | UUP | SDLP | Sinn Fein |
|---|-----------|------------|----------|-----|-----|------|-----------|
| End any involvement in organised crime. | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| End all targeting. | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| End all paramilitary attacks and 'punishment beatings'. | 2 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| End all their intelligence gathering operations. | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 5 |
| Require their members to 'Stand Down'. | 6 | 2 | 11 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 28 |
| Decommission all their weapons. | 5 | 3 | 8 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 21 |
| Disband their paramilitary organisations. | 6 | 3 | 11 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 27 |

But when it comes to more general policies to help ensure peace and security the Northern Ireland consensus is restored. Nearly everyone wants normalisation at 41% 'Essential', 32% 'Desirable', 21% 'Acceptable', 4% 'Tolerable' and only 3% 'Unacceptable' (Table 20). Similarly, almost everyone supports an independent monitor to report on all aspects of violence and an independent commissioner to draw up plans and monitor progress towards normalisation and peace. They also want the British and Irish governments to direct their security services to end all paramilitary activity and would like programs of regeneration and transformation to assist communities with paramilitary links to achieve 'normalisation'. Three million pounds has already been allocated to this end.

Table 20. Ensuring Peace and Security

| Proposed Policy | Essential | Desirable | Acceptable | Tolerable | Unacceptable |
|--|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|--------------|
| The British Government should take all necessary steps to normalise security arrangements in Northern Ireland. | 41 | 32 | 21 | 4 | 3 |
| An independent monitor should report on all aspects of violence in Northern Ireland and who was responsible. | 34 | 36 | 23 | 4 | 2 |

| | | | | | |
|---|----|----|----|---|---|
| An independent commissioner should draw up plans for and monitor progress towards normalisation and peace. | 33 | 35 | 24 | 5 | 3 |
| The British and Irish governments should direct their security, police and legal services to use all possible means to end all paramilitary activity. | 40 | 30 | 24 | 5 | 4 |
| Programs of regeneration and transformation should be established to assist communities with paramilitary links to achieve 'normalisation'. | 36 | 34 | 22 | 6 | 2 |

No one will be surprised at the resistance of some Protestants to continued police reform and the reticence of some Sinn Féin supporters to go beyond a simple end to paramilitary activity. And the question of OTRs, like early prisoner releases, was always going to be controversial. But what is perhaps surprising is the almost unanimous acceptance, across both communities, of all the other proposals put forward to make the Belfast Agreement work. In this context it is difficult to understand why the two governments and pro-Agreement parties have waited until now to tackle questions of stability, community relations and normalisation in a more engaged way. It would seem to be the case that the people have got ahead of the politicians. Hopefully, now, the two governments and pro-Agreement parties will do what has to be done to catch up.

What can be Done if the Negotiations Fail

If the negotiations on the future of the Belfast Agreement fail what should the Governments and parties do? A series of options were put to the people of Northern Ireland on this issue and here it may be helpful to put them in order of least resistance as percentages of 'Unacceptable' (Table 21). As Table 21 shows, no one seems to be willing to quite give up on the Belfast Agreement yet and the new institutions it has created.

Table 21. Actions to be taken if negotiations fail

| Proposal | All of Northern Ireland, % |
|--|----------------------------|
| The Civic Forum should be maintained as a public voice. | 7 |
| A Shadow Executive should be established to advise the Government. | 9 |
| The Assembly Committees should be re-established to advise each Government department. | 9 |
| Bring in an electoral system that more evenly distributes seats and power between the small and large parties. | 11 |
| The two Governments should move quickly and decisively to fill the political vacuum. | 12 |
| End suspension and have fresh elections. | 12 |
| The British and Irish governments should implement as much of the Belfast Agreement as they possibly can. | 14 |
| Joint Authority in combination with a Northern Ireland Assembly. | 16 |
| Continuation of Direct Rule from London with no Northern Ireland Assembly. | 25 |
| Bring in an electoral system that distributes more seats and power to the largest parties. | 29 |
| Joint Authority by Direct Rule from both London and Dublin. | 30 |
| Scrap the Belfast Agreement and negotiate a new agreement. | 39 |
| A new Anglo-Irish Agreement. | 43 |
| Negotiate a united Ireland. | 47 |



Pushing for Peace and Stability: Some Observations on Colin Irwin's Polls

Landon E. Hancock, George Mason University

It appears quite evident from these recent surveys that what the population desires above all else is the creation and maintenance of a 'normal' civic life for Northern Ireland. The two main goals of removing the gun from Northern Irish politics and the creation of a stable, working government attest to this apparent desire. The form and fashion of the current government appears to be what the general public most desires, rather than some reformulation of the agreement or the principles by which devolved government was set up. The key here is the desire for normality and stability; including the disarmament of the paramilitaries and a scaling back of the security apparatus.

Another thing to note from Irwin's data is that the Protestant responses reflect a growing unhappiness with the current agreement and, primarily, with its implementation. This mirrors to some extent the findings of the Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys that Protestants are increasingly feeling that Catholics are benefiting much more from the agreement than they are.

From a policy standpoint it would seem wise for the principals involved to focus on three major areas of contention. The first two areas go hand in hand and include the twin desires for decommissioning and the reinstatement of Northern Irish Assembly. Both of these will address the understandable desire for a sense of normality in social life and the concomitant demilitarization of the security situation. Although these issues appear to be the thorniest they are, at heart, really the most simple. Both sides understand what they need to do, the problem they appear to have is not with the public at large but with selling these necessary actions to their rank and file supporters. So it is not a matter of what to do, but how to do it. Irwin's data make it apparent that a bare majority (61%) of the general population believes that the agreement is most likely to fail due to a lack of good faith on the part of either the Unionists or Republicans. Therefore, it seems prudent to recommend that all the main parties, UUP, SDLP and Sinn Féin must at the very least 'appear' to be pushing for a resolution to these issues rather than appearing to be forced to the table by the British and Irish governments.

The third issue is actually the thorniest as it most directly addresses popular support for the agreement or the lack thereof; in particular from the Protestant community. This issue would seem to be most important in the Loyalist areas of the community, which have suffered a great deal from the failure of the traditional economy and, to date, have apparently not benefited equally from the much touted peace dividend. I use the term 'apparently' here in recognition of the vast amounts of monies that have been sent to both communities under the auspices of the Peace One and Peace Two programs. However, if the sentiments reported by Michael Hall in his series of Island Pamphlets are correct, then many of the Loyalist 'recipients' of monies feel that their voices are not being heard and that the main purpose for these funds is to employ Unionist community workers. If this is indeed the case then all parties to the conflict, especially the Protestant-based political parties and the British Government, can and should work with community leaders in Loyalist areas to elicit *their* needs and help *them* to create a vibrant and economically viable community where young people have options other than joining paramilitary groups or criminal gangs. Elicitive policies aimed at communities afflicted with violence and gangsterism could go a long way towards stabilizing Northern Irish society, providing a sense of benefit to a community that has felt left out and, hopefully, increasing support for the agreement.

If the needs of the Loyalist community are addressed alongside the willingness for both sides to make *real* concessions on the issues of disarmament and stability, then in my

opinion this 'longest running' peace process will have made substantial progress toward the long-term transformation of the conflict.

Public Opinion and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland: A Comment*

Sid Noel, King's College, University of Western Ontario

In no divided society has public opinion been as deeply probed as in Northern Ireland, thanks largely to the series of surveys carried out by Dr. Colin Irwin for the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. Irwin's February 2003 survey of attitudes towards devolution, suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the future of the peace process is once again exemplary in its thoroughness, consistency and seriousness of purpose. In contrast to the superficial 'horse race' preoccupations of most party- or media-sponsored polls, Irwin's aim is to probe beneath the surface of expressed political preferences, and the results are illuminating. Like a railway cutting that exposes the geological strata beneath the surface of the land, this survey exposes the bed-rock attitudes, biases and preferred explanations of events that underlie Northern Ireland's political landscape.

In this brief comment it is possible to discuss only a few findings. The most significant, in my view, are those that explore aspects of trust and confidence, and the related matter of blame. It is useful to start with a few questions. What is the minimum level of trust necessary to sustain a power-sharing government? And between whom must trust be shared? Only between the political leaders of the communities in conflict? Between political leaders and their respective communities? Between those communities? Between the communities and the external mediators and/or guarantors of power-sharing arrangements?

Consociational theory provides no clear answers, but presumably there must be some trust along all of the above dimensions. Political leaders who enter into a power-sharing coalition must at least be willing to trust one another to honour their commitment to power-sharing; otherwise, their coalition is a sham and doomed to failure. Leaders must be able to count on at least some trust from their communities; otherwise, they would not be able to bargain at all. Communities must at least trust one another not to use power-sharing as a 'time out' to surreptitiously prepare for a resumption of armed conflict; and all must place at least some trust in the capacity of interlocutors to act as honest brokers and reliable guarantors. In Northern Ireland, as this survey shows, levels of trust, which were never very high, have fallen to a low ebb. Are they nevertheless high enough to support a resumption of devolved government? This is a question that may soon be answered.

There is little in this survey to comfort those who hold that the Belfast Agreement is essentially sound, and needs only a little fine-tuning for devolved government to be successful. Only 60% of Protestants now support the Agreement, down from a high point of 89% in 1999. (Curiously, while 60% is higher than the bare majority who voted for the Agreement in the May 1998 referendum, when asked how they would vote 'if the referendum was held today,' 64% said 'No'). Perhaps the most salient finding is that 37% of Protestants now respond to the question 'Do you want the Belfast Agreement to work?' with a blunt 'No' (compared to a mere 5% for Catholics).

Moreover, even among those who still support the Agreement there is a conspicuous lack of trust in the various parties responsible for its implementation. In answer to the question 'Who do you think can be trusted to implement the Belfast Agreement?' a clear

*I wish to thank Brian O'Riordan of G.P. Murray Research Limited, Toronto, for generously sharing with me his expertise in survey data analysis.



majority of Protestants (55%) either 'do not trust' or 'do not trust at all' the British Government. Predictably, they trust the Irish Government even less. Of the political parties, none is trusted by a majority. A mere 9% of Protestants trust the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) 'a lot' and 25% trust it 'a little' (while 23% 'do not trust' and 21% 'do not trust at all'). Even among UUP *supporters* only a minority expressed any trust in the party -- while 23% 'do not trust' it, and 12% responded 'do not trust at all' -- and this for the party that Protestants trust the most!

Among Catholics the level of trust in government is similarly low. 55% do not trust the British Government to implement the Agreement, and they are also mistrustful of the Irish Government: only 8% trust it 'a lot' and 31% 'a little' (while 23% 'do not trust' and 15% 'do not trust at all'). When it comes to political parties, however, Catholics have considerably more trust in nationalist parties than Protestants have in unionist parties: the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) is 'trusted a lot' by 22% (the highest total for any political party) and 'trusted a little' by 40% (again the highest). Sinn Féin is second, being trusted by 48% overall. However, Sinn Féin is also the most distrusted nationalist party -- a party that 18% of Catholics 'do not trust' and 12% 'do not trust at all.'

Trust that transcends the sectarian divide is conspicuous mainly by its absence. Among Protestants, only 11% have some trust in the SDLP, as opposed to 63% who do not. (For Sinn Féin the comparable numbers are 3% and 89%!) Among Catholics, 12% have some trust in the UUP, while 64% do not. Among Sinn Féin supporters, a mere 3% express any trust in the UUP. The only major parties that attract more than a risible level of trust across the divide are the UUP and the SDLP. Among UUP supporters, 16% have some trust in the SDLP and among SDLP supporters 23% have some trust in the UUP.

When it comes to casting blame, Protestants overwhelmingly (71%) identify 'The failure of Republicans to abandon violence' as the reason for continued conflict and the suspension of the Assembly. Catholics by a similar margin (73%) identify 'The failure of Loyalists to abandon violence.' When broken down by party, however, some important variations emerge. 64% of UUP supporters also cite 'The failure of Loyalists to abandon violence' and 71% of SDLP supporters also cite 'The failure of Republicans to abandon violence.'

If devolved government is not restored, and the peace process collapses, the two sides have their explanations ready. For Protestants (73%) it will be 'Because Republicans will not work the Agreement in good faith.' For Catholics (82%) it will be 'Because Unionists will not work the Agreement in good faith.' There is also plenty of blame to spread around. For example, both Protestants (58%) and Catholics (56%) point accusing fingers at the British and Irish governments for their 'lack of co-operation and determined commitment.'

The overall picture that emerges from this survey is of ground being elaborately prepared for failure -- psychologically if not politically. The deeper the poll goes into the rationales and explanations of events that underlie the respondents' opinions the more it uncovers the still-potent litanies of blame, recrimination, and projected mirror-image fears. Both sides, for example, believe that if the peace process collapses it will be because of the other side's refusal to budge and the result will be more paramilitary violence on both sides. Both sides purportedly yearn for 'normalisation' -- but in the meantime they are preparing their stock of rote answers if once again 'things fall apart.'

It would, however, be premature to write off the Belfast Agreement. Public opinion is a fluid thing. Its measurement -- and interpretation -- are as much art as science, and the

most suggestive clues are often buried in the less eye-catching numbers. It should be noted that the percentage who answered 'Not sure' to key questions is relatively high. For example, for all Northern Ireland, the percentage who are 'not sure' about their assessment of UUP-SDLP co-operation is 28-30% -- higher than any other response. Moreover, although Protestants are about evenly divided on the question 'Do you think Direct Rule or Devolved Government is best for Northern Ireland?' (47% and 49% respectively), there is another number that also deserves attention. For all Northern Ireland, scrapping the Belfast Agreement is rated an 'unacceptable' option by 39% -- one of the highest totals. What these findings suggest is that middle ground has shrunk but not disappeared, and may yet be enough to build upon.

Finally, are there any lessons to be drawn? I would propose two. First, the British and Irish governments should ponder the reasons why they have largely ceased to be viewed as trustworthy interlocutors, and do everything in their power to regain the confidence they have lost. Second, the moderate parties need to take heart. The UUP and the SDLP are the only parties that show any capacity to bridge the political gap between Protestants and Catholics, and they should trumpet this fact to their own and each other's electorates. If the voters nevertheless shift their support to the extremes, to the DUP and Sinn Féin, no one should be surprised if the Belfast Agreement joins the Sunningdale Agreement in the archive of hopeful but ultimately futile initiatives.

The Story from the Polls: Some Reflections

Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, University of Sheffield

Northern Ireland exerts an endless fascination. This small region of Europe has contained, over many decades, one of the most potent combinations of religious/cultural/political antagonisms in Western Europe, antagonisms which between the late 1960's and the late 1990's of course expressed themselves in a long spiral of sub-state terrorism and state counter-terror. Indeed, long before the events of 9/11 and the 'Americanisation'¹ of a war on terror, the people of the Province and to some extent those in the rest of the United Kingdom experienced at first hand the horror and anxiety provoked by paramilitary groups that saw violence as a legitimate expression of political frustration in the struggle between the two traditions of Nationalism/Republicanism and Unionism/Loyalism. So intractable did the conflict seem that it became customary to think that this was a war without much prospect of peace. 'No surrender' became the leitmotif of Northern Irish politics. And yet, shortly after the end of the Cold War, many of the groups engaged in violent struggle for decades gave up pursuing their mutually incompatible objectives to participate in the construction of a peace process which at the time of writing remains precariously on track. While the causes of these processes will be debated for years – some suggest those engaged in Republican violence had simply been defeated by a British military/political strategy, whilst others are more doubtful – there is little doubt that some in an ageing Republican leadership had little stomach for yet more killing.

Dr Irwin is to be congratulated on producing some valuable and clear data on current opinion in Northern Ireland. Such is the richness and breadth of his work that I concentrate on only a few of the very many important dimensions he raises. The first concerns the position of Sinn Féin. What is perhaps most compelling in the reports produced by Dr Irwin is how revelatory they are of the seismic shift on the

¹ The impact of 9/11 on the US attitude towards terrorism meant that Sinn Féin came under increasing pressure from the White House to decommission at least some of its arsenal in the months after the terrorist attacks on Washington and New York. The Bush Administration has also designated the Real IRA as a foreign terrorist organisation.



Nationalist/Republican side which helped to bring peace about. Sinn Fein has now established itself firmly within the political centre of Northern Irish politics and commands a sizeable – and on recent form growing – share of electoral support. While the tussle between the SDLP and Sinn Fein for the hearts and minds of the Catholic community is not new, the growing ‘respectability’ of Sinn Fein in some but by no means all quarters and its perceived effectiveness in representing the Nationalist cause means that a new middle ground for Northern Ireland has effectively been established. Indeed, while Dr Irwin has argued in his short commentary that the polls appear to demonstrate a move away from alignment to the centre it might be better to suggest that the centre of gravity in the politics of Northern Ireland has moved and that Sinn Fein have simply been very successful in colonising it and driving others to more extreme responses. Whatever the longer term agenda of Sinn Fein in terms of a united Ireland, the recognition by figures such as Gerry Adams that it has been possible to achieve political objectives through working within constitutional politics will be central to the development of democracy in the Province.

A second theme raised by Dr Irwin’s research is that of the position of Unionism in the contemporary politics of Northern Ireland. The ‘success’ of Sinn Fein does little to reassure those on the Unionist side who have long deplored the inclusion of these representatives of Republicanism in the Executive of Northern Ireland. The UUP in particular have consistently argued that there should be no place in government for Sinn Fein until the IRA decommissions all of its weaponry. While the Hillsborough Declaration of April 1999 which did require the IRA to place some of its arsenal ‘beyond use’ was later overridden by Tony Blair, it is clear that the ‘no guns, no government’ issue continues to trouble a considerable proportion of the Unionist population. Equally, though, it is fascinating to see that ‘no surrender’ as a philosophy of Republicanism still inspires a proportion of the Catholic community. Indeed, it would be foolish to imagine that the decision of Sinn Fein to pursue politics through the framework of devolved government has carried the whole Republican movement with it. There are still those in the Province who continue to seek a resumption of the armed struggle and will not be satisfied with devolved government and power sharing in the northern part of Ireland. To some extent Unionist fears, as expressed through these polls, over the reluctance of the IRA to disband its weaponry are understandable. Although decommissioning in itself will not of course prevent paramilitary groups rearming, the issue of putting ‘arms beyond use’ is related to Unionist views of the reform of policing structures in the province. The much lower level of satisfaction expressed by members of the Unionist community (especially those in the DUP) on issues such as police reform reflects a view that the Nationalists/Republicans have succeeded in undermining institutions, such as the RUC, which guaranteed the security of the Unionist community. To add salt to Unionist wounds, the IRA still retains some of its military arsenal. It is likely therefore, as the responses to Dr Irwin have indicated, that policing and the composition of the policing board will remain contentious.

Let me now turn to a third area raised by Dr Irwin’s research. This area might be termed the politics of ‘convergence’. While there is understandably after the events of the last thirty years a gulf between the two communities, especially on issues of security, there appears to be a convergence between the two sides on a range of issues. One, and perhaps the most encouraging, is the commitment and desire for political stability at local level through the encouragement of cross community links. Dr Irwin’s research clearly demonstrates an overwhelming appetite for stability through reconciliation and institution building. There is, for example, a consensus in favour of the establishment of an assembly committee on human rights and for government to provide opportunities for multiple channels of integration. Given the institutional and cultural sectarianism that has characterised much of Northern Irish politics, the desire for stability, integration and

'normalisation' is striking. There is also an evident degree of frustration within both communities at the lack of speed and the relative paucity of opportunity for such endeavours.

Perhaps though, the most intriguing revelation in Dr Irwin's research, is the desire within both communities for an understanding of the past and troubled history of the Province. While some respondents do still appear to have an addiction to a continuing debate over who or what was responsible for 'the troubles', there is also a strong demand for the issue of blame to be shelved in favour of a culture of accountability. This is especially obvious in attitudes towards the past actions of successive British and Irish Governments. Respondents were, for example, absolutely in favour of full government co-operation with public inquiries into the history of the troubles. While a general distrust of politicians seems to characterise most modern societies, the population of Northern Ireland has good reason to demand to know what exactly happened over the course of the last thirty years. It is especially the actions of British security and intelligence services which attract most attention. While allegations of a 'shoot to kill' strategy have long dogged the security apparatus in the Province, the very recent revelations about the continued surveillance of some members of the Northern Irish Executive will continue to excite concern in both communities.

Dr Irwin argues in his commentary that it will be up to the British Government to choose to divulge any or all details of the past behaviour of its security forces. But it is also the case that the demand to know 'truths' forms an almost irresistible part of most peace processes. I have less certainty than Dr Irwin that the British Government will always be able to control what we know about the past in Ireland. It is, moreover, a moot point as to whether knowing the 'truth' can always bring about 'reconciliation'. The truth can hurt as well as heal. The most recent revelations of an alleged closeness between Mo Mowlam and Martin McGuinness during the course of the peace process are sure to antagonise certain factions of Unionism.

So does Dr Irwin's research indicate progress in the politics of Northern Ireland? The distinguished scholar of Ireland, Professor Paul Bew has argued that with the Belfast Agreement of 1998 it might be said that Northern Ireland is on the verge of completing a transition from being an ethnic democracy in the 1921–72 period to being a liberal, multicultural, consociational-type political entity (Bew 2000). There is some evidence for that view in these responses. Majorities in both communities support power sharing and the inclusion of the different traditions in the everyday life of the province. Even the inclusion of women, for so long on the margins of political life in the Province, now evokes little opposition – though it is interesting to discover that a larger proportion of respondents (6%) continues to oppose the entry of women into positions of political authority. It would be fascinating to find out more from surveys such as this about how the role of women in the province has changed since the Good Friday Agreement. While we are used to viewing women as those who have held families and communities together in the face of conflict and violence, there is an important story to be told on how women adapt, or are allowed to adapt, to the new politics of representation in the Province (Fearon 2000).

A final question is whether statistically representative samples fully capture social reality where extremism may be the position of a small but politically significant minority. While those who responded to Dr Irwin may be genuine in their desire for stability and integration across communities, it is hard to reconcile these views with the rather graphic displays of communal hatred so evident still in Northern Ireland. One need only think of the stand off around the Holy Cross Girls Primary School in Northern Belfast or in the recent threats by the INLA against Protestant workers, not to mention the sectarian problems that arise from every marching season. On the other hand though, the politics



of Northern Ireland are now such, that sectarian incidents are usually roundly condemned across both communities and have led on occasion to joint demonstrations organised by both Catholics and Protestants to mitigate against such hatreds. Dr Irwin's research provides grounds for hope that these processes will continue and be consolidated within public attitudes. As yet, however, these grounds remain uncertain.

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International Negotiation Best Practice: A Reply to Hancock, Noel and Kennedy-Pipe

Colin Irwin, Queen's University Belfast; www.peacepolls.org

I am most grateful to Landon Hancock, Sid Noel and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe for their comments on my latest Northern Ireland 'peace poll', particularly for some of their most generous and kind remarks about my work. All their points are well made and it would be churlish of me to 'nip pick' over details of interpretation here. Rather, in the context of the suspended elections and publication of the two governments 'Joint Declaration' it might be more helpful to consider what the next steps in the Northern Ireland peace process should be and any lessons that can be taken from this.

Firstly, it is important to remember that I am the facilitator of the polls and that the questions are formulated in consultation with representatives of the pro-Agreement parties. Consequently, if a proposal gets raised in the polls for test against public opinion and if that proposal is acceptable to the vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland then it is fair and reasonable to ask what, if anything, is being done to implement that particular proposal. On this occasion nearly all of the suggestions so tested in the poll have found their way into the 'Joint Declaration', its three annexes, the 'Agreement Between The British and Irish Governments' and the 'Proposals In Relation To On The Runs (OTRs)' and the pro-Agreement parties and two governments are to be congratulated on their efforts in this regard.

It is therefore a matter of considerable regret that the elections have been postponed; many Unionist politicians have condemned the Joint Declaration out of hand and the IRA have not been able to match the 'Security Normalisation' annex with a plan of their own that would meet minimum British and Irish government requirements for an 'act of completion'. The necessities of electoral politics seem to have derailed the Northern Ireland peace process yet again, but all is not lost, far from it. The Joint Declaration effectively provides the two governments and pro-Agreement parties with 'a programme of government', all be it in some sort of shadow form. They should now work together to implement as much of it as they possibly can as soon as they possibly can, without recriminations and without 'playing the blame game', in an effort to establish trust, peace and stability that can lead to elections. If they fail in this exercise over the coming months then the autumn will see the Belfast Agreement brought into review at which time changes can be introduced that could then turn the Joint Declaration into a social, economic and political reality. One way or another the two governments need to do what

has to be done to achieve this end, fill the political vacuum and move the peace process forward. The Joint Declaration is arguably the new Northern Ireland 'road map' but unlike its Israeli/Palestinian counterpart we know it is acceptable to the vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland, by how much and in which constituencies and if there are any lingering doubts on any of these points they can be tested again.² Some politicians may disagree with the Joint Declaration but the Northern Ireland peace process does not belong to them alone. It also belongs to the people who answer the polls and to those who voted for the Belfast Agreement in the referendum. In Northern Ireland the peace process has been built from the *bottom up* as well as from the *top down*, from the *centre out* as well as from the *polarities in*. Tony Blair was right to suggest that President Bush should do as much for the peace processes his government has taken a degree of responsibility for. But it is a lesson the USA has not yet learnt. Here are a couple of examples:

In Cyprus US Aid and the State Department through the US Embassy in Nicosia sponsored a series of private polls that they shared with their staff and key figures in the Greek and Turkish Cypriot negotiating teams. But the questions were all wrong. They pointed up differences and attitudes more than looking for and mapping out common ground and when some of these questions ended up in local media polls they only served to demonstrate how difficult a settlement might be. They looked more for problems than solutions and consequently the Embassy staff thought they were dealing with a particularly intractable problem. However, when I took these matters up with the representatives of civil society it was clear that the problems were, as in Northern Ireland, not nearly so bad as their political leaders would have 'us' believe. The UN team in Cyprus wanted me to go ahead with a poll but the US Embassy and US Aid would no longer have anything to do with it. In part, I suspect, because it may not have fitted their own political and regional agenda but in part, I also suspect, because they did not want to expose the failures of their own programme of confidential research. Those responsible for the negotiations, particularly the US Embassy staff, were wedded to the paradigm of deals to be done 'behind closed doors' between the senior leaders of the two communities. Regrettably those negotiations failed in 2003 although most observers took the view that the majority of the people on the island of Cyprus would have been willing to accept the proposals put forward by the UN. But the people of Cyprus were never given an opportunity to make their wishes known either through a referendum or the polling methods used in Northern Ireland. An opportunity was lost and the people of Cyprus were denied the possibility of becoming active partners in their own peace process until they took to the streets.

In Israel and Palestine the US has sponsored programmes of public opinion research over many years through a variety of institutions. Again the research is superficial when looked at alongside the Northern Ireland work. And although the polls clearly demonstrate the desire of the people for an agreement around security and a two state solution the research is not done as a collaborative effort with party negotiators in an effort to pin down the details of an acceptable accommodation.³ The 'people' are not brought along in and with negotiations in a pro-active public way so that when deals are attempted they tend to fail for lack of public preparation. Regrettably President Clinton's efforts may have failed because of this lack of pre-negotiation problem solving and 'stage setting' and it seems very likely that future efforts may similarly fail if negotiating practices are not changed.⁴

² Copies of the questionnaires and statistical reports can be downloaded from www.peacepolls.org and analysis found in Irwin (2002).

³ Seventy two% of Israelis and 72% of Palestinians would accept peace with the 1967 borders and cessation of violence according to polls reviewed by Michael Emerson and Nathalie Tocci (2003).

⁴ For a review see Klein (2002).



Consensus politics are not presently mainstreamed as a key element in international negotiation best practice with its almost exclusive emphasis on the political elite of the largest ethnic groups. Centre parties, who may frequently accept compromises as their policies of first choice are sidelined and well informed electorates who want and should be given an opportunity to take ownership of and a degree of responsibility for their own peace process are all too often ignored. Without real efforts to build consensus as part of a political process leading to peace, then peace, in modern democracies, is difficult to sustain. We no longer live in an age where simply 'doing deals behind closed doors' is good enough – perhaps we never did. The Northern Ireland peace process is far from perfect but it still has much to teach the world.

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