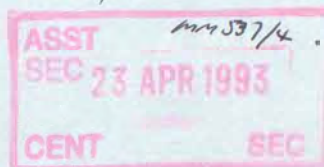


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FR D J R HILL
CPL DIVISION
21 APRIL 1993

Mr Watkins



1. Mr McNeill NIB 23/4
2. Mr McNeill (old) 26/4
3. Mr McNeill
88.5
21.4

cc	PS/Mr Mates(L,B&DFP)	-B&M
	PS/Mr Atkins(L,DOE&DED)	-B&M
	PS/Mr Hanley(L,B&DENI)	-B&M
	PS/Lord Arran(L,DANI&DHSS)	-B&M
	PS/PUS(L+B)	-B
	PS/Mr Fell	-B
	Mr Thomas	-B
	Mr Ledlie	-B
	Mr Bell	-B
	Mr Williams <i>21.4</i>	-B
	Mr Watkins	-B
	Mr Jardine, PPRU	-B
	Mr Wood(L+B)	-B
	Mr Cooke	-B
	Mr Maccabe	-B
	Mr Dodds	-B
	Mr Stephens	-B
	Mr Quinn	-B
	Mr Rickard	-B
	Mr Caine	-B
	Mr Archer, RID	-B
	HMA Dublin	-B
	Mr Sibson, Cabinet Office	-B

PS/Secretary of State(L+B) -B *4. Mr*

THE NORTHERN IRELAND ELECTORATE

I attach a paper prepared by Mrs Rogers of this division, in consultation with colleagues around the system, which explores the evidence about future trends in the Northern Ireland electorate.

2. The current twin assumptions that there will be a Catholic majority in Northern Ireland within a few decades and that this majority will vote for a united Ireland does of course have considerable political significance. The paper suggests that both assumptions are questionable.

3. This work was mentioned at a political development stocktaking last month and the Secretary of State asked for advice on what line he should take on the subject. The Government's formal position on

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all this (eg the "Institute of Structural Engineers" speech) is that we do not think there will be a majority in favour of change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland within the foreseeable future. The Secretary of State has also noted that many Catholics support the present constitutional status of Northern Ireland. (There is impeccable evidence for the latter point but it may be counterproductive to make too much of it, as it could generate counter-claims from nationalist politicians, speaking "on behalf of their community" which it would be difficult to refute.) ? BSAS / F. Faul.

4. I see no need for the Government to go further than this in public, though if pressed on the "demographic evidence" the Secretary of State could point out that the prediction of demographic trends is a highly technical matter, requiring subjective judgements to be made about a range of related factors, and offers no certainties. I imagine that Mr Compton will in due course produce an academic paper on the statistical evidence which will find its way into the public domain.

5. Officials will, if the Secretary of State is content, continue to convey (to politicians, academics, journalists and other contacts) the interpretation of the demographic evidence which is reflected in the paper and to emphasise that Government policy is based firmly on the assessment that Northern Ireland will remain a part of the United Kingdom for the foreseeable future.

Wider Political Implications

6. The wider implication of the debate about whether and when a Catholic/nationalist voting majority will emerge in Northern Ireland is that it unhelpfully focusses political discussion on the single emotive issue of "the constitutional question" and tends to polarise the community around it.

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7. Although the Anglo-Irish Agreement envisages that Irish unity would be brought about by the two Governments on the basis of a simple majority vote in Northern Ireland, it is in practice difficult to see how this could be achieved. Whether or not they are in a majority in Northern Ireland, up to a million Protestants could not be forcibly integrated into a united Ireland against their will. Quite apart from the political difficulties, there must be a risk that, as the moment of balance approaches, the paramilitaries on both sides would be tempted to engage in whatever "ethnic cleansing" was necessary to ensure that moment arrived, or to defer it. Such concerns about the possible future situation (which, as the paper argues, may never arise) contribute significantly to current political tensions and reinforce the case for taking what steps we can to defuse the issue.

8. Obviously, a political accommodation across all three strands which tended to promote greater mutual respect, trust and co-operation within Northern Ireland and between the two parts of Ireland could have an important role to play in reducing fears, familiarising people with the idea of working constructively together and demonstrating the advantages of doing so.

9. Mr Spring's "covenant" notion of reciprocal guarantees could also help reduce Unionist fears about the advent of a nationalist majority in Northern Ireland by giving them the assurance - at least at the level of general principle - that their interests as a minority in a united Ireland would be more than adequately safeguarded.

signed David Hill

D J R HILL
CPL DIVISION
21 APRIL 1993

*have contents
from OIRH.*

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THE NORTHERN IRELAND ELECTORATE

INTRODUCTION

1. The Government is committed to the principle, enshrined in the Northern Ireland Constitution Act of 1973, that there will be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of a majority of its people.

2. There is no doubt that, currently, a majority of the people in Northern Ireland wish to remain part of the United Kingdom but it is also recognised that a substantial proportion of the Roman Catholic community wish Northern Ireland to be part of a separate united Ireland. Some commentators and politicians speak in terms which assume that all Catholics in Northern Ireland are "nationalists" in this strict sense; and this gives a particular political/constitutional twist to the debate about the proportion of Catholics in the Northern Ireland electorate.

3. Our own analysis, borne out by statistical, survey and anecdotal evidence over the years, is that while most Catholics in Northern Ireland want to see their "Irishness" expressed in various ways - including in political arrangements - there is very far from being a unanimous view that Irish unity should come about forthwith. Fr Faul argues that only about 50% of the Catholic community would support Irish unity in the short term. Precise figures are difficult to find, but that would not be inconsistent with the conclusions of academic researchers and survey evidence (summarised, for example, in Dr John Whyte's book, "Interpreting Northern Ireland").

4. Leaving that important debate to one side for the moment, this paper begins by examining the available evidence for the growing belief, on both sides of the community, that there will be a Catholic majority in Northern Ireland within decades.

THE ISSUE

5. There is a fairly wide-spread belief that Catholic birthrates are, and will remain, higher than their non-Catholic neighbours; and it is therefore often assumed that at some point in the future the Catholic population will become the majority. The primary purpose of this paper is to examine the following points:-

- i. is the assumption of a higher Catholic birthrate a correct one?
- ii. if (i) above is correct, when might a Catholic voting majority (50% + 1) come about in Northern Ireland?

6. Its conclusions can be summarised as follows:-

- i. at the present time, the Catholic birth rate in Northern Ireland (like that elsewhere in the Catholic world) is declining;
- ii. however, the long-held perception of a Protestant majority in Northern Ireland, based on a 2/3-1/3 split no longer holds. The Catholic population has broken the 40% barrier, the Protestant has dropped below 60%.
- iii. despite (ii) above variations in demographic, economic and social trends make the prediction of a Catholic voting majority unreliable.

THE BACKGROUND

7. The assumption that there will one day be a Catholic majority has long coloured political attitudes in Northern Ireland and has received an unfortunate boost by inaccurate reportage of the 1991 Census Report.

8. The 1991 Census was the first to contain a voluntary question on religion in which the respondents were invited to state "religion, religious denomination or body" to which they belonged. The results can be summarised:

	%
Catholic	38.4
Protestant and Other	50.6
None	3.8
Not stated	7.3
All	100.0

The figures were published as part of a summary of the 1991 Census Report in an NI Information Bulletin released on 23 October 1991. A full copy of the press release is attached at Annex A.

9. Following the publication of the census some comment was created by David McKittrick's articles in the "Independent on Sunday" of 1 November. In these pieces (copies attached at Annex B) McKittrick quoted a figure of 43% for the Catholic population as evidence of a very sharp rise in the Catholic population indicating that they would become a majority " in the foreseeable future". His figures were also quoted (un-attributed) in a BBC 1 nine o'clock news broadcast.

10. The only public challenge to McKittrick's assumption has been a letter in a subsequent "Independent on Sunday" from Paul Compton of Queens University (copy attached at Annex C). In his letter Mr Compton pointed out that Mr McKittrick's calculations had omitted those who refused to reveal their denomination to the census and thus had distorted the figures. It was Mr Compton's opinion that the bulk of these who refused to reveal their denomination were Protestants who refused to cooperate on conscientious grounds. Catholics, in his opinion, were urged by their politicians and community leaders to cooperate fully with the census to demonstrate

their numerical strength. This contrasts with McKittrick's claim that the 1981 census was unreliable because it was conducted during the hunger strikes and boycotted by some Nationalists. Neither Compton's nor McKittrick's assumptions as to community motivation has been backed up scientifically but it can be confirmed that McKittrick misquoted the statistical evidence.

PAST DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

11. Previous Northern Ireland Census Reports have shown that despite higher Catholic fertility rates the population balance was only a few per cent more Catholic than it was at the first population census of 1861 (see chart at Annex D). This is because since 1861 migration rates have had a proportionally greater effect on the Catholic population which declined to 33.5% in 1926 before gradually rising to its 1991 level. From the late 1970s and the early 1980s, statistics indicated that the annual number of births of the two communities were almost identical, which of course meant a higher birthrate in the smaller Catholic community. Given this higher Catholic birthrate it would not have been unreasonable to project the balance to switch in favour of Catholics, resulting in a Catholic majority aged under 15 by the end of the century, a majority in the population by 2026 and a voting majority by 2036.

12. There are, however, further variables which would need to be added to the equation. Firstly migration, which has traditionally borne more heavily on the Catholic population, is now more evenly balanced but of course similar numbers migrating from the two communities does have a greater proportionate effect on the smaller, Catholic, community.

13. The rate of migration is still subject to a number of influences including the state of the economy in Northern Ireland and the prevailing level of terrorism. The effects of the economic situation are particularly difficult to quantify. The recession, overall employment in the United Kingdom and the increasing mobility of the labour market in Europe and elsewhere could all effect the level of migration from Northern Ireland.

14. Likewise, although the Government would wish to see a steady decline in the level of terrorism this cannot be guaranteed nor can the response to the level of terrorism by the two communities be anticipated.

15. The level of migration might also be affected by the Government's attempts to reduce discrimination in such areas as education and employment and it is not yet possible to forecast what that effect might have on the economic and social differentials which tend to encourage mobility.

WORLDWIDE TRENDS

16. Social factors have resulted in Protestant and Catholic fertility rates elsewhere converging. The Protestant birthrate remains broadly stable while Catholic rates are in decline. In respect of the Catholic birthrate this is an international phenomenon not merely one applicable to Northern Ireland. For example, Italy now has the lowest birthrate in Europe. This is a trend that has reached the Republic of Ireland rather later than the rest of the world but even there evidence is that the fertility rate has collapsed in quite a dramatic fashion. The same pattern is now appearing, later still, in Northern Ireland. The Graph at Annex E tells the story. In contrast, recent figures in Great Britain indicate that fertility rates are beginning to increase after a prolonged rate of decline. If this trend is replicated among the Protestant population in Northern Ireland in tandem with continued downward pressure on Catholic fertility rates, the religious balance of births would diverge again.

*must be
a difficult
hand-over*

17. The demographic evidence therefore suggests that it is difficult to estimate the precise population pattern in Northern Ireland in the future. Based on current statistics the eventual rate of convergence of the two birth rates (excluding emigration factors) could be as soon as the first decade of the next century or as late as the third quarter of the century (see Annex F). Mr Compton suggests that the true increase in the Catholic population is 1.5%

over the ten years of 1981 to 1991 (not 5% as Mr McKittrick suggests) and this would produce a Catholic majority in 70 years time. A Catholic voting majority would seem unlikely to appear, if at all, before the second quarter of the next century.

considered?

VOTING TRENDS

18. It is generally assumed that a Catholic majority is synonymous with a Nationalist or Republican majority that would vote for a united Ireland. But recent survey evidence confirms the view offered in that this assumption is highly questionable.

The British Social Attitudes (9th Report) produced a table showing political partisanship in 1991 which can be summarised as:-

	Protestants	Catholics
	%	%
* Nationalist	-	61
+ Unionist	65	-
Alliance	9	9
None	13	16
Other and non respondents	13	14

It also produced a summary in answer to the constitutional question as follows:-

	Protestants	Catholics
	%	%
Remain part of the UK	92	35
Reunify with the rest of Ireland	4	53
Others/don't know/non-respondent	4	12

- * SDLP, Sinn Fein and Workers Party
- + Democratic Unionist and Official Unionist

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The fact that 35% of Catholics (along with 92% of Protestants) favoured remaining part of the UK while just over half favoured re-unification illustrates that a Catholic majority may not necessarily be one that votes for a united Ireland.

19. Future voting patterns may also reflect changed economic and social conditions. For instance, if the Catholic community felt relatively secure within Northern Ireland, either under arrangements for direct rule or under new political arrangements, including some kind of institutional link between the two parts of Ireland they might feel it was unnecessary to vote for those parties which sought re-unification either as an immediate prospect or a long-term objective. Similarly, economic and social conditions within the Republic of Ireland (which are currently undergoing a period of great change) might affect the voting attitudes of a proportion of the Catholic population in Northern Ireland. All in all there may well be as many variables in future Catholic voting patterns as there are in the population trends in Northern Ireland.

20. By comparison, the Protestant/Unionist voting patterns over the last 20 years have only changed within the Unionist "family" for example between the DUP and the UUP. There is no evidence of their vote making any more radical change.

21. Finally, the Social Attitudes Survey of 1991 noted a fall in the proportion of Northern Ireland residents that identified with British political parties. In 1989 27% of respondents said they identified with one of the 3 main British parties, 19% with the Conservatives. In 1991 only 21% identified with British parties, 13% with the Conservatives.

CONCLUSIONS

22. What is significant in these population trends is that, overall, the Catholic population has broken the 40% barrier and the Protestants have dropped below 60%. The old 2/3:1/3 calculation no longer holds. The Statistics Coordinating Group has already been

commissioned to examine those returns that declined to state their religion or declared themselves as having no religion. It will be of interest to see whether they can be correlated to any particular grouping or whether they form a cross-section of the whole community.

23. The 1991 Census shows there is potential for a significant change in the political make-up of the Northern Ireland population but the number of variables makes it difficult to estimate what that change may be. What is plain, however, is that the popular mythology about birthrates and voting trends does not stand up to scrutiny and socio-economic changes will continue to disrupt the old certainties.