

THE PARADES QUESTION

Independent body wins the public's vote of confidence

As the marching season reaches its climax with Drumcree and the Twelfth, a project carried out by three members of Queen's University reveals there is wide popular support for an independent body on parades. **Colin Irwin** reports on the findings.

ON THE radio, in the press, and at countless public meetings, republicans blame the Orangemen and unionists for failure to compromise on the routing of parades.

On the other hand, those who claim a right to march accuse republicans of exploiting all possible opportunities to obstruct their "sacred rights" for political ends.

As with so many things in Northern Ireland, there seems to be no middle ground. And even if there were, it would only be occupied by the supporters of the Alliance Party.

Everyone, it would seem, has resigned themselves to yet another Marching Season dominated by protests, with more of the same next year and the year after that.

But it does not have to be this way. The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland will accept compromise and this includes the supporters of Sinn Fein.

As part of a province-wide survey on "Peace Building and Public Policy" a random sample of the population were asked to place various options for change in their order of preference.

From 715 completed questionnaires, the results for Northern Ireland as a whole bring few surprises, as most people choose "Allow all

Parades" or "Let Residents Decide" as their first choice. However, when it comes to their second choice an "Independent Body" has wide popular support.

This trend continues to be maintained even when the results are broken down for Catholics and Protestants, with a surprising 19% of Protestants wanting to "Let Residents Decide".

One possibility for decision making in Northern Ireland is based on the principle that a majority from each of the two main communities must agree to any given proposal before it can be adopted.

When it comes to parades this principle would work very well. Of the four options put on offer here an "Independent Body" is the only one that can pass this test.

Similarly, it may be possible to resolve other politically contentious issues.

If we now take a look at the results of the survey, broken down by the electorate from each of the five main political parties, the results start to get even more interesting.

Predictably, Alliance voters do hold the middle ground, with an Independent Body being their first choice. The DUP give their support to the Right to March and the RUC. And Independent Body is their third choice.

The UUP and DUP electorate are in agreement for their first choice but the

UUP clearly choose an Independent Body as their second choice, as do Sinn Fein and the SDLP, which both put the rights of residents first.

In public, the leaders of these political parties would be expected to give voice to the first choice of their supporters.

But everyone knows that nearly everyone wants peace and the establishment of an Independent Body to rule on disputed parades is the first choice of many and the second choice of most.

A majority from each of the two main communities in Northern Ireland would be willing to support this compromise.

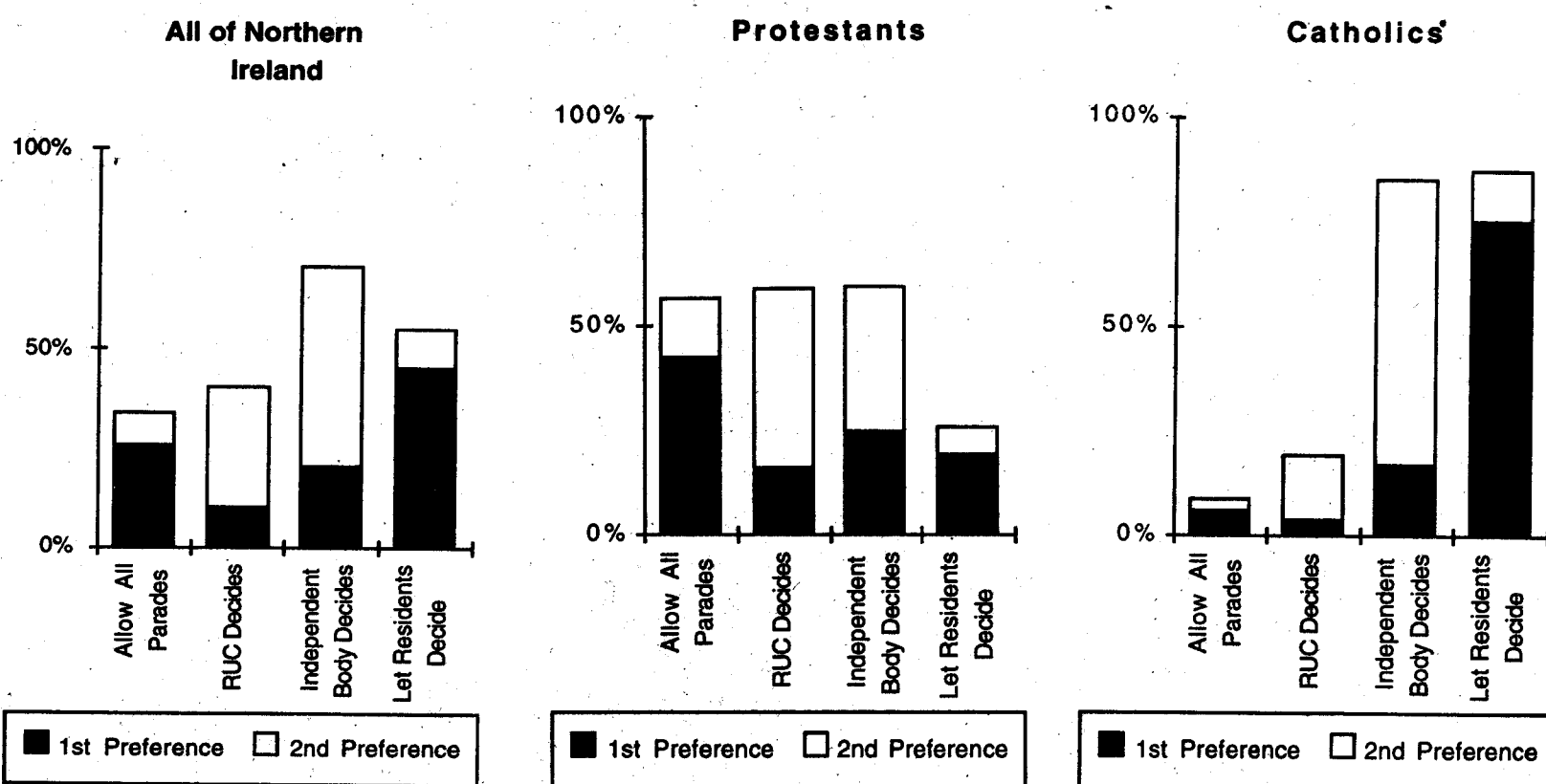
In this case the objectives of "Peace Building" would best be served by abandoning the principle of "Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed".

Perhaps the politicians should not be afraid to take a lead in this matter and collectively advocate the setting up of some sort of Parades Commission.

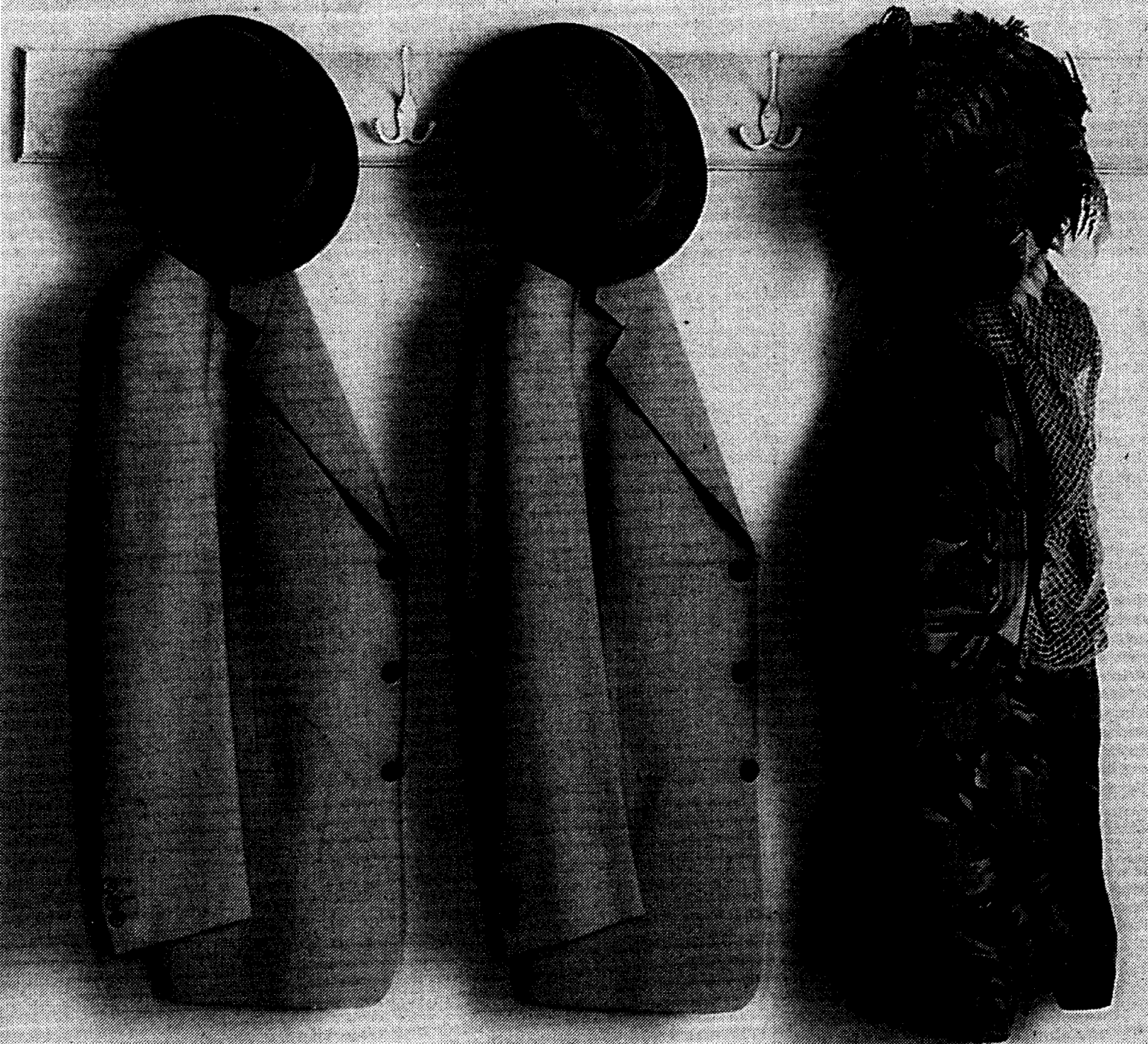
"PEACE Building and Public Policy in Northern Ireland" is a research project undertaken by Dr Colin Irwin of the Institute of Irish Studies, Professor Tom Hadden of the Law School and Professor Fred Boal of the Geography Department all at The Queen's University of Belfast.

The survey is being funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and includes questions on Employment, Housing, Education, Community Relations, Political Development and Policing. Full results will be published in September.

The author is grateful to Dominic Bryan and Neil Jarman for their suggestions in developing the options for the "Parades Question" (see Belfast Telegraph "Parades, protests and parity of esteem", Thursday, June 27).



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If you want to you can try the "Parades Question" for yourself and see how you compare with the findings. Just put a tick in the box against your first, second, third and finally least preferred option.

This is the question as it appeared in the survey: "Here are some alternative options for the way disputed parades and marches could be handled in Northern Ireland. Please read carefully and then tick them in your order of preference below."

	First Preference	Second Preference	Third Preference	Least Preferred Option
Allow all parades - All parades should be allowed to march on all public roads and should be provided with police protection.	1	2	3	4
RUC to rule on disputes - The decision to allow parades to march through different areas should be left to the RUC.	1	2	3	4
Independent body to rule on disputes - There should be an independent body to rule on all disputes relating to the routing of parades.	1	2	3	4
No parades where they are not wanted - No parades should be allowed to march through areas where a majority of the residents do not want them.	1	2	3	4

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