

CAN WE ACCEPT ALTERATIONS TO THE STRUCTURES OF POLICING IN NORTHERN IRELAND, AND IF SO, HOW MUCH?

Changing the force of habit

WHILE members of the Northern Ireland Police Authority are forced to resign, threaten to resign or consider asking the Chief Constable to resign, a project carried out by three members of Queen's University searches for an acceptable compromise to the police question. **Colin Irwin** reports on the findings.

THE announcement by government that it will look into the management of contentious parades is welcome. But nearly all commentators are agreed that it is too little and too late. This initiative should have been taken a year ago after the first Drumcree stand-off.

On the other hand, when it comes to the issue of policing, one authoritative report follows hard on the heels of another. Everyone has something to say. The Centre for the Study of Conflict at Coleraine, The Northern Ireland Police Authority, the Government in a White Paper and the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights (SACHR).

So why do we still have a policing problem? Why does

Cardinal Daly find it necessary to ask for an independent inquiry into the role of the RUC at Drumcree? The reason is quite simple. No one is willing to grasp the nettle and say what really has to be done in fear of alienating the nationalists or unionists or, worst still, both, by proposing some sort of compromise. "Leave it to the politicians at the talks" is the wise consensus. Everyone, it would seem, is playing "Pass the Parcel". Perhaps the people of Northern Ireland can shed some light on this thorny issue.

In the Rowntree survey on "Peace Building and Public Policy" a random sample of the population were asked to put a range of five different policing options in their order of preference. You can try the question if you wish. It

appeared in the questionnaire as follows.

Option A — No Change — Leave current policing structures as they are while attempting to recruit more Catholics.

Option B — Create new community policing units within the RUC — create new policing units to deal with domestic, community and non-violent sectarian problems at a local level as part of the RUC.

Option C — Create new community policing units outside the RUC — Create a number of new police forces at the local level to deal with less serious crimes leaving the RUC to deal with more serious crimes for Northern Ireland as a whole.

Option D — Create a new single police force — Disband the RUC and create a new single police force with fair representation from both communities.

Option E — Create a number of regional city police forces — Disband the RUC and create a number of new regional and city police forces in, for example, Belfast (London/Derry and East

Protestants are reticent about reform. Catholics require reform.

and West of the River Bann.

From 715 completed questionnaires the results show how deeply divided the two main communities are on the policing question. As a matter of first choice Protestants are clearly in favour of keeping the RUC much as it is while most Catholics would like to see the RUC disbanded and replaced with a single new service.

Even when the 13% who did not declare themselves as being either Catholic or Protestant are included in the results the outcome does not change significantly as these "others" are also split on the question of policing.

Given this deep division of opinion it is only when we go to the third choice of each community that a consensus can be reached with a majority of both Catholics and Protestants

willing to accept a new service outside the RUC.

See Graphics 1 and 2.

The recent Police Authority survey also found a majority of both Catholics and Protestants in favour of a "functional splitting of the force". So some sort of two-tier police service may be an acceptable compromise.

The Police Authority also came to the conclusion that most people were happy to keep the culture of the RUC much as it is without radical changes to name, symbols and uniform.

However, when these issues are put in the context of making the police force more acceptable to the nationalist community the Rowntree survey produced a more positive response with 50% of the population in favour of reforms.

Question: "Whatever the future structure of the police force might be do you think it should make a greater effort to recruit more Catholics and be more acceptable to the nationalist community by the Nationalist community by, for example, changing the name and uniform of the RUC?"

See Graphic 3.

Fifty percent of Alliance

party voters were also in favour of reforms with the DUP at only 3%, the UUP at 21%, Sinn Fein at 78% and the SDLP at 92%. The Sinn Fein electorate were probably less in favour of reforms than the SDLP as most Sinn Fein supporters would not believe the RUC capable of implementing effective change. After Drumcree SDLP support for reforms may now have slipped for similar reasons.

But the people of Northern Ireland are not in disagreement over everything that relates to the improvement of the police service. Nearly everyone wants a more effective complaints procedure.

Question: "At the present time complaints against the RUC are investigated by the police and supervised by an independent commission. Are you in favour of establishing a completely independent agency to investigate complaints against the RUC?"

See Graphic 4.

So where do all these questions and statistics get us. Most people want a new complaints procedure, most

The only basis for a compromise seems to be a two-tier service.

people will accept a two-tier police force and most people would prefer a single force to a number of regional and city forces.

Protestants are reticent when it comes to reform. Catholics require reform. So the only basis for a compromise seems to be some sort of two tier service with as many reforms implemented as can possibly be managed.

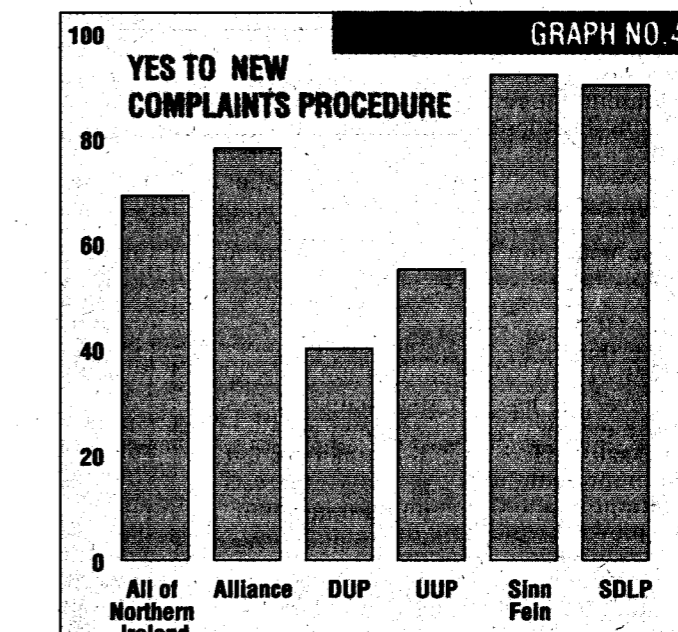
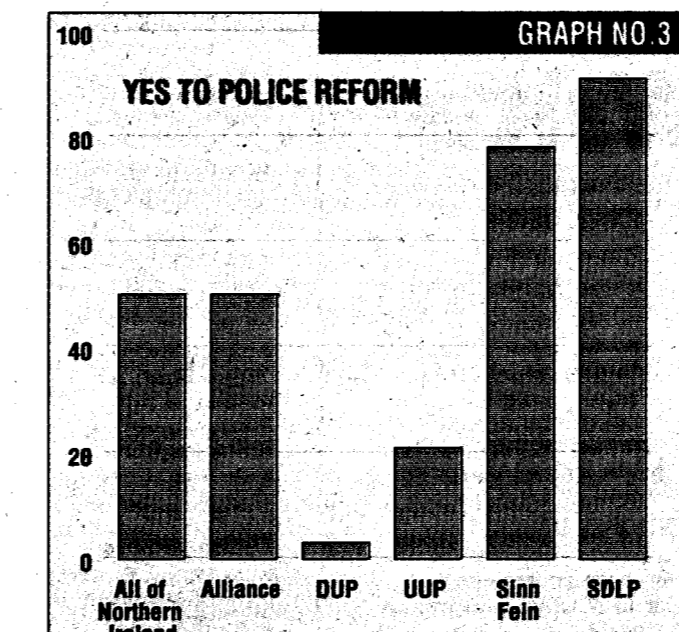
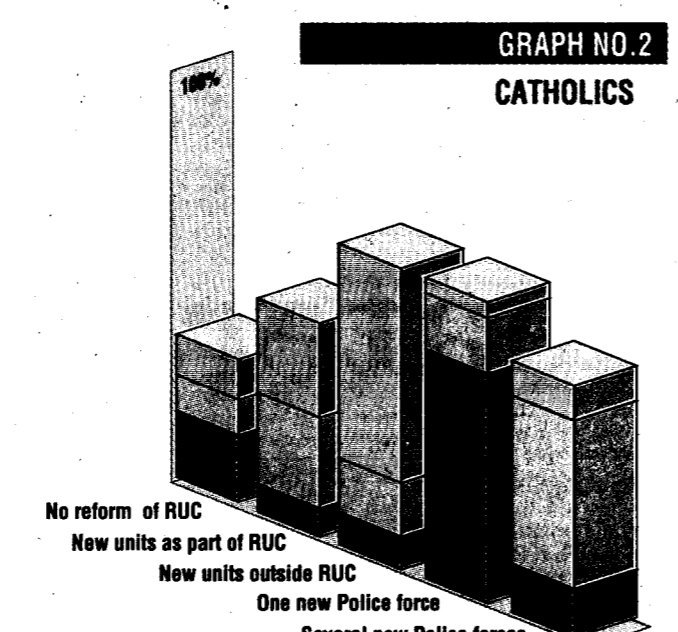
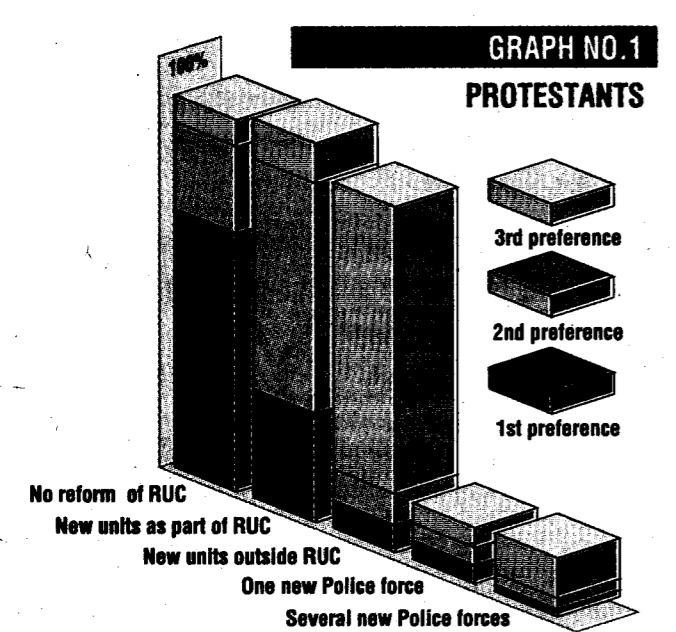
Such a suggestion may well give offence to both unionists and nationalists. Hopefully, the offence is equal. But the bottom line is this. Policing is being used as a bargaining chip at the talks while policing policies that are found to be wanting by one community or the other have already brought business to a close at the Forum and are threatening the peace process.

Many are sceptical about the prospects for establishing an independent body to rule on contentious parades. However, if the problems of policing can be solved then the prospects of successfully dealing with the parades issue will be greatly increased.

The necessities of peace building require that parades and policing should not be dealt with in isolation of each other.

Similarly, SACHR have advised the NIO "that the piece-meal way in which reform of policing has been approached is not helpful and is potentially dangerous as such compartmentalisation may well mislead." The time has come to stop playing "Pass the Parcel".

"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 work is being funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.



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