

HITTING A BRICK WALL

THE people of Northern Ireland want the government to support integrated schools. They always have done. Three members of Queen's University explore the education question and ask if DENI's new policies for 'transformation' can deliver real parental choice. **Dr Colin Irwin**, of the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen's University Belfast, reports on the findings of their research.

Scholars claim progress slow on integrated education

ON Thursday, October 22, 1968 a Belfast Telegraph headline read "Clear Call for End to Religious Separation in Schools". The paper reported that its National Opinion Polls survey found 65% of young people between 17 and 24 years of age in favour of integration at primary school level, while 70% supported integration at secondary level. Today, 28 years later, only 2% of children in Northern Ireland are in integrated schools. Why did all these people change their minds? Or did they? In a recent Rowntree poll, a random sample of the Northern Ireland population were asked if they would like to send their children to a

single or a mixed religion school. From 715 completed questionnaires, 61% chose mixed. There's no significant difference from 1968. They were also given four options for government education policies with reference to integrated schools. These are schools which strive to maintain an equal balance of students, staff and governors from each community. You can try the question if you wish. Assume that the academic quality of all the schools is the same, and then put the options in your order of preference. **Option A — Separation** Establish separate education authorities to manage separate schools for Catholic and Protestant children in Northern Ireland with no state funded integrated schools.

what young Ulster thinks?

54%

Clear call for end to religious separation in schools

Do you think Protestants and Roman Catholics should be educated together or separately in secondary schools?

Option B — No change Leave education policy as it is, where parents generally have to choose between sending their child to a Catholic or Protestant school. **Option C — Guaranteed choice** Ask parents if they would prefer to send their child to a single religion school or to an integrated school, and make sure their wishes are met by adequately funding integrated schools.

Option D — Integration Establish a single education authority to manage integrated schools for Catholic and Protestant children in Northern Ireland, with no state-funded Catholic and Protestant schools. Forty-four per cent chose "Guaranteed Choice" as their first preference, and 25% chose "Integration" with no government support for single religion schools. This 25% must be very

serious about integrated education indeed. So why are only 2% of children in integrated schools? Perhaps the integration movement has failed because they are all from one community? Not so. 59% of Catholics and 63% of Protestants said yes to mixed religion schools, and a majority of the electorate from the two largest political parties also said yes, with the UUP at 68% and SDLP at 61%. The Alliance party was at 87%, with Sinn Fein at 37% and the DUP at 28%. So what is the problem? The fact is that children are

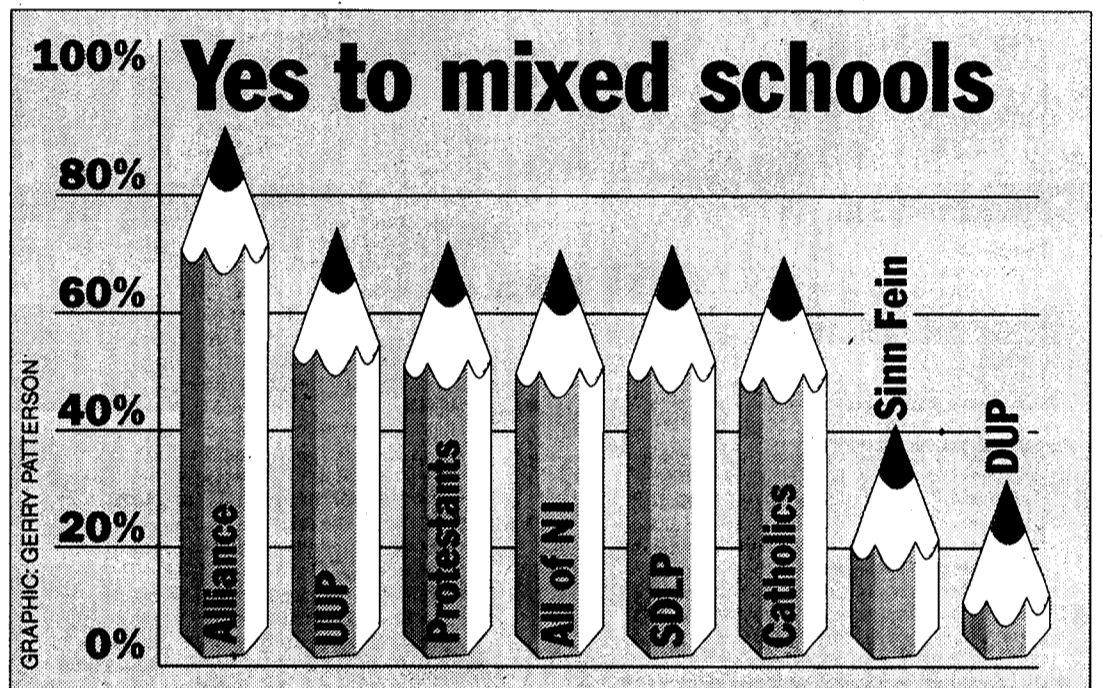
being turned away from integrated schools for lack of places. This is a breach of their human rights. In 1995, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child told the government to make greater provision for integrated schools, and DENI has now come up with a plan called "Framework for Transformation". But the plan is both fundamentally flawed and compromised by spending cuts. It is proposed that 'transforming' schools will be able to get started with only 1% of their students from the minority community. This policy could put children at risk. Common sense, personal experience and educational research all tell us that placing a very small group of students from one community in a school dominated by the other community has the potential to do more harm than good. Instead of learning, playing and making friends in a balanced social environment that naturally promotes mutual respect, these children can become the targets and victims of sectarian abuse. In these circumstances, the abusers are also harmed, as they are provided with opportunities to perfect their skills as both bigots and bullies. Parents who are interested in truly integrated education should be wary of "transforming" integrated schools unless they have an "integrated" philosophy and ethos, and are making real efforts to recruit

governors, staff and pupils from the other community in significant numbers. Government must set adequate standards for these schools. Education and library boards must make sure those standards are met. Finally, the wishes of parents must be paramount. They must be allowed to choose a Catholic, Protestant or Integrated school for their child. That is what the people of Northern Ireland want, and it should be their right by law. Trying to create more integrated schools on the cheap may impress a few foreign dignitaries who fly in on a whistle-stop tour. It may also get the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child off the government's back for a few more years. But cutting corners with integrated education is positively dangerous. No-one ever said real peace building was easy — or cheap. It isn't. Conflict is easy — it is also far more expensive.

■ "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.



Hazelwood College, Belfast: But only 2% of children in Northern Ireland are in integrated schools.



Compromise a casualty of conference rhetoric

LOOKING for the story behind blunt political statements can be useful. Examine republican demands for meaningful talks, say, or their routine denunciations of John Major and John Bruton. What you get underneath is unease and confusion, mostly understandable. Then mist descends. Inquiry is baffled by the thinking of people sworn all their adults lives to a secret army and pledged together against a hostile world. How do they imagine they can control the course of renewed violence here? Or do they still think that once they deem bombs and bullets necessary, wrecked lives are regrettable but incidental, and political spin-offs impossible to judge, therefore irrelevant? There is also the possibility that there might be no subtleties, that republicans are at a loss and that sound and fury and spreading blame is the best they can do at the moment. The simplest explanation is right, now and again. Apply that principle to Ulster Unionists and what have you? To judge by their public face as presented most recently at their party conference, and by their leader's statements, these are people set against any agreement with nationalists except on unionist terms. The Ballymena air breathed relief that the breakdown of the IRA ceasefire restored normal politics. David Trimble's speech insisted on the virtues of 'the

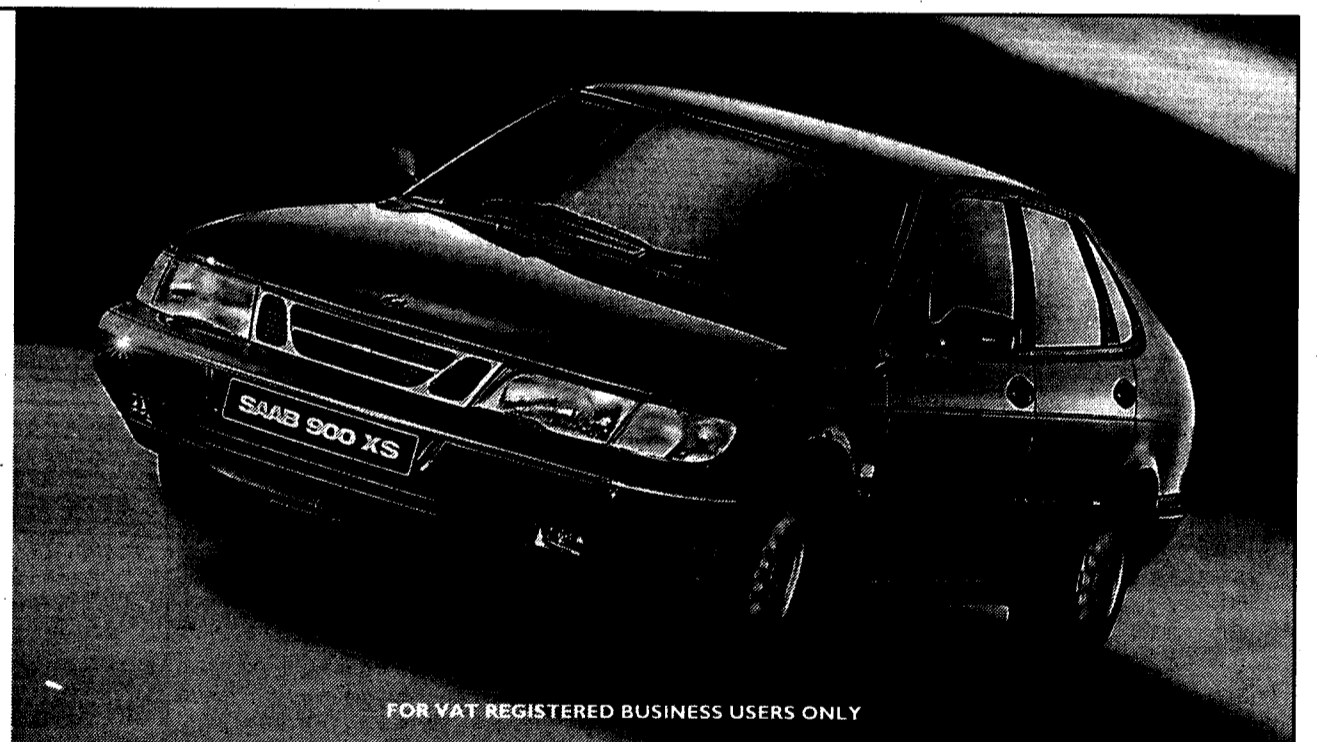
Union' and 'internal arrangements', proclaimed it time to leave Sinn Fein behind and all thought of 'messy unstable compromise'. Indeed, he declared, compromise between unionism and nationalism was neither possible, nor desirable. We had debates which cheered the 'unfettered right to march', catalogued pro-republican media bias, demanded SDLP participation in the Forum. Delegates and leaders alike denounced the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Downing Street Declaration, the Framework documents. They condemned Dick Spring, the Maryfield Secretariat, boycotts, and blockades — which meant DUP-backed crowds abusing Mass-goers, of course, not Drumcree-inspired roadblocks. The young Arlene Kelly shone among dull speakers. The development from Anglo-Irish Agreement thinking that 'got her' was 'the one that equates the Irish aspiration and British citizenship. It's only an aspiration, it's not the same

thing as my citizenship.' Nationalists had the right to express their views and to push for change in a democratic fashion. 'But that's it'. A year ago, Ms Kelly won newspaper profiles as a fresh new face of Unionism. The old heart of Unionism leapt to her on Saturday. The veteran Jean Coulter did her annual turn, to the usual glee mixed with embarrassment. "My last words are for God's sake stop saying 'the two governments'. We have one government." She won a solid cheer. Yet in the Press conference David Trimble gave as soon as he finished his leader's speech, Mr Trimble blithely and repeatedly referred to 'the governments', plural. He did it, of course, as criticism not praise. Clearly, however, Mr Trimble's efforts are entirely bound up in trying to demolish the structures created by the two governments. He can hardly refuse to recognise that they exist. He does the next best thing. In front of his party he distanced himself, put the

phrase 'the two governments' in Bob McCartney's mouth, for example, mentioned 'Anglo-Irishism' or 'narrow', insisted that accommodation inside Northern Ireland is the point of talks. Mr Trimble does not lead his party through arguments. Instead they get darts of declamation, spurts of justification, rapid changes of subject. Mr Trimble showed the same turn of speed to the despised media later. It took only seconds to write off the talks he had so recently depicted as the arena for Unionism's victory. First he insisted talks must progress before Christmas or lapse until after the General Election. In practical terms it was inconceivable Sinn Fein would now enter the process, Mr Trimble said. The journalist least likely to be denounced as a tool of republicanism asked if his dismissal of compromise did not make the outlook for talks progress 'dire'? Mr Trimble replied that this was an either/or situation. Compromise between unionism and nationalism was 'moonshine'. The Framework document with its suggestion to the contrary had been purely consultative and was in the dustbin. "The people of Northern Ireland have been consulted and have made our position clear." If there is any flexibility in the unionist position, Ulster Unionist delegates neither sought it nor saw it last Saturday.

The Ballymena air breathed relief that the breakdown of the IRA ceasefire restored normal politics.

TOMORROW: Criminal waste of talent?



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Saab in Northern Ireland

Svenska Saab
1 Glenmachan Place
Boucher Road, Belfast
Tel: (01232) 245999

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Screen Road, Coleraine
Co Londonderry
Tel: (01265) 44045

