

NORTHERN IRELAND'S FUTURE IS PUT UNDER THE MICROSCOPE BY ACADEMICS

ULSTER PEOPLE COULD DECIDE WAY FORWARD

With the peace process at a critical stage, three members of Queen's University explore the constitutional question and ask if the people of Northern Ireland can give shape to their own political destiny. Colin Irwin reports on the findings of their research

LET'S get straight to the point. If the current talks process fails could the people of the province decide their own political future?

Some may view such a suggestion with a certain degree of horror. Indeed, some may have an interest in not finding a quick solution, in not putting the matter before the people and insisting that the people can not possibly choose between the various complex options.

No-one should assume that the issues are easy and require little thought. On the other hand, no-one should assume that the people of Northern Ireland are politically unsophisticated and unable to deal with such matters until they have at least had an opportunity to try.

In the recent Rowntree poll a random sample of the Northern Ireland population was asked to put eight options for the future political development of Northern Ireland in order of preference:

No-one should assume people are unable to deal with such matters

Option A - Separate Northern Irish state.

The complete separation of Northern Ireland from both the UK and the Republic of Ireland and the establishment of a separate state within the European Union.

Option B - Full incorporation into the British state.

Direct rule from Westminster and local government similar to the rest of the UK with no Northern Ireland Assembly or separate laws for Northern Ireland and no Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Option C - Continued direct rule (no change).

The continuation of direct rule from London in consultation with the Irish government under the terms of the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Option D - Power sharing and the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Government by a Northern Ireland Assembly and power sharing Executive under the authority of the British government but in consulta-

tion with the Irish government under the terms of the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Option E - Power sharing with North-South institutions but no joint authority.

Government by a Northern Ireland Assembly, power sharing Executive and a number of joint institutions established with the Republic of Ireland to deal with matters of mutual interest. (But these arrangements will not include joint authority between the British and Irish governments).

Option F - Joint authority and power sharing.

Government by joint authority between the British and Irish governments in association with an elected power sharing Executive and Assembly.

Option G - Separate institutions for the two main communities.

Creation of separate structures for the government of each of the two main communities in Northern Ireland, subject to joint authority by the British and Irish governments.

Option H - Full incorporation into the Irish state.

Full incorporation of Northern Ireland into the Republic of Ireland to create a single state within the European Union.

Of the 715 who completed the questionnaire almost everyone was able to identify their first choice and most people were able to list all eight options without too much difficulty.

As so many choices were offered, it may help to start by eliminating the options that are most definitely not acceptable to one community or the other - or both.

Very few people from either community want an independent state or separate institutions for the management of a segregated society.

Most Catholics do not want full incorporation into the British state and most Protestants do not want full incorporation into the Irish state.

So these four options can be taken out of the equation as non-starters for a political compromise.

This process of elimination leaves four options available from which to develop new constitutional arrangements for Northern Ireland: continued direct rule; power sharing and the Anglo-Irish Agreement; power sharing with North-South institutions; and joint authority and power sharing.

Of these options Catholics would prefer joint authority and would like to see an end

to direct rule. Conversely, Protestants would prefer direct rule and would find joint authority very difficult to accept.

The only acceptable compromise for both communities would seem to be the establishment of an Assembly with a power sharing Executive in combination with either the Anglo-Irish Agreement or North-South institutions.

With the least favoured options removed and a little more flesh put on the bones of the middle ground compromises, the poll could now be run again in an effort to better define the wishes of the people.

For example, different kinds of North-South institutions could be proposed, ranging from something like the Anglo-Irish Agreement to the creation of a body with executive powers.

People could also be asked to pick and choose the areas of policy that they think such a body should deal with: the environment, tourism, agriculture, fisheries, representation in Europe etc etc?

The politicians could be asked to put the will of the people into practice

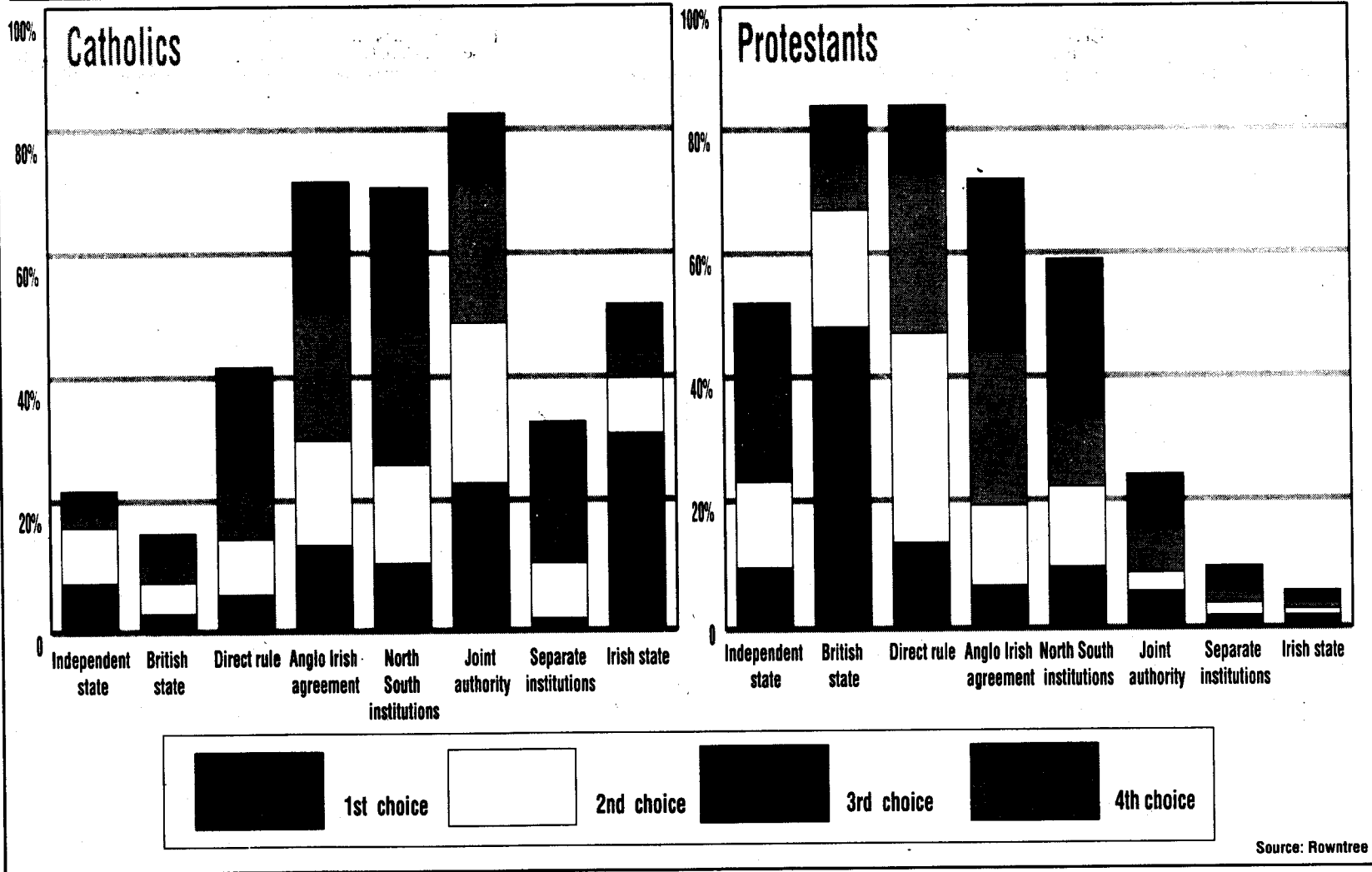
With the experience of the polls established, the people of Northern Ireland would be well prepared to make their choice known through some kind of referendum. Acceptance by both communities would be required.

The issues would have to be presented in simpler terms than those used here and perhaps in stages that progressively eliminated unacceptable options. Finally the politicians could be asked to work out the detail and put the will of the people into practice.

So, if the talks fail, the people of Northern Ireland can help to decide the political future of the province. They can express their views through public opinion polls and referendum. They can move the peace process forward by "breaking the logjam."

"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 Frea Boal of the Geography Department, all at The Queen's University of Belfast. The work is being funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

The survey asked a random sample of the Northern Ireland population to put eight options for the political development of Northern Ireland in their order of preference



Source: Rowntree

Election nerves surface

THE whiff of elections is in the air. Noses and hackles are up: will John Major jump before next May, will John Bruton be there before him?

Our own local election-hounds are well away. Cecil Walker in North Belfast is only the most noticeable. In council chambers, in backrooms, in increasingly frequent meetings, the calculations have begun.

Beyond that, preoccupations vary. SDLP and Sinn Fein party workers have their lists in front of them, and their sums in their heads. At leadership-level - and arguably among voters - what happens to the prospect of a ceasefire still takes precedence.



FIONNUALA O'CONNOR

Their leaders' reactions are starkly different. John Hume refuses to accept the assumption that no movement is now likely before a Westminster election. Gerry Adams goes off to sign books in Greece: Mr Hume seeks a meeting with John Major.

Upheaval in the Dublin coalition heightens a general sense of dislocation. If the coalition falls, what follows? Judging the mood of the Republic's electorate has seemed well beyond the capability of commentators there in recent years.

Unionists - at least, union-

ist politicians - profess unwavering dislike for the personalities involved, and a disdain for the process. Nationalists, by and large, are unnerved by the shuffle of parties and personalities alike.

Reynolds disrespected John Hume, then did his best, and fell. Bruton has been the enemy befuddled, a pushover for John Major. Spring was suspect, then a champion, but always hard to read.

There is little of that sense of distraction to be seen in the DUP. The Rev Ian Paisley had other sensations to throw

around at the weekend, but there was no mistaking his most serious target. For the DUP leader, Ulster Unionism is rival and prize all in one.

If he can do major damage to David Trimble, a riven UU will be laid out before the smaller, hungrier DUP. Or so the DUP man has always believed. The early years, when he took Unionist leaders scalp after scalp, fed his appetite and his energy.

He has never shown anything but pleasure in the memory. When the former Terence O'Neill died in 1990, the Paisley touch brought cold reality to the cosy fug of tribute. The Lord O'Neill, he reminded his people, had been an enemy of Ulster and Ian Paisley was the man who said he must go.

The last leader of the Ulster Unionists, however, was not driven out by the Paisley lash.

When Jim Molyneux's own pride felled him, it ended a period for Ian Paisley during which he lost ground and

clout to the bigger party. Jokes about the small man in the Doc's shadow had long faded.

But Mr Molyneux overestimated his influence at Westminster and misread government. His legacy is a muddled and divided bunch of MPs and a leadership more admired in London editorial offices than at home.

The dividend for Ian Paisley is considerable. Ulster Unionists scoff as the DUP man storms in and out of Stormont, mock when the McCartney temper gets another airing. There is unease in both scoffing and mockery.

Singly, the Paisley or McCartney shows could be mocked more comfortably. In tandem, they destabilise. The aggregate noise factor alone could destabilise a more secure political organisation than Glengall Street unionism.

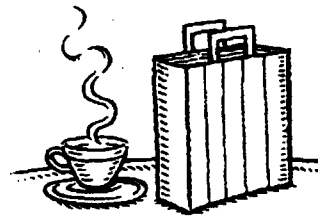
As election fever increases, McCartney jibes that the party as been "Trimbled" will produce more shivers. The shiver was there, even this past week when Mr Trimble was disposed to glow a little in the aftermath of the government's statement about ceasefire conditions.

As ever, the most confident unionist voices are those which play to the deepest lack of confidence in their own community, the fear of British betrayal. Fear of being fooled is now second nature to Ulster Unionists.

They neither like nor respect Mr McCartney, but he knows where their sore spots are. Ian Paisley sets UU supporters jangling and party nerves a-flutter. Mr Trimble, like Gerry Adams, might judge the need greater to build images abroad.

For the SF man, there might be no option. Mr Trimble has a different kind of struggle ahead.

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