

A BELFAST TELEGRAPH/QUEEN'S SURVEY

TRUCE HOLDS KEY

With the General Election less than a month away, the Belfast Telegraph has commissioned a major opinion poll to find out what the electorate think about the key issues facing Northern Ireland. In the first of three authoritative reports from the Belfast Telegraph/Queen's Survey we focus on decommissioning, the Stormont talks/ a negotiated settlement, and find out which party is doing most for peace. **Colin Irwin** reports.

Sharp divisions on how talks replace the guns

AFTER the General Election a new Government in Westminster will have an opportunity to make a fresh start at the Stormont talks.

With 94% of the people of Northern Ireland willing to lend their support to negotiations is there anything a new Government can do to give hope to the 74% of the population who do not think the talks can deliver a settlement?

Some of the political parties at the talks seem to be caught, like two bus drivers facing each other down some deserted country road, neither willing to give way for fear of showing weakness in front of their passengers.

But what do the people of Northern Ireland really think? Do they want their political leaders to move closer to some sort of accommodation and compromise on the key issues that have been holding up the talks?

Will they continue to support their leaders on such a quest or will they abandon them?

This critically important question was asked in the survey by presenting a range of policy options to the public and inviting them to say which policies they considered to be "preferred", "acceptable", "tolerable" or "unacceptable".

For the purposes of the poll these terms meant:

Preferred — This may not be exactly what you want but this option, or something very similar to it, would be your first choice.

Acceptable — This option is not what you would prefer if you were given a choice but you could certainly live with it.

Tolerable — This option is not what you want. But, as part of a lasting peace settlement for Northern Ireland, you would be willing to put up with it.

Unacceptable — This option is completely unacceptable under any circumstances. You would not accept it, even as part of a peace settlement.

Question 1

"Here are some options for the different conditions under which political parties with an electoral mandate and perceived association with paramilitary organisations could be allowed into the Talks. Please indicate which of the following options you consider to be preferred, acceptable, tolerable or unacceptable?"

● Immediate all party talks — All parties, including those associated with paramilitary organisations, should be allowed into the talks now without any preconditions.

● All party talks after a ceasefire — All parties, including those associated with paramilitary organisations, should be allowed into the talks as soon as a ceasefire is called and the Mitchell Principles are agreed to.

● All party talks after a ceasefire and other preconditions — All parties, including those associated with paramilitary organisations, should be allowed into the talks when a ceasefire is called, the Mitchell Principles are agreed to and a number of other preconditions, such as a period of probation and a ban on decommissioning, are satisfied.

● No to parties with paramilitary connections — The talks should continue but political parties who have any association with paramilitary organisations should not be allowed to remain in the talks. (See tables 1 and 2).

Protestants at 40% and DUP supporters at 43% marginally prefer the option of all party talks after a ceasefire over the option of all party talks after a ceasefire and other preconditions which is the first choice of UUP supporters at 44%.

On the other hand Catholics clearly prefer immediate all party talks at 65%, with the SDLP coming in at 62% and Sinn Fein at 87%.

But 59% of Protestants find this option unacceptable so an immediate ceasefire followed by all party talks as soon as possible would seem to be the people's most acceptable choice.

Apart from who should be at the talks, one of the most difficult obstacles on the road to real talks would seem to be decommissioning.

An immediate ceasefire followed by all party talks as soon as possible would seem to be the people's most acceptable choice

Question 2

"Here are some options for making political progress at the talks and making progress with decommissioning. Please indicate which of the following options you consider to be preferred, acceptable, tolerable or unacceptable?"

● Fixed timetable for the talks followed by decommissioning — Political progress in the talks should take place on a fixed timetable. Decommissioning can take place when a settlement is reached.

● Fixed timetable for the talks and simultaneous decommissioning — Political progress in the talks and decommissioning should take place in parallel in accordance with a fixed timetable that leads to a settlement.

● Flexible timetable for both the talks and simultaneous decommissioning — Political progress in the talks and decommissioning should take place in parallel, but no time limits should be set on reaching a political settlement.

● Fixed timetable for decommissioning followed by the talks — Decommissioning should take place on a fixed timetable that is unrelated to political progress in the talks. The talks should take as long as is required to reach a settlement. (See tables 3 and 4).

Senator George Mitchell is clearly faced with a formidable task when confronted with the problem of trying to persuade the parties to reach a compromise on decommissioning.

Fifty two per cent of Catholics want a fixed timetable for the talks followed by decommissioning while an almost equal percentage of Protestants (50%) want the opposite — a fixed timetable for decommissioning followed by the talks.

But only a small percentage of Catholics and Protestants (about 17%) find the compromise options of simultaneous talks and decommissioning unacceptable.

The level of unacceptability for these compromises rises from a low of about 6% for Alliance voters to 8% for the

SDLP, 10% for the UUP, 20% for the DUP and 34% for Sinn Fein.

The British and Irish governments have now passed legislation to set up an international body to deal with the day to day practicalities of decommissioning.

But even with this legislation in place and a compromise found on simultaneous talks and decommissioning, the parties have not, as yet, reached agreement on how to deal with decommissioning problems.

Question 3

"Here are two options for dealing with any major problems that may arise over decommissioning at the talks. Please indicate which of the following options you consider to be preferred, acceptable, tolerable or unacceptable?"

● Stop the talks until the decommissioning problem is solved — If any major problem arises over decommissioning the talks should stop until that problem is resolved.

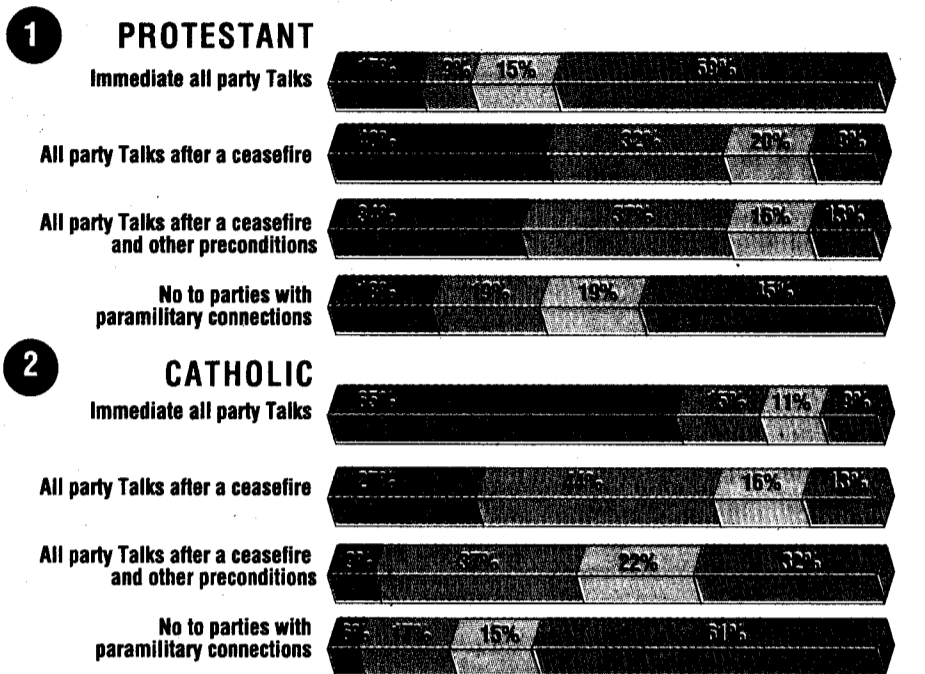
● Do not stop the talks, let a sub-committee deal with decommissioning problems — If any major problem arises over decommissioning that problem should be delegated to a sub-committee of the talks so that the principal delegates can continue to move ahead with other business. (See table 5).

The results leave little margin for any doubt about the people's preference. Sixty nine per cent of the adult population of Northern Ireland do not want the talks to stop, with only 12% finding this option unacceptable.

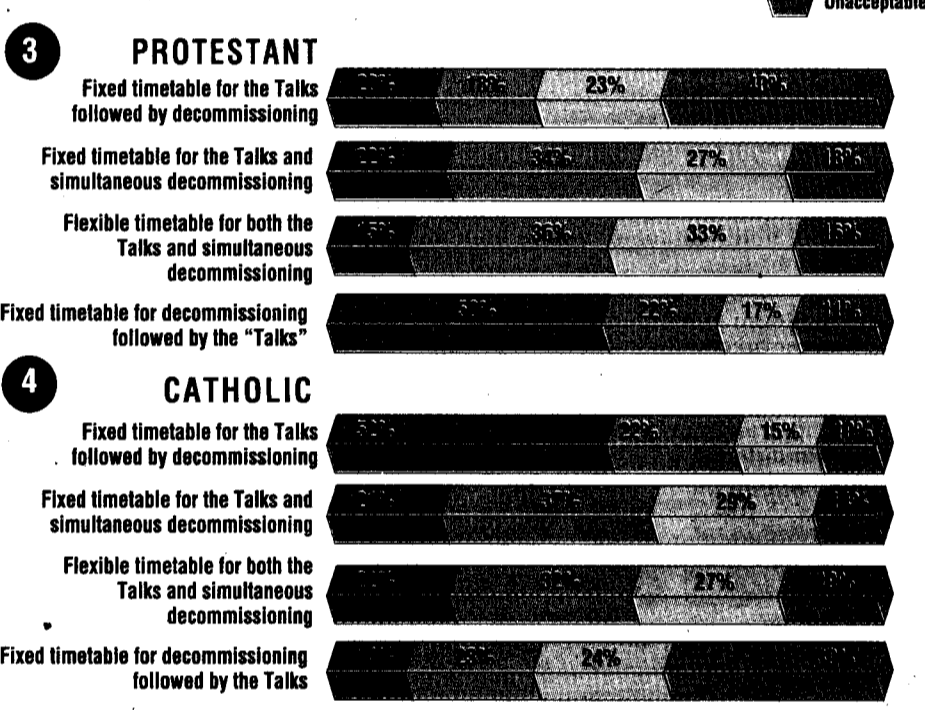
Perhaps the answers to all these questions can be combined into a package that has the potential to clear the way to real talks.

It would have to include a ceasefire followed by a reasonably short period of probation combined with the establishment of an international body and a talks sub-committee to deal with decommissioning problems.

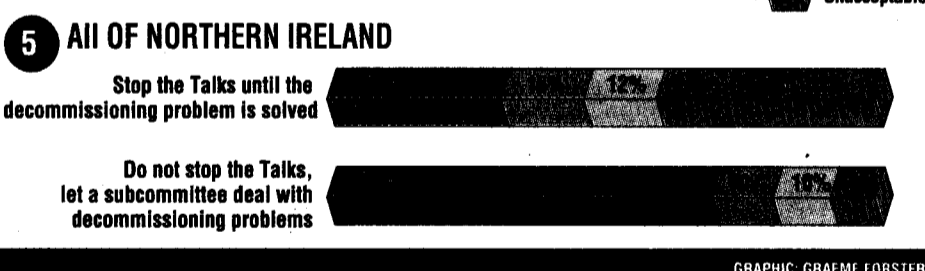
Here are some options for the different conditions under which political parties with an electoral mandate and perceived association with paramilitary organisations could be allowed into the Talks. Please indicate which of the following options you consider to be "Preferred", "Acceptable", "Tolerable" or "Unacceptable"



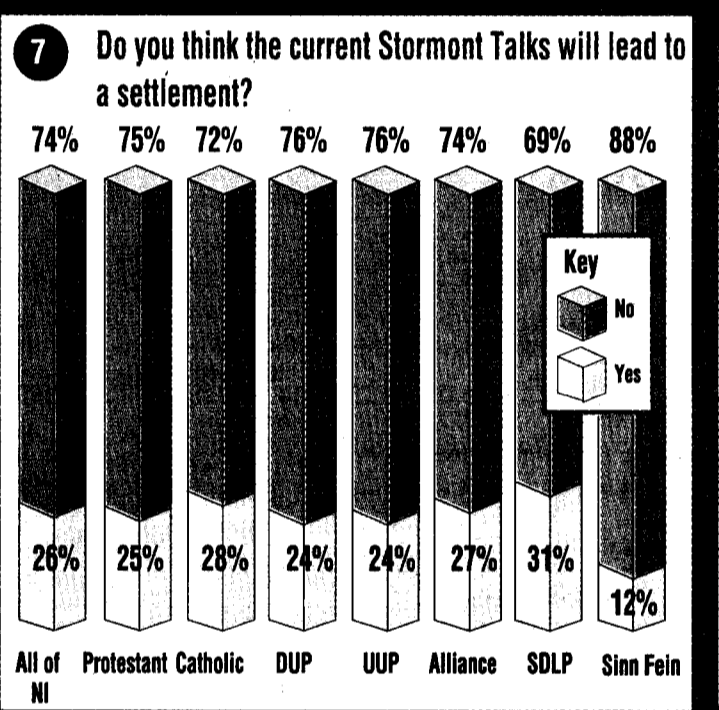
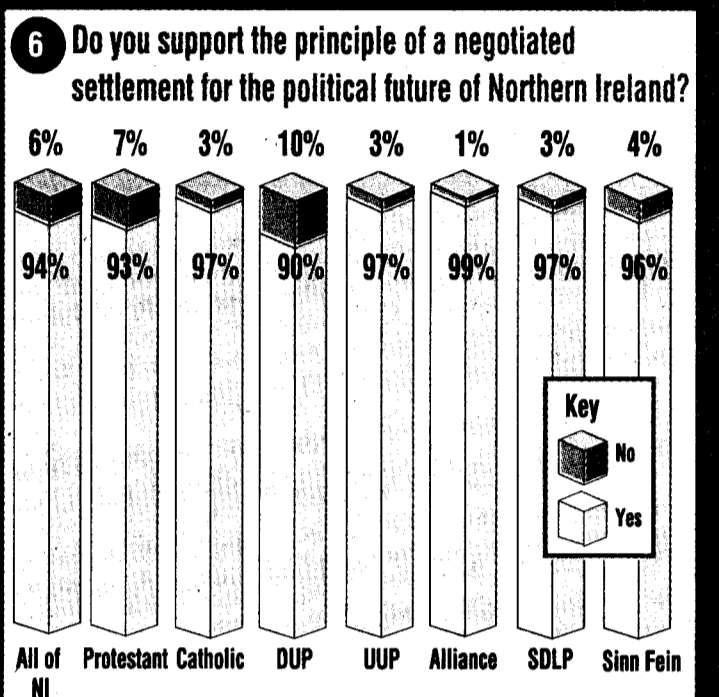
Here are some options for making political progress at the "Talks" and making progress with decommissioning. Please indicate which of the following options you consider to be "Preferred", "Acceptable", "Tolerable" or "Unacceptable".



Here are two options for dealing with any major problems that may arise over decommissioning at the "Talks". Please indicate which of the following options you consider to be "Preferred", "Acceptable", "Tolerable" or "Unacceptable".



Belfast Telegraph/ Queen's Survey THE POLL RESULTS



Question 8 "How much do you think the Northern Ireland party you support is doing to..."

	All of NI	Protestant	Catholic	DUP	UUP	Alliance	SDLP	Sinn Fein
...try and reach a political settlement at the Stormont Talks	42%	41%	47%	39%	45%	41%	65%	26%
...resolve the issue of contentious parades	40%	39%	45%	50%	38%	33%	51%	62%
...build confidence between the two main communities in Northern Ireland?	39%	34%	48%	36%	32%	51%	60%	39%

Voters query parties' push

SDLP tops the league table in peace efforts

HOW do the voters rate their own political parties, when it comes to peace building, and for that matter the performance of the British and Irish governments?

Nationalists and republicans probably don't think unionists and loyalists are doing very much to advance the peace process.

The feeling is probably mutual.

So there isn't much point in asking DUP supporters what they

think of Sinn Fein or how they in turn rate the actions and policies of the DUP.

So everyone interviewed for the survey was asked three questions.

"How much do you think the Northern Ireland party you support is doing to try and reach a political settlement at the Stormont talks?"

"Resolve the issue of contentious parades?" and

"Build confidence between the two main communities in Northern Ireland?"

Of all the political parties, the SDLP seems to have the highest approval rating for their performance.

Sixty five per cent of their electorate think they are doing "a lot" to try and reach a political settlement at the Stormont talks compared with the UUP at 45%, Alliance at 41%, DUP at 39% and Sinn Fein at 26%.

Sixty per cent of SDLP supporters also believe they are doing "a lot" to build confidence between the two main communities, compared to the UUP at 32%, Alliance at 31% and Sinn Fein at 39%.

The DUP get their highest approval rating for trying to resolve the issue of contentious parades.

Fifty per cent of their voters think they are doing a lot, but Sinn Fein supporters think their party is doing even more with an approval rating of 62% for this issue. (See table 8).

On average about 40% of those asked thought their party was doing "a lot" to resolve all these problems.

However, only about 10% thought the British Government were also doing "a lot" and the Irish Government didn't do much better, with an average 12% approval rating.

Clearly people here take the view that new governments in both London and Dublin have plenty of room for improvement when it comes to the development of their policies for Northern Ireland.

HOW WE DID OUR RESEARCH

■ THIS poll has been commissioned by the Belfast Telegraph in collaboration with the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen's University of Belfast.

■ The project has also been supported by a grant from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

■ With the co-operation of members from the 10 leading political parties in Northern Ireland the research was carried out by Dr Colin Irwin of the Institute with the additional assistance of Professor Tom Madden of the Law School and Professor Fred Boal of the Geography Department.

■ Market Research Northern Ireland (MRNI) conducted the fieldwork for the survey between March 12-26th and 932 face-to-face interviews were completed from 32 points across Northern Ireland to give a representative quota sample of the population.

■ In all respects the poll was undertaken within the guidelines set out by the Market Research Society (UK) and in accordance with their code of conduct.

■ The opinions expressed in the survey and the conclusions reached are not those of Queen's University.

TOMORROW: What should be done about parades and a Bill of Rights