

THE FUTURE OF NORTHERN IRELAND: OPINION POLL EXCLUSIVE

What hope for Council of the Isles?

PRIME Minister Tony Blair at the weekend put forward his proposals for a Council of the Isles in a bid to move the Talks process forward.

For most people in Northern Ireland, it was probably the first time that they heard the phrase but is the idea workable and what support would such a body command?

Over the years a number of different institutions have been mooted, including a Council of the Isles, a Council of the British Isles, a British-Irish Council, a Council of the Islands and now a Council of the Isles.

However, the only body that ever saw the light of day was the Anglo-Irish Agreement and Secretariat? Could a Council of the Islands or Isles be the replacement for the Anglo-Irish Agreement that is needed to establish a new east-west relationship in Strand Three of the Stormont Talks.

Most international treaties are based on a number of principles and the Anglo-Irish



Is a Council of the Islands or Isles an acceptable replacement for the Anglo-Irish Agreement? In the fourth and final article from the Queen's University/Rowntree Trust opinion poll, **DR COLIN IRWIN** examines this question and the need for constitutional reform.

Agreement is no exception to this rule. Which of these principles, if any, could be a basis for a new treaty?

With this question in mind, people were asked to indicate which principles they considered to be 'essential', 'desirable', 'acceptable', 'tolerable' or 'unacceptable' as part of a lasting settlement (See table, right).

All of the principles, ranging from the promotion of peace, stability and equality in Northern Ireland to a recognition of its constitutional status, were considered 'acceptable', 'desirable' or

'essential' by a majority from both communities.

In contrast to the principles that underpin the workings of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the institutions of government that it created, the Anglo-Irish Secretariat and their offices in Belfast did not fare so well.

Although most Catholics considered them to be 'acceptable' or even 'desirable' most Protestants only found them 'tolerable' and even a proposal to extend these facilities to include London and Dublin did not

receive any better support.

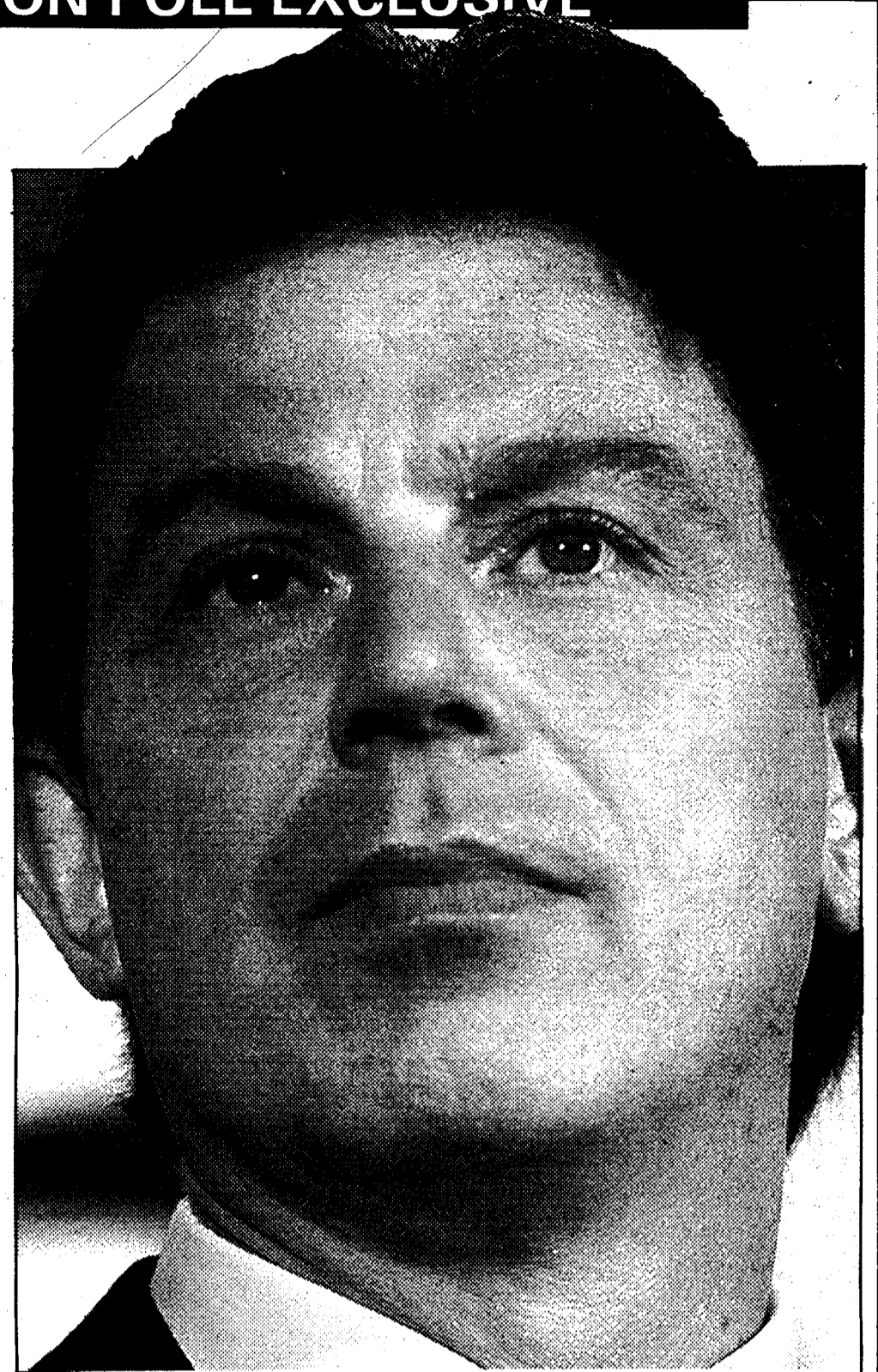
Fortunately, one new proposal was 'acceptable' to a majority from both communities. The establishment of a regional Council of the Islands that would facilitate co-operation between Scotland, Wales, England, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

This proposal could not have even been given serious consideration under the previous Conservative government. It is a clear break with the Framework Document and it is only with the creation of a Scottish Parliament and

Welsh Assembly by the Labour Government that such an option can come into play.

It is imaginative and bold. It could mark the beginning of a new relationship for everyone on these islands, British and Irish, into the next millennium. A relationship built on consent as a region in Europe that attempts to put aside the past failures of borders, partition and competing nation states.

The ball is now clearly in the courts of the London and Dublin governments.



What principles should British and Irish co-operation be based on?

| | | Essential | Desirable | Acceptable | Tolerable |
|---|------------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| Co-operation in Europe | Protestant | 16% | 40% | 73% | 92% |
| | Catholic | 40% | 72% | 94% | 98% |
| Peace and stability in Northern Ireland | Protestant | 55% | 81% | 94% | 96% |
| | Catholic | 79% | 91% | 98% | 100% |
| Equal rights of the two major traditions | Protestant | 31% | 53% | 79% | 91% |
| | Catholic | 76% | 90% | 99% | 100% |
| Rejection of violence for political objectives | Protestant | 55% | 81% | 95% | 97% |
| | Catholic | 68% | 85% | 97% | 100% |
| Reconciliation between unionists and nationalists | Protestant | 33% | 57% | 81% | 89% |
| | Catholic | 60% | 85% | 96% | 98% |
| Respecting the identities of the two communities | Protestant | 34% | 61% | 84% | 91% |
| | Catholic | 74% | 88% | 96% | 98% |
| A society free from discrimination and intolerance | Protestant | 50% | 79% | 95% | 96% |
| | Catholic | 83% | 93% | 98% | 99% |
| Both communities to participate fully in the structures and processes of government | Protestant | 33% | 56% | 78% | 88% |
| | Catholic | 71% | 89% | 96% | 98% |
| The consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland is required for any change in its status | Protestant | 68% | 82% | 93% | 96% |
| | Catholic | 27% | 49% | 73% | 85% |
| The recognition of the present status and wishes of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland | Protestant | 66% | 84% | 93% | 95% |
| | Catholic | 21% | 41% | 66% | 84% |
| The right of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland to establish a united Ireland in the future | Protestant | 29% | 38% | 57% | 77% |
| | Catholic | 45% | 66% | 85% | 93% |

CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

IN AN effort to meet the concerns of the different communities in Northern Ireland, several possibilities are available for the modification of the constitutional relationships that exist between the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the UK.

This can be done by modifying the constitution of the Republic of Ireland and the various Acts of Parliament in Westminster that establish the constitutional status of Northern Ireland.

The complete deletion of the Republic's constitutional claim over Northern Ireland is considered to be 'essential' by 63% of Protestants, while 70% of Catholics consider

such a deletion to be 'unacceptable' as part of a lasting settlement.

Is this where the Stormont Talks founder or can a compromise be found? Fortunately, the answer to this apparently intractable problem is a very strong 'yes'.

A majority of both Catholics and Protestants find it quite 'acceptable' for both the Republic's constitution to be modified to allow only for a united Ireland with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland and for the constitutional status of the province as part of the UK to be subject to the same principle of consent which it presently is.

And if this were not good news enough, both the British and Irish governments jointly

agreed to these principles of consent when they signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Additionally, as part of any

Many nationalists and unionists also find the language used in section 75 of the British 1920 Government of Ireland Act and the 1937 Constitution of the Republic of Ireland to be a little outdated

balanced constitutional reform, it should also be noted that a majority of both Catholics and Protestants are willing to accept or tolerate

both the British and Irish governments having a responsibility for the well-being of their citizens in both Northern

and on the island of Ireland as a whole and that all the rights of British or Irish citizenship should be guaranteed.

Perhaps these rights should be extended to Irish citizens in England, Scotland and Wales — but this question was not asked.

Finally, although a majority of Catholics considered joint authority to be 'acceptable', this option was 'unacceptable'

to Protestants and neither community wanted to consider re-partition as the way forward.

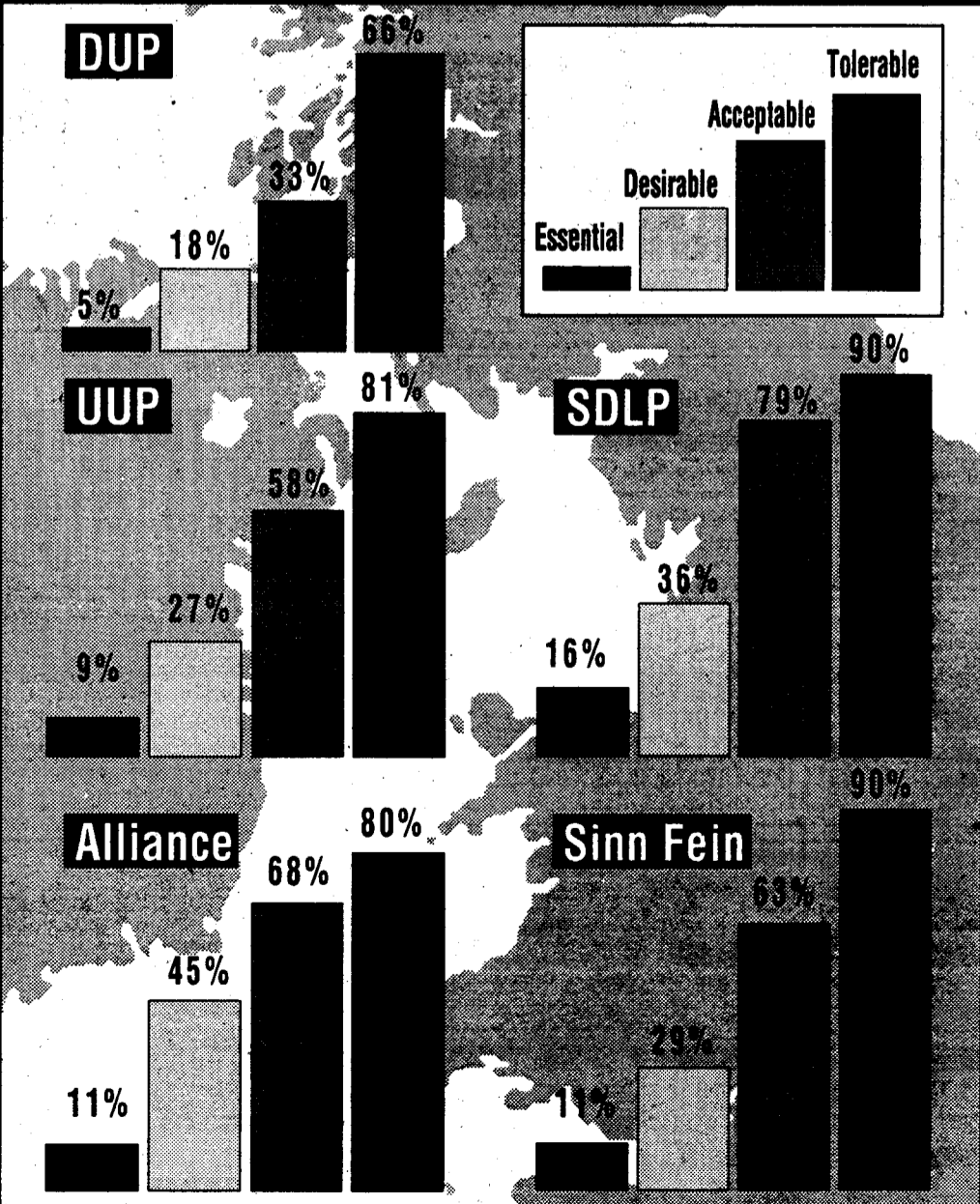
Many nationalists and unionists also find the language used in section 75 of the British 1920 Government of Ireland Act and the 1937 Constitution of the Republic of Ireland to be a little outdated.

While introducing balanced reforms that fully embrace the principle of consent, any other redrafted sections and articles should pay close attention to the use of modern phrases and terms that avoid giving offence.

Many of the new agreements reached at the Stormont Talks will provide opportunities for this kind of legal 'housekeeping'.

If the two governments can get it right, then they will be able to cast the foundation upon which a lasting settlement can be built. Their citizens, both British and Irish, eagerly await the outcome of their constitutional labours.

Support for a Council of the Isles



A COMPREHENSIVE SETTLEMENT

IN BROAD terms, the major elements of a lasting settlement that seem to emerge from this opinion poll can be summarised as follows:

- A Regional Assembly made up from elected members who share responsibilities in proportion to their representation and employing a voting system with other checks and balances to ensure the fair participation of both

communities in government and the prevention of abuse of power.

- North/South bodies strictly controlled by the elected politicians who establish them to deal with a wide range of issues using various functions and powers appropriate to the areas of government policy being managed.
- Replace the Anglo-Irish Agreement with a Council of the Islands to establish a

new relationship between London, Dublin, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast, appropriate to the needs of the region as a part of Europe.

- Constitutional reform that embraces the principle of consent and other balanced changes required to implement the various agreements made at the Stormont Talks.
- A Bill of Rights that deals specifically with the

political, social and cultural problems that have aggravated the conflict and a Human Rights Commission with responsibilities and powers to educate, monitor standards and bring cases to court.

- A reformed two-tier police service restructured with a view to recruiting more Catholics and improving community relations under the authority of a new Depart-

ment of Justice in a Regional Assembly. Perhaps the parties and governments can improve on this package, particularly the detail. But any radical departure from these basic arrangements will require sound reasons if it is to be acceptable to a majority from both communities. Certainly these proposals should be more widely acceptable than the Framework Document.

IMPLEMENTATION

A COMPREHENSIVE settlement has to deal with many changes to political life.

These reforms could be introduced all at once, or gradually over a period of time, perhaps as an interim agreement that could be subject to periodic review.

Although Protestants would prefer the settlement to be final, all these options are 'acceptable' to them, while Catholics consider an interim agreement that can be reviewed after a set period of time to be their most 'acceptable' choice.

Balancing the needs for future political stability and the very real fears of both

communities faced with radical political change is not going to be easy. But a lasting settlement seems to be what is really important.

Providing the parties at the Stormont Talks can reach an agreement, then both communities appear to be willing to accept whatever arrangements have to be made to make it work.

● THE research was independently funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and has been under taken by Dr Colin Irwin of the Institute of Irish Studies at the Queen's University of Belfast in collaboration with representatives of the 10 political parties elected to the Stormont talks.

The public opinion survey work was conducted by Market Research Northern Ireland between December 4 and 22 to produce 1,002 completed questionnaires that represented a cross-section of Northern Ireland in terms of age, gender, social class, religious affiliation and geographical area.

The complete findings of the poll will be published by the Fortnight Educational Trust with the February edition of Fortnight magazine.