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* Wednesday, April 1, 1998 128th Year
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Major Telegraph opinion poll
poll
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What support does Sinn Fein have?

PMS GO ALL OUT FOR DEAL



It could be revealed within days

EDEL'S MILKY WAY FIND HAS SCIENTISTS SPINNING

Queen's student sees 'stars'

By Jason Johnson

AN Ulster graduate's career was set to take off today after she discovered two tiny ice planets in a far flung corner of the Milky Way.

Edel Fletcher, who is studying for a PhD in astro-physics at Queen's University in Belfast, was working at a giant telescope in the Canaries Island when she spotted the 70-mile wide objects.

And her find, which throws new light on the extent of the mysterious Kuiper Belt group of asteroids in our solar system, is set to send scientists worldwide into a spin.

"I'm delighted it's happened," said Ms Fletcher (25) from Strabane, "but the main thing on my mind is getting good results. I still have a year



Sky spotter: Astro-physicist Edel Fletcher was delighted when she found two ice planets in the Kuiper Belt of asteroids.

and a half to do at Queen's."

Ms Fletcher was one of three scientists, including Dr Alan Fitzsimmons — also from Queen's — stationed at the 7ft wide telescope.

The lens is so powerful it can pick out thousands of

stars and galaxies from a tiny patch of sky.

The ice rocks, known as minor planets, are likely to prove to be the faintest objects ever defined from a land-based telescope.

"What this means is that

there will have to be more deep searching to find out if this actually means there's a cut-off point or not for the Kuiper Belt," said Ms Fletcher.

"So really this is a significant development."

By Desmond McCartan and Martina Purdy

PRIME Minister Tony Blair and Taoiseach Bertie Ahern were today set to hammer out a draft settlement deal that could be put to the parties within days.

With the April 9 deadline for agreement looming, the two Premiers were aiming to have the draft ready by the weekend.

The crucial meeting in London this evening takes place against a backdrop which, publicly, suggested a hardening of differences between the political parties.

And it is understood that a document on security policy, setting out proposals for policing, has been delayed after the Government's failure, so far, to win unionist approval.

Mr Blair, facing Commons questions ahead of his meeting, was expected to indicate his latest assessment of the prospects of an agreement.

The Government maintained its optimism that a deal could be struck next week, despite signs that both the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP are sticking to their ground.

The discussion between Mr Blair and Mr Ahern, who was

in London for the Asia-Europe conference, was expected to last several hours.

Officials said it would be a "substantive" review of the current state of the talks process.

Although Downing Street maintains that no decision has been made, Mr Blair is set to join the Taoiseach in Belfast next week, provided the parties indicate that a deal on the prospective package is imminent.

Mr Blair, who met SDLP leader John Hume last night after speaking by telephone to Gerry Adams and Lord Alderdice, was aiming to contact loyalist party leaders today.

Downing Street sources, meanwhile, dismissed as inaccurate an Irish Times claim

that Mr Blair had personally drafted a paper on the structure and workings of North-South bodies.

The newspaper claimed the document was drafted over the weekend and handed to Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble.

It claimed that Mr Blair had taken "considerable trouble" to set out the way in which devolved powers, such as trade and tourism, would operate in the North-South structure.

Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams today met Mr Ahern in Dublin.

A Sinn Fein spokesman said Mr Adams would be pressing the need for powerful all-Ireland bodies and changes to the British legislation relating to its claim to Northern Ireland.

Mr Adams also had a 15-minute phone conversation with Mr Blair yesterday.

Said a party spokesman: "We made clear to him (Mr Blair) that a partial agreement which excludes Sinn Fein is not going to work... To be fair to Mr Blair, one of the first things he said to Gerry was that he was committed to seeking an inclusive agreement."

Mr Hume met with Mr Blair for 75 minutes yesterday and rejected unionist proposals for a non-legislative committee-led Assembly.

Ulster Unionists, meanwhile, continue to reject SDLP proposals for a cabinet-style administration, and stepped up the pressure over the Irish constitutional claim on Northern Ireland.

Flashpoint peaceline planned

By Chris Thornton

A NEW 'peaceline' will be built in a flashpoint area of north Belfast, the Northern Ireland Office announced today.

Security Minister Adam Ingram said a 600-ft long fence in the Whitewell Road area 'will prevent further sectarian disturbances.'

Work on the first peaceline built for more than three years, is expected to begin this week. It will cost £150,000.

Mr Ingram said he agreed to the RUC request after hundreds of sectarian incidents in the area over the past 15 months.

"I have based my decision solely on the pressing need to maintain the safety of both communities living in the area," he said.

Sinn Fein councillor Bobby Lavery said the decision will not be welcomed by nationalist residents, who view it "as an attempt to stop nationalist expansion".

"Nationalist north Belfast is

bursting at the seams," he said.

"People on the Whitewell Road have been refused a school crossing because the DoE can't afford it, but the NIO has found the money for this."

Democratic Unionist Party councillor Nigel Dodds said he hopes the wall is completed in time for the marching season.

"It's unfortunate that we have to have it, but it's a reality in that part of north Belfast."

Majority backs local Assembly

By Paul Connolly

SINN Fein's non-partitionist agenda of no local assembly and strongly independent North-South bodies receives little support from the electorate, an opinion poll reveals today.

But there is a strong desire for a Bill of Rights and for responsible government institutions that can make a political settlement work, the survey shows.

Part two of the Queen's University/Rowntree Trust survey, published exclusively in the Belfast Telegraph today, reveals that the 'non-partitionist' option of not having a regional assembly is thought 'unacceptable' by 48% of Protestants and 35% of Catholics.

A majority of both communities consider an assembly with powers to monitor and administer the NIO, make new laws and alter taxes 'is acceptable'.

The idea of a second chamber for an Assembly is also 'acceptable'.

On North-South bodies, 40% of Protestants believe this proposal 'unacceptable' by itself — but 74% are willing to accept it as part of a comprehensive agreed talks settlement.

Protestants consider the 'non-partitionist' option of a directly elected 'Council of Ministers' to be 'tolerable', but they would like a Northern Ireland Assembly to have the final responsibility for decisions taken by North-South bodies.

Catholics, however, would prefer responsibility for decisions to lie with the Assembly and Irish parliament, or the 'Council of Ministers', or the North-South bodies when given permission to act independently.

Thirty per cent of Catholics believed a 'Council of the Isles' to be 'unacceptable' by itself — but 81% of Catholics are willing to accept such a council as

part of a comprehensive agreed settlement.

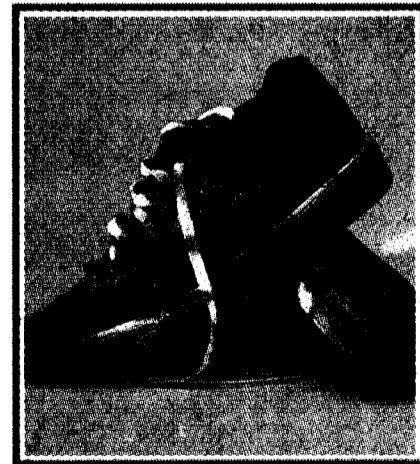
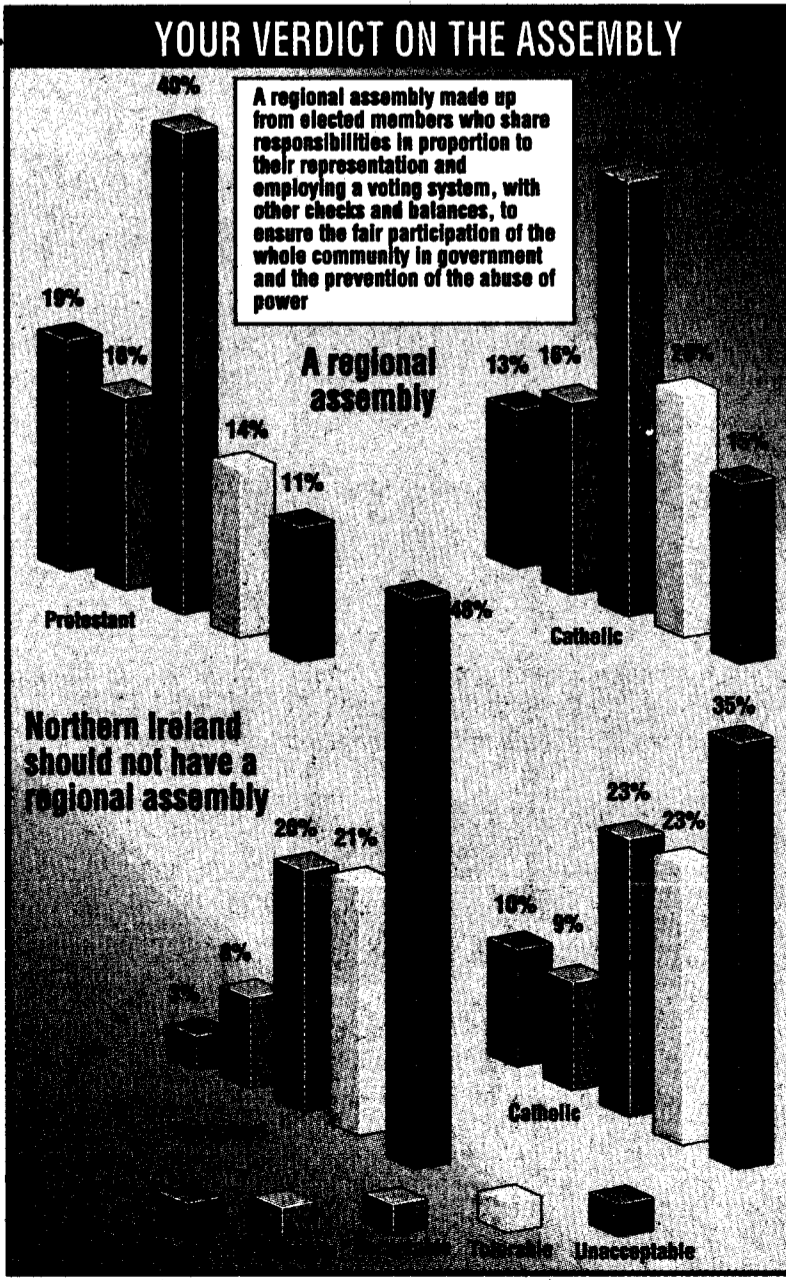
A majority of both Catholics and Protestants consider constitutional reform 'acceptable', but the 'non-partitionist' option of extending the principle of consent to the island of Ireland as a whole is considered 'unacceptable' by 84% of Protestants.

While 40% of Catholics consider RUC reform 'essential', the 'non-partitionist' proposal for a 'new policing service reflective of the community as a whole and accountable to an all-island body' does not receive significantly more support from the Catholic community (41%), but is deemed 'unacceptable' by 77% of Protestants.

Arriving at Stormont today, Mo Mowlam said: "I think yesterday, despite some of the coverage, was actually a very positive day."

"I was very encouraged by the poll in the Belfast Telegraph."

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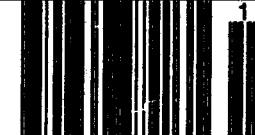
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Weather Outlook

GREATER BELFAST AREA: It will stay overcast and misty through the night with patches of hill fog. It will be wet, too, with some light rain or drizzle, turning steadier and heavier before morning. Min temp 6C with a moderate easterly wind.
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