



DEADLINE ULSTER

Little support for SF agenda

In the final part of the Queen's University/Rowntree Trust opinion poll on a referendum package, the Belfast Telegraph publishes exclusively DR COLIN IRWIN's analysis of the outstanding issues to be resolved during the last nine days of negotiations.



THE survey shows a lack of cross-community support for Sinn Féin's non-partitionist agenda of no local assembly, completely independent North/South bodies, no Council of the Isles, consent on an all Ireland basis and replacing the RUC.

But everyone wants a bill of rights and there is an overwhelming desire, from all sections of the community, for responsible government institutions that can make a settlement work.

In part one of the survey published yesterday, 77% of those polled said they would vote yes for a comprehensive settlement agreed to at the Talks. But this support for a referendum package fell to 50% when the backing of the political parties was removed.

A regional assembly at all is not very popular in either the Catholic or Protestant communities. A majority of both Catholics and Protestants consider an assembly with powers to monitor and administer the Northern Ireland Office, make new laws and alter taxes to be acceptable.

Today each of the six parts of the settlement is tested to see how it stands up against proposed alternatives. And a range of other issues, for fine tuning an agreement, is examined.

This was done by asking everyone interviewed to say which options they considered to be essential, desirable, acceptable, tolerable, or unacceptable.

Table 1	Religion	Essential	Desirable	Acceptable	Tolerable	Unacceptable
A regional assembly	Protestant	19%	16%	40%	14%	11%
	Catholic	13%	16%	36%	20%	15%
Northern Ireland should not have a regional assembly	Protestant	3%	8%	20%	21%	48%
	Catholic	10%	9%	23%	23%	35%

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. (Table 2)

Although 40% of Protestants consider this proposal for North/South bodies to be unacceptable by itself, 74% of them are willing to accept it as part of a comprehensive settlement agreed at the Talks.

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.

Table 2	Religion	Essential	Desirable	Acceptable	Tolerable	Unacceptable
North/South bodies	Protestant	3%	10%	19%	28%	40%
	Catholic	33%	26%	23%	10%	8%
A Council of Ministers appointed from the executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish Dail	Protestant	3%	6%	16%	23%	52%
	Catholic	14%	24%	39%	13%	10%
A Council of Ministers directly elected by proportional representation North and South	Protestant	3%	7%	19%	23%	48%
	Catholic	21%	25%	38%	9%	7%

REPLACE the Anglo-Irish Agreement and establish a COUNCIL OF THE ISLES to create a new relationship between London, Dublin, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast appropriate to the needs of the region as a part of Europe. (Table 3)

While 30% of Catholics consider this proposal for a Council of the Isles to be unacceptable by itself, 81% of Catholics are willing to accept it as part of a comprehensive settlement agreed to at the Talks.

The non-partitionist option of limiting the responsibility for East/West relationships to the existing Anglo-Irish parliamentary body is unacceptable to 53% of Protestants.

Table 3	Religion	Essential	Desirable	Acceptable	Tolerable	Unacceptable
Council of the Isles	Protestant	4%	20%	38%	21%	17%
	Catholic	6%	12%	30%	22%	30%
No 'Council of the Isles' - the Anglo Irish body as it now exists should assume responsibility for issues of common interest throughout the two islands	Protestant	3%	4%	13%	27%	53%
	Catholic	5%	15%	30%	17%	33%

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM that embraces the principle of consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland to keep or change its status, guaranteed rights of British and/or Irish citizenship, and any other balanced changes required to implement the various agreements made at the Stormont Talks. (Table 4)

A majority of both Catholics and Protestants consider this proposal for dealing with constitutional reform to be acceptable. The balance between the principle of consent, on the one hand, and guaranteed rights of citizenship, on the other hand, seems to have been struck just right.

The non-partitionist option of extending the principle of consent to the island of Ireland as a whole is more acceptable to Catholics but 84% of Protestants consider this option to be unacceptable.

Table 4	Religion	Essential	Desirable	Acceptable	Tolerable	Unacceptable
Constitutional reform	Protestant	36%	18%	27%	12%	7%
	Catholic	20%	25%	33%	13%	9%
The people of the island of Ireland as a whole should decide the status of Northern Ireland	Protestant	1%	2%	4%	9%	84%
	Catholic	31%	24%	23%	11%	11%

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. (Table 5)

A Bill of Rights is broadly accepted as one of the strongest areas of common ground by the politicians at the Stormont Talks.

Quite a few technical/legal issues will have to be resolved but given the good will of both the Protestant and Catholic communities for a Bill of Rights its development will undoubtedly be a welcome addition to a comprehensive settlement.

Table 5	Religion	Essential	Desirable	Acceptable	Tolerable	Unacceptable
A bill of rights	Protestant	12%	23%	36%	20%	9%
	Catholic	48%	23%	20%	6%	3%

This research was independently funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and has been undertaken 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

adult population of Northern Ireland in terms of age, gender, social class, religious affiliation and geographical area. 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.

ABOUT THE POLL
The public opinion survey work was conducted by Market Research Northern Ireland between March 12-20 to produce 1,000 face to face interviews that represented a cross section of the

REFORM THE RUC to create community policing units as part of a two tier service restructured with a view to recruiting more Catholics and improving community relations under the authority of a new Department of Justice in a Regional Assembly. (Table 6)

While 40% of Catholics consider reform of

the RUC to be essential, 48% of Protestants consider these same proposals to be unacceptable. But it should be stressed again that, as part of a comprehensive settlement agreed at the Talks, these reforms are acceptable to 74% of Protestants.

The non-partitionist proposal for 'a new

Table 6	Religion	Essential	Desirable	Acceptable	Tolerable	Unacceptable
Reform the RUC	Protestant	3%	8%	19%	22%	48%
	Catholic	40%	21%	21%	9%	9%
A new policing service reflective of the community as a whole and accountable to an all island body	Protestant	1%	1%	10%	11%	77%
	Catholic	41%	19%	22%	10%	8%

MAKING THE SETTLEMENT WORK

All of these political reforms will have to deal with many different issues and it is entirely possible that some of the new institutions created as part of a comprehensive settlement will not deliver the hoped for changes.

Several proposals were put forward to deal with this problem. Firstly it was suggested that all

the executive members of a Northern Ireland Assembly, Council of Ministers, North/South bodies or Council of the Isles should agree to a 'duty of service' that includes 'a commitment to undertake and fulfil the responsibilities of their office'.

A majority of both Protestants and Catholics considered this option to be desirable and they

also took the view that 'a commitment to the principles of democracy and non-violence' was essential. (Table 7)

This strong positive vote sends a clear message to the politicians. The people of Northern Ireland are not only weary of the violence but they are also fed up with party antics, wrecking tactics and abstentionism.

Table 7	Religion	Essential	Desirable	Acceptable	Tolerable	Unacceptable
A commitment to undertake and fulfil the responsibilities of their office	Protestant	36%	22%	26%	11%	5%
	Catholic	46%	28%	20%	5%	1%
A commitment to the principles of democracy and non-violence	Protestant	56%	14%	19%	8%	3%
	Catholic	63%	21%	12%	3%	1%

With regard to any failure to comply with this 'duty of service' a majority of both Protestants and Catholics considered it acceptable for complaints and appeals to be dealt with by an Ethics Committee of a Northern Ireland Assembly, a court of law, a special constitutional court or the voters at an election.

By way of contrast having the Secretary of State or British and Irish Governments make

decisions on these matters was only tolerable. Legal and democratic procedures, it would seem, are to be preferred over mechanisms that invite political intervention.

But will proportionality, responsibility sharing and a 'duty of service' backed up with appropriate legal sanctions lead to good governance and the smooth working of these new institutions.

Sinn Féin have their doubts and perhaps that is why they cling so tenaciously to their non-partitionist agenda and seek bilateral negotiations with unionists.

But even negotiations are not a substitute for good will. Perhaps what is really needed are assurances made in good faith - on both sides. Without that, all of this may be worth nothing at all.

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