



The Belfast Telegraph

TODAY'S NEWS TODAY

CITY

WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 19, 2003 50p (€0.86) EST 1870 www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk



HE WON'T LOOK BECK IN ANGER

P32

WIN A FIAT PUNTO

SECOND FINALIST: MOIRA AHERNE P12

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Ulster poll shock rocks Agreement

- Voters disillusioned
- Deal support on slide
- Arms still key issue

By Chris Thornton

THE public's disillusionment with the political process has deepened since the suspension of the Assembly, according to the results of a new poll published exclusively today by the Belfast Telegraph.

The opinion survey shows:

● Support for the Agreement has slid to an all-time low.

● Voters appear to be withholding support for the political parties in record numbers.

● Majorities in both communities say they are fed up with decommissioning and the instability of the institutions.

● Trust in every major party and both governments has also plummeted.

The results of the Queen's University/Rowntree Trust poll also show that active Protestant support for the Agreement has hit record depths, with just over one-third of Protestants saying they would vote Yes in a new referendum.

And while a majority of Protestants – 60% – would still be happy to see the Agreement work, that figure has also fallen to the lowest level since the 1998 referendum.

While Catholic support

for the Agreement remains very high – 90% would vote Yes again – the negative trend of many of today's findings should cast gloom on the current bids by London and Dublin to revive the political process by the start of March.

But they could also translate into pressure for action on the parties, who are positioning themselves for the election scheduled on May 1.

Today's poll results suggest the election is wide open. The four main parties sit within five percentage points of each other, with each in range of grabbing one-fifth of the vote.

The registered support for every party has fallen, except the SDLP and Women's Coalition, which recorded slight rises.

And crucially, 17% of the respondents – as many as indicated they would vote for the DUP or Sinn Fein – refused to register support for any political party. This is the highest refusal rate recorded for that question in nine years of QUB/Rowntree Trust polling published by the Belfast Telegraph.

While this figure undoubtedly contains some Sinn Fein and DUP supporters who traditionally do not identify themselves to pollsters – it must also indicate that a

significant section of the electorate are floating voters. In a similar BBC poll last October, just 3.5% of respondents refused to align themselves with a party.

Protestant and Catholic respondents to today's survey share many of the same concerns about the state of the Agreement.

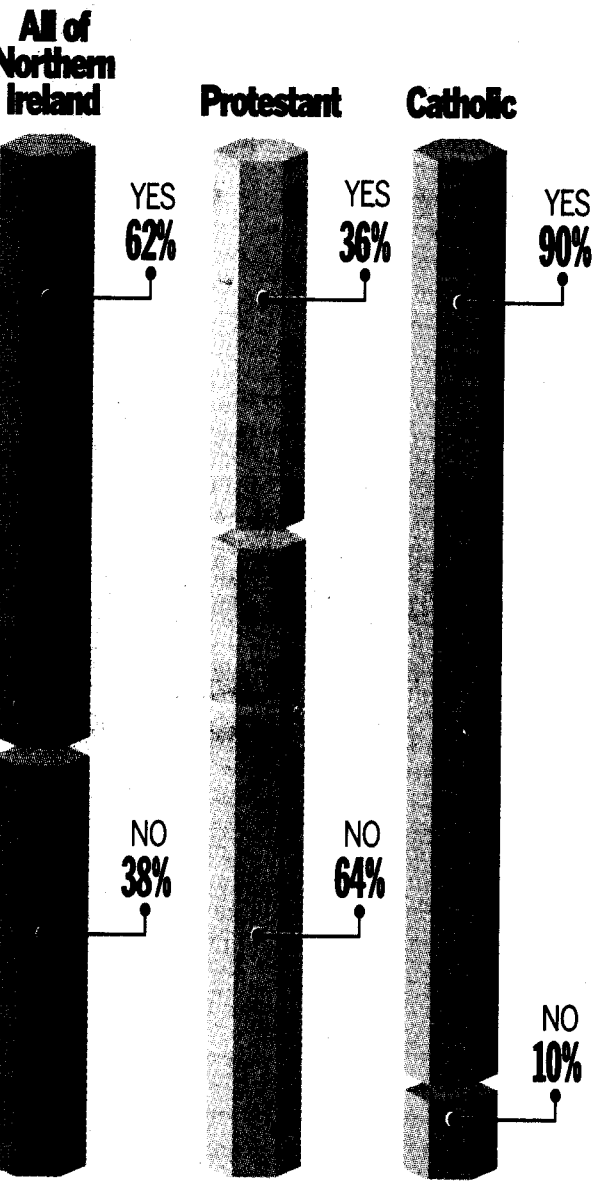
Decommissioning tops the list of unfulfilled concerns for both communities, followed by the instability of the institutions.

But that shared disappointment does not translate into common cause. Both sides still blame each other: a significant majority of Catholics – 82% – fault unionists for the current collapse, while a similarly large majority of Protestants – 73% – blame republicans.

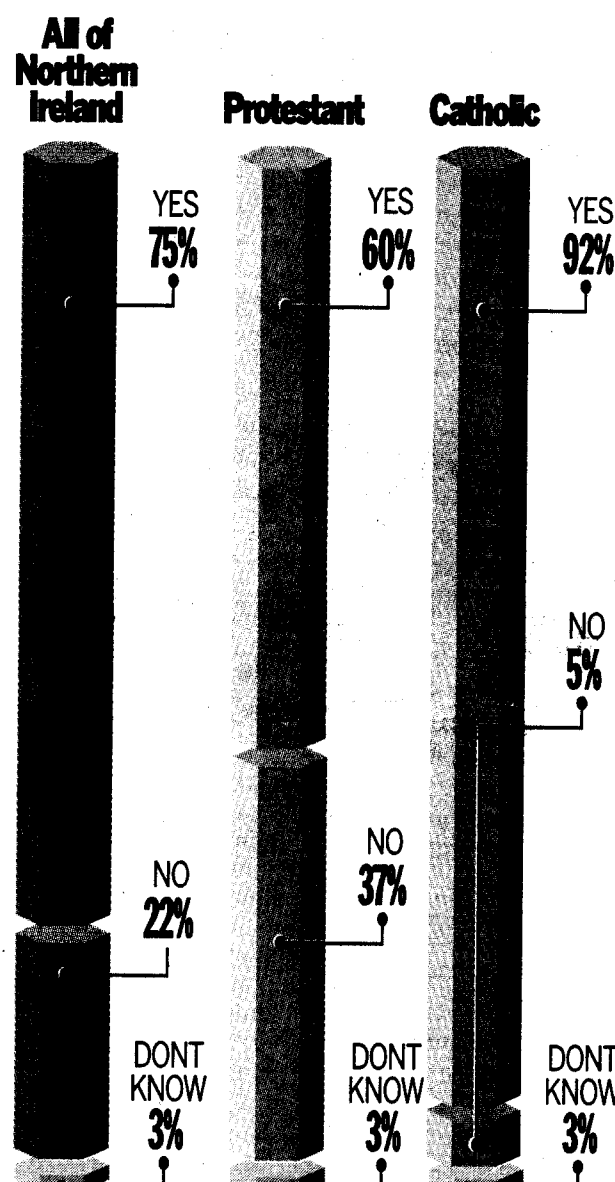
The Government is likely to be encouraged by a significant drop in Catholic concerns about police reform. Where that issue used to top Catholic dissatisfaction with the peace process, it has now fallen to eighth in that community's list of concerns, with less than half – 44% – saying they are dissatisfied with police reform.

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If the Referendum was held today how would you vote?



Do you want the Belfast Agreement to work?



'No rift' Beckham waits to hear if he is playing

By Staff Reporter

DAVID Beckham was today waiting to hear if he plays in Manchester United's crunch Champions League match with Juventus following his bust-up with manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

The star today insisted there is no rift between him and his boss following Saturday's incident which left Beckham sporting an injured left eye.

But the player has now described the incident – in which a furious Sir Alex kicked a football boot, accidentally hitting him – as "just one of those things".

Press reports today suggested that Beckham was still furious and had even threatened to quit if his manager did not apologise.

However, the star said today: "The dressing room incident was just one of those things – it's all in the past now. I want to assure all Manchester United fans that there is complete harmony."

Sir Alex Ferguson yesterday described the incident as "freakish" and refused to apologise.

Ferguson said: "If I'd tried it 100 times or a million times, it couldn't happen again. If it did, I would carry on playing."

He added that Beckham did not need stitches.

And the manager insisted that what happens in a dressing room "remains sacrosanct".

Beckham has recovered from a calf injury sustained on the pitch last Saturday and is fit to play in tonight's match at Old Trafford.

Manchester Utd fans across the globe will be waiting to see if the rift between the two men really is over and if Sir Alex picks his star midfielder.

See page 6 and back page

INSIDE

Castlereagh pool to close

CASTLEREAGH'S only swimming pool complex is likely to close in April due to spiralling maintenance costs.

Police probe fraud at RVH

AN alleged fraud at the Royal Hospital involving thousands of pounds is being investigated by police.

Vandals hit the Oval

GLENTORAN officials were left fuming when they arrived at the Oval today to find their dug-outs had been vandalised. They now face a race against a time to have the dug-outs repaired for Saturday.

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£2bn loans fund schemes unveiled

By Chris Thornton
POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT

A LARGE range of projects to improve roads, schools, hospitals and water services were cleared for funding today with a detailed announcement on how £2 billion in Government loans will be spent in Northern Ireland.

Among the more than 100 projects funded by the loans package are the new hospital planned for the West of the Province, a £100 million Rapid Light Transport pilot scheme in Belfast, and upgrades for the Westlink and the M1 approach to Belfast.

The loans will be paid for by an increase in rates and the introduction of direct water charges in the coming years.

But Finance Minister Ian Pearson, who gave the details of the Strategic Investment Programme, said it will cost each household £1 per week for £500m spent.

Projects paid for by the scheme include new buildings or major refurbishment for around 50 schools, and additional or purpose-built accommodation for third level education colleges such as North West Institute in Londonderry, East Antrim Institute in Newtownabbey and Stranmillis College.



Ian Pearson: Gave details of spending plan

WHERE CASH GOES

- A pilot rapid light transit system running from east Belfast into the city centre
- The provision of new buildings and refurbishment of about 50 schools
- A new acute hospital in the south-west of the province
- The construction of two new fire stations in Antrim and Carrickfergus, the refurbishment of four existing stations
- The provision of new fire engines and equipment enabling firefighters to deal with deliberate chemical and biological leaks
- Several projects upgrading waste water treatment, water mains and sewerage services

Queen's University and the University of Ulster will also receive new facilities.

The funding will allow the Fire Brigade to receive new training for dealing with chemical or biological terrorist attacks.

A potential logjam in planning for new houses may now be freed up by plans to upgrade waste water treatment facilities.

The new money will address concerns that the waste system could not cope with a spate of new housing.

In transport, the loans package will fund the relaying of railway track between Bleach Green and Whitehead, and the replacement of all buses over 18-years-old meeting safety standards and requirements for disabled access.

Mr Pearson said the loans system has the "clear backing of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor".

"It is widely welcomed by the private sector, who have commended Northern Ireland for taking this initiative forward. Unique opportunities present challenges that require innovative and imaginative solutions," he said.

"We now have the means to invest in a much larger number of schools. The schools projects listed today will go ahead in the next three years and it will also be possible to bring more projects in the coming years."

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