

What now for the Agreement?

By Colin Irwin

Collapse of middle ground politics?

THE interviews for this poll seem to have been undertaken at a politically sensitive time. The 17% refusal rate for the political support question is the highest recorded.

If, as has happened in the past, Sinn Fein and DUP supporters are less inclined to declare their party of choice than Sinn Fein, at 17%, could be 'neck and neck' with the SDLP at 19%, and the DUP at 16% could be closing on the UUP at 21%.

A poll undertaken for the BBC Hearts and Minds programme last October put Sinn Fein ahead of the SDLP. That poll also placed Alliance at an all-time low of just 3%. Its situation has not improved and the UUP is down from 4% to 2% and Women's Coalition down from 2% to 1%.

The UUP and SDLP may be feeling the squeeze from the DUP and Sinn Fein but so too are all the smaller pro-Agreement parties.

The people of Northern Ireland appear to be moving away from the voices of moderation and accommodation and back into their separate political camps.

Support for the Agreement at all time low

POLLSTERS get nervous when they have to ask the people of Northern Ireland how they voted in the May 1998 referendum because the result will reveal any fundamental flaws in the quality of their research. On this occasion the response was 'spot on' at 71%.

But that is as far as the positive results for this poll and the fortunes of the Belfast Agreement go.

Support for the Agreement has reached an all-time low of 62% with only 36% of Protestants saying they would still vote for it. Catholic support, however, remains high at 90%.

Protestant support for the Agreement hit its high point in May 2000 just after the IRA said it would "completely and verifiably put its arms beyond use". Could the IRA "save" the Agreement again?

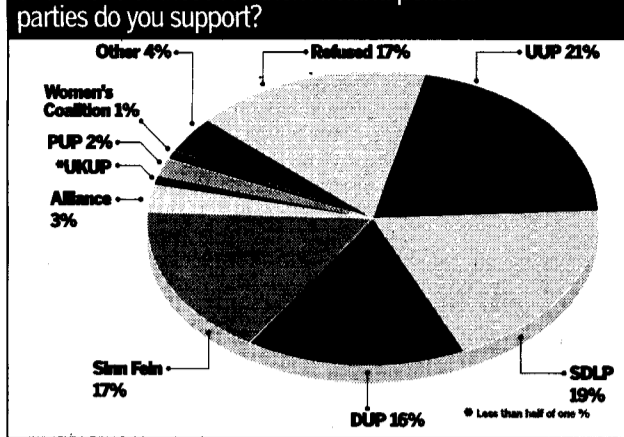
Perhaps, but bringing back the Protestant vote from a low of 36% will not be an easy task without "acts of completion".

But unprecedented movement to full implementation of the Belfast Agreement could still restore confidence.

Although the percentage of those wishing to see the Belfast Agreement work is also at an all-time low of 75% - down from a maximum of 93% four years ago - a majority of Protestants, 60%, are still willing to lend their support to the peace process - providing, of course, the pro-Agreement parties and two Governments can make it work.

EXCLUSIVE: THE QUB/ROWNTREE POLL

Which one of these Northern Ireland political parties do you support?



Decommissioning tops 'To Do Lists'

IN October 1999, May 2000 and February 2003 the people of Northern Ireland were asked to pass judgment on the different parts of the Belfast Agreement.

Specifically, they were asked about aspects with which they were "very satisfied", "satisfied", "only just satisfied", "not satisfied" or "not satisfied with at all".

It will come as no surprise that the level of dissatisfaction for the Protestant community has risen to an all-time average high of 62% "not satisfied" or "not satisfied with at all".

But for Catholics the picture is very different. Their level of dissatisfaction has fallen steadily across all three polls from an average of 51% "not satisfied" or "not satisfied with at all" in 1999 to 44% in 2000 and 42% in the most recent poll.

Why? The explanation is simple. For Protestants decommissioning of paramilitary weapons was always at the top of their "to do list" and that item has not begun to be addressed to their satisfaction.

For Catholics, however, many of the top items on their "to do list" are getting dealt with. Police reform, for example, has moved from being their number one pri-

ority in May 2000 down to number eight.

Decommissioning was their main concern in October 1999 at 63% "not satisfied" or "not satisfied with at all". It fell to a low of only 38% in May 2000 after the IRA pronouncements but it is back up to 60% in this poll.

Sinn Fein has skilled negotiators and many would say they have served their community well in recent years but perhaps, with decommissioning back at the top of both communities' concerns, they are now running the risk of over-playing their hand.

It should also be noted, however, that a new item introduced for this poll, "The stability of the institutions of government", is No. 2 on the Catholic list and No. 3 for Protestants.

Political instability is clearly, almost universally, unpopular.

The Northern Ireland Blame Game

ONE of the most popular cross community activities in Northern Ireland is playing the 'blame game'. It is difficult to understand why when matches nearly always seem to end in a draw.

In this poll, 61% of the people of Northern Ireland thought it "very probable" or "probable" that the Belfast Agreement and peace process will collapse if "devolved government is not restored to Northern Ireland or if Sinn Fein is excluded from holding Ministerial posts in the Executive".

Sixty-one per cent believed this would happen "because unionists will not work the Agreement in good faith" and 61% thought it was the fault of the republicans.

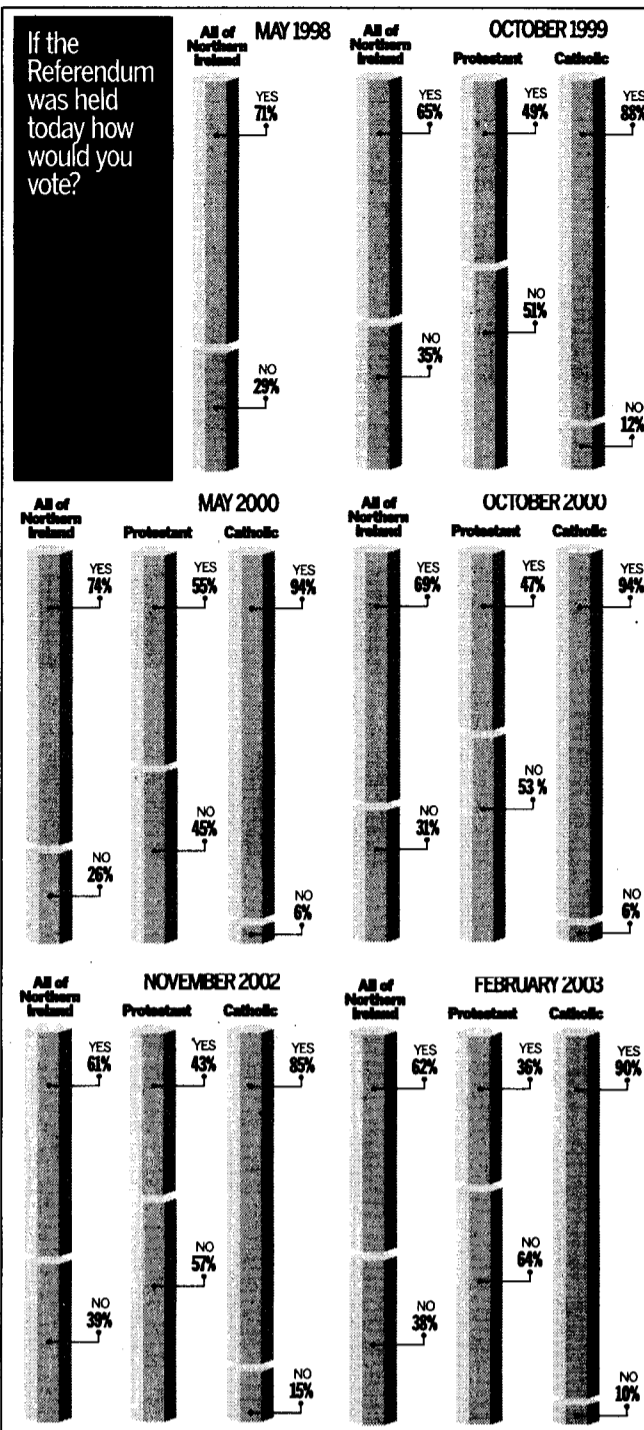
These figures rose to 84% of Sinn Fein supporters blaming unionists and 82% of DUP supporters blaming republicans. SDLP supporters thought the UUP could have done more to work with them, while UUP supporters thought the SDLP had not done enough.

But everyone was quite even handed when it came to blaming the two Governments, at 58% for Protestants, 56% for Catholics, 55% for DUP supporters, 60% for the UUP, 51% for the SDLP and 60% for Sinn Fein.

When the question of blame is looked at over time, like so many other statistics reported in this poll, the level of blame is up from the lows of May 2000.

But so too, more seriously, are fears about increased paramilitary activity - particularly loyalist paramilitary activity. Seventy-two per cent of UUP supporters now think it "very probable" or "probable" that dissident loyalist paramilitary groups will become more active, compared to 59% in May 2000, and 83% of Sinn Fein supporters share this view compared to 61% in May 2000.

Concerns about dissident republicans remain unchanged for Ulster



Unionists at 68%, but it is on the rise for Sinn Fein supporters, from 45% in May 2000 to 53% for this poll.

Trust in 'Free Fall'

STARTING with the poll done for the Mitchell Review in October 1999, people were asked to indicate which of the Governments and parties who agreed to the terms of the Belfast Agreement they: "trust a lot", "trust a little", are "not sure about", "do not trust" or "do not trust at all".

The same question was asked again in May 2000 and in this poll. Trust, quite simply, is in free fall for all the pro-Agreement parties, and for the British and Irish Governments, in both the Protestant and Catholic communities.

For Protestants "trust a lot" or "trust a little" has fallen from 37% on average in 1999 to 30% in 2000 and 17% in 2003.

For Catholics the average has fallen from 48% in 1999 and 2000 to 34% in 2003.

Still the 'Government and Guns' problem

PEOPLE from different communities often hold very different views about the causes of continued conflict in Northern Ireland and suspension of the Assembly.

From a list of 18 frequently referred to sources of failure people were asked to indicate which ones they considered to be "very significant", "significant", "of some significance", "of little significance" or "of no significance" at all.

These causes of political failure are listed in the table in their order of significance. Although both Protestants and Catholics now place decommissioning at the top of their 'to do lists', they clearly see this issue in very different terms as problems. For Protestants the failure

of republicans to abandon violence comes first at 42% "very significant", followed by the failure to put Sinn Fein out of the Executive at 36% and loyalist violence at 27%.

For Catholics the threat of suspension comes first at 43% "very significant" followed by the UUP threat to walk out and no penalty for doing so at 38%. For Catholics these political failures are the causes of continued violence coming in fourth at 37% "very significant".

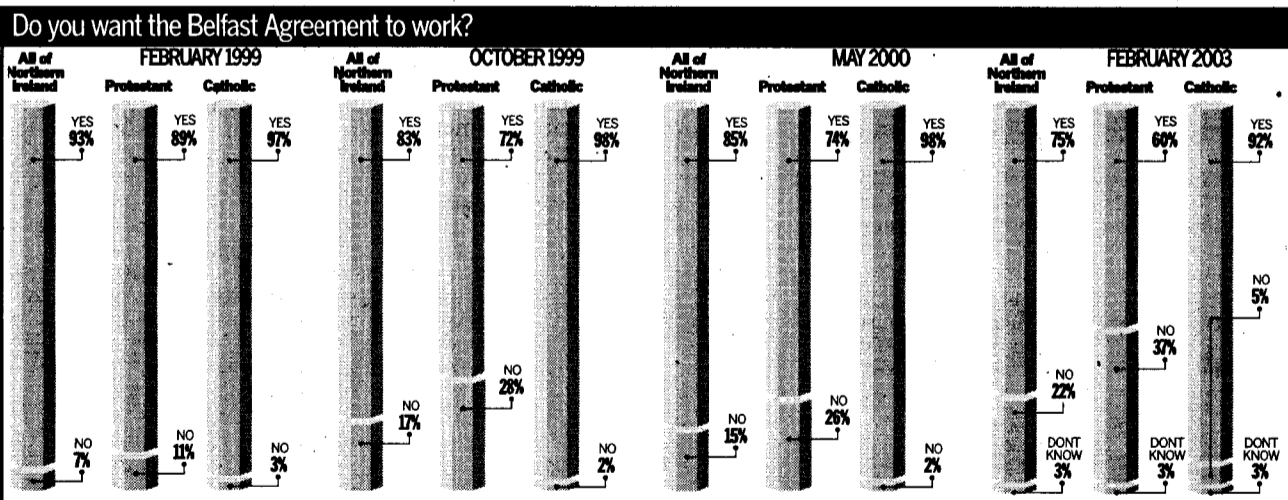
This same item is eighth on the Protestant list at only 20%. But isn't this just the "government and guns" problem looked at in a slightly different way?

Surely by now the political leaders in each community understand this dynamic very well. It has to be fixed. It is destroying the peace process.

THIS research was undertaken by Dr. Colin Irwin of the School of Politics at Queen's University Belfast. The project was independently funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. The public opinion survey work was conducted by Market Research Northern Ireland between January 21 and February 6 to produce 1000 'face to face' interviews that represented a cross section of the 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. This poll is the sixth in a series published by the Belfast Telegraph. They are reviewed in the author's book The People's Peace Process in Northern Ireland (Program) with full statistical reports available at <http://www.pacopoll.org>.

Top 10 'To do' lists			
PROTESTANT % NOT SATISFIED	OCT 1999	MAY 2000	FEB 2003
Decommissioning of Paramilitary weapons	88%	74%	84%
The reform of policing	69%	69%	74%
The stability of the institutions of government	-	-	70%
The reform of the criminal justice system	65%	65%	70%
Demilitarisation and Normalisation	66%	59%	70%
The North/South Ministerial Council	52%	49%	68%
The British/Irish Council	55%	51%	67%
Support for the victims of the 'Troubles'	74%	66%	65%
Obligations to non-violence, peace and democracy	74%	65%	65%
The full implementation of all parts of the Agreement together	63%	57%	63%
CATHOLIC % NOT SATISFIED	OCT 1999	MAY 2000	FEB 2003
Decommissioning of Paramilitary weapons	63%	38%	60%
The stability of the institutions of government	-	-	55%
The full implementation of all parts of the Agreement together	56%	47%	54%
Demilitarisation and Normalisation	59%	56%	53%
Support for the victims of the 'Troubles'	48%	41%	49%
Obligations to non-violence, peace and democracy	52%	43%	48%
The present status of Northern Ireland as part of the UK	42%	50%	47%
The reform of policing	61%	61%	44%
The reform of the criminal justice system	56%	61%	44%
Reconciliation and improved community relations	-	-	44%

Who do you trust?			
PROTESTANT % - TRUST A LOT OR TRUST A LITTLE	OCT 1999	MAY 2000	FEB 2003
The British Government	48%	42%	27%
The Irish Government	35%	27%	9%
The Ulster Unionist Party	60%	51%	33%
The Progressive Union party	49%	37%	26%
The Alliance Party	40%	28%	14%
The Women's Coalition	30%	23%	14%
The SDLP	30%	26%	11%
Sinn Fein	5%	8%	3%
AVERAGE	37%	30%	17%
CATHOLIC % - TRUST A LOT OR TRUST A LITTLE	OCT 1999	MAY 2000	FEB 2003
The British Government	48%	42%	26%
The Irish Government	48%	68%	39%
The Ulster Unionist Party	29%	28%	12%
The Progressive Union party	27%	20%	11%
The Alliance Party	46%	36%	32%
The Women's Coalition	55%	45%	44%
The SDLP	77%	78%	62%
Sinn Fein	51%	69%	48%
AVERAGE	48%	48%	34%



The Belfast Agreement and peace process will collapse...							
% - 'VERY PROBABLE' OR 'PROBABLE'	ALL OF NORTHERN IRELAND	PROTESTANT	CATHOLIC	DUP	UUP	SDLP	SINN FEIN
Because Unionists will not work the Agreement in good faith	61%	44%	82%	45%	46%	85%	84%
Because Republicans will not work the Agreement in good faith	61%	73%	48%	82%	71%	62%	26%
Because the SDLP have not done everything they could to work with the UUP	42%	53%	31%	58%	55%	30%	29%
Because the UUP have not done everything they could to work with the SDLP	51%	41%	64%	43%	39%	63%	72%
Because of the lack of co-operation and dialogue between the two governments	57%	58%	56%	55%	60%	51%	60%

TOMORROW: FINDING THE ANSWERS

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