

Making peace in two deeply divided societies, Northern Ireland and Brexit UK

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In his keynote address at a conference on ‘Brexit and Public Opinion 2019’ organised by the UK in a Changing Europe Sir John Curtis quite rightly underlined the point that ‘remainers’ and ‘leavers’ are strongly polarised on issues concerning the future relationship of the United Kingdom and the European Union. In this context he also suggested that there was little or no support for any one solution to this problem as, like Parliament, there was not a clear majority of the British public in favour of one solution or another. Again the facts from the various public opinion surveys cited by Sir John suggest that he was right and in the following discussion he pointed out that even in Northern Ireland more than 50 per cent of Unionists voted ‘yes’ for the Belfast Agreement. True again but this fact misses the point that both Northern Ireland and Brexit UK are two ‘deeply divided societies’ and to get to a compromise in Northern Ireland in which both Unionists and Nationalists / Protestants and Catholics agreed a political way forward we had to get them there from a base where support for that compromise was not 50 per cent plus but closer to 10 per cent. Critically, if we had used Sir John’s methods for analysing public opinion in Northern Ireland we would never have got to peace! Clearly this assertion needs to be supported with some public opinion facts.

Sir John cited the results of a poll commissioned by the Change Britain campaign and completed by BMG. In this study eight options were tested ranging from leaving the EU on a Canada-style deal, to a Norway-style deal, the government’s withdrawal agreement and a second referendum with informants being asked to select their most preferred option. Firstly, with so many options on offer it is difficult to get above 50 per cent for any one option and, most importantly, we do not know what informants second and third choices might be and therefore do not know where a compromise might be found between leavers and remainers or between Conservative and Labour party supporters.

As a tool for conflict resolution analysis this methodology is worse than useless as it highlights differences without identifying common ground. Similarly when eight options for the resolution of the Northern Ireland conflict were tested against public opinion only 11 per cent of Protestants and 10 per cent of Catholics accepted the power sharing compromise that became the Belfast Agreement. For Protestants remaining in the United Kingdom without sharing power with Catholics was their number one choice at 49 per cent but it was also the last/eighth choice for Catholics at 33 per cent (see table). So power sharing was the way forward.

Percentage preference for Northern Ireland options in 1996 (Irwin, 2012 p11)¹

Catholics	Independent State	British State	Direct Rule	Anglo-Irish Agreement	Power Sharing	Joint Authority	Separate Institutions	Irish State
1st Pref.	8	3	6	14	11	24	2	32
2nd Pref.	9	5	9	17	16	26	9	9
3rd Pref.	2	4	10	21	22	23	11	6
4th Pref.	4	4	18	21	23	11	12	6
5th Pref.	8	9	17	18	14	10	15	9
6th Pref.	14	10	19	8	10	5	21	12
7th Pref.	15	29	18	2	3	1	19	12
8th Pref.	34	33	5	1	3	1	11	12

Protestants	Independent State	British State	Direct Rule	Anglo-Irish Agreement	Power Sharing	Joint Authority	Separate Institutions	Irish State
1st Pref.	10	49	14	7	10	6	2	2
2nd Pref.	14	19	34	13	13	3	2	1
3rd Pref.	19	8	26	25	11	7	2	1
4th Pref.	10	9	11	28	26	9	4	2
5th Pref.	13	8	6	14	28	19	9	3
6th Pref.	13	5	4	6	7	40	24	2
7th Pref.	11	3	3	6	3	15	51	8
8th Pref.	10	2	5	6	5	7	9	57

But in the real negotiations of the Belfast Agreement we had to deal with literally hundreds of issues and test them against public opinion to help the negotiators come to a compromise and it simply is not possible to rank order hundreds of options. So we came up with a qualitative scale that would achieve the same result for each and every item. The negotiators wanted to know what their publics considered to be ‘essential’ or ‘desirable’ or ‘acceptable’ or ‘tolerable’ or definitely ‘unacceptable’ and when we used this five point scale the politicians could see exactly what each side needed in an agreement and what they would never agree to. A settlement of the Northern Ireland problem was the result with more than 50 per cent of Protestants voting ‘Yes’ for power sharing and the Belfast Agreement. We can do exactly the same for Brexit to find out what remainers and leavers, as well as Conservative and Labour supporters, can compromise on to mend the divisions in the UK body politic and copied below is a draft question and questionnaire to do just that.

The UK is taking on many of the characteristics of deeply divided societies found around the world. This fact needs to be recognised and acted on by the political leadership. Such leadership is not easy, indeed it is very difficult, but the research community can help by providing that leadership and the public with facts and analysis from conflict resolution best practice. In this regard the polling methods used in Northern Ireland are best practice and should be used to analyse and resolve Brexit.

Solving the Brexit problem² (Working Draft)

Parliament is presently trying to solve the Brexit problem. Listed below are the different options that have been made law or proposed as law along with the amendments tabled by MPs to change the law. Please indicate which options to solve the Brexit problem you consider to be ‘Essential’, ‘Desirable’, ‘Acceptable’, ‘Tolerable’ or ‘Unacceptable’.

	Essential	Desirable	Acceptable	Tolerable	Unacceptable
The PMs Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration – Negotiated and agreed with the European Union to settle the terms of the UK leaving the EU and outlining the terms of a future trading arrangement. ³					
The PMs Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration – But with an expiry date for the Northern Ireland backstop or no backstop. ⁴					
The PMs Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration – But with alternative arrangements to the Northern Ireland backstop to avoid a hard border. ⁵					
Indicative Votes – By MPs in the House of Commons on a variety of alternatives to the PMs Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration. ⁶					
A permanent customs union – For trade with the EU and strong relationship with the single market underpinned by shared institutions, obligations and alignment on rights and standards. ⁷					
Norway-style deal – Including a customs union with the EU and membership of the European Economic Area with Norway, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Iceland. ⁸					
Canada-style deal – A free trade agreement with the EU to include arrangements made between the EU and Canada and other trading partners. ⁹					
Status quo – Remain in the EU on present terms by revoking Article 50. ¹⁰					
A public vote/referendum – On any deal that has the support of the majority of MPs in the House of Commons. ¹¹					
No Deal – To leave the EU on 29 March 2019 with no agreement on future relations in place and with no transition/implementation period. ¹²					
Reject leaving the EU – Without a withdrawal agreement and a framework for the future relationship. ¹³					
Parliament Decides – If the Government can not get a majority for their proposal to withdraw from the EU then for one day only the House of Commons can make proposals and vote them into law. ¹⁴					
Special EU Committee – Establish a special all-party representative House of Commons committee to manage the EU Withdrawal Negotiations. ¹⁵					
Extension to Article 50 beyond two years – If the PMs Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration is not passed in the House of Commons by 26 February 2019. ¹⁶					
A Citizen’s Assembly – Of 250 members, comprising a representative sample of the population to consider and make recommendations to the House of Commons on the process of withdrawal of the UK from the EU. ¹⁷					
A public vote/referendum – On any deal or to stay in the EU. ¹⁸					

Endnotes

¹ Irwin, C. J., (2012) The People's Peace, CreateSpace, Scotts Valley, CA. Available at: <http://www.peacepolls.org/peacepolls/documents/002539.pdf>

² This 'working draft' questionnaire is written in the style of those used to help resolve the Northern Ireland problem during the negotiation of the Belfast Agreement. A book explaining the methodology is available here:

<http://www.peacepolls.org/peacepolls/documents/002539.pdf>

³ It is not possible to reduce the contents of the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration to a single sentence or two so it is captured here as simply the PMs negotiated agreement with the EU. However we are told by the EU that this is not possible!

⁴ This amendment is placed here as it follows on from the PMs Withdrawal Agreement and covers a number of amendments with different dates and mechanisms.

⁵ Another amendment on the Northern Ireland backstop.

⁶ This procedural amendment seems to work well here as an introduction to the substantive amendments that follow.

⁷ This amendment from is not one of the four items noted in the indicative vote amendment but seems to fit well here as the first of the substantive amendments.

⁸ This is one of the four indicative vote options.

⁹ This is one of the four indicative vote options

¹⁰ This option has not been tabled as an amendment but I have included it as it is legal in this form and completes the 'shopping list' of options available to the UK.

¹¹ This option is not exactly one of the indicative vote options but is a tabled amendment and seems to fit well here as it follows on from the 'shopping list' of substantive options to be voted on.

¹² This is one of the four indicative vote options.

¹³ It seemed logical to put this amendment here as we are now getting into what happens if nothing has been agreed.

¹⁴ This option is the most difficult to write as it is an interpretation of the intent of various procedures in Parliament. I hope I have not got it too wrong!

¹⁵ This option is a variant of the previous option.

¹⁶ Again this is another amendment to deal with the failure of the Parliamentary process, amended or otherwise and includes the date.

¹⁷ This amendment seems to follow on naturally from a need for an extension.

¹⁸ This option is one of the indicative vote options and is placed at the end as it could also deal with options proposed by the Citizens' Assembly, although, in practice, such suggestions would have to go to the Commons.