

Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey
RESEARCH UPDATE

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Government not politics!

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The long tradition of brinkmanship in Northern Ireland has come to a head once more. As our political leaders stand fast, resolute - and deadlocked - we take a closer look at the views of the public as measured in the last *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey*. In the autumn of 1998, after the euphoria of the pro-agreement politicians had long since disappeared and the horrors of the summer were still vivid, the Life and Times Survey was able to capture something of the sense of underlying uncertainty among the majority of people interviewed. In stark contrast to the hard-line attitudes that dominate the media, we examine some of these contradictory, hopeful and fearful attitudes that reflect so well the true complexity of public opinion about the prospects for government in Northern Ireland.

“It’s the health service...stupid”

The new Northern Ireland Assembly will face massive challenges in what could be a politically and economically hostile environment. We started by simply asking people to identify what they saw as the most important priorities for the new Assembly. 40% chose improving the health service and 37% increasing employment opportunities. More political or partisan issues such as reducing discrimination against Catholics or Protestants scored poorly at 3% each.

Protestants and Catholics are in complete consensus on their priorities, with 41% of both religious groups prioritising improving the health service. When people were asked “Which of these, if any, do you think is the second most important for the Assembly to bring about”, again the emphasis was on health, employment opportunities and education. Once again more political issues scored poorly and once again Protestants and Catholics were united on their priorities.

Priorities for the new assembly	First	Second
	%	%
Improving the health service	40	29
Reducing discrimination against Protestants	3	4
Making it more likely that Northern Ireland will eventually leave the UK	2	4
Improving education	6	21
Giving Northern Ireland a stronger voice in the UK	8	10
Reducing discrimination against Catholics	3	5
Increasing employment opportunities	37	26

Despite the content and tenor of recent political debate it would seem that people want *government*, not politics. 'Bread and Butter' issues of improved public services far outweigh more 'political' or identity-based issues. Whatever doubts and hopes people have about the “big”

issue of the constitutional future of Northern Ireland - their sense of what the new assembly should be occupied with sends an unequivocal and prosaic message to Northern Ireland's Assembly members.

Fear, optimism and compromise

Virtually *nobody* thinks that unionists have benefited more than nationalists from the Good Friday Agreement. That is the headline finding of both our own and numerous other surveys conducted over the last twelve months. Just over half of our sample felt that both unionists and nationalists had benefited equally, while a third felt that nationalists had benefited more than unionists. Only 3% felt that unionists had been the main beneficiaries. Among Protestants, a full half felt that nationalists had benefited more than unionists. Grim news perhaps? Or is this apparent imbalance accepted as equitable in the interests of a long-term solution? Attitudes as expressed in the survey are equivocal.

% agree	
"My fear is that my own viewpoint will be lost among louder voices"	49
"The more people that are willing to compromise, the better off everyone will be"	82
"It is possible to compromise without surrendering basic principles"	68

Certainly there is significant anxiety on all sides - no less than 43% of Catholics and 54% of Protestants interviewed in the survey endorsed the fear that "*My own view point will be lost among louder voices*". Yet set alongside this, however paradoxically, is the clearest sense of optimism. When asked how they regarded the chances of peace in Northern Ireland compared to five years ago, 73% thought they were better, 20% about the same and only 4% thought they were worse. This optimism existed even among those who felt that *nationalists* were the true beneficiaries of the Belfast Agreement - 61% still felt that the chances of peace were better than they were five years ago and only 9% thought that the chances

were worse. Combined with this optimism sits an impressive consensus on the need for "compromise"; 82% agreed that "*The more people that are willing to compromise, the better off everyone will be*" and 68% agreed that "*It is possible to compromise without surrendering basic principles*". Easy to say of course, but what of the hard political choices to be faced in the years ahead?

Realpolitik

The Good Friday Agreement makes Northern Ireland's constitutional position conditional on the wishes of the majority of its people. If a majority of Northern Ireland's citizens want a united Ireland the British and Irish governments are pledged to facilitate this. In short, the Agreement gave much greater political power to the people of Northern Ireland. Implicit in this in-built conditionality is that the minority will indeed *accept* the majority view with equanimity. Government policy thus rests on an unknown quantity - public reaction to the prospect of major constitutional change. The Life and Times Survey first asked people to reveal their constitutional preferences and then went on to ask about their expectations and their reactions to possible changes.

When asked to state their constitutional preferences, 57% - a clear majority - opted for Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. Less than one quarter favoured a united Ireland. Given this, the prospect of major constitutional change looks fairly remote.

Do you think the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be for it ...	
	%
To remain part of the United Kingdom	57
To reunify with the rest of Ireland	22
Independent state	6
Other answer	3
Don't know	12

Only about half of Catholics favour a united Ireland outright and a full one in five are uncertain. The fact that Catholic support for a united Ireland is equivocal is consistent with previous opinion polls but is a finding that continues to surprise many people. The notion

that all Catholics are nationalists and all Protestants are unionists has been repeatedly challenged by survey evidence - though this fact remains stubbornly invisible within public debate. Yet while people are reasonably clear on their constitutional preferences, there is division on what they actually *expect* to happen in the future. In response to the question: "*At any time in the next twenty years, do you think it is likely or unlikely that there will be a united Ireland?*", 42% believe it to be quite or very likely and an equal percentage believe it to be quite or very unlikely. Moreover political uncertainty is not restricted to one religious group, 45% of Catholics and 42% of Protestants believe that a united Ireland is quite or very likely in the next twenty years. These findings point to a society defined by a high level of political uncertainty and has worrying implications for the longevity of the conflict. If people think that major constitutional change is likely then they may be encouraged to agitate for it - or in opposition to it.

In sum the Life and Times Survey reveals a deeply wary society which has just agreed on a major peace agreement but in which substantial numbers expect major constitutional change within the next twenty years. The question of potential reactions to that change is therefore critical. The survey followed up the question on constitutional preferences. Those who preferred the option of staying within the United Kingdom were asked:

If the majority of people in Northern Ireland ever voted to become part of a united Ireland do you think you.....	
	%
...would find this almost impossible to accept	16
would not like it, but could live with it if you had to	38
or, would happily accept the wishes of the majority?	42
don't know	4

A high figure - 79% - would accept the wishes of the majority either happily or begrudgingly. Clearly there is a difference between being asked

to anticipate constitutional change as part of an opinion poll and the prospect of real and immediate constitutional change accompanied by the possibility of violent upheaval. Nevertheless, the overwhelming numbers who would accept the will of the majority may surprise hard-liners on all sides.

A significant minority - 16% - would find it almost impossible to accept a united Ireland even if a majority voted for it. When the figures are broken down by religion, this translates into 23% of Protestants.

For those who expressed a preference to be part of a united Ireland, the survey also asked about reactions to a continuation of the existing relationship within the United Kingdom:

If the majority of people in Northern Ireland <i>never</i> voted to become part of a united Ireland do you think you.....	
	%
...would find this almost impossible to accept	4
would not like it, but could live with it if you had to	26
or, would happily accept the wishes of the majority?	64
don't know	6

The figures show this, the status quo, to be a more acceptable option. Only 4% would find it "almost impossible to accept" which translates into 5% of Catholics. This may well reflect unwillingness among the vast majority of the Catholic community to tolerate another campaign of violence.

Conclusion

The Life and Times survey strikes an optimistic note for the Agreement. It expresses much stronger support for non-partisan positions. Attitudes towards paramilitary parties are relatively benign. High tolerance is expressed for constitutional changes - *if they have a democratic sanction*. The phrase "silent majority" is much

overused in the context of Northern Ireland politics. Nonetheless a majority and consensual view is clearly evident in much of the results presented here. Most people think that the chances of peace are better now than they were five years ago. Most people feel that it is possible to compromise without surrendering basic principles. Most people want to stay part of the United Kingdom. Most people would accept a united Ireland if it were indeed

democratically sanctioned. Above all, most people are clearly much more concerned about bread-and-butter issues than constitutional ones.

This update is based on data from the political attitudes module within the Life and Times Survey. In all over 70 questions were asked and the results for these are available on the web site as detailed below.

KEY POINTS

- *Government not politics.* People want to see the Assembly working on health and employment issues.
- *Political uncertainty is widespread.* 42% believe a united Ireland to be quite or very *likely* in the next 20 years and 42% believe it to be quite or very *unlikely*.
- *Staying within the United Kingdom is still the preferred option.* 57% want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. Only about half of Catholics favour a united Ireland and one in five are uncertain.
- *Willingness to accept a united Ireland?* Of those who want to remain part of the United Kingdom 79% would accept a united Ireland if a majority of people voted for it.
- *Political optimism is high.* 73% regard the chances of peace in Northern Ireland as better now than five years ago.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. About 1800 adults are interviewed on the main survey and between 400 and 500 young people on the accompanying Young Life and Times Survey. A joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities, its aim is to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. All of our survey results are publicly available and you can download the data yourself. Check the web site for more information on the survey and findings (www.qub.ac.uk/ss/csr/nilt) or call the survey co-ordinator at Queen's University (01232 273585) with any queries.