

Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

RESEARCH UPDATE

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Now what? Attitudes to devolution in Northern Ireland

By Roger Mac Ginty and Rick Wilford

As the local parties and the British and Irish governments prepare for a further review of the Good Friday Agreement, a major survey of political attitudes carried just before the suspension of the Assembly reveals widespread public anger with both politicians and paramilitaries for frustrating political progress. That such anger is keenly felt is underlined by a resilient level of support for the Agreement and a high degree of optimism towards the future.

The *Life and Times* survey, carried out between mid-October 1999 and mid-January 2000, is one of the largest ever conducted in Northern Ireland. It reveals that 64% of those who support the Agreement say they are angry with politicians for blocking its implementation, while 72% blame the paramilitaries for the lack of progress. The latter figure includes almost two-thirds of Catholics (64%) and 84% of Protestants.

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about implementing the Good Friday Agreement? (Asked of those who supported the Agreement.)

a I am angry at the politicians for blocking progress on the Good Friday Agreement

b I am angry at the paramilitaries for blocking progress on the Good Friday Agreement

	Angry at politicians	Angry at paramilitaries
	%	%
Strongly agree	22	29
Agree	42	43
Neither agree nor disagree	15	12
Disagree	17	12
Strongly disagree	2	1
Don't know	2	2

The February 2000 IRA statement withdrawing co-operation from the International Commission on Decommissioning is likely to compound this public anger towards paramilitaries.

The survey, completed before the reintroduction of direct rule on 11 February 2000, shows a high level of

public concern over decommissioning. Almost 50% of people wanted to see total decommissioning before the Executive was put in place, while a further 36% wanted some decommissioning to have occurred. Only 10% said there should be no decommissioning prior to the formation of the Executive.

	All %	Cath %	Prot %
There must be <u>total decommissioning</u> of paramilitary weapons before an executive can be put in place	49	29	64
There must be <u>some decommissioning</u> of paramilitary weapons before an executive can be put in place	36	45	30
There need be <u>no decommissioning</u> of paramilitary weapons before an executive can be put in place	10	20	2
Don't know	5	6	3

No one community monopolises concern over the decommissioning issue. 94% of Protestants wanted at least some decommissioning to have taken place before the Executive was formed – a view shared by 74% of Catholics. Just 2% of Protestants and only one in five Catholics said there should be no decommissioning in advance of the establishment of the Executive.

Despite the widespread support for 'prior' decommissioning and the protracted difficulties surrounding its implementation, overall support for the Agreement remains high. If the May 1998 referendum was to be re-run, 67% would vote 'Yes', a marginal fall from the actual result of 71%. However, whereas 94% of Catholics would still support the Agreement, the Protestant community remains almost as evenly divided now as it was at in May 1998: 47% would vote 'Yes', 48% 'No', with 6% undecided. While there has been some movement, there has, in short, been no mass exodus by Protestants from the 'Yes' to the 'No' camp.

The survey also reveals high levels of political optimism. 75% of the population believe the chances of peace are better now than at the time of the first cease-fires more than five years ago. Just four per cent believe the chances of peace are worse. Hefty majorities of both Catholics (88%) and Protestants (64%) share this optimism. This level of Protestant optimism has

remained unchanged over the last year, during which prisoner releases have continued, the Patten Report was published and the major paramilitary organisations failed to disarm.

Do you think that the chances of peace in Northern Ireland are better now than they were five years ago, worse, or about the same?

	All	Cath	Prot
	%	%	%
Better	75	88	64
Worse	4	1	7
About the same	20	10	27
Don't know	2	1	1

The population is cautious about the future prospects of Assembly. While a 2:1 majority believe it will still be in place in 2003 when the next Assembly election is scheduled, Protestants are less confident that this will be the case. Barely half believe it will survive, compared to two-thirds of Catholics.

The survey strongly endorses the joint leadership of David Trimble and Seamus Mallon as First and Deputy First Ministers by demonstrating that there is no credible or popular alternative to this pairing. 48% of people (41% of Catholics and 57% of Protestants) would choose Trimble as First Minister, four times as many as the nearest alternative – John Hume. Overall, 48% would choose Mallon as Deputy First Minister.

The survey is also good news for three out of the four parties which constituted the Executive. 89% of SDLP supporters, 87% of Sinn Féin supporters and 76% of UUP supporters believe their party has done much to secure peace. In contrast, more than half of DUP supporters (55%) believe their party could have done more to help the chances for peace. There is also considerable dissatisfaction among Alliance Party voters, more than a third of whom (38%) believe it has done little to secure peace.

Do you think that the party you support has done a lot to help the chances of peace over the last few years or do you think that they could have done more?

	UUP	SDLP	DUP	Alliance	SF
	%	%	%	%	%
Done a lot	76	89	38	59	87
Could have done more	22	10	55	38	12
Don't know	2	1	7	3	1

The findings of the survey carry clear messages for those tasked with bringing the impending review to a successful conclusion. Having endorsed the Agreement in 1998, the overwhelming majority are exasperated with the failure of both politicians and, even more so, the paramilitaries to anchor it to the bedrock of public opinion.

However, while sensitive to the difficulties involved in its implementation the population not only wants devolution to succeed but also wants it to develop and flourish. But what about the constitutional issues that lie behind the Good Friday Agreement?

A clear majority of people wants Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom, but this is the lowest figure for ten years. According to the *Life and Times* Survey, 56% of people questioned wish to maintain the Union, a fall of 13% since 1989.

The drop in numbers favouring the Union does not translate into increasing popularity for a united Ireland, but reflects growing political uncertainty and a greater range of constitutional options produced by the peace process.

The survey shows that less than a quarter (21%) aspire to Irish unity, while 11% would now opt for an independent Northern Ireland. 9% simply do not know what the long-term policy should be.

Do you think the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be for it ...

	1989	99/00
	%	%
...to remain part of the UK,	69	56
Or to unify with the rest of Ireland?	24	21
Independent state	1	11
Other answer	3	3
Don't know	4	9

	1999/00	
	Cath	Prot
	%	%
...to remain part of the UK,	16	87
or to unify with the rest of Ireland?	48	3
Independent state	18	5
Other answer	2	2
Don't know	16	3

The uncertainty over Northern Ireland's constitutional future is again reflected in expectations of a united Ireland. 40% of people believe a united Ireland is likely by 2020 – four years later than 2016, the 'target' date mentioned recently by Gerry Adams – whereas 45% believe it to be unlikely.

At any time in the next 20 years, do you think it is likely or unlikely that there will be a United Ireland?

	All	Cath	Prot
	%	%	%
Likely	40	44	36
Even chance	8	8	8
Unlikely	46	40	51
Don't know	7	8	5

The survey suggests that the principle of consent – the new constitutional imperative ushered in by the Good Friday Agreement - has taken root. While 87% of Protestants favour the Union, more than two-thirds of them would live with a united Ireland if a majority of the electorate endorsed that option at a referendum – although almost 1 in 3 stated they would find this almost impossible to accept.

If the majority of people in Northern Ireland ever voted to become part of a United Ireland do you think you...(question asked of those who do not support a united Ireland)

	All	Cath	Prot
	%	%	%
...would find this almost impossible to accept	19	<1	29
Would not like it, but could live with it if you had to	35	14	45
Or, would happily accept the wishes of the majority?	42	80	23
Don't know	5	6	3

The sense of ‘ownership’ of the Agreement is felt throughout the population and finds expression in support of increased powers for the Assembly. Overall, a majority (57%) wants the Assembly, like the Scottish Parliament, to have tax varying powers although this is more strongly felt by Catholics (69%) than Protestants (48%). Equally, a majority of people (54%) wants responsibility for policing to be devolved to the Assembly – as proposed in the Patten Report – although again this is more strongly supported by Catholics (66%) than Protestants (47%).

Thinking about the Northern Ireland Assembly, there is still some discussion about exactly what things the new assembly should be doing. Do you think that it should...

	All	Cath	Prot
	%	%	%
Be responsible for policing in Northern Ireland	54	66	47
Have the power to raise or lower income tax like the Scottish Parliament does?	57	69	48
Provide extra subsidies for farmers	67	73	65
Promote the Irish language by introducing bi-lingual road signs	35	67	11
Better integrate the economies North and South	67	89	51
Develop closer links with the Scottish Parliament	51	52	53
Develop closer links with the Welsh Assembly	44	49	41
Legalise abortion	38	23	45
Support the single European currency	39	61	24

The proposition that the Assembly should adopt Welsh practice – where the language enjoys official status – by introducing bilingual road signs discloses a wide division of opinion. Two-thirds of Catholics would support such a policy compared to just 11% of Protestants. Parity of cultural or linguistic esteem finds scant favour within the majority community.

Turning to the external aspects of the Agreement – Strands Two and Three – a majority of both Protestants (53%) and Catholics (52%) would like the Assembly to develop closer links with the Scottish Parliament. Links to the Welsh Assembly are rather less favoured, attracting the support of 49% of Catholics and 41% of Protestants.

The affinity of attitudes in relation to ‘east-west’ matters isn’t matched to the same extent by those over north-south linkages. While two-thirds of the population (67%) want to see better integration between the two economies facilitated by the Assembly, only a bare majority of Protestants (51%) take this view compared to 89% of Catholics.

A key question remains whether people are willing to put political issues such as decommissioning or Northern Ireland’s constitutional future ahead of more day-to-day issues such as health or education?

The survey looked first at people’s priorities for the Assembly in terms of day-to-day issues, and predictably, improving the health service was top of the list. When people were asked about their political priorities for the Assembly, decommissioning was in the majority of both Catholic and Protestant minds - though not perhaps as overwhelmingly as might have been expected. But when asked to choose between day-to-day issues or political issues as a priority for the Assembly - the results were stark. Only 11% of the population would have the Assembly give political issues priority over issues like health, jobs and the economy, while a further 39% would argue that they have equal priority.

Although the decommissioning issue is a deeply important issue to a very large number of people, and although it may not be the job of the Assembly to bring about decommissioning, these results suggest that when faced with the ‘guns or butter’ dilemma, people choose butter. Less than 1 in 10 Catholics and Protestants would put decommissioning as the single most important issue for the Assembly to address.

This card shows a few day-to-day issues that the Northern Ireland Assembly will have to deal with in years to come. Which of these, if any, do you think is the most important for the assembly to deal with?

	All	Cath	Prot
	%	%	%
Improving the economy of N Ireland	29	27	33
Improving the health service	41	41	41
Increasing employment opportunities	20	23	17
Improving transport	1	1	1
Improving education	6	7	5
Improving the environment	1	1	1
None of these	1	1	<1
Don't know	1	<1	1

This card shows a few of the **political issues** that the Northern Ireland Assembly will also have to deal with. Which of these, if any, do you think is the most important for the assembly to deal with?

	All	Cath	Prot
	%	%	%
Bringing about decommissioning	57	56	57
Securing Northern Ireland's union within the United Kingdom	21	3	35
Bringing about a United Ireland	8	18	<1
None of these	10	17	4
Don't know	5	5	3

Do you think it is more important that the Assembly spends its time dealing with day-to-day issues like (insert answer given) or that it spends its time dealing with political issues like (insert answer given)?

	All	Cath	Prot
Day-to-day issues	48	53	43
Political issues	11	9	13
Both equally	39	36	42
Don't know	3	2	3

As the politicians and the paramilitaries grapple with decommissioning and attempt to restore the infant political institutions, they can do so in the knowledge that there remains a robust level of support for the Agreement. This survey shows that people in Northern Ireland want it to work and are exasperated with those perceived to prevent its full and, prospectively, fuller implementation.

This update is based on material first published in the Belfast Telegraph on 21 and 22 February 2000.

The political attitudes module of the NILT Survey was funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. It involved face to face interviews with a random and representative sample of 2200 adults in their own homes. Figures do not always add up to 100 because of rounding.

Dr Roger Mac Ginty is a lecturer in the Richardson Institute for Peace and Conflict Research at Lancaster University. Dr Rick Wilford is a Reader in the School of Politics, Queen's University of Belfast.

KEY POINTS

- *Support for Good Friday Agreement is still high* - if the May 1998 vote was rerun, 67% would vote Yes.
- *Placing the blame*: 64% of those in favour of the Agreement are angry with politicians for blocking its implementation; 72% are angry with paramilitaries.
- *Calls for decommissioning are widespread*: 84% of respondents want some or complete decommissioning before an executive can be put in place.
- *Support for the Union is falling*: while 56% wish to retain the Union, this is the lowest figure for 10 years. This reflects growing political uncertainty and a greater range of constitutional options.
- *'Butter, not guns!'* - political issues, such as decommissioning, are not seen as the main priorities for the work of the Assembly.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 1999/2000, 2200 adults were interviewed on the main survey and between 400 and 500 young people on the accompanying Young Life and Times Survey. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The Life and Times Survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.qub.ac.uk/ss/csr/nilt) or call the survey co-ordinator at Queen's University (028 90 273585) with any queries.