



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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cc PS.4/PPPG  
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Secure Fax: 538

18 May 1998

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To: HQ  
To: Secretary Gallagher

From: Belfast  
From: Joint Secretary

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M. McLaughlin  
Passed on to the  
Taoiseach  
19.5.98

Subj: NIO opinion polling and internal assessment

1. We understand that the following were the key points to emerge from the most recent opinion poll which McCann/Erickson carried out for the NIO (last Friday/Saturday):

- There continues to be overwhelming nationalist support for the Agreement (with only 1% of nationalist respondents indicating opposition to it);
- However, Unionist opinion remains deeply divided. 30% indicated that they will be voting Yes, 38% will be voting No and 32% are in the "don't know" category (with a significant trend towards the No vote);
- If it is assumed that the "don't know" segment will transfer in its entirety to the No vote, this produces an estimated overall picture next Friday of 56% for the Agreement and 44% against. (This is, of course, the worst-case scenario; it is unlikely that the "don't knows" will translate uniformly into No votes).

probably 2.  
Next evening  
is Thursday  
morning

The Secretary of State and her Ministers today reacted very gloomily to these findings (which, we understand, will be updated later in the week, probably after the Prime Minister's visit). They are now resigning themselves to the inevitability of an outcome which will fail to deliver a majority of Unionists for the Agreement. The only development which might forestall this, it is being suggested to us, is a statement over the next few days by Sinn Féin or the IRA to the effect that "the war is over".

3. We pointed out that the Taoiseach and his Ministers have been urging this repeatedly on Sinn Féin, both in public and in private. This is very much appreciated on the

British side.

4. The NIO have also produced an internal assessment, from their own contacts, of the current state of opinion on both the Unionist and nationalist sides.

The following main conclusions are worth noting from a report which was sent to Ministers last Friday (and which we have been shown in confidence):

- There has been a significant downturn in attitudes towards the Agreement, particularly among Unionists;
- The main cause was the appearance of the IRA prisoners at the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis. Michael Stone's attendance at the UDP rally had a similarly negative effect. It eclipsed, in terms of public perceptions, the Prime Minister's "statement about decommissioning, thereby reducing any reassuring effect this may have had on overall Unionist opinion";
- The Bloomfield Report produced a positive reaction. However, Adam Ingram's appointment as Minister for victims produced a lukewarm response from Unionists while antagonising many Republicans. (On the latter point, the report notes sharp criticism from the SDLP of a Sinn Féin claim that Ingram's appointment was "insensitive");
- The Chancellor's initiative attracted positive attention. However, coming so soon after news of the additional money for victims, it led some Unionists to conclude that the Government was trying to bribe them to vote Yes;
- The Irish Times poll figure of only 35% of Unionists being willing to vote Yes is described as "probably not far off the mark";
- Reactions to the Ard Fheis were strongest among moderate Unionists, including many who have had little time for party politics in recent years. In the immediate aftermath of Good Friday, this group included a significant proportion of Yes voters. Recently, however, many of them have reportedly changed their minds in the light of what they see as appeasement of the IRA by both Governments;

- The Michael Stone appearance also played badly, particularly as some Unionists misinterpreted it as a misguided attempt by the British Government to balance the Republican prisoners' appearance;
- There has also been an unwelcome shift in working-class Loyalist opinion, with a significant proportion now ready to vote against the Agreement;
- The No campaign continues to gather momentum, with well stage-managed rallies taking place nightly across NI. The UUP are to launch a "battle-bus" tour on Monday, supported by media advertisements and radio/TV appearances by Trimble;
- What would give the UUP's Yes campaign a major boost would be for Jeffrey Donaldson to lend it his support. On the other hand, it will be dealt a serious blow if Molyneaux comes out against the Agreement. (Comment: the report was written prior to Donaldson's statement of Friday and Molyneaux's over the weekend);
- On the nationalist side, the report observes that Republican euphoria following the Ard Fheis vote has been tempered by a suspicion that the British Government, "in a characteristic act of bad faith, is now attempting to insert new provisions into the Agreement". Sinn Féin have adopted a wait-and-see approach to the Prime Minister's speech and are to take the temperature of the movement over the weekend;
- The report suggests that, although Sinn Féin will not wish to expose themselves to criticism from Republican dissidents, they are likely to accuse the British Government this week of playing the Orange card by tampering with the Agreement and focussing almost exclusively on Unionist sensitivities. If the process is seen to "falter again over decommissioning", Sinn Féin will seek to "blame the Government for introducing new and unrealistic preconditions";
- The SDLP, who by last week were starting to regain a media profile, were pushed into the background again by the Ard Fheis. Their referendum campaign, which got off to a slow start, continues to rely on public meetings

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involving Mark Durkan;

- The media images of the Balcombe Street people were as offensive to many moderate nationalists as they were to Unionists and Loyalists. Nationalists are not, however, as influenced by the prisoner issue as Unionists. The nationalist community remains more inclined to look at the Agreement as a package and to be prepared to take risks in the hope of achieving lasting peace;
  - The report ends with a warning that attempts by the British Government to assist one group or party could provoke a very negative reaction from the other side and that in the last week of the campaign particular care will have to be exercised in this regard.
4. Finally, Peter Bell confirmed the accuracy of a Sunday Tribune report over the weekend that Paul Murphy was pressurised by Robert McCartney last week (under pain of legal action otherwise) into supplying the UKUP with copies of the opinion polls privately commissioned by the NIO. Evidence that these polls had been copied to David Trimble was contained in an internal NIO minute which, it seems, reached the UKUP.