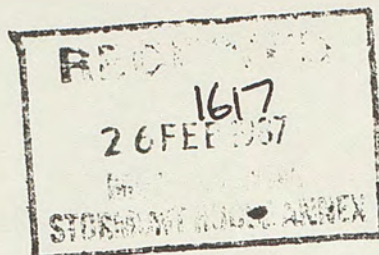


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ER
PS/Secretary of State (L)

50x
cc PS/SofS(B) - M
PS/Ministers (L&B) - M 56/12
PS/PUS(L&B) - M
PS/Mr Bloomfield - M ✓
Mr Burns
Mr Chesterton
Mr Elliott - M
Mr Ferneyhough - M
Mr Spence - M
Mr G Hewitt - M
Mr S Hewitt - M
Mr Kirk
Mr McConnell - M
Mr Wood



15 -



2 Held for meeting
at 6pm on
Monday 2 March.

UNIONIST PETITION: ANALYSIS

Mr Ward's note of 12 February to Mr Chesterton asked officials to scrutinise the petition.

Methodology of Analysis

A full scrutiny of a petition of some 400,000 signatures would be lengthy and very expensive. We would have, for example, to confirm the authenticity of names and addresses, and check for duplicates. This would take many months. I doubt that such an exercise would be appropriate: it would suggest that the petition had the status of a properly organised poll. Rather we have sought, by examining a small number of random samples, to see if there is widespread evidence that the petition was conducted unsoundly. Percentages are given below for certain of our findings, but should not be used publicly. The samples on which they are based are too small to be statistically reliable.

Our Conclusions

We can find no evidence that the overall count of signatures (404,074) is seriously inaccurate.

As you had noted, one feature of the petition is that several names

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often appear in the same hand. We examined 100 full petition forms (each containing 25 names), and found 124 instances of this (13% of the total). They broke down as follows:

Names in one hand	instances
6 or more	2
5	6
4	14
3	19
2	83
	—
	124

There are many possible explanations: one member of a household might have signed with the full permission of another member. But very often, this might also indicate something less acceptable. Someone might have signed as he or she thinks the rest of the household would sign; or as they should have signed. (Perhaps I am too cynical, but I doubt whether in Northern Ireland on any issue of this kind, many people's true opinions will have been misrepresented as a result.)

We also compared a number of the names on the petition against the electoral roll. (This was a time-consuming task, chiefly because we lacked an effective index to the roll). Out of 50 names 4, amounting to 8%, do not match up with the register, either because the address does not exist or someone else is listed as living there. This does not, of course, necessarily indicate invalidity; registered voters may have moved into new or existing houses since the qualifying date, too late to be included in the register (15 September 1985). Some would have been entitled to a postal vote in an election; and other signatories might be qualified as electors, but

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have for some reason missed or simply not bothered to get themselves on the electoral roll. But this is nevertheless evidence that the petition is not as reliable as an election - with all its safeguards - would be. But there is no conclusive proof of malpractice.

Our comparison did, however, show a small proportion of cases - less than 1% - in which someone of the same name as one of the electors listed at an address, who was not listed him or herself, signed the petition (or was signed for). All electors coming of age during the validity of the register should appear on it, with their names appropriately endorsed. One explanation of these extra names is that people too young to vote in an election have nonetheless been counted in the result of the petition. If so, it would be significant if those under 18 have been included in the petition, its organisers can no longer claim 40% of the electorate but only 27% of the total population of Northern Ireland. But we have not got sufficient data to say this with certainty.

Our scrutiny cannot of course, reveal all the faults of the petition. It tells us nothing about the pressures that signatories might either have been subjected to in fact, or have felt themselves subjected to, to sign; in some areas (eg those with a small Catholic minority) there are reasons for believing that the perceived pressures, however properly the signature-collector conducted himself, would have been great. This may be the ground on which the petition is most vulnerable. Nor would it show, without a very great effort, how much multiple signing there might have been.

Conclusions

Nothing emerges from a scrutiny of the petition to suggest that it is the product of any widespread fraud. But having been conducted without the safeguards associated with an election, it cannot be considered wholly reliable even though it is most unlikely, given our other evidence, to misrepresent Unionist sentiment. In particular:

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the way the petition was conducted could evidently have led many signatories to feel themselves, rightly or wrongly, under pressure to sign:

A cursory look at the petition returns shows a large number of instances of several names being signed in the same hand. These entries are obviously unreliable.

There were no safeguards against multiple signing, or signing in fictitious names, or against people under 18 participating.

Public comment

We should be very careful about public comment. The vast majority of the signatures do not appear to be irregular (though the extent of intimidation is unquantifiable). If we argue strongly that the referendum is 'invalid', we would begin a fruitless, and no doubt acrimonious debate with the Unionists, who could point with force to the undoubtedly large number of genuine signatures. We would also create the impression that if the result of the referendum were wholly valid the Government would find it persuasive. Nevertheless if challenged Ministers can reasonably make the point that the petition was not conducted with the usual safeguards of an election. In particular there may have been pressure applied to signatories; some signatories may have been under 18; and there is clear evidence that some signatures are on behalf of more than one person. But we should be careful to make the point that obviously a large number have supported the petition, and that we recognise the strong opposition to the Agreement that exists in the Unionist community.

(Signed)

P M BELL

25 February 1987

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