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PS/Secretary of State (B&L)

PUBLIC OPINION

Summary

9/14

This is PAB's fourth review of local opinion in the run-up to the referendum.

2. In the last fortnight we have seen the results of a number of opinion polls (McCann Erickson, Colin Irwin etc), received the first information from focus groups organised by the University of Ulster and have continued to take soundings across the community. A number of conclusions can be drawn from this:

- a substantial majority of the electorate plans to vote in the referendum. The McCann Erickson poll put it at 72%. This compares favourably with the highest turn out in any recent election. Feedback from the focus groups suggests there is a general feeling that the referendum is very important, and that this is recognised even by those who have chosen not to vote in recent elections.
- A substantial proportion **at present**, plans to vote in favour of a settlement, though this is comprised of just 36% in the Unionist community compared to 71% in the Nationalist.
- There is a total lack of understanding of the elements of a settlement. Feedback from the focus groups showed considerable ignorance of such

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basic concepts as the "three Strands", "devolution" and the nature of a future Assembly - North/South bodies. The McCann Erickson survey suggested that many voters will follow the lead of their chosen political representatives.

- The majority of Unionists remain very nervous about the shape of a settlement. Their primary concern is North/South bodies and the possibility of these being used to bring about a United Ireland. Only 20% of 100 delegates polled by the Sunday Times at the UUP Council meeting on 21 March were prepared to accept North/South bodies.
- The "no" campaign has as yet made little headway in attracting support. Only 2% (McCann Erickson) of all voters (only 12% of DUP supporters) have definitely decided to vote against a settlement, although 76% (Colin Irwin's poll) of DUP supporters said they would vote "no" if their Party opposed the deal. The joint Unionist (DUP, UKUP and UUP dissidents) rallies have not attracted much support - only 200 attended last night in the Ulster Hall. We anticipate that the campaign will pick up when there are actual proposals to attack, but its failure to attract much attention so far is encouraging. (The anonymous NIO lookalike advertisement in today's News Letter - "It's your choice: Vote yes for a united Ireland" - is probably a taste of what is to come).

3. Although the opinion polls are encouraging, Northern Ireland election results often confound the pollsters. More extreme parties usually do better on the day (the DUP usually scores about 10% in opinion polls but gets 15-18 % of the vote in General and Local Government elections), and analysis of historical voting patterns may not be a guide to a referendum. If history is any guide, a greater proportion of those classed as undecided are more likely to vote "no" than "yes".

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The Unionists

4. The Unionist electorate remains nervous and largely uncommitted, as evidenced by the McCann Erickson poll. Concern continues to centre particularly on the nature and powers of North/South bodies. Factors adding to this nervousness include the continuing violence (particularly the level of Republican activity), media reporting of the Irish Government's reluctance to change Articles 2 and 3 (confirming Unionist prejudices) and a general distrust of HMG's motives. The last factor has been fueled by the leak of Tom Kelly's paper on information strategy and by media speculation about possible moves on police reform and prisoners. Early release of prisoners is a particularly sensitive issue.

5. Although there is considerable Unionist nervousness, this has yet to be translated into widespread support for a "no" campaign. Feedback from the focus groups suggests that many people will want to see what benefits (or otherwise) agreement will bring before making up their minds. This is supported by discussion with PAB's contacts. In the focus groups DUP supporters expressed concern that their Party was not represented in the Talks; but were evenly divided as to whether the blame for this lay with HMG or their own leaders. This highlights a division within the DUP about what kind of Party it should be or should become.

6. David Trimble survived the UUP Council meeting on 21 March without a challenge to his leadership. This does not, however, mean that opposition within the Party has gone away - the challenge is merely delayed until the shape of an agreement is clear. The Council spelled out very clearly the concern within the Party about the nature and scope of North/South bodies and this has severely limited Trimble's room for manoeuvre. We understand there will be a UUP Executive meeting on or before 9 April to consider the terms of any

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proposed agreement, and a further Council meeting within a week of this to consider any agreement entered into.

7. Willie Thompson signalled his intentions very clearly by sharing a platform with Bob McCartney and Ian Paisley Jnr at an anti-talks youth rally last night. Thompson, with 5 or 6 supporters, also remained seated during the standing ovation after Trimble's speech at the UUP Council meeting. A UUP Talks negotiator recently attended a meeting in Thompson's constituency to explain the Party's position, but only 12 people showed up. A subsequent meeting addressed by Thompson himself attracted a full house. Thompson's standing within the Party is not such as to cause a major split, although he would certainly take with him most of his own constituency association and a number of others.

The Nationalists

8. Conversely, there is growing optimism among the Nationalist community, due in large part to a greater sense of momentum in the Talks. Since his announcement of a deadline, Senator Mitchell is perceived to be driving the process forward, and his synthesis paper is eagerly awaited as a means of forcing the parties to face up to the compromises that will have to be made. The close involvement of the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach in nudging the Talks participants as the deadline for agreement approaches, has been welcomed. The "It's your choice" campaign is allowing Nationalists to begin to feel a sense of ownership of a process which has hitherto felt remote. Policing, prisoners and the forthcoming marching season remain, however, issues of deep concern.

9. The SDLP is currently preoccupied with building sufficient safeguards into an Assembly to make it palatable to a Nationalist electorate with a long memory. Although the polls show SDLP voters as being overwhelmingly (95%) in favour of a settlement, this percentage would plummet if what was on offer in Strand 1

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appeared to give Unionists an automatic veto over decisions of the Assembly, or if there was no concrete evidence of progress on the equality agenda.

10. Meanwhile, Sinn Fein is keeping its options open. It is likely that Gerry Adams will want to get the formal support of the Ard Fheis, when it meets later this month, to any decision to take seats in an Assembly, having first cleared his lines with the wider Republican Movement. (It is also rumoured that several dissident members of the 32 County Sovereignty Committee will be expelled from Sinn Fein at an Ard Comhairle tomorrow). The ultimate decision on an Assembly will almost certainly be directed towards the goal of establishing Sinn Fein as the largest Nationalist party in Northern Ireland within a short timescale. If Sinn Fein agrees to or acquiesces in a settlement it can expect votes in the ensuing election as a reward for continuing to give a political strategy primacy, and will use those votes as justification for participating in new institutions and influencing their future development. If it opposes a deal it can blame the Unionists for not engaging, the Brits for not making them, the SDLP for breaking up the pan-Nationalist front, and the Irish Government for abandoning the North to a partitionist settlement for the second time in seventy-odd years.

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