

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code: 2003/16/561

Title: Irish government memorandum on the advantages of holding a plebiscite on Irish unity on the same day as a proposed plebiscite in Northern Ireland on its constitutional position.

Creation Date(s): [June, 1972]

Level of description: Item

Extent and medium: 4 pages

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

Access Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

Plebiscite

In his speech in the House of Commons on 24th March 1972 Mr. Heath said

This Government, and their predecessors, have given solemn and repeated assurances that the position of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom will not be changed without the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. We have decided that it would be appropriate to arrange for the views of the people of Northern Ireland to be made known on this question from time to time. We therefore propose in due course to invite Parliament to provide for a system of regular plebiscites in Northern Ireland about the Border, the first to be held as soon as practicable in the near future and others at intervals of a substantial period of years thereafter.

These plebiscites will be in addition to, and not in substitution for, the provisions in the Ireland Act, 1949, which require the consent of the Northern Ireland Parliament to any change in the Border. This position is not prejudiced by the temporary prorogation of that Parliament.

We hope that this arrangement, while leaving open the possibility of a change in the status of the Province if the majority so wish, will both confirm that no such change will be made without their consent and provide, in the intervals between plebiscites, a greater measure of stability in the political life of Northern Ireland.

On 15th June Mr. Whitelaw said in the House of Commons

"If my conversations also show a wide-spread desire for a plebiscite on the border at an early date the Government would be very ready to arrange it.

In the meantime, ^(prior to 15 June) of course, the Taoiseach has made known his opposition to the plebiscite idea both in principle and in practice.

What was a "proposal" by Mr. Heath in March has become a willingness "to arrange a plebiscite on the border" if there is a wide-spread desire for it. It is possible therefore that Mr. Whitelaw's statement is a small step back from Mr. Heath's statement rather than a step forward. The corollary to a wide-spread desire is that there might be a sufficiently strong opposition to a plebiscite which would enable Mr. Whitelaw to delay any action on it.

The advantages to Britain in having a plebiscite are

1. As the result is a foregone conclusion the unionist population might be assuaged by it.
2. Internationally Britain could point to the result as satisfactory evidence that Northern Ireland wishes to remain British and that, therefore, the views of the Dublin Government about Irish unity should be discounted.

- 2 -

If it should be desired to intervene in the matter the Government can take any of four possible courses of action

- (i) To state that a plebiscite about Irish unity (or U.K. unity) in part of Ireland has no validity;
- (ii) To say (i) above but to go on to suggest that the minority record their votes anyway;
- (iii) To recommend that the minority in the North should not participate in such a plebiscite;
- (iv) To follow out the logic of (i) preceding by having a plebiscite on the same day in the rest of the country.

The advantage of (i) and (iii) is that they are clear cut formulae. Disadvantages are

- (a) They do nothing positive.
- (b) The generality of Government policy about the North has been progressive and forward looking; ignoring or recommending a boycott regarding a plebiscite reverses this cycle.
- (c) Nothing is discovered about the actual views of people in the North, particularly if (iii) is followed and
- (d) It is not certain that the minority would follow the Government's view in the matter.

(ii) seems, in a sense to contradict (i). If, however, such advice were followed it could have the advantage of recording a vote against the present constitutional status of Northern Ireland which would be a majority in large areas of the North. If this should happen the argument made by the Taoiseach on a number of occasions that Unionism is in a minority in more than half the area of Northern Ireland might be established. As against this there is the risk that, given that the overall result is known in advance, much of the minority would choose not to vote at all and it is reasonably sure that many would be advised not to vote by one or both wings of Sinn Féin. This has the added disadvantage that the vote against the present constitutional status of Northern Ireland could drop well below the figure of 40%.

- 3 -

The attractions of (iv) become clear in the light of the above remarks. They include

- (a) The result, again a foregone conclusion, would certainly indicate an overwhelming vote in Ireland as a whole for Irish unity;
- (b) By having a plebiscite here the Government are enabled to encourage the minority to vote massively in the six counties as well so as to show the national will as a whole. There are two advantages in this: Firstly, a massive vote in the six counties will almost certainly show that a very large part of that area is in principle in favour of Irish unity thus weakening further the carefully cultivated unionist idea that the North was a unionist state; secondly it would get the SDLP off something of a hook as Mr. Hume, for example, recommended a plebiscite some years ago in order to take the border issue out of day-to-day politics and thirdly it would put the Alliance Party, the NILP and others in the position of having to decide what their fundamental view about Northern Ireland really is - or force them to take no view at all;
- (c) On this one issue it would spread politics right across the border i.e. one could envisage politicians from here campaigning on the matter in the North and opposition politicians from the North campaigning here. Psychologically this would do a great deal to insert Dublin directly into Northern politics;
- (d) It would also of course tend to wreck the notion that a plebiscite confined to Northern Ireland only is realistic politics in terms of Anglo-Irish relations;
- (e) It would over-take any movement on the part of other groups which might possibly recommend a boycott of a plebiscite by the minority in the North.

The disadvantages also need to be examined. They include

- (a) Technical difficulties - the expense might be queried.
- (b) Votes are available at the age of 18 in the North but not here - this might require the preparation of a special voting register (perhaps this could be tied with the recent commitment to have a referendum on the question of votes at 18).

- (c) The Government might be accused of gimmickery. However a plebiscite about Irish unity confined to the North is fraudulent in any event. Attacks and counter attacks between London and Dublin on this issue would not affect the real situation.
- (d) If there should be an accusation by Britain that such an action here is unhelpful the reply is, partly, that such accusations have been made before without serious result and that, in any event, the British are going against the Taoiseach's expressed views and must properly expect the Taoiseach to represent the Irish interest as a whole.

As questions are likely to be put in the near future on what the Government's views might be on this subject it would be useful to have a directive.