

20 JUL 92

FROM: E F JARDINE
PPRU - SSD

DATE: 16 JULY 1992

Mr D A Hill
ESL Division

THE NORTHERN IRELAND ELECTORATE

1. Your minute of 10 July 1992 refers.
2. There are two issues here. First, there is the question of if and when there will be a Catholic voting majority. The second is however just as interesting and important - how would a Catholic majority vote?
3. The principal work on the demographics of the two communities has been undertaken by Paul Compton at Queens and the projections which I quote below are his, flavoured by my own observations on some trends which have become evident since Compton last wrote on the subject. But first the usual caution! I think it was in his 1991 Budget speech that the Chancellor commented on the difficulties he faced in predicting future economic performance - particularly as it was difficult to discover what had happened in the past. We are on somewhat firmer ground with respect to the past when it comes to demography but future projections are subject to a range of influences which means they need to be treated with caution.
4. The background is that despite higher Catholic fertility rates the current population balance is only a few percent more Catholic today than it was at the first Census of Population in 1861. However differential migration rates have had the effect of depressing the proportion of the overall population which is Catholic which declined to 33.5% in 1926 before gradually rising to its current level. Evidence on fertility from the late 1970's and early 1980's indicated that annual births to the two communities were almost even and it would not have been unreasonable to project the balance to switch in favour of Catholics resulting in a Catholic majority aged under 15 by the end of the century, a majority in the population by 2026 and a voting majority by 2036.
5. However, two further variables need to be added to the equation. The first is migration which has traditionally borne more heavily on the Catholic population although more recent evidence suggests that recent migrants may be more evenly balanced. Nevertheless similar numbers migrating from the two communities will obviously have a greater proportionate effect on the smaller community. Migration is subject to a number of influences including the state of the economy (here and elsewhere) and to the levels of terrorism prevailing at any particular time.

6. More importantly, there is evidence of Protestant and Catholic fertility rates converging with Protestant rates remaining broadly stable while Catholic rates are in decline. This is an international phenomenon which has happened rather later in the ROI than elsewhere in the world and later still in NI than in the ROI. Most recent evidence is that fertility rates in the ROI have collapsed in quite a dramatic fashion and are now lower than in NI. However, the NI rate has also declined. The attached graph tells the story.
7. Depending on the eventual rate of convergence which could be as soon as the first decade of the next century or as late as the third quarter of the century there will be a small Protestant majority (convergence over 25 years), a broad balance in the population (convergence over 40 years) or a Catholic majority (convergence over 90 years). Superimposing current net levels of migration on these assumptions delays the possibility of a Catholic majority, perhaps indefinitely.
8. These are of course fascinating questions and we expect them to be informed by the results of the 1991 Census of Population and by some further work on emigration which we have on-going with the two local universities. There is one major gap in our information base. As the GRO does not record religion at the registration of births we are forced to use the indirect route of baptismal rolls to estimate Protestant and Catholic births.
9. It is also important to recognise that a Catholic majority is not synonymous with a nationalist majority. While the most recent NI Social Attitudes Survey showed that 74% of Protestants supported 'Unionist' parties (including Alliance) and 14% expressed no party preference only 61% of Catholics supported SDLP, Sinn Fein or the Workers Party while 9% supported Alliance and 13% had no specific party preference. It is also interesting that the same survey shows that 60% of Catholics but just 2% of Protestants describe their national identity as "Irish" while 10% of Catholics and 66% of Protestants describe themselves as "British". The remainder describe their national identity as "Ulster" or "Northern Irish".
10. I hope this is helpful and would be happy to discuss.

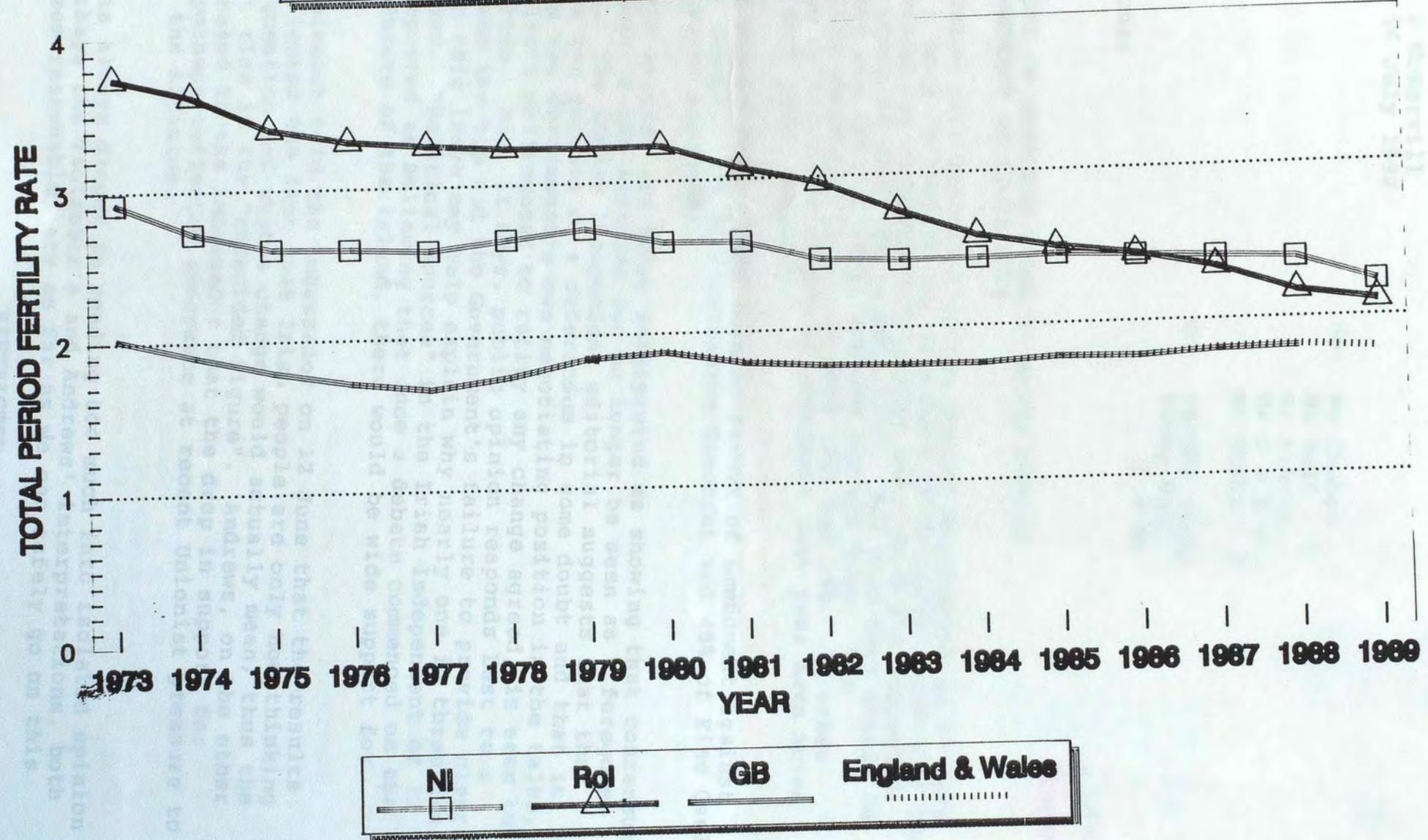


EDGAR F JARDINE

4344/EJ/PW

TOTAL PERIOD FERTILITY RATES COMPARISON

NI, RoI, GB and England & Wales



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H-200

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Helle

UNDER/ 721/7
SEC
22 JUL 1992
CENT SEC

FROM: D A HILL
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DIVISION
20 JULY 1992
(X 6495 OAB)

MR BELL

cc Mr Thomas
Mr Alston
Mr Watkins *6.8*
Mr Maccabe
Mr Cooke
Mr D J R Hill
Mr Petch *Talks*

In recent exchanges on whether a simple majority should decide whether Northern Ireland should be a part of the United Kingdom or the Republic there has been an underlying assumption that at some point the Catholic population in Northern Ireland would become a majority. There was also a concern that as the Catholic population approached being a majority that fact would cause political turbulence.

2. I recently asked Mr Jardine of PPRU whether the Catholic population would in fact become a majority, and, if so, when. As you will see from the attached note it was the case in the late 1970's and early 1980's that there would be a Catholic voting majority by 2036. However there has recently been a decline in the Catholic birth rate, whilst the Protestant birth rate has remained broadly stable. It therefore seems possible that there will in the future be a convergence between the Protestant and Catholic birth rates (the dramatic collapse of the birth rate in the Republic adds weight to that possibility); and that it is far from inevitable that there ever will be a Catholic majority. In practice much depends, not only on the level of the Catholic birth rate, but also on the level of emigration. Nevertheless even if there is to be a Catholic majority it will not be until well into the next century and is perhaps too far off to be taken account of in present political calculations. It should also be borne in mind that a simple Catholic majority of voting age would not necessarily mean a voting majority for a united Ireland; there is a part of the Catholic community which supports the Alliance party and therefore has a broadly unionist outlook.

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3. I think we can draw from this that if there is any vote in favour of a united Ireland within the next 40-50 years it will be because a substantial part of the Unionist vote has changed its views. Nor is it inevitable that there will be a Catholic majority or a majority for a united Ireland.

THE NORTHERN IRELAND ELECTORATE

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signed

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D A HILL
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DIVISION
20 JULY 1992

3. Demographics of the two communities undertaken by Paul Copton at Queens and the projections which I quote below are his, flavoured by my own observations on some trends which have become evident since Copton last wrote on the subject. But first the usual caution: I think it was in his 1991 Budget speech that the Chancellor commented on the difficulties he faced in predicting future economic performance - particularly as it was difficult to discover what had happened in the past. We are on somewhat firmer ground with respect to the past when it comes to demography but future projections are subject to a range of influences which means they need to be treated with caution.

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