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Part I
Public Opinion Polls and Peace Processes

1
Political Negotiations and Public Opinion Polls

Eight surveys of public opinion were conducted in support of the Northern Ireland peace process between April 1996 and May 2000. Critically the questions for seven of these polls were drafted and agreed with the co-operation of party negotiators to enhance the peace process by increasing party inclusiveness, developing issues and language, testing party policies, helping to set deadlines and increase the overall transparency of negotiations through the publication of technical analysis and media reports. This chapter reviews the principal findings of these polls and their role in the political development and implementation of the Belfast Agreement.

Poll 1: Peace building and public policy[1]

This poll was undertaken as a piece of pure research by a group of academics at Queen's University[2] and conducted as a random sample of the population of Northern Ireland in April and May of 1996. Most of the questions dealt with problems of discrimination and segregation as they related to employment, policing, education, Irish language, public parades and housing. The Catholic community, which had been systematically discriminated against in the past, wanted stronger policies than Protestants to deal with this particular problem but Protestants were willing to accept more reforms than were presently in place providing this would also improve the quality of services, fairness and choice. Both communities wanted policies that would reverse the trend towards increased segregation. Other questions also dealt with political arrangements for the future of Northern Ireland. Areas of compromise that were potentially most acceptable to both Irish Nationalists and British Unionists started to be identified. A selection of a few results may help to illustrate these points.

As with most conflicts between peoples, intolerance and discrimination are common threads running through the Northern Ireland problem. When asked 'Should the police make a greater effort to recruit more Catholics and be more acceptable to the Nationalist community by, for example, changing

the name and uniform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary?' only 20 per cent of Protestants said 'Yes' compared to 88 per cent of Catholics. With regards to cultural matters only 2 per cent of Catholics were opposed to Irish language schools compared to 39 per cent of Protestants, while only 6 per cent of Catholics would allow all Orange Order parades compared to 42 per cent of Protestants. However, although the Northern Ireland Fair Employment Commission (FEC) had been established to eliminate discrimination, particularly against Catholics, only 28 per cent of Protestants wanted to scrap it while 72 per cent of Protestants and 97 per cent of Catholics wanted to keep the FEC or strengthen it. Clearly some problems were going to be more difficult to deal with than others, as part of a comprehensive settlement.

Another thread running through all conflicts is segregation, in part brought about by questions of personal security. But in Northern Ireland 80 per cent of Protestants would prefer mixed workplaces, 64 per cent mixed neighbourhoods and 63 per cent mixed schools, while 87 per cent of Catholics would prefer mixed workplaces, 68 per cent mixed neighbourhoods and 59 per cent mixed schools. But even if the people of Northern Ireland would prefer to live and work together, could a political agreement be reached that would help to facilitate that ambition?

This was not going to be an easy problem to solve because most Protestants wanted to maintain their ties with the British state while most Catholics wanted strengthened relations with the Irish state. However, when preferences for different potential options were analysed the proposed central feature of the Belfast Agreement – *power sharing with North–South institutions but no joint authority* – was found to be a viable compromise. The possibilities of using public opinion polls as part of the Northern Ireland peace process was clearly demonstrated and this point was not lost on the politicians.

Here are a few practical observations from the experience of the first poll that could be relevant to the running of similar polls elsewhere:

- Cover all major aspects of social and political life effected by public institutions and government departments, since the 'people' and their 'political representatives' often have very different views (and interests) about the nature of the conflict and its resolution.
- Because the work requires many different kinds of expertise, put together an interdisciplinary research team as required.
- Encourage key decision-makers to become involved in drafting the research questions and designing the methodology so that they will take the results more seriously.
- If politicians disagree with the results of the pure research poll – this is welcome – invite them to help design the next survey to their satisfaction.

The state of negotiations in January 1997 and getting started

In January of 1997 the multi-party negotiations for the political future of Northern Ireland had reached an impasse at the Stormont talks. Sinn Féin had broken their ceasefire and were excluded from the talks while the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP) refused to negotiate before weapons were handed in – the precondition of decommissioning. It was in this context that all ten parties elected to take part in the Stormont talks were invited to participate in a survey to test public opinion on the various issues that were stalling the talks process. Probably because none of the parties wished to appear to be talks-wreckers, all the parties agreed to participate and a series of polls were conducted.

But not all the parties were equally enthusiastic about this new enterprise. Most of them had dismissed the 'Peace Building and Public Policy' poll as irrelevant a year earlier. At that time only the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and Sinn Féin (which represented the political interests of the major Loyalist and Republican paramilitary organisations) expressed any interest in a poll designed to explore various public policy options for the improvement of relations between the two communities. But that survey demonstrated both the independence of the work and the validity of the methods used. Additionally the results of the poll were published in the most widely read regional newspaper, the *Belfast Telegraph*,[3] and as a free supplement in a local current affairs magazine, *Fortnight*.[4] The report was also given to all the party members recently elected to the new Northern Ireland Forum established by the government as a vehicle for facilitating the Stormont talks. A number of additional observations are probably worth noting at this point:

- Financial support for the first poll, which critically reviewed public policy in Northern Ireland, had been turned down by the government's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) which tends not to fund potentially controversial projects. A grant for the research was, however, forthcoming from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust which actively takes on projects that are potentially controversial and has a special Northern Ireland Programme. They subsequently became the principal sponsors of this work.
- Initially the greatest enthusiasm for running a poll as part of the Northern Ireland peace process came from the smaller centre parties who probably saw it as an opportunity to give their political agenda a more significant public 'voice'. Specifically the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition Party, Alliance Party, Labour Party of Northern Ireland, Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) all felt their agenda was being sidelined by the dominant Nationalist and Unionist parties.

- The larger parties, particularly the Ulster Unionists (UUP) and Democratic Unionists (DUP), which probably did not have a need for such a public 'vehicle', were, however, willing to participate as the style of questions used allowed each party to test its own policies, against the policies of competitor parties, as a series of options or preferences.
- Sinn Féin, which was presently excluded from the Stormont talks because the IRA had broken its ceasefire, also probably wanted to be included as it provided them with one of only a few opportunities to participate actively in the peace process.

And here are a few practical observations that came out of this experience:

- As politicians may be sceptical about the benefits of public opinion polls, first undertake a programme of pure research to demonstrate the independence and validity of the work.
- Do not exclude any serious parties from the applied research – it is most helpful to test support for mainstream opinion, centre party compromises and radical reforms together.
- If the large established parties do not show willing, try the small centre parties first after which the larger parties may decide they do not wish to be left out.
- Secure independent funding, remembering that those who control the 'purse strings' could have a veto over the continuation of the research.

Poll 2: After the elections … ?[5]

The first in this series of polls undertaken with the co-operation of the political parties elected to take part in the Stormont talks was conducted in March and published in April 1997 to help set a context for an invigorated talks process after the May elections. Some general problems were dealt with as well as procedural questions about decommissioning and the participation of parties with paramilitary associations. In general the electorate wanted 'all party talks' subject to a minimum of preconditions. But these had to include paramilitary ceasefires which the IRA had broken. Labour was elected to government in May and subsequently allowed Sinn Féin into the talks after the IRA called a second ceasefire in July. Some observations on some specific questions may be helpful here.

The first question was a very general one designed to put the interviewee at ease: *Do you support the principle of a negotiated settlement for the political future of Northern Ireland?* 94 per cent said 'Yes' ranging from a high of 99 per cent for Alliance voters to a low of 90 per cent for DUP supporters. The idea for this question had been borrowed from President De Klerk who, in a 1994 referendum, had asked the white population of South Africa: *Do you support the continuation of the reform process which the state president began on 2 February 1990 and which is aimed at a new constitution through negotiation?*

69 per cent said 'Yes' and with this mandate he was able to complete his historic agreement with Nelson Mandela and the ANC. We hoped for a similar outcome in Northern Ireland. It was a confidence-building question.

A series of questions then dealt with procedural or 'shape of the table' questions that focused on who should be allowed into the talks and when the decommissioning of illegally held weapons should be undertaken. For the most part the Unionist 'No Parties' – the DUP and UKUP – who wanted the talks as they were then conceived to fail wanted as many preconditions as possible while the Nationalists – the SDLP and Sinn Féin – wanted to proceed with as few preconditions as possible. Along with the centre parties and Ulster Unionists these parties became known as the 'Yes' or pro-Agreement parties after the Belfast Agreement was made in April 1998.

The people of Northern Ireland wanted peace. Not at any price, however; they supported all-party talks providing ceasefires were called but were willing to have decommissioning dealt with as a separate issue. Additionally, with regard to procedural matters, people were asked for their opinions on various uses for referendums to replace, advance, advise or endorse a talks settlement. All these options were acceptable. The only one that wasn't was 'no referendum'. The people wanted to have their say.

With regards to substantive issues some first steps were taken in this poll to try to eliminate the extreme political positions of 'die hard' Republicans and Unionists that would never be acceptable to both communities. As well as finding out what people could agree to it was important to underline what was genuinely unacceptable. On the status of Northern Ireland, independence, which was never realistically on offer, was generally unpopular. Protestants solidly wanted to stay in the Union but Catholics were more flexible, except for Sinn Féin supporters who wanted a united Ireland. Not much common ground there except for the elimination of the separate state option. Progress of sorts. Catholics also wanted stronger relations with the Republic through the establishment of North–South institutions. Protestants were not over-enthusiastic about this option but considered the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which had been signed without their consent, even more unacceptable. The North–South bodies, agreed to as part of a negotiated settlement, were the lesser of these two evils as far as the Protestants were concerned and in these terms were a potential settlement winner. With regards to government within Northern Ireland, Protestants wanted a devolved assembly subject to majority rule; Catholics wanted the same but with responsibility or power sharing. No devolution at all or separate institutions for each community were generally unpopular. People were tired of the Northern Ireland Office running their affairs with little public accountability and they didn't want a political divorce in spite of the 'Troubles'. Some form of devolved government was definitely going to be part of the solution.

Here are a few practical observations from the experience of the second poll:

- Start with some simple confidence-building questions about the peace process in general and other confidence-building measures (CBMs) that could easily be implemented.
- Deal with all of the principal procedural or 'shape of the table' issues before getting into too much detail over substantive or 'negotiated settlement' issues.
- In public opinion polls the elimination of extreme positions, those with little cross-community support, is just as important and just as easy as finding compromises and common ground.
- It is worth noting that several questions that had been drafted and agreed in Northern Ireland could not be run in some polls for lack of space. This was not entirely a bad thing as it provided a working foundation for later polls.

Poll 3: The future of the Stormont talks[6]

The DUP and UKUP said they would not stay in the talks with Sinn Féin present and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) said they would consult with their 'grass roots' before deciding if they would stay in or not. If they walked away from the talks the negotiations would have collapsed with no significant Unionist participation. This poll, conducted in September 1997, demonstrated public support for the peace process and for continued Unionist participation. The Ulster Unionists subsequently decided to stay in the talks but refused to engage in 'face-to-face' negotiations with Sinn Féin. A few observations on some specific questions may prove helpful again.

The critical question this time was: *In today's circumstances do you want the political party you support to stay in the talks?* 92 per cent of the people of Northern Ireland said 'Yes' ranging from a high of 100 per cent for Sinn Féin voters to a low of 76 per cent for DUP supporters. These results warranted a front-page headline in the *Belfast Telegraph*. Other questions elaborated this simple 'yes/no' option with various Unionist preconditions: on decommissioning before talks; dealing with the Republic's claim on the territory of Northern Ireland before talks; rejecting the two governments, 'Framework Document' as a basis for talks; and finally, rejecting talks altogether. None of these options was acceptable. The people wanted talks.

But a BBC poll run at the same time also asked if the parties they supported should negotiate with Sinn Féin. For most Protestants this was a step too far, so although the Ulster Unionists stayed in the talks they never spoke directly to Sinn Féin and only addressed them through the talks chairman Senator George Mitchell. This lack of direct communication did long-term harm to the peace process as it seriously delayed the development of a normal working relationship so essential for the building of confidence and trust.

A second set of questions dealt with what to do if various parties walked out of the talks or if the talks collapsed. In practice, under the rules of the negotiations, if the largest Unionist party, the UUP, or largest Nationalist party, the SDLP, left the talks then the talks would collapse. The electorate understood and accepted this reality but also accepted the proposition that if Sinn Féin 'walked' then the talks should continue. However, in the event of a collapse, the people of Northern Ireland also wanted the two governments to put a proposed settlement before them in a referendum. Most people, it would seem, welcome opportunities to exercise their democratic franchise, particularly if the politicians they elect to do a certain job fail to undertake or complete that responsibility.

Here are a few practical observations from the experience of the third poll:

- Systematically deal with all preconditions and objections to a peace process – people generally want 'jaw jaw' in preference to 'war war'.
- Do not avoid sensitive issues because others might take on those same questions in a less helpful way that is potentially more damaging to the peace process.
- Give 'the people' every opportunity to answer questions about the exercise of their democratic franchise – they like it – and the results should send a message to their elected politicians.

Poll 4: In search of a settlement[7]

While all these political negotiations were going on and the official talks were stuck on procedural issues all the parties continued to negotiate substantive issues through the public opinion poll process. Thus, in December 1997, a poll was conducted on all the substantive issues and was published in January 1998 in an effort to help move the talks process forward. After increased violence over the Christmas period this effort proved to be successful and most of the parties started to negotiate in earnest, with the exception of Sinn Féin who held firm to a 'non-partitionist' settlement that excluded the possibility of a regional assembly for Northern Ireland.

This questionnaire was the most complex one of them all. It had to deal with all the elements of an agreement for which options had been in the drafting process for nearly a year. In this case the informant had to provide 273 responses on a wide variety of matters. The other polls were conducted as face-to-face interviews but this one was a 24-page take-home booklet (almost an exam!) that had to be filled out. The first important question in this survey asked the interviewee to rate the significance of 19 causes of the Northern Ireland conflict and the second question did the same for 17 steps that could be taken towards a lasting peace. These questions proved to be very useful and informative when analysed for the two main communities to produce separate rankings of their respective concerns and aspirations. Through this objective measure everyone could see what their

opponents' constituencies considered to be most important and the two lists were substantially different. For Protestants the number one issue was paramilitary violence and how to deal with it. For Catholics it was questions of equality and police reform. Reform of the institutions of government, the primary focus of the peace process, was much lower on everyone's list. Unfortunately this failure to get the priorities right weakened the effectiveness of the Belfast Agreement and arguably put the peace process at risk in 1999. The second section of the questionnaire contained 29 questions on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland and the third section 25 questions on police reform. All these questions were drafted by all the parties but, for the most part, were left out of the agreement to be dealt with at a later date by commissions.

The questionnaire then went on to deal with the major political/institutional elements of the Belfast Agreement with 39 questions on Strand One which covered relationships in Northern Ireland relating to regional government. Fifty-six questions on Strand Two covered relationships within the island of Ireland, notably North–South bodies. Twenty questions on Strand Three covered relationships between the British and Irish governments and dealt with a replacement for the Anglo-Irish Agreement as well as an additional 16 questions on constitutional issues.

By employing a method of analysis based on the voting system used in the talks – a simple majority from both communities – a summary of what an acceptable agreement would look like was produced as follows:

A comprehensive settlement

- A Regional Assembly made up from elected members who share responsibilities in proportion to their representation and employing a voting system with other checks and balances to ensure the fair participation of both communities in government and the prevention of abuse of power.
- North–South bodies strictly controlled by the elected politicians who establish them to deal with a wide range of issues using various functions and powers appropriate to the areas of government policy being managed.
- Replace the Anglo-Irish Agreement with a Council of the Islands to establish a new relationship between London, Dublin, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast appropriate to the needs of the region as a part of Europe.
- Constitutional reform that embraces the principle of consent and other balanced changes required to implement the various agreements made at the Stormont talks.
- A Bill of Rights that deals specifically with the political, social and cultural problems that have aggravated the conflict and a Human Rights Commission with responsibilities and powers to educate, monitor standards and bring cases to court.

- A reformed two-tier police service restructured with a view to recruiting more Catholics and improving community relations under the authority of a new Department of Justice in a Regional Assembly.

This solution proved to be very close to the deal struck on Good Friday and was used as a basis for testing a 'Comprehensive Settlement' package in poll number five.

Here, again, are a few more practical observations derived from this experience:

- Devise questions that can produce a ranking of the major problems in a conflict and their potential solutions.
- Develop questions that include all of the potential elements of a final agreement by way of informing both the negotiators and the general public.
- Do not be put off by complexity. The people living with a conflict often have a very sophisticated understanding of that conflict.
- Use a method of analysis that reflects the voting procedures used in the negotiations proper in terms of both constituencies and levels of support required.

Poll 5: A comprehensive settlement[8]

With the DUP and UKUP outside the talks and Sinn Féin not willing to actively negotiate, a test 'package' – very similar to the one outlined above – was agreed by the remaining seven parties and a survey conducted in March 1998. The poll also included alternatives put forward by the DUP, UKUP and Sinn Féin. This survey of public opinion proved to be critical as it demonstrated the lack of cross-party support for the extreme Unionist and Republican proposals, while the centre ground settlement agreed to by the seven remaining parties could win support if put to the people of Northern Ireland in a referendum. Subsequently, on 22 May 1998 71 per cent of the population voted in favour of the Belfast Agreement.

In this survey two simple questions were asked about the 'package'. Firstly, *If a majority of the political parties elected to take part in the Stormont talks agreed to this settlement would you vote to accept it in a referendum?* Seventy-seven per cent said 'Yes'. But secondly, when asked *If you said 'Yes' would you still accept these terms for a settlement even if the political party you supported was opposed to them?* the 'Yes' vote dropped to 50 per cent. These results were taken very seriously by both the parties and two governments. If the parties could agree a deal they could 'carry the day'. But if they could not agree then it was very unlikely that the two governments would be able to push a deal through against the opposition of a majority of the parties. Everyone needed everyone else. It was a 'united we stand, divided we fall' situation. Unfortunately the pro-Agreement parties did not hold together as well as they might have after the signing of the Belfast

Agreement while the 'no parties' campaigned with a single voice. Percentage points were lost and by the time the Assembly elections took place in June the Unionist vote got 'shredded', leaving David Trimble and the Ulster Unionists with only a narrow working majority.

After the 'package' as a whole was 'voted on' by the person being interviewed they were asked how they felt about each part of the 'package' separately. It is interesting to note that the respective Protestant and Catholic communities remained strongly opposed to some of the individual reforms but were willing to accept them as part of an overall agreed settlement. The whole, it would seem, was greater than the sum of its individual parts. Another important section of this poll included the repetition of Unionist and Republican alternatives to the comprehensive settlement. These proposals, although strongly supported in the separate communities, continued to receive little or no cross-party support. Visiting these issues again, at this critical point in the negotiations, helped to underline the fact that there was no alternative to the carefully worked out compromise.

Here are a few practical observations from the experience of the fifth poll:

- Test comprehensive agreements as a 'package' as many of its problematic elements will be acceptable as part of a balanced settlement.
- 'Underline' the politically unacceptable alternatives to a comprehensive settlement when it is opportune to do so. For example, when radical groups are actively opposing a 'deal'.
- Timing is of the essence. For example the 'comprehensive settlement' poll would have been almost useless if run months before the parties were ready to 'cut a deal' or the day after the talks collapsed!

Poll 6: Implementation of the Belfast Agreement[9]

The details of the new institutions of government were agreed in a vote of the new Northern Ireland Assembly on 16 February 1999 but the Unionists refused to sit in an Executive with Sinn Féin prior to decommissioning. In an effort to overcome these difficulties a poll was conducted in collaboration with the Assembly parties representing the principal paramilitary groups – Sinn Féin and the PUP. The results were published on 3 and 4 March 1999. Over 90 per cent of the people of Northern Ireland wanted the peace process to succeed and were willing to have their political representatives reach an accommodation to achieve this outcome.

It was intended that the referendum of 22 May should have marked the end of this series of public opinion polls. However, in September of 1998 a few parties indicated their desire to continue the work. Decommissioning was still at the top of the Unionists' agenda – but not Sinn Féin's. Some of the parties wanted to tackle this issue again, perhaps in the hope of renegotiating it. By the end of the year it had become apparent that the failure to set

up the Executive with the inclusion of Sinn Féin could bring the agreement down. With this very real concern in mind the PUP and Sinn Féin decided to undertake a poll that would explore all the possibilities for resolving this problem but strictly within the terms of the Belfast Agreement as they understood it. It was now January 1999 and the issue had been festering since the elections the previous summer with Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionists painting themselves ever more tightly into their respective corners. If funds had been made available in September the problem might have been more easily dealt with then. But some of the parties did not consider it to be a serious problem at that time and would not support a poll. Everyone had a veto. It was not until the problem became almost intractable that the veto was lifted and the poll was funded. But this is all said with the wisdom of 20/20 hindsight. If the problem had been fixed everyone would have said 'it was best left to the politicians to resolve'. But they didn't and it hadn't.

The poll turned out to be both effective and interesting. Effective because it demonstrated that the people of Northern Ireland were willing to be pragmatic and wanted their politicians to do what had to be done to make the Belfast Agreement work. The governments and parties got into a new set of talks after the poll was published, almost tripping over each other in a rush to issue invitations. The poll was interesting as responses to some of the questions clearly demonstrated that the reason why progress with implementation was so slow was because Unionists did not trust Republicans and Republicans did not trust Unionists. An agreement, it would seem, is not enough. Trust and confidence are also required and all the important issues that had been left unresolved in the Belfast Agreement still remained at the top of the Protestant and Catholic 'to do' lists – decommissioning and police reform respectively.

The original plan for implementation of the Belfast Agreement envisaged the setting up of a shadow Executive prior to devolution. Given the months of negotiations with Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionists only addressing each other through the chair this period of time set aside for developing normal working relationships was essential. Unfortunately this process never started to happen until the new round of negotiations got under way following the publication of this poll. But the two governments and the Northern Ireland civil service also had to make adjustments. The Belfast Agreement was far more complex than the simple devolution of powers to Scotland or Wales. Everyone needed a period of time to test relationships, build confidence and establish trust. The peace process needed careful management. Again, with 20/20 hindsight, perhaps the first priority of the two governments should have been to get all the new institutions up and running, where necessary on an advisory basis, with the devolution of real powers undertaken progressively as and when circumstances might have allowed.[10]

Here are a few practical observations from the experience of the sixth poll:

- Try to retain control over funding so that the parties involved with the polls will not be able to exercise a veto if they think the work is not going to go their way.
- Don't use public opinion polls to renegotiate agreements. Regrettably much of the partisan media will do this anyway.
- Don't assume the work is over once the deal is signed, particularly if many of the issues raised in the research are not dealt with in the agreement!

Poll 7: The Mitchell Review[11]

Decommissioning and setting up the executive still proved to be 'a bridge too far'. The negotiations of that summer failed, with the Unionists refusing to take up their ministerial posts in the absence of a hand-over of weapons. Their slogan was 'No guns, no government'. Faced with a political 'stand-off' Seamus Mallon, the Nationalist Deputy First Minister, resigned throwing the peace process into a review. Senator George Mitchell was persuaded to return to take on this unwelcome task and another poll was conducted in support of these negotiations. It did not produce any remarkably new results. The people of Northern Ireland still wanted their politicians to 'cut a deal'. But on this occasion all the pro-Agreement parties were involved, not just the PUP and Sinn Féin. Critically the Ulster Unionists now took the results of the poll seriously and a 'step-by-step' programme for implementation was agreed.

This was the most difficult poll of them all, not because the issues were particularly complex but because, from the outset, neither Sinn Féin or the Ulster Unionist really wanted to negotiate. When the questions for this poll were starting to be drafted neither of these two parties had actually agreed to participate in the Mitchell Review and their first contributions were no more preconditions to setting up the Executive from Sinn Féin and 'no Executive' without decommissioning and an end to all violence from the Ulster Unionists. Fortunately all the centre parties to this disagreement, the PUP, UDP, SDLP, Alliance and Women's Coalition, played an invaluable constructive role by introducing options for compromises and pointing out the dangers to the peace process of running some of the unhelpful questions suggested by other parties.

As was often done in previous polls some confidence-building questions were asked. Eighty-five per cent of the people of Northern Ireland wanted the Mitchell Review to be a success. But this was probably the last best opportunity to get the Belfast Agreement implemented. It could not be lost so a series of questions were included to highlight people's fears on this point. Only 44 per cent of people asked thought the Review would succeed and support for the Belfast Agreement had dropped from 71 per cent in the

referendum to 65 per cent with Protestants now split 50/50. If a way forward could not be found now it was not going to be found. It was make or break time for the Agreement and the politicians who had gambled their careers on its success. Only 10 per cent of Sinn Féin supporters trusted the Ulster Unionists 'a lot' or 'a little' while only 5 per cent of them trusted Sinn Féin 'a lot' or 'a little'. In spite of this lack of trust David Trimble agreed to lead his party into the Executive and Gerry Adams persuaded the IRA to appoint a 'go-between' to work with the Independent International Decommissioning Commission. The British government had also published the Patten report on the reform of the RUC at the beginning of the Review. Important steps had been taken but the peace process was far from done.

Here are a few practical observations from the experience of the seventh poll:

- Even when a very difficult decision has to be made try and include all the critical parties to that decision – however difficult that makes the work.
- When key players refuse to negotiate use neutral parties to feed in constructive suggestions.
- When key players introduce questions designed to produce an unhelpful result get neutral parties to critique the value of such questions.
- Design and run 'cold shower' questions when the point of 'do it or lose it' is reached. Public opinion polls are an excellent medium for dealing with 'contextual' issues.

Poll 8: The future of the peace process[12]

The Mitchell Review moved the Northern Ireland peace process forward by creating conditions in which the Executive could be established. Unfortunately, when the Ulster Unionist Council formally accepted the terms of the Mitchell Review for going into government with Sinn Féin they had also added in the condition that IRA decommissioning should begin within a set period of time and they scheduled another meeting of their Council to vote on the matter. From a Republican point of view their 'voluntary act' had now become an 'act of surrender'. Consequently, beyond appointing an IRA representative to work with General de Chastelain and his Commission, little happened on the decommissioning front, the Unionists withdrew their support for the Executive and the new British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Mandelson, suspended the institutions of government set up under the terms of the Belfast Agreement. It was 'back to the drawing board' and the two governments undertook what amounted to an informal review in an effort to solve the decommissioning problem yet again. They were successful. The concepts of decommissioning as a 'voluntary act' undertaken, initially, as a 'confidence-building measure' were now accepted by Unionists and, critically, the idea

of decommissioning by 'placing arms beyond use' in secure, inspected dumps was accepted by the IRA.

However, on this occasion, some pro-Agreement Ulster Unionists were reluctant to run another poll in case it gave support to their anti-Agreement lobby, while some members of Sinn Féin had misgivings about using the polls to continually prop up the Belfast Agreement in the face of what many considered to be increasing Ulster Unionist indifference to the principle of shared government. If the Ulster Unionists wanted to exercise their veto and bring down the Belfast Agreement perhaps they should be allowed to do so. But other parties, notably the PUP and SDLP, did want to run a poll and at a special meeting of Rowntree Trustees the decision was made to go ahead.

Events proved their judgement to be correct. In addition to repeating all the contextual peace process questions asked in the Mitchell Review poll the eighth poll, 'The Future of the Peace Process', tested the new proposals for managing decommissioning along with police reform and demilitarisation in general. The results were published in the *Belfast Telegraph* on 25 May 2000. Seventy-two per cent of Ulster Unionist supporters wanted their party to go back into government with Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionist Council agreed to do so at their meeting of 27 May 2000 by a narrow majority of 459 votes to 403.

The Northern Ireland peace process was back on track again but it took several more turns, both good and bad, with blame being passed around on all sides as to who was or was not living up to their obligations to fully implement the Belfast Agreement. On Friday 27 October 2000 the *Belfast Telegraph*[13] published yet another poll in which a majority of UUP supporters still wanted their party to stay in the Executive and again their Council voted to do so one day later. Fortunately the new institutions, particularly the Executive and Assembly, were now beginning to deliver an effective programme of accountable, regional government. This is what the people wanted, this is what they had voted for and a review of all the polls was published in the *Belfast Telegraph*[14] and *Irish Times*[15] in February 2001 to underscore this point.

Unfortunately the general and local government council elections held in the spring of that year had a polarising effect on the politics of Northern Ireland and it was not until they were past that sensitive political issues, such as police reform, could be properly dealt with. Offers were made to the parties to run more public opinion surveys on their behalf but the media were now regularly commissioning their own polls to help David Trimble and his Ulster Unionists through their various political difficulties. Needless to say the people of Northern Ireland continued to support all positive efforts made to move the peace process forward. This included a BBC[16] poll in support of SDLP and UUP membership of the new Policing Board in September 2001 and, following a start to IRA decommissioning in

October, a *Belfast Telegraph*[17] poll in support of the re-election of David Trimble as First Minister in November 2001. Surveys of public opinion, it would seem, were now an almost everyday part of the Northern Ireland peace process.

Finally then, here are a few more practical observations drawn from the experience of the eighth poll:

- Try not to end the research arbitrarily. Let the parties have a say in when to run the last poll as they are ultimately responsible for the success of the peace process.
- When support for running a public opinion poll is 'mixed' consult widely and do not be afraid to temporarily poll against the wishes of some parties.
- Have an experienced board or advisory group at hand to back up difficult polling/ethical decisions.
- As an independent facilitator or mediator it is generally inappropriate to express personal opinions but reviewing the work done and progress made can sometimes be very helpful.

Conclusion

The public opinion polls, although the most visible aspect of this approach to conflict resolution, were not an end in themselves; the process of poll-making was equally important. As a programme of independent research the parties were encouraged to take the drafting of the questions, the timing of the polls and the publication of the results in any direction that they believed would be helpful to the advancement of the peace process. It was a collective enterprise that they could use as they saw fit until the new institutions of government created under the terms of the Belfast Agreement would render such work superfluous to political requirements. Hopefully this has now been done.

But what are the prospects of using similar methods in other conflict settings? Probably better than one might think. Firstly, the problems of literacy and accessibility may not be as serious as generally thought. For example, the 'Lords of the Arctic: Wards of the State' research that fed into the negotiation of the Canadian Nunavut Settlement used public opinion polls to explore the relevant social and cultural issues from an Inuit point of view.[18] The associated reports were published in both Inuktitut and English and again widely discussed in the popular press to considerable effect.[19]

Of course Canada, Britain and Ireland wanted to reach their respective agreements as did the Inuit and pro-Agreement parties. If people just plain do not want to agree there is probably not a lot that can be done about it. But then again most people do want peace and justice and with 'the

people' 'on side' a very great deal can be accomplished even when faced with an intransigent politician who, at some point, must meet his or her destiny with the ballot box.

Which perhaps brings us to the first serious limitations to the application of this method. A respectable degree of democracy and a reasonably free press may be a necessary requirement, although it is possible to imagine circumstances where a dictatorial regime might be persuaded to undertake a programme of research similar to the ones carried out in Northern Ireland and Canada if, for example, another state or international agency would muster the appropriate political and/or economic influence (e.g. the USA, Europe, the UN or World Bank). Access to the relevant parties and their electorate is essential as well as the independence of the researchers – without, it should be stressed, being subject to any forms of intimidation – and an independent source of funding, if at all possible, would be welcome. These are probably the main ingredients for a practitioner's 'wish list'. It could ideally be made longer but we do not live in an ideal world.

The work is both difficult and demanding but very rewarding. Anyone trying this for themselves will undoubtedly be confronted with obstacles not reviewed here. Each poll, personality, party and government will create its own unique set of problems. But if parties and pollsters seek only solutions, in good faith, then a way forward will be found.

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