

# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

## IRELAND



**Reference Code:** 2012/59/1559

**Creation Date(s):** [December 1982]

**Extent and medium:** 4 pages

**Creator(s):** Department of Foreign Affairs

**Access Conditions:** Open

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Trends in British Public Opinion on Northern Ireland

1. Public opinion: British public opinion, as measured by opinion polls, has shown a remarkable consistency of view on the Northern Ireland situation. In summer 1981 a Gallup poll for "New Society" revealed the following preferences (results of a similar poll in 1974 in brackets): Irish unity 21% (18%); Independent Northern Ireland 37% (36%). In a 1975 Gallup poll 64% replied in the affirmative to the question whether Britain "should begin to withdraw" troops. In the 1981 Survey, 37% wanted British troops withdrawn immediately, 17% wanted them withdrawn within 5 years, 33% wanted them to remain until a settlement was reached and only 7% stated there should be no withdrawal.

2. It is interesting to note that the preference for Irish unity was strongest among Social Democrats and weakest among Labour supporters (SDP 33%, Liberal 22%, Conservatives 21%, Labour 16%). Conversely, the preference for an independent Northern Ireland was strongest among Labour supporters and weakest among Conservatives (Labour 46%, Liberal 36%, SDP 31%, Conservatives 30%). Support for Northern Ireland remaining part of the UK was strongest among Conservatives and weakest among SDP supporters (Conservatives 35%, Labour 24%, Liberal 21%, SDP 19%).

3. British public opinion, therefore, is much more prepared to consider radical choices regarding Northern Ireland than is true of the political parties. A disturbing element, from our point of view, is the overwhelming preference, among those who wish to cut Northern Ireland adrift, for an independent state

rather than a relationship with the South. Paradoxically, it is probably true that despite public detestation of the Provisional IRA and the INLA, it is the unending level of violence that has been responsible for public willingness to abandon the North to its own devices. Equally, however, the attitude of all the political parties is framed by an unwillingness to "yield" to violence in terms of considering solutions of a genuinely radical nature.

5. Notwithstanding the antipathy to violence, the issue of Northern Ireland has not ranked high among the average voters concerns. The question is whether public opinion will move from passive perception of policy preference to active and emotional involvement in such a policy as being of personal importance. If this were to happen, the Westminster consensus would probably break. The present public attitudes have, however, persisted for over a decade with only marginal variation and there does not appear any reason to expect a profound change in the foreseeable future in terms of strength of feeling as opposed to perception and awareness of potential solution.

6. The public opinion figures suggest that people in Britain generally regard Northern Ireland as a foreign entity, that integration would not be a popular policy and that some form of agreed devolution corresponds most closely to the preferred option of most electors. In addition, all three opposition parties, Labour Liberal and SDP, are committed to devolution for Scotland and to the development elsewhere of regional assemblies with real power and resources. Accordingly, there appears to be a broad

basis of support in the country as a whole for a devolutionary approach in Northern Ireland and a stoical acceptance that the only solution is to persevere in present policies. While there is still acceptance of the role of the Republic, there is no longer any clear idea of how such a role could be developed. This does not, of course, mean that the Tory right and the opponents of devolution in the Unionist Party will not succeed, perhaps after the next election, in changing course.

7. While 1981 was a year during which Irish coverage in the British media was favourable and our image was enhanced (despite the tensions created by the hunger-strikers,) the opposite has generally been true of the past year. It is sufficient to list the major developments during 1982, none of which was such as to elicit favourable or supportive coverage over here: the election debate in the spring about the state of the economy; the perception of political instability because of two elections in nine months and a third in the offing; the Government's opposition to the Prior proposals; the Falklands crisis; the subsequent freeze in Anglo-Irish relations and contacts; the London bombings; and the resignation of the Attorney General. Overlying all these factors was a very strong antipathy in the media to the credibility of the Taoiseach and an eagerness to attribute to him personally all adverse developments. Conversely, during the past year, the situation in Northern Ireland has been fairly quiet, the Unionists have not had a high profile and the Assembly elections took place without serious incident.

8. The result has been negative and often hostile coverage in the right wing press and many of the tabloids (e.g. Telegraph, Express, Sun, Standard, Mail). While papers such as the Guardian, Financial Times and Economist have occasionally been critical, the most noticeable effect has been a growing pessimism in regard to

Northern Ireland and a stoical acceptance that the only solution is to persevere in present policies. While there is still acceptance of the role of the Republic, there is no longer any clear idea of how such a role could be developed.

9. The task which faces us here is to persuade the people, media and politicians, that the development of a new relationship between north and south offers a viable means of solving the Northern Ireland problem and removing it from the agenda of British politics. There is considerably more dissatisfaction with the North than there is confidence in Irish unity as a solution. Developments during the past year have not been helpful in that regard. The situation will not be made easier by the growth of a distinctively Thatcherite foreign policy after the next election, an approach which, in its application to Anglo-Irish relations, will certainly create strains in our relationship.