

FROM: T KELLY
DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS
20 March 1998

UNDER 823/5
SEC
26 MAR 1998
CENT SEC

HEAD OF THE N.I.
N1036
23 MAR 1998
37
CIVIL SERVICE

- cc PS/Mr Murphy
- PS/Mr Ingram
- PS/PUS
- PS/Mr Semple
- Mr Thomas
- Mr Stephens
- Mr Jeffrey
- Mr Bell
- Mr McCusker
- Mr Brooker
- Mr Hill
- Mr Beeton
- Mr Howard
- Mr Maccabe
- Mr Woods
- Mr Ferguson
- Mr Whysall
- Mr May
- Mr Crawford
- Mr Johnston
- Mr Warner
- Ms Healy

- P. 2612
- 1. Mr [unclear]
- 2. Mr [unclear]
- 3. Mr [unclear]

Mr Watters

ASST/ SEC
3 MAR 1998
C.C.R.U.

ASST SEC 26 MAR 1998
CENT 581/3 SEC

Julie
Political Talks file re.
6/4.

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE

FOCUS REPORTS

Advise to [unclear] 23/4
[unclear] 23/4
[unclear] 23/4
[unclear] 23/4
[unclear] 23/4

We have now had the full results from the focus groups we commissioned earlier this month. The main message is not a comfortable one. That the two communities are highly polarised, and show a lack of knowledge of and confidence in the political process, and a limited awareness of the potential significance of the referendum. Given the lack of visible progress from the talks, and the continuing sporadic violence, that is not surprising. Hopefully, if we can show more concrete evidence of the talks moving towards a successful outcome, that may change, but whatever happens the results give us an agenda we need to address in the coming weeks.

The overall conclusion is that the breakdown of the first IRA ceasefire has seriously affected the views of both sides, apparently confirming the belief that peace does not work, and that violence is endemic. Allied to that on the Protestant side is a fundamental fear of a future dominated, as they see it by nationalist culture, and on the Catholic side by deep resentment about the past, which is strongly focused on the RUC. On both sides there is a fatalistic belief that in the end it will be demographics, rather than politics, which will resolve the issue. On both sides the young are more hardline in their opinions, but also less likely to vote.

Protestants

In more detail, Protestants fear that they will lose their British identity as a Catholic/Gaelic culture is imposed on them. They see Sinn Fein as the dominant voice of nationalism, and since they do not believe it can compromise on its commitment to achieving a united Ireland, they do not think agreement is possible. The referendum is seen in simplistic terms as a choice between being in the UK or not. Those feelings are particularly strong West of the Bann, where Protestants feel themselves under threat as a minority seeing the border getting closer all the time.

The one positive note is that because Protestants see themselves as a majority now, they do not see the Referendum as an immediate threat.

Catholics

The views of Catholics in many ways are a mirror image of the Protestant position. There is deep, intense resentment about past discrimination and what is seen as continuing repression of their culture, though also some acknowledgement that things have got better. The focus of Catholics' hostility is concentrated on the RUC, and that is the number one priority they think any agreement must address. They also have a strong desire to see some form of ROI involvement in a solution, eg the inclusion of north/south bodies with executive powers. They are equally pessimistic about the possibility of agreement, because they do not think that unionist politicians are capable of compromise, though they do seem to exempt the "new Loyalists" from those comments.

CONCLUSION

The main issue, therefore, that the focus groups suggest that we need to address is a pessimism about the possibility of political agreement, combined with a fatalism about continuing violence. That is the main aim of our television advertising campaign with its theme of "It's your choice." And the message does seem to be getting through. But we need to take on that fatalism directly in other outlets as well, whether it is speeches or interviews: the assumption that nothing will change, or can change. Equally, we need to address directly the other concerns each side raises – Protestant's fear of domination, Catholic's resentment and the belief that neither side is capable of compromise. We will now be looking for opportunities to do that.

(Signed)

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