

Campaign pushes "yes" vote on British-Irish agreement

A numbing barrage of official propaganda

Richard Tyler
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Richard Tyler reported from Dublin and Belfast in the run-up to yesterday's referendum on the Northern Ireland agreement.

In the North the text of the British-Irish agreement is packaged like a glossy magazine, with a full-colour photograph of a family silhouetted against the clear crimson sky, and bold letters spelling out 'The Agreement.' Underneath the words: 'This Agreement is about your future. Please read it carefully.' And then: 'It's your decision.' 'Your' is underlined both times.

In the South it comes in plain black and white with no photograph, printed on flimsy paper, with just the title on the front: 'Agreement reached in the multi-party negotiations'. Every registered voter on the island has received a copy. Almost 4 million citizens from Coleraine in the North to Cork in the south have been asked to register their support or rejection of its contents in two referendums held simultaneously on Friday, May 22.

Dublin, Wednesday, May 20

Visitors to Dublin will find most of the lampposts in the city centre carry a poster from the main nationalist party, Fianna Fail, urging 'Vote Yes for peace.' A statue of the Irish nationalist leader Charles Stuart Parnell, with its inscription reading, 'No man has the right to fix the boundary to the march of a nation,' is surrounded by a call to support the Republic dropping its historic claim to the northern six counties.

Very occasionally, a 'no' poster can be spotted. 'One nation, not two provinces of the British Isles. Vote No,' exhort the posters of Republican Sinn Féin, a tiny hard-line nationalist group.

The media maintains a numbing barrage of propaganda promoting a 'yes' vote. The editorial column of the *Irish Times* leads with 'Saying Yes for Peace.' The *Irish Independent* front page declares, 'It's an all-Ireland Yes.' Even *The Big Issue* magazine, sold by Dublin's homeless to supplement their meagre benefits, has a cover with 'Yes' in letters six inches high.

Search high and low for a more penetrating analysis of the real motives and meaning of *The Agreement*, as it is generally referred to, and you will seek in vain. Almost without exception the referendum is presented in apocalyptic terms. 'Nothing less than the future of Ireland,' 'the alternatives are conflict, misery and economic stagnation,' 'the only chance for peace,' 'to reject the Agreement means voting for a return to bombs and terror.' In one variant or another the message is repeated ad nauseam. Radio and television stations provide no relief from this propaganda deluge.

It has certainly had an effect. Standing outside the busy market on Moore Street, where Dubliners come to purchase their fruit and vegetables, those stopped and questioned regarding their voting intentions replied uniformly. They will be voting yes. Asked why, the most common response is it is 'a vote for peace.' The media hype has connected with an elemental desire to see an end to 30 years of bloody terror and murder.

Although all questioned said they would vote for it, few had read its 11 chapters plus Annex, written in the dry and terse language of an official

document. Support for the Agreement spanned different age groups, occupations and political affiliations.

A group of young friends sat around a cafe table discussing their intentions and thoughts about the Agreement. Of the five, three were voting yes, one was undecided and one was voting no. The young woman who said she could not vote 'yes' was unable to articulate her reasons, beyond a feeling that such a vote meant betraying all those who had fought and died in the long struggle for Irish independence and a united Ireland.

Later, as the warm evening sun started to go down, in shop doorways along Grafton Street, Dublin's main shopping area, homeless youths unrolled blankets and sleeping bags, setting up their beds for the night. Will the Agreement make any difference to their plight?

The property pages abound with headlines reporting the dazzling sums which the booming private housing sector presently commands, '£800,000 plus to live next door to the Guinness family,' 'penthouse with turreted roof garden for over £460,000,' and '£2.2m sale sets second-highest record for house.' The property speculators certainly expect the market to rise to new heights after the referendum.

A very thin social layer who have profited from the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' status of the Irish Republic's economy can be seen enjoying their wealth in the surroundings of Dublin's most exclusive restaurants and wine bars. Alternatively they drive to their second homes in the beautiful countryside outside the city, and away from unpleasant reminders of those for whom no wealth has 'trickled down,' only Ireland's cold rain.

An *Irish Times* editorial commented on the recent recommendations of the Commission on the Family. 'Child Benefit of £30 per week for every child under three years would be an attractive proposition to all those who have young children. It would also strike a blow against poverty--one third of Irish children live in poverty. But does anybody seriously believe that this, or anything like it, is going to happen?'

Next day, the traffic coming into Dublin brings technicians and software engineers, store workers and computer assembly operatives. They provide an educated and relatively low-wage work force for the high-tech companies and service sector employers who have taken advantage of the Republic's generous tax breaks and investment incentives. What do companies like Microsoft, Intel and Marks & Spencer hope to gain from the Agreement?

In Leixlip, to the west of Dublin, on the site of a former stud farm, computer chipmaker Intel has recently unveiled its latest \$1.4 billion investment. It has built a new plant to manufacture the next generation of products with which the company hopes to secure its already 90 percent monopoly of the market for computer chips.

According to *The European*, 'Intel is now the single most important firm in Ireland's high-technology sector, which accounts for half of Irish exports.' With the Republic on course to join the European Monetary Union, the transnationals are looking to Ireland as their springboard into this market of over 300 million potential customers. The Irish

Development Agency (IDA) give them £10,000 for every person they employ. They get tax breaks for 10 years. One young worker comments wryly, 'After that they will say, it's too expensive here now, we are going to relocate somewhere else.'

Belfast, Thursday, May 21

Driving from Dublin to Belfast takes about three hours. The road winds through sleepy little towns and villages whose residents either work locally, mainly in agriculture, or who commute to the capital to earn their living. The countryside rolls away from either side of the road, a patchwork of fields and meadows. As the North approaches the Mourne mountains begin to rise on the horizon. Although the road joins the two most populous centres in Ireland, it is no six-lane expressway. For most of its 160 miles the traffic is squeezed into two lanes. Impatient Mercedes drivers make death-defying manoeuvres in their haste to reach their destination. Heavy lorries trundle in both directions, carrying their commercial loads between the two parts of the island.

Investment in infrastructure projects along the Belfast/Dublin corridor is considered to be vital in order to revive the economy in the North and provide the South with better access to the port of Belfast, the island's main trade connection to the outside world. This has been prevented in the past because neither side was prepared to shoulder costs that would benefit their economic rivals. But things have already begun to change in response to the demands of industry and trade. While the cars and trucks edge north and south, a train passes them rapidly along newly laid tracks.

The North approaches. On hilltops overlooking the road, military installations begin to appear. Watchtowers and communications masts betray the presence of the British Army in the otherwise idyllic scenery. Finally the border. The traffic slows as the road curves round between low rocky cliffs. Signs every 20 yards declare, 'Controlled Area. Absolutely No Stopping.' Suddenly behind the rocks and vegetation a soldier peers out, menacingly holding his assault rifle. In the road, a Royal Ulster Constabulary officer in an armoured vest, pistol on his hip, is waving the cars past. Occasionally one is stopped and the occupants questioned or asked to provide identification. At the verge, an Army Landrover and another group of armed soldiers watch closely. On high poles to either side, a mass of video surveillance cameras record the scene. The last time I drove through such a border was in 1989 going into East Berlin.

Not just the presence of soldiers and armed police indicate that conditions here are very different to those in the South. For several miles practically every road sign as has had 'Vote No' sprayed on it in thick black letters. Posters urging a 'no' vote declare that Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader David Trimble 'is an MI5 agent.' Then a poster in the colours of the Irish flag with just the word 'yes' in the middle. But these are far outnumbered by those saying 'no' along this stretch of the road.

As Belfast comes closer the messages are more mixed. The strident tone of Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party--'It's right to say No'--are interspersed with those of Trimble's UUP, 'Say Yes for the Union.' The Progressive Unionist Party, which is allied to the paramilitaries, has also been active in promoting a 'yes' vote behind the slogans, 'Take the road ahead. Vote Yes,' and 'Progress, Union, Peace,' echoing the party's initials.

Non-partisan organisations have also been at work: 'Peace Train. Vote Yes for peace and harmony.' The non-sectarian Northern Ireland Women's Coalition says, 'Yes is the answer! Peace is the goal! Now is the time! Vote Yes on May 22 for a new beginning!!!'

In today's *News Letter*, the public service union UNISON has taken out a half-page advertisement, 'Yes for Hope, Yes for Healing, Yes for Peace.'

Opinion polls following last week's public appearance of the IRA's Balcombe Street gang and loyalist murderer, Michael Stone, urging a 'yes' vote, recorded a heavy fall in support for the Agreement amongst Unionist voters. This raised the prospect that the Agreement might pass, but with a majority of Unionist supporters voting 'no.' To counter this, British Prime Minister Tony Blair engaged in a whirlwind tour of the North to support

UUP leader David Trimble and the 'yes' campaign.

In a speech at the University of Ulster in Coleraine, Blair emphasised that there could be no change to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without majority consent. As prime minister of the United Kingdom, 'I value that union. I value what goes with that,' he said.

Thousands of posters are being hung depicting five hand-written pledges by Blair:

- No change to the status of Northern Ireland without the express consent of the people.
- The power to take decisions to be returned from London to Northern Ireland, with accountable North-South co-operation.
- Fairness and equality for all.
- Those who use or threaten violence to be excluded from the government of Northern Ireland.
- Prisoners to be kept in prison unless violence is given up for good.

Conservative Party leader William Hague flew to Northern Ireland with Blair. He called on voters to trust the people who had negotiated the agreement. US President Bill Clinton has also delivered a final radio address before the referendum, once more urging a 'yes' vote.

In the final hours of the campaign, the Church of Ireland has come out in favour of a 'yes' vote, in the person of the Archbishop of Armagh, Dr Robin Eames. He told the press that 'none of us wants the grandchildren of the North, let alone the children of the North to live their lives as so many of us have lived ours.' Significantly, later in the day former RUC chief Sir John Hermon appeared alongside David Trimble saying, 'a 'yes' vote will hold the centre ground of moderation.'

Like the South, the newspapers and media in Belfast are presenting a united front calling for 'yes.' The Ulster edition of the *News Letter's* double-banner headline reads, 'Chance of a lifetime,' with the rest of the front-page simply reproducing the hand-written 'pledge to the people of Northern Ireland' by Blair. *The Belfast Telegraph*, which calls itself 'the national newspaper of Northern Ireland,' pictures Blair walking alongside David Trimble and Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) leader, John Hume, with the quote, 'this deal is right, just and proper.'

The centre of Belfast has been besieged by politicians and 'personalities' who provide the attendant media circus with their photo opportunities and sound bites. Multibillionaire Virgin boss, Richard Branson, went walking about with Labour's Northern Ireland Secretary Mo Mowlam. Branson told the press, 'I have got shops in Northern Ireland, cinemas in Northern Ireland and if there was a 'yes' vote I would want to bring more.'

As the hours have ticked by towards the referendum, a further series of opinion polls record the 'yes' vote amongst Unionist supporters creeping up but still in a minority. Friday's *Irish Independent* leads, 'Yes vote 'on a roll' in eve of poll surge.' The article reports, 'the final days of an intensive campaign have seen a decisive shift by Northern voters towards the Yes camp, leading to estimates of a pro-agreement vote ranging from 65pc to 72pc.' A telephone poll for Thursday's *Irish Times* suggests 60 percent in favour of the agreement (up 4 percent on the previous week), 25 percent against (no change) and 15 percent undecided (down 4 percent), indicating a swing in favour of a 'yes' vote.

As voting started Friday, at polling booths in both parts of the island, the outcome looks certain to be 'yes' overall. But there is an all-pervading feeling of hollowness hanging over the entire campaign. 'Hope,' 'peace' and 'progress' are cited like mantras to ward off any manifestation of critical thought. An agreement designated as historic is endlessly alluded to without any serious reference to the historic problems it claims to resolve or the very real social crisis that is manifest in the urban decay gripping Belfast. There is a Catch-22 here for the British and Irish ruling class. In order to get the agreement through they have been forced to arouse people's expectations for a better quality of life. When this fails to materialise, how will the new Northern Ireland Assembly be able to stabilise and enforce the new political arrangements being set up?

See Also:

Interviews on British-Irish deal:

Support for agreement mixed with reservations

[23 May 1998]

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[25 April 1998]



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