

Polls on Irish Unity are Unreliable

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A somewhat eccentric BBCNI TV programme last week on its 'Spotlight' current affairs slot was titled 'A Contested Centenary'. It included new poll results on Irish Unity and an interview with Boris Johnson. The poll results from LucidTalk showed 49% wishing to remain in the UK and 43% in support of Irish Unity. This might be viewed by unionists as too close for comfort but is in fact unlikely to be a reliable guide to actual public opinion. The reason is that in LucidTalk polls the sample is drawn from individuals who have volunteered to take part in a range of polls. In any voluntary panel those with strong political views are likely to be over-represented especially on highly emotive issues like Irish unity. Importantly, it is difficult to prevent those who wish to manipulate results from registering several different identities.

Polls undertaken by LucidTalk show support for Irish Unity in the range 40-48%. Other polls including the NI Life and Times Survey from Queens and Ulster Universities, and polling by Liverpool University, consistently show much lower support for Irish Unity in the range 19-29% range. These results are so hugely and consistently different from each other that they cannot both be correct. One implication is that no serious news outlet should ever quote one without giving a wider polling context. Yet this is what the BBC Spotlight programme did not do. It gave no hint that polling on Irish Unity is a highly contested and uncertain area. Others including the Sunday Times and ITN have recently behaved similarly. BBCNI also compounded their felony with a follow-up programme provocatively discussing what changes would accompany the Irish Unity which their polls predicted was not far off.

This behaviour is unacceptable and should stop. A key reason is that these polling results have constitutional importance. The Good Friday Agreement says that the Secretary of State must call a border poll "*if at any time it seems likely to him (sic) that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the UK and form part of a united Ireland*". Leaving aside the impracticability of changing the nationality of almost a million unionists on a narrow poll majority, the reality is that several polls including LucidTalk have already reported majority support for Irish Unity.

It is clear that the UK Government does not believe these polls. Indeed, Boris Johnson stated clearly on the Spotlight interview that "*I don't think the Secretary of State is going to be in that position, not as far as I can see for a very long time to come*". Many Unionists of course do not trust the PM, but this is not primarily an issue of future intentions. The point is that if the PM and Secretary of State had believed polls showing majority support for Irish Unity, they should have already organised a border poll. The fact that nationalists in Northern Ireland have made no fuss about this apparent lapse suggests that they also have little faith in these polls.

Can we believe in any polls? As a statistician I have reasonable faith in the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey organised by QUB and UU and funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. This conducts lengthy face to face interviews with around 1200 people each year and asks questions on a wide range of economic social and political issues. It is true that respondents to this survey under-report intentions to vote for Sinn Fein or the DUP and over-report intentions to vote

for Alliance. This may be because working-class people are under-represented in the random sample. Alternatively, interviewees may be unwilling to admit support for what they know are perceived to be parties with extreme views. Whatever, the reason, the bias is balanced. It affects Sinn Fein and DUP supporters alike.

The Life and Times Survey results on Irish Unity are thus unlikely to be biased towards either nationalist or unionist positions. What this survey shows is that support for Irish Unity is low at 20%, and support for remaining in the UK is almost three times greater. While Brexit has affected support for Irish Unity the impact has been small, rising only from 16% up to the present 20%. Support for staying the UK has fallen by the same small amount. If one believes this poll, then the PM on Spotlight was correct to predict no border poll *'for a very long time to come'*. It was also reasonable for Arlene Foster to suggest that no poll would occur until long after she had departed this life.

The Spotlight programme seemed impressed that its LucidTalk poll had found that a majority of respondents viewed Irish Unity as likely to occur within 25 years, but such speculation is as close to meaningless as one can get in a poll. Much more pressing is the political tension surrounding the Northern Ireland Protocol and the distortion of trade it is causing and will increasingly cause. Rather surprisingly, Spotlight made no mention at all to a clear statement on this issue in its full unpublished interview with the PM. When asked if the Protocol should be scrapped Boris Johnson said that, *"if we have to invoke Article 16 because we think that this thing isn't working...in the interests of NI, then that's what we'll do we just think that the way it's currently working... doesn't for my money conform with the integrity of the... UK internal market. We ...will continue to make changes and improvements as necessary. I rule nothing out"*.

Again, many Unionists will distrust this prediction, but I view it as serious. Chief negotiator David Frost has indicated that large changes must be made to the Protocol and is currently negotiating these. The PM who is a strong unionist, knows that he is distrusted in Northern Ireland and that he needs to come good on these latest promises. Article 16 of the Protocol gives him legal means to deliver. It says that the UK may take measures to rectify any serious societal difficulties or diversion of trade caused by the Protocol. At present the UK is trying to get agreement with the EU to make these changes but the threat to take unilateral action has been clearly made. The German government noticed this threat immediately, but BBCNI was unable to shine a spotlight on it.