

*National Democratic
Institute for
International
Affairs*

A Big Step in the Right Direction

**A Report on a Series of Focus Groups
on the Ceasefire, Politics and Political Parties
in Northern Ireland**

June 12-15, 1995

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National Democratic Institute For International Affairs

conducting nonpartisan international programs to help promote, maintain and strengthen democratic institutions



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NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) was established in 1983. By working with political parties, civic organizations, parliaments, and other institutions, NDI seeks to promote, maintain and strengthen democratic institutions in new and emerging democracies. The Institute is headquartered in Washington, D.C., and has a staff of 175 with field offices in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and the former Soviet Union.

NDI has supported the development of democratic institutions in more than 60 countries. Programs focus on six major areas:

Political Party Training: NDI conducts multipartisan training seminars in political development with a broad spectrum of democratic parties. NDI draws international experts to forums where party members learn first-hand the techniques of organization, communication and constituent contact.

Election Processes: NDI provides technical assistance for political parties, nonpartisan associations and election authorities to conduct voter and civic education campaigns and to organize election monitoring programs. The Institute has also organized more than 25 major international observer delegations.

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INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the findings from 12 focus groups conducted by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) in Northern Ireland from June 12-15, 1995.

These focus groups are part of an ongoing training program for political parties in Northern Ireland that began in September 1994. NDI's party training program in Northern Ireland assists party and elected officials to improve their skills in political organizing and governance. NDI's program is based on the premise that the current peace negotiations will invariably lead to some devolution of power in Northern Ireland. Regardless of the final settlement, all parties in Northern Ireland will be required to take a more active role in the region's governance. Polling, internal party organization and membership development are among the many training topics offered by NDI to party members. These training programs are conducted by experts in political party development from Africa, Europe, Latin America and the U.S.

NDI conducted these focus groups to help political parties better understand public attitudes toward politics and politicians, and the role that polling and focus groups play in understanding these views. In addition, the focus groups assisted party organizers in understanding the organizational, substantive and financial decisions related to organizing a successful series of focus groups. In an effort to concentrate on areas of common interest among a group of diverse political parties, NDI intentionally excluded from the discussions any issues specifically related to peace negotiations, the Framework Document, published by the British and Irish governments in 1994 to outline key principles that would guide subsequent negotiations, or other questions related to the popularity of individuals or political parties.

NDI hopes that the information gained from these focus groups will assist parties across the political spectrum in becoming more responsive to and effective in meeting the needs of their constituents.

Unlike the results of a **quantitative** survey, which are statistically representative of the sample population, focus groups are not precise measures of public attitudes due to their small sample size. Focus groups are **qualitative** research, which is very helpful in gaining an understanding of public attitudes and attitude formation. This focus group report seeks to help the reader understand the general viewpoint of the public toward politics and regarding the tangible, everyday changes prompted by the cease-fire. **It is not intended to be a comprehensive study of public opinion or the political process in Northern Ireland, and should not be interpreted as such.**

METHODOLOGY

A focus group is a semi-structured discussion, usually involving eight to 12 participants who have been recruited based on specific criteria. A focus group discussion generally lasts 90 minutes to two hours. The discussion is led by a trained moderator who guides the group through a discussion of predetermined topics.

The focus group participants for this project included both voters and non-voters chosen from selected geographic areas. Two groups were conducted in Londonderry/Derry, two in Cookstown and eight in the Greater Belfast area. Approximately seven to nine individuals participated in each group.

While focus groups in Northern Ireland are widely used for market research purposes, NDI knows of no other instance in which political focus groups have been utilized in any kind of organized or systematic fashion. The overall success of this project and the willingness of individuals to participate in candid discussions about politics bodes well for future political focus group work in Northern Ireland.

The schedule and a description of the 12 focus groups follows.

MONDAY, JUNE 12: DERRY/LONDONDERRY

Group 1: Middle-class (Protestant)

- Mix of men and women
- Mix of party affiliation
- Mix of ages (25-60)
- Mix of clerical and professional workers

Group 2: Middle-class (Catholic)

- Mix of men and women
- Mix of party affiliation
- Mix of ages (25-60)
- Mix of clerical and professional workers

TUESDAY, JUNE 13: COOKSTOWN

Group 3: Mix socio-economic status (Protestant)

- Mix of men and women
- Mix of party affiliation
- Mix of ages (25-60)
- Mix of occupation
- Mix of education

Group 4: Mix socio-economic status (Catholic)

- Mix of men and women
- Mix of party affiliation
- Mix of ages (25-60)
- Mix of occupation
- Mix of education

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 14: GREATER BELFAST AREA

Group 5: Working class (Protestant)

- Mix of men and women
- Mix of party affiliation
- Mix of ages (25-60)
- Mix of manual and clerical workers

Group 6: Working class (Catholic)

- Mix of men and women
- Mix of party affiliation
- Mix of ages (25-60)
- Mix of manual and clerical workers

Group 7: Disaffected youth non-voter (Protestant)

- Mix of men and women
- Non-voters only
- Ages (18-25)
- Mix of occupations, education and income level

Group 8 Middle/upper middle-class (Protestant)

- Mix of men and women
- Mix of party affiliation
- Mix of ages (25-60)
- Mix of professionals and business people

THURSDAY, JUNE 15: GREATER BELFAST AREA

Group 9: Middle/upper middle-class (Catholic)

- Mix of men and women
- Mix of party affiliation
- Mix of ages (25-60)
- Mix of professionals and business people

Group 10: Disaffected youth non-voter (Catholic)

- Mix of men and women
- Non-voters only
- Ages (18-25)
- Mix of occupations, education and income level

Group 11: Working class women (Mixed Religion)

- Mix of party affiliation
- Mix of ages (25-60)
- Mix of clerical and working class

Group 12: Middle/upper middle women (Mixed Religion)

- Mix of party affiliation
- Mix of ages (25-60)
- Mix of middle/upper middle-class

MAJOR FINDINGS

General Outlook

Nobody wants to go back.

The "cease-fire" or "peace," as it was alternately called, was the dominant issue on people's minds at the time of the focus groups. Without prompting, participants first mentioned the cease-fire, and cited issues such as crime and jobs as secondary.

Regardless of religious, geographic or socio-economic differences among the groups, there was a positive feeling and outlook associated with the cease-fire, and participants could cite very tangible reasons for these sentiments. Many people have experienced both positive attitudinal and lifestyle changes as a result of the cease-fire. The following are verbatim statements volunteered by the focus group participants.

"It's a big step in the right direction." "There's a tremendous undercurrent of optimism." "We've had so many years of troubles. At least it's some sort of start now." "There's a more peaceful environment." "You can go out now and not have any fear." "Kids do their own things. The town is theirs now." "It's safer going out now." "Your parents don't worry about you going out late at night." "You don't feel as apprehensive."

"Since the cease-fire, no one has been shot." "There are no bombs going off." "Nobody is getting killed anymore." "It's a big thing, not waking up always hearing bad news." "I'm glad for the sake of the children who have known nothing but war."

"You can go into Belfast now." "It's more relaxing going into town." "Less hassle when you go shopping, you're not getting stopped." "No more traffic jams from police and barricades." "You can go on and do your own thing." "Now on a Saturday night, there's more to do."

"People are not afraid to talk to each other now." "People are talking who wouldn't have talked before." "There is a more relaxed attitude about things." "It's more relaxed, less tension."

While the cease-fire and resulting changes encouraged feelings of optimism and hopefulness about the future, there was also significant apprehension that the cease-fire could breakdown and violence would resume. Even though the situation was designated alternately as the "cease-fire" or "peace," the distinction was made that "it's only a cease-fire, it's not peace yet."

"Nobody wants to go back." "I hope it will [last] but you can't be sure." "The shooting might be finished but other things are still problems." "The violence isn't over, the killings may be." "It's just the beginning. There's still a long

way to go." "It's so fragile, if one side gets annoyed . . ." "If one party will refuse to budge any further and the whole thing will crumble." "At anytime, things could go one way or the other." "It only takes one person to do a stupid thing." "All it takes is one incident or one person and the fighting could be back." "Until the arms are put down, we can't be sure." "There's always the threat because the arms haven't been handed over." "There's going to be an explosion somewhere."

The positive feelings associated with the cease-fire do not necessarily extend to other issues. While there is a sense that the cease-fire represents movement in a positive direction, most other aspects of life in Northern Ireland at this time are perceived less favorably. Other than beneficial consequences of less violence, most people have not yet experienced many changes in other areas of their lives.

"The feeling of freedom within one's self is better, but not money-wise or prospect-wise. If someone was unemployed, they're still unemployed." "Mentally it has [improved], materially it hasn't." "In general terms we're better off, happier; but we're not financially better off."

In fact, relative to some issues -- specifically crime and drugs -- most respondents believe that these matters have worsened during the last year. There was a widespread perception that drugs are more readily available within their communities than before the cease-fire.

"The crime rate has risen since the cease-fire." "The drug problem has increased." "Drugs were also there [before the cease-fire], just more underground." "Drugs were rare before the Peace. Now you go to any nightclub and see five or six people dealing drugs." "More gangster types, more break-ins and ordinary crime, drugs, muggings." "Violence may continue through drugs -- become like gangland." "Drugs exploded overnight."

As the participants discussed the problems and issues that most concerned them, a common theme surfaced. Their greatest underlying apprehension is the future for their families and children, particularly regarding employment and educational opportunities, drug use and crime prevention.

In every group, parents articulated their fear that young people, especially in light of greater freedom prompted by the cease-fire, will now have too much time on their hands and will get into trouble.

"There are no proper play areas for youngsters." "Lack of facilities for youth." "Teenage unemployment." "There is nothing for those 12 to 16 years old." "Boredom for teenagers." "Teenagers are bored. They're getting into trouble, experimenting." "Public education money was wasted by the government. They don't know how to utilize the time of the children."

While most respondents had not yet perceived any positive changes in the economic situation in Northern Ireland, participants expressed significant hope and optimism when asked to comment on their economic future. In each of the groups (with the exception of the working-class Protestant group in Belfast), respondents voiced considerable optimism regarding their economic future.

"There is an opportunity now for businesses to come in and get people off unemployment." "Now there can be investment from other countries that wouldn't have come in before." "You're more likely to get a job now because people are not as paranoid to go to different places." "Job prospects will be good." "There has been an influx of tourists to Northern Ireland." "Tourism is booming."

Yet, the working-class Protestant group in Belfast, expressed very different sentiments regarding the future including pessimism about their own futures and their economic and employment possibilities.

As a result of the cease-fire, the participants had expectations and hopes beyond their economic future. Some of their hopes focus on the political situation.

"Get the guns out of Northern Ireland." "I'd like to see the guns and ammunition gone." "I'd like to see real talks happen, our own politicians sit down and talk." "Clamp down on drugs."

Other hopes and expectations focus on the youth and their future, particularly cross-community activities.

"Try to provide more money for kids' social lives. If we have a lasting peace, these [youth] will be the problems." "Start working together, mixing." "Like to see all children grow up together." "Will have to make changes through the children." "Integrated education." "More mingling and cross-community groups." "We're all working with Catholics and Protestants on a business level and we get along. Why can't we accept each other on a Saturday night?" "It's not the general people. Normal people live together happily enough to work together. It's just these hotheads [politicians]."

Politicians and Political Parties

They should listen to what the people want.

There was consistent agreement across the focus groups regarding politicians and political parties. Participants were very clear and very specific with suggestions for politicians and political parties. Many of the suggestions focused on the notion of "listening."

"They should listen to what the people want." "Get people's ideas, listen."
"They should get out among the people." "Go and have a chat with them
[ordinary people]." "Talk more to ordinary people. Come around our houses
and get people's views." "I'd like to see the politicians doing what you're doing.
Let them hear what we have to say instead of sitting in their big houses." "They
should show you what they're doing." "Less talk more action." "Show they
[politicians] can talk and mix between themselves."

The respondents also want to see their politicians and parties focus on "meaningful" issues that affect their daily lives.

"Nobody bothered about other issues during the troubles." "They should focus on issues like food prices, health, education, employment." "They should be dealing with grassroots issues." "They should help people more, especially in their own community." "Parties only deal with big issues. That's why small, local groups have started up." "Parties need to come up with more meaningful issues."

Membership or participation in "community groups" was viewed as being both more appealing and effective than membership in political parties. Community groups were perceived to offer more than political parties.

"Other organizations bring people together. "Politics pushes people apart."
"People don't talk about politics. In a tenants association you talk about housing. You can achieve something. If you join a party, you'll get nowhere." "You want to come out at the end of the day with something. In politics, what will you come out with?" "I wouldn't want to be involved because of the impression other people have of it." "You can make a difference in other organizations, not in a party." "They [community groups] have an agenda that's achievable and generated by people in the organization."

Voting

You can't complain if you don't vote.

It is of interest to note that these focus group participants experienced difficulty articulating the importance of voting and the reasons behind why they vote in a particular way. Many individuals had never thought about or discussed these issues.

In all of the focus groups (with the exception of the two groups of disaffected voters in Belfast), there was strong agreement about the importance of voting. Voting is viewed as one's civic duty and a privilege or obligation. However for most, voting does not assume a level of importance beyond this basic civic duty. Few perceive voting as making a larger impact on their lives.

"It's the way we were brought up. We were brought up to vote." "You can't complain if you don't vote." "If you don't vote, you can't expect them to work for you." "It's a mechanical process. I have no real feelings toward any of them." "We just do it, it's not really important."

Overall, decisions on voting appear to be dominated by one's family tradition, one's place in the constitutional debate and one's party. Many of the participants said they vote because they feel they must help maintain their "side's" voice in the political debate. While many noted that they would prefer more emphasis on other issues affecting their lives (especially social issues), their traditional religious and sectarian boundaries dominate the choices they make at this time. In general, these factors determine the parameters of their voting behavior.

"I vote because my family has always voted that way." "I vote because I have the right. I go for the party, not the person." "I do what my family does. It is inbred which party you vote for." "People don't look at the candidate but at the party." "I have no real knowledge about people in my area. If I don't know them, I just vote for the party." "People don't look at the candidate. They look at the party." "People look at the party before looking at the candidate."

Within that overall context, voters in Northern Ireland have considerable experience with tactical voting. Almost as many participants see voting as a way to defeat an opposing party or politician, as view it as a means to elect their party or candidate.

"You vote because you want your party in and [want to] keep the other party out." "If you don't vote, then somebody else gets in."

While constitutional issues and party affiliation appear to be the dominant factors affecting individual voting decisions, some differences in this pattern did emerge depending on the type of election under consideration.

At the Westminster level, the focus group findings revealed party loyalty to be the strongest determinant in the voting decision. Since this level of government is most closely associated with the constitutional direction of Northern Ireland and one's position on it, these votes are based almost entirely on party and are the most "automatic." Westminster elections are viewed as important in maintaining the overall position and status of the voter's particular "group." Also, since Westminster elections allow each person only one vote, voters appear less likely to consider another party.

"You might find a politician whose agenda is correct, but you have to stick by the party." "There might be a better candidate but they didn't stand for the right party."

Participants across the groups agreed that local elections affect their daily lives most directly. Because local elections tend to be less "constitutional" than Westminster elections, the individual candidate and issues assume greater importance in the decisionmaking process.

"It's the most important election." "Local is more important. Local men are supposed to be fighting for us." "I look more at the individual at the local level."
"In local elections, I vote for the individual, irrespective of their political party."
"You look at the person in local elections."

Party loyalty also recedes somewhat in importance at the European level. There is a sense that at the European level, most politicians -- regardless of their sectarian leanings -- follow a broad agenda that is likely to respond to the needs of many communities in Northern Ireland. Individuals of varying backgrounds appear more united on these "European" issues than on constitutional or even local issues.

"There is a common agenda so party doesn't matter so much." "We need a voice in Europe, need European investment."

While many participants expressed a willingness to switch parties within their sectarian communities (Nationalist/Republican or Unionist/Loyalist), very few were willing to switch parties across sectarian boundaries. This type of shift is beyond the limits of acceptable choice for most people, primarily because of the power of constitutional issues and sectarian identities. These factors are so influential that few participants were able to conceive of a situation where they would cross sectarian boundaries, even if they were especially moved by the personality or stand of a candidate outside their sectarian group. Middle-class participants appear to be more likely than working-class respondents to express any possibility at all of cross-over voting.

Two different exceptions emerged to the voting patterns previously described. Tactical cross-over voting is a distinct possibility if a specific situation warrants it. In the Belfast groups, Protestant participants said they had voted for Catholic nationalist Joe Hendron of the SDLP in his race against Sein Fein President Gerry Adams and cited this choice as an example of tactical cross-over voting. The other possible exception is in European elections where vote preferences are not as strongly affected by constitutional concerns and many voters appear more willing to waive party affiliation and vote based on a candidate's perceived stature and effectiveness.

Specific Attitudes of Women

We're very far behind, way behind because of the troubles.

On several fronts, women participants expressed very different attitudes and opinions than their male counterparts. For instance, the women voiced strong concern about the lack of adequate and affordable daycare; this issue was not raised by the men in the groups. The women portrayed adequate and affordable daycare as fundamental to a woman's ability to do anything else -- work, attend meetings or volunteer in the community.

Many women in the focus groups expressed a strong feeling of alienation from the political process. There was an overwhelming view among the women that "politics is a man's world" and that women are not really welcome in the process. In addition, many women do not

understand how politics would affect their lives or the lives of their families and therefore show very little interest in getting involved.

"A man's world." "The tension and troubles were a disincentive for women."
"Too dangerous." "Haven't had the chance." "Women wouldn't want to do it."
"Women's place is still in the home. It's hard to get more than two nights a week out."

The women participants described the "role" of women in society in very traditional terms, even though many of the women themselves portrayed much different roles than they described.

"Look after the family." "Take a back seat in general." "Backing the man up."
"We are not educated properly. There are jobs for men and jobs for girls."
"We're very far behind, way behind because of the troubles. Women stayed in the background and looked after the family."

While women used traditional terms to characterize their "role," both men and women indicated their belief that opportunities for women are improving. There was a general sense of optimism among the groups regarding the emerging opportunities for women in Northern Ireland.

"More important decisions are shared now." "Men are coming around to take more responsibility, especially younger men." "Young girls have different attitudes. Young girls think 'I can do that as well or better than a man.'"
"Things are starting to get better." "There are more women in top jobs compared with 20 years ago." "The European Community is important for women in Northern Ireland to bring us up to the [child care] level of others."