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*File  
for 27/3.*

*Pine divider  
This strikes me as exaggerated  
but there is undoubtedly an  
undercurrent of reality here,  
as you have picked up for  
them, and I have for  
reaction.  
26/3.*

SUBJECT: KEYDOC: IRISH ATTITUDES TOWARDS A CONSTITUTIONAL  
REFERENDUM ON A TALKS AGREEMENT

#### SUMMARY

1. Popular Irish opposition to abandoning the territorial claim to Northern Ireland seems to have hardened. This presents a real threat to a successful constitutional referendum in the Republic unless the Government develop a coherent strategy. We need to encourage them in this.

#### DETAIL

2. On the assumption that the current talks process produces an agreement, this will then be put to the peoples of Northern Ireland and the Republic in the form of concurrent referendums. This side of the border, it will be cathartic; in deciding on constitutional change involving renunciation of the territorial claim to Northern Ireland, people in the Republic will be forced to take a stand on this issue for the first time since their Constitution was drafted in 1937.

3. Against that backdrop, it is understandable why even professional pollsters here are reluctant to make confident predictions as to the likely outcome. But that uncertainty goes deeper than mere lack of precedent. Because for generations, those Articles (2 and 3) of the Irish Constitution have been at the heart of how the people in the republic have defined their own identity, let alone nationality, and how they relate to what they have seen as the beleaguered nationalist community in Northern Ireland.

4. It might be supposed that the ongoing modernisation of Irish society - economic, social and religious - would impel people here to drop the territorial in the context of a balanced agreement



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bringing peace to Northern Ireland. It might also be supposed that any agreement which enjoyed the support of most if not all of the talks participants and that of the five main political parties in the Republic would again encounter no real resistance in a referendum. However, as I argued in my despatch of 31 October last year, the reality is not quite so straightforward.

5. For beneath the sleek bodywork of the Celtic Tiger remains a good deal of anti-British prejudice, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland. This no longer manifests itself in quite the stark manner of yesteryear. Shared membership of the European Community, the rapprochement between the two Governments, which began in earnest in the mid-80s, the development of a more cosmopolitan outlook, and the fact that Irish emigration is now more a matter of choice than economic necessity, have certainly softened the edges of Irish popular opinion. But the new prosperity, not least in relative terms to the UK, has enabled people in the Republic to move away from a sense of national identity that was defined in terms of being anti-British and anti-border to something more positive and outward-looking. In doing so, they have discovered a new confidence in their nationalism, and also it seems, in their aspiration for a United Ireland.

6. That certainly seems to be the trend in such polling as has been done in the Republic since 1990. Those figures show a consistent trend away from acceptance of amendment of Articles 2 and 3 as a means of underscoring support for non-violence, and the consent principle, from a high of 53% in 1990 to 36% late last year (with outright opposition climbing from 29% to 40%). The reasons for this go beyond the redefinition of national identity and growing self-confidence. They also reflect widespread disillusionment with efforts to find a solution and persistent scepticism that agreement can be reached. This gives space for unrealistic, aspirational views to grow. Ceasefires too, with their reduction in security threat and apparent shifts in Sinn Fein strategy, have also played their part, though it has to be said that the trend seems consistent, ceasefire or not.

7. These polling trends seem to be supported by anecdotal evidence. The political correspondents here are almost unanimous in agreement that a hardening of attitudes on Northern Ireland has taken place. A breathtaking array of successful people in all walks of life have shown themselves incapable, in private conversation with me, of grasping the true nature of obstacles



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which stand in the way of a United Ireland. This was underlined to me graphically at the weekend, when in the company of the Taoiseach, his elder brother gave me a very traditional Fianna Fail line on the perils of amending Articles 2 and 3 even in the context of a balanced agreement.

8. This makes for a difficult market for the Irish Government to sell constitutional change as part of an agreement. Their task is further complicated by legal constraints imposed upon the Government in 1995, when a Green MEP, Patricia McKenna succeeded in getting a High Court ruling preventing the Government from funding activities designed to promote a "Yes" vote in referendums. As a result Government performance in successive referendums since then has been uninspiring to say the least. This Government has already given the nay sayers a significant head start in campaigning on the Amsterdam Treaty referendum set for 22 May (which, given wider Irish support for the EU, should be a vote for motherhood and apple pie). They are now showing every sign of conceding ground to the "antis" on Northern Ireland long before agreement is even close in the talks.

9. The other main factor is the domestic political scene. As my telegram on Ahern's first nine months made clear (tur), recent by-election defeats have shaken the Government's confidence. There is a real risk that a preoccupation with improving the Government's image with the electorate, to proof them against further, possible terminal blows, may yet divert them from the concerted preparatory work for a referendum of the sort now underway in Northern Ireland. Ahern also has to come to terms with opinion within his own party, where our impression is that the shock of the by-election defeats has pushed backbench and grassroot opinion back to core values.

10. So what we can do? In all our contacts with the Government here, we have been stressing the need for the Irish to develop a coherent strategy for a possible referendum. There are at last signs that that is happening, but on too limited a scale. I see real advantage in this being the subject of early Ministerial exchange, either between SOSNI and Mr Andrews in Belfast, or between the two Prime Ministers during the course of their frequent contacts. It is not for us to tell the Irish what they should be doing. But by sharing our strategy with them at a political level, we may encourage them to get moving soon.



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