

The magic number is 64

Predictions are always tricky but I am confident that the British-Irish Agreement will be endorsed in the two referendums held today. The agreement requires majority support in both the North and the South of Ireland to come into force, but its survival probably requires a 64 per cent "Yes" vote in the North. The agreement will be backed by almost all nationalists in the North, who make up 40 per cent of voters, but to work its institutions need to be actively supported by 40 per cent of non-nationalists. In other words, 24 per cent of the other voters.

The problem is that if the agreement fails to win enough backing from unionists, hard-liners in Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party and dissidents in David Trimble's Ulster Unionist Party will have enough strength in the assembly elections, due to take place four weeks from today, to prevent the assembly completing its work on North-South institutions. That would kill the agreement.

So a figure below 64 per cent in the North will spell serious difficulties ahead. It is possible too to predict what the likely vote shares will be in the assembly elections. According to my calculations, unionists will take 56 of the 108 seats; the nationalists will take 44. Breaking it down by party gives the UUP 29 seats; the DUP 22, the UKUP three, the Progressive Unionist Party two, the Alliance eight, the SDLP 25 and Sinn Féin 19.

If these projections are close to the mark there will be enough support for the agreement's institutions to operate. The agreement will establish an assembly, in which all members must register as unionist, nationalist or other. It will have a power-sharing executive, presided over by a first and deputy first minister who have different titles but identical powers. One unionist and one nationalist will be elected by cross-community procedures that require the candidates to be acceptable to at least 40 per cent of the other bloc's members. So even if Gerry Adams leads Sinn Féin into surpassing John Hume's SDLP in seats won, unionists will be able to block Adams' nomination as deputy first minister.

Other ministerial posts will be allocated to parties in proportion to their strength in the assembly. Ministers will take a pledge of office requiring them to follow exclusively peaceful and democratic politics, to partici-

The people of Northern Ireland may well vote for their own assembly today, but the consequences will be enormous for everyone in these islands. Brendan O'Leary explains just how radical the agreement really is

pate in preparing a programme of government and to follow the assembly's decisions. The duties of office include a requirement to serve all the people equally and to prevent discrimination.

The assembly is to be elected by proportional representation, using the single transferable vote, that will enable voters to transfer their lower order preferences to pro-agreement candidates and parties. The executive is to be proportional, but so too are other institutions. The agreement envisages a representative police service, a non-discriminatory civil service and vigorous fair employment throughout the public and private sectors.

Most importantly, the agreement promises the equalisation of both national communities as British and Irish. The European Convention (which is weak on the protection of collective rights) will be supplemented to give Northern Ireland a tailor-made Bill of Rights, to protect both national groupings as well as individuals.

The last internal dimension of the settlement is the protection of minorities. The assembly has complex cross-community devices that protect nationalists from unionist dominance. Indeed they do so in such a comprehensive manner that they may conceivably

be used by hard-line unionist opponents of the agreement to wreck its initiation. In the courts, disaffected nationalists and unionists will have the means to redress breaches of their rights.

At a higher level, the agreement creates two confederal relationships. The first is all-Ireland. The North-South Ministerial Council will be established after the assembly has come into being. The assembly and the council are mutually interdependent. If the assembly does not create the council it will in effect destroy itself. The North-South Ministerial Council is the means by which nationalists hope to persuade unionists of the attractions of Irish unification, and it will link northern nationalists to their preferred nation-state.

The Irish government will change its constitution to ensure that the council may exercise island-wide jurisdiction in those activities in which unionists are willing to co-operate.

The second confederal relationship affects all the islands of Britain and Ireland. In the British-Irish Council, the two sovereign governments, all the devolved governments of the UK and all the neighbouring insular dependent territories of the UK may meet, agree to delegate functions and agree common policies. This proposal meets unionists' concerns

Northern Ireland's women: homemakers or warmakers?

A study of the role of women's groups in the peace process shows women are not necessarily the peacemakers they traditionally have been assumed to be. Ruth Jacobson, a research associate at the department of peace studies at Bradford University, found women on both sides of the

divide unwilling to compromise their beliefs in order to achieve peace. Unionist women were

insistent about their desire to remain linked to the United Kingdom; nationalists on their desire to form a United Ireland. Jacobson says there is a public face of masculinity in Northern Ireland — many of the marches are conducted by all-male groups and opposed by all-male groups. "But look behind that and their

women are there," she says. "In some cases they are egging them on. Or you find women actually being

attacks on people from other places who have come to live in their area." This status quo — men in front, women behind — is harder to challenge than in most communities, she argues. "If you live in a Protestant loyalist household and the men of the household have always marched and

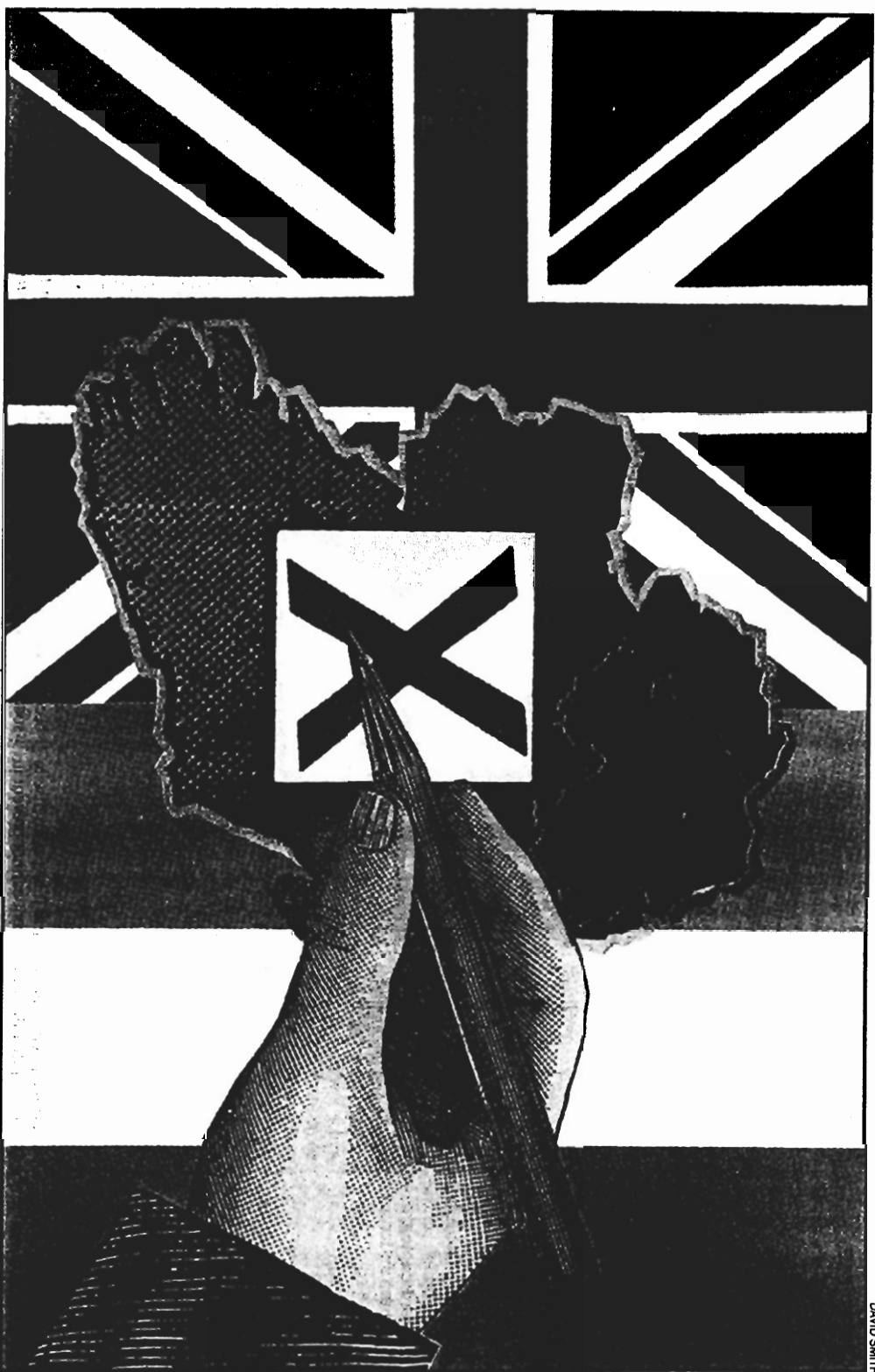
you have always made the tea and sandwiches, the risks of making a fuss about it are quite high." They range,

she says, from physical violence, to being named as a traitor, to being ostracised by one's family. But women's political groups did force the peace talks at parties involved in the peace talks at least to consider previously sidelined issues, especially local community issues, because the women are such an

intrinsic part of those communities. This could cause

them problems in the long run. How will wives and mothers cope with the release of political prisoners back into families after 15 or more years away? Anecdotal reports from other countries that have experienced similar enclosed similar demobilisations suggest that Ulster's women may be facing the risk of more domestic violence. **Harriet Swain**

DAVID SMITH



Those who signed the agreement calculate that they can only reconcile nationalists to the Union, especially in the light of shifts in the balance of demographic power, by being generous now. Unionists get a share in self-government, avoid the prospect of a British government making further deals over their heads with the Irish state, and have some prospect of persuading northern nationalists that the new reconstructed Union is a secure home for them.

The beauty of the agreement is that both nationalists and unionists have sound reasons for believing that they are right about the long term. Because they cannot be certain they are right they are willing to make this elaborate settlement now.

But even if the agreement has a good beginning will it die once it becomes apparent who is right about the long term? That possibility cannot be excluded, but that is why the agreement repays inspection. There are incentives for each bloc to accommodate the other precisely in order to make its vision of the future more likely. The confederalising and federalising possibilities ensure that both national communities will remain linked, come what may, to their preferred nation-states.

That is not to say that presiding over the twilight of the second Protestant ascendancy in Irish history and managing the rearticulation of militant republicanism will be easy tasks, but the agreement has already digested many impossibilities before its first breakfast.

Brendan O'Leary, professor of political science at the London School of Economics, was born in the Republic of Ireland and grew up in Northern Ireland. He is a former adviser to Martine Mowlam, secretary of state for Northern Ireland.