

Public Opinion, Public Diplomacy and Peace Making

Dr Colin Irwin explains how public opinion polls can be used in long-running conflicts to help the pursuit of peace.

The People's Peace

Social and political conflicts are a major source of instability in the post-Cold War world. They affect not just the countries in which they occur, but very often engulf their neighbours and have a potential to throw entire regions into turmoil. Even if settlements are reached, they often remain unstable, resulting in a return to violence or necessitating ongoing intervention by the international community. But the potential for the success of peace processes can be greatly increased when all sections of society are provided with opportunities to become active partners in their own peace process. Imposed solutions and deals done 'behind closed doors', backed up with international pressure and force, may bring temporary relief to apparently intractable problems. But 'home grown' solutions that have the widest possible support amongst the various elements that make up a society are essential for progress towards long-term stability and peace.

In the modern political world of international norms, globalisation, mass media and an increasingly well-informed electorate, solutions to political, economic and social problems require a discourse and decision-making process that engage with the leadership, civil society and the population at large. Achieving such a process in divided societies is problematic and requires every possible assistance and support. However, by taking advantage of some features that characterise and shape contemporary societies, it is possible to initiate a process of communication and decision-making that can bring divided communities closer to a consensus as to how they can best manage their affairs. By pro-actively testing public opinion as part of the search for compromise and common ground, it is possible for negotiators to build consensus and strengthen the potential for political stability, economic prosperity and the degree of social cohesion necessary to sustain them.

Northern Ireland

To this end, nine surveys of public opinion were conducted in support of the Northern Ireland peace process between April 1996 and February 2003. Critically the questions for eight of these polls were drafted and agreed with the co-operation of party negotiators. The aim was to enhance the peace process by increasing party inclusiveness, developing issues and language, testing party policies, helping to set deadlines and increase the overall transparency of negotiations through the publication of technical analysis and media reports.

In so far as it was possible, the parties were given 'ownership' of the research so that they would take the results seriously. Each party to the negotiations nominated a member of their team to work with me on the polls. Questions were designed to test party policies as a series of options or preferences from across the social and political spectrum. The moderating voice of 'the silent majority' was thus given expression, while extremist positions were demonstrated to be marginal with little cross community support. All questions, options and preferences had to be agreed as not being partisan or misleading. From the drafting of these questions, to

sample design, ethics, timing and publication, the programme of research was decided by all the parties, and they were encouraged to take the work in any direction that they believed would be helpful to the peace process.

The focus of the research was on problems, solutions and policies for conflict resolution, as opposed to inter-community attitudes and values. Questions were 'pitched' at what most people could understand most of the time, not at the lowest common denominator. All relevant issues were covered, and no irrelevant issues. All the results were also made publicly available, effectively giving the wider community a 'seat at the negotiating table', and exposing the research to the highest standards of peer review and public scrutiny. There was no 'cherry picking' of the results. Everyone had to deal with all the issues that were raised as part of what became a 'pre-negotiation problem-solving exercise'. This inter-track activity, which extended across the political spectrum to all the major parties, civil society and the public at large, helped to build a consensus for the Belfast Agreement, which led to a successful referendum and a subsequent period of increasing stability and peace. For example, the 5th poll in this series tested the



Figure 1. Headline from the Belfast Telegraph of 31 March 1998, reporting the result of an opinion poll that tested a comprehensive settlement 'package'.



Figure 2. Kashmir, October 2007: Colin Irwin meets Molvi Mohd Abbas Ansari, chief of the All-Party Hurriyat Conference.

Agreement against public opinion two weeks before it was made on Good Friday 1998, so all the parties knew they would be able to carry a referendum before 'the deal' was done and no one had to risk political suicide (Figure 1).¹

Going international

All the work in Northern Ireland had been funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT). Irish Republicans were suspicious of any involvement by the British State, and Unionists were similarly opposed to the Irish State having any control over the purse strings of research. Without the commitment and resources of an independent charity like JRCT it is unlikely that such a politically sensitive project could have been the success that it was. Following the signing of the Belfast Agreement, Atlantic Philanthropies provided me with a two-year grant to try and internationalise the work. A good start was made with feasibility studies completed in Israel, Palestine and Cyprus, and a series of what were then being called

'peace polls' across the Balkans in Macedonia in 2002, Bosnia Herzegovina in 2004, and Kosovo and Serbia in 2005. These polls were supported by a small independent Greek NGO based in Thessalonica, the Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in South East Europe (CDSEE). Critically no major agencies would step in to support the work internationally throughout the Bush years.

But in 2007 I was awarded a Small Research Grant from the British Academy that allowed me to travel to a number of unresolved conflicts around the world. The relationships between public opinion, public diplomacy and peace making were explored through a programme of private and public discussions, seminars and conferences in Cyprus, the US, Switzerland, Israel, Norway, Palestine, Germany, India and Sri Lanka. These discourses included the parties to conflicts, public opinion researchers and organisations, NGOs and UN negotiators and peacemakers.

In Cyprus, meetings were held with representatives of the Presidents Offices of both the North and South of the island in Nicosia (Lefkosia). Legal counsel to negotiations were met with in Ramallah, Palestine. In India meetings were held with representatives of the government responsible for Kashmir, and in Kashmir the political leaders of various parties to the conflict were interviewed (Figure 2). Discussions were held with organisations undertaking public opinion work in support of peace processes in Cyprus, Israel, Palestine, Delhi and Colombo (Figure 3), including conferences on this topic in Jerusalem and Berlin organised by the World Association of Public Opinion Research (WAPOR).



Figure 3. Colin Irwin with the Social Indicator research team, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in October 2007. The Social Indicator team completed a peace poll that was published in the Daily Mirror of Colombo.

With regard to major NGOs and the UN, seminars and meetings were held with the US Institute of Peace (USIP), National Democratic Institute (NDI) and Academy for Educational Development (AED) in Washington, all of whom use polling in support of their peace research. In Israel and Palestine meetings were held with UNDP/Interpeace in Jerusalem and Ramallah. And with regard to negotiators and peacemakers, seminars and meetings were arranged with the UN in Cyprus and New York with the departments of Political Affairs and Peacebuilding. These engagements led to further meetings in Geneva with the UNDP/Interpeace and Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), which in turn lead to an invitation from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to present at and attend the Oslo Forum 2007 – an annual event for world mediators and peacemakers.

Change at last

This programme of research and consultation helped to create a better understanding and wider acceptance of public opinion research as an aid to public diplomacy and conflict resolution. This was done in terms of: advances in best practice, social science theory, setting new international standards, and the wider application of these methods to other conflicts.

Best practice. Following a presentation to the Department of Political Affairs at the UN in

New York, I was invited to help them draft a set of operational guidance notes on the use of public opinion polls as a tool for peacemakers. These notes have now been published on the project website at www.peacepolls.org with the three central principals incorporated into a critical review of research ethics and peace making.² These principles for best practice are:

1. All the parties to a conflict should draft and agree all the questions.
2. All the communities and peoples to the conflict should be asked all the questions.
3. All the results should be made public.

Theory. By extending the principles developed by Donald T. Campbell for the epistemology and methodology of applied social science to public opinion polls and peacemaking, it has been possible to detail the theoretical principles upon which peace polls can most effectively be made. Essentially this requires bringing *adversarial stakeholders* into all aspects of the design of the research and interpretation of the results. Thus the ethical principle that ‘we make peace with our enemies’ in this context becomes ‘we make peace research with our *adversarial stakeholders*’.

International standards. Following the drafting of operational guidance notes for the UN and

various papers on peace polls presented at WAPOR conferences, the World Association of Public Opinion Research decided to set international standards for peace polls. This is at the working draft stage and a sub-committee will be established to agree and monitor these standards over the coming years.

Application. Following the presentation of the peace polls methods at the Oslo Forum 2007, I was invited to make a submission to representatives of the international community to undertake programmes of applied research in a number of different countries in an effort to help analyse and resolve their conflicts. These applications were successful, and in 2008 I started to work in Sri Lanka with the All Party Representative Committee (APRC) to test policies for a new constitution that could deal effectively with the problems of their past.

Following the election of President Obama to the White House and the appointment of Senator George Mitchell as Special Envoy to the Middle East (previously Chair of the Northern Ireland ‘Talks’), funds for new peace polls became available for Cyprus, Israel and Palestine from both international and private sources. The lean and difficult years of the Bush Administration seem to be over and I will be meeting up with colleagues³ from Cyprus (North and South), Israel, Palestine, India (Kashmir) and Sri Lanka to report and

Figure 4. *The divided City of Jerusalem. OneVoice in Israel and Palestine invited Colin Irwin for consultations on problems relating to public opinion research, public diplomacy and peace making, in September 2008. Meetings were held in Tel Aviv, Ramallah and Jerusalem, including a seminar at the Arab World for Research and Development offices in Ramallah.*



share experiences of new peace polls undertaken in all these key conflicts this year, at the WAPOR Annual Conference in Lausanne, Switzerland (11–13 September 2009).

It has taken ten years to implement the Belfast Agreement⁴ and it also seems to have taken the same ten years to learn and apply some of the most important lessons of that peace process to other conflicts around the world. In this I must extend my thanks to the British Academy who supported me when others would not. During all my years of research I

can't recall when such a small grant (£7,071) has achieved and led to so much. A little money in the right place at the right time can sometimes accomplish very great things.

Notes

1. For a review of the political impact of these polls, see Colin Irwin, *The People's Peace Process in Northern Ireland* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).
2. Colin Irwin, 'Research Ethics and Peacemaking', in *The Handbook of Social Research Ethics*, ed. D. Mertens and P. Ginsberg (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008).
3. These include Alexandros Lordos and Erol Kaymak from Cyprus, Nader Said-Foqahaa from Palestine, Mina Zemach from Israel, Yashwant Deshmukh from India, and Pradeep Peiris from Sri Lanka.
4. See Marianne Elliott, 'The Good Friday Agreement, Ten Years On', *British Academy Review*, issue 12, January 2009.

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