

## **The Chill Factor and Irish Signage**

Analogical Research recently commissioned LucidTalk to conduct a short survey consisting of three questions to establish whether there was a “chill factor” among Unionists and Protestants when Irish signage is erected.

The figures shown in this article are based on a representative sample of 1050 people in Northern Ireland selected by LucidTalk from 3001 who completed the survey.

The first question asked about people’s reaction if the local council put up Irish language street signs in the road where they lived. Respondents were asked if that would make them more likely to move, less likely to move or whether it would make no difference.

Some 71% of those who voted for a Unionist party and 63% of those who identified as Protestant said that it would make them more likely to move. There were variations between the Unionist parties. For the TUV voters the figure was 84%, DUP 71%, and UUP 57%. It is noteworthy that a clear majority of UUP voters, who would normally be regarded as more moderate, thought that they would be more likely to move if Irish street signs went up.

The second question asked respondents to imagine that they were house hunting. If a road had Irish language street signs would that make them more likely to move there, less likely to move there, or would it make no difference?

This time 88% of Unionist voters and 82% of Protestants said they were less likely to move there. The responses from different Unionist party supporters were very similar: DUP 89%, TUV 86%; UUP 84%. Middle class voters (socio-economic groups ABC1) had a very similar negative reaction to working class voters (C2DE).

This question identified 26% of Alliance voters who were less likely to move to such a street. Irish street signs therefore brought a negative response from a proportion of those considered very moderate. At the same time, although the majority of Nationalists-Republicans said the presence of Irish street signs would make no difference to them, there were 38% who said they were more likely to move to a road if it had Irish street signs.

It has often been considered acceptable to erect Irish street signs if a majority of people in a road support such a move. However it is likely, in the light of these results, to have a significant negative effect if there is a Unionist and/or Protestant minority in that street.

The results for the first question suggest that Unionists and Protestants become more likely to move when Irish street signs go up. Of course, they could be replaced by people of the same political and religious persuasion. However, the results for the second question suggest this is more and more unlikely. The strong negative reaction indicates Unionists and Protestants will avoid roads with Irish street signs when house hunting.

At the same time, there are those of a Nationalist-Republican persuasion who are positively attracted to roads with Irish street signs. The probable effect of these preferences is to cause the Unionist and Protestant population to fall and the Nationalist-Republican presence to increase in those streets. The likely outcome, if not the intent, indicates that the erection of Irish street signs will become a non-violent form of ethnic cleansing. Local people will certainly be able to identify areas of North and South Belfast where this is likely to be an issue.

The third question in the survey related to council-run leisure centres. Survey participants were asked, if their leisure centre had Irish signage, would it make them more or less likely to use the facility, or would it make no difference. Some 75% of Unionists and 69% of Protestants said the Irish signage would make them less likely to use the leisure centre. The party figures were TUV 83%; DUP 79%; and UUP 59%. At the same time 39% of Nationalists and Republicans stated that they would be more likely to use such a facility.

This strongly suggests that the introduction of Irish signage in places like Olympia Leisure Centre would reduce Unionist and Protestant attendance. The chill factor, which was speculated about in some Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs), is now confirmed by empirical evidence.

I suggest there are a number of lessons to be learned.

1. The chill factor introduced by Irish street signs is likely to lead to the non-violent ethnic cleansing of Unionists and Protestants in certain areas.
2. Councils of all persuasions should make sure that the findings of this opinion poll are taken into account during EQIAs and call-ins.
3. Pressure should be brought to bear on the Equality Commission to stop saying that the use of Irish is a “neutral act”. There are many situations, such as the use of Irish on street signs and in leisure centres where it is not neutral at all. Ordinary Unionists and Protestants clearly have an understanding of the symbolic significance of Irish as a political weapon which has quite escaped many in the equality and human rights industries.

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