

Written evidence submitted by Joseph Ward (Doctoral Researcher, POLSIS, University of Birmingham)

Background

The evidence presented below is drawn from a chapter draft of a PhD project currently being completed at the University of Birmingham on the emergence of the referendum in British politics. It is submitted in conjunction with a full draft copy of the chapter to be used as a point of reference for the working group of the Irish Unification Referendums project. The chapter presents an archival analysis of the first referendum to be held within the UK – the Northern Ireland Border Poll, 1973. The data from which the chapter draws were primarily collected from the National Archives of the British state at Kew (London), and are therefore most relevant to the aspect of the project concerning the British government. In preparing this document I have gleaned the principal findings from the chapter and also tried to include those that seemed pertinent to the questions included in the CfE document. That said, it is likely that the broader context and detail contained in the chapter itself may be of wider interest to the group, and throughout this document I have often referred to the where you will find the more detailed point in the chapter itself.

As noted above, the chapter is very much in draft form at the moment, and part of larger project which is yet to be completed. As such, I would appreciate that the chapter draft was not published.

Chapter Summary Key Findings

The key findings of the chapter are as follows:

removing the border issue from political contestation. Although officials and ministers were aware of these developments, the policy was announced and implemented regardless. The result arguably created some space for the Heath government to implement more substantive initiatives around power-

meaning 'the status quo on one hand or a specified change on the other' (Ward n.d: 14). These issues pertain to how any referendum process is organised in a future vote, and suggest that if – in accordance with the Good Friday Agreement provisions (Whysall 2019: 3) – the SoS decides to call a vote on the principle of a united Ireland prior to substantive negotiations taking place, it seems as though it would also be necessary to hold a second vote to confirm the consent of the electorate to the new arrangements – in-line with the recommendations of the Independent Commission on Referendums (2018) (see Ward n.d: 18-21 for discussion in relation to Gibraltar example).

A further consideration that should be paramount in the minds of the NI, UK and ROI governments in relation to any future poll is the possible (inevitable?) politicisation of the legislative and implementation process surrounding the poll. This was a concern raised by officials throughout the process of implementing the 1973 vote, particularly pronounced because of the strategic objective to attempt to remove the border issue from political contestation (see Ward n.d: 8). One key example of this was with regard to timing, as the first SoS for Northern Ireland, Willie Whitelaw, had promised the unionists an early poll, which ultimately proved difficult to implement and exacerbated tensions between unionists and nationalists, as well as between NI and Westminster (20-22).

References

Independent Commission on Referendums (2018)