

JONATHAN TONGE AND JOCELYN EVANS*

Another Communal Headcount: The Election in Northern Ireland

1. Introduction

The Westminster election in Northern Ireland attracted more interest beyond the region than is normally the case. This was not because of healthy new attention being paid to the polity's regular communal (to critics, sectarian) bloc headcount. Rather, it was because the contest's outcome might influence the formation of a minority government at Westminster. This possibility was actively discussed even into election night results programmes, after the exit poll predicted the Conservatives to fall just short of an overall majority, with 316 seats. As that seat tally rose, Northern Ireland's election slid back to its default positions of obscurity and parochial communalism. Religious community background remained easily the most important voting determinant. Unionist electoral pacts in four constituencies heightened the prevailing sense of a traditional Orange versus Green contest, one in which the Alliance Party, aligned to neither bloc, lost its solitary representative. Turnout was a very modest 58%, well below the UK average. Only Sinn Féin, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Alliance contested all 18 constituencies. Nonetheless, the contest was not entirely bereft of interest. There were significant arguments over a disparate array of topics ranging from welfare reform to that of same-sex marriage, still banned in Northern Ireland. Four seats changed hands and the once-dominant Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) recovered some recent lost ground to regain Westminster representation.

*Jonathan Tonge, Department of Politics, University of Liverpool, j.tonge@liv.ac.uk; Jocelyn Evans, Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, j.a.j.evans@leeds.ac.uk

Table 8.1 Party vote and seat shares in Northern Ireland, 2015 Westminster election

	Seats	Change in seats	Votes	% of votes	Change in % share from 2010
DUP	8	0	184,260	25.7	+0.7
Sinn Fein	4	-1	176,232	24.5	-1.0
SDLP	3	0	99,809	13.9	-2.6
UUP	2	+2	114,935	16.0	+0.8
Independent	1	0	17,689	2.5	-0.1
Alliance	0	-1	61,556	8.6	+2.2
TUV	0	0	16,538	2.3	-1.6
Conservative	0	0	9,055	1.3	N/A ^a
Green	0	0	6,822	1.0	+0.5

^aThe Conservatives held an electoral alliance with the Ulster Unionist Party in 2010.

2. The results

Table 8.1 indicates party fortunes in the contest. As has been the case since the 2001 election, Sinn Fein dominated the Nationalist bloc vote, the party's share being 63.8%, compared with the SDLP's 36.2%. Equally predictably, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) maintained its lead over the UUP evident at the previous two Westminster elections, this time by 61.6% to 38.4%.

As can be seen, changes in party vote shares were modest. As might be expected, there was a very strong relationship between party performance in 2010 and that in 2015 as Table 8.2 shows.

The results marked a significant upturn in fortunes for the UUP, a 'positive joy' for the leader since 2012, Mike Nesbitt, who had prioritised a return of his party to Westminster.¹ The UUP had suffered catastrophic reverses to the DUP in 2005 and its only MP, Lady Sylvia Hermon, quit in disgust prior to the 2010 election over the bizarre alliance with the Conservatives. Tentative signs of revival emerged in the 2014 local elections and the capture of two parliamentary seats in 2015 exceeded expectations. The party's hopes centred mainly upon taking ultra-marginal Fermanagh and South Tyrone from Sinn Fein, one of four constituencies where electoral pacts between the DUP and UUP were agreed. The DUP stood aside for the UUP in Fermanagh and South Tyrone and Newry and Armagh, a deal reciprocated by the UUP in Belfast East and Belfast North. The pact arrangement was derided as bad politics that turned off or disenfranchised the electorate. Yet turnout increased in all four constituencies in which the pacts operated, by an average of 3.5%. Only four of the other 14 constituencies recorded an increase in turnout. The electoral arrangement was also criticised as a skewed deal favouring the DUP; or as a pact which would not work,

¹*Irish Times*, 9 May 2015, 'Revitalised UUP Get Most from Night of Mixed Fortunes', p. 5.

Table 8.2 Correlations between 2010 and 2015 Westminster election vote at constituency level

2015	DUP (2010)	UCUNF (2010)	Alliance (2010)	SDLP (2010)	SF (2010)
DUP (16)	.942 (17)				
UUP (15)		.736 (17)			
Alliance (18)			.957 (18)		
SDLP (18)				.931 (18)	
SF (18)					.959 (17)

The figures in brackets represent the number of constituencies contested.

although more perceptive commentators acknowledged the potential for both parties.²

The deal worked extremely well for both forces, allowing the DUP to recapture East Belfast and retain the key seat of North Belfast. Had the UUP polled at its 2010 level in East Belfast, rather than stepping aside, Alliance would have retained the seat. If the DUP had lost votes to the UUP in North Belfast and the SDLP had stood aside for its Nationalist rival, the seat would have been taken by Sinn Fein. A unified communal headcount worked for the DUP in North Belfast amid what its victorious candidate, Nigel Dodds, claimed was ‘one of the nastiest campaigns I have been involved in’.³ From fearing the elimination of parliamentary representation in Belfast, Unionists again held half of the city’s four seats. In Fermanagh and South Tyrone in 2010, although a solitary Unionist candidate (standing, oddly and nominally, as an independent) had stood, the Unionist campaign had been lacklustre. Amid greater Unionist unity, a more prominent candidate (Tom Elliot was a former UUP leader) and weaknesses in Sinn Fein’s defence of the seat, the UUP defied expectations and overturned the slender republican majority of four. The UUP’s other gain was not pact-dependent, a 3% swing in South Antrim allowing the party to recapture a seat lost to the DUP in the calamitous election of 2005. Whilst the UUP’s revival should not be exaggerated, in that its vote share rose by less than 1% in both the 2014 local and 2015 General Elections, the party had restored its credibility as an alternative for relatively moderate Unionists still somewhat DUP-adverse. Table 8.3 provides the party vote shares in individual constituencies.

Average turnout in majority Protestant constituencies was 55.7% and in majority Catholic constituencies 60.5%, maintaining a differential, but one that has been reduced in recent elections, having been as high as 11% as recently as 2005 (North and South Belfast are excluded from the 2015 tallies as their populations are almost

²See as an example of a more judicious analysis, Alex Kane’s view at <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/analysis-great-deal-for-the-dup-but-nesbitt-could-still-be-a-winner-1-6641211> on 19 March 2015.

³*Irish Times*, 9 May 2015, p. 5.

Table 8.3 Northern Ireland constituency results, 2015 Westminster election (% of vote)

	Result	DUP	UUP	Alliance	Sinn Fein	SDLP	Oth	Turnout	Turnout change from 2010	% Swing from 2010
Belfast E	DUP gain from Alliance	49.3	–	42.8	2.1	0.3	2.7	62.8	+3.9	5.5 Alliance to DUP
Belfast N	DUP hold	47.0	–	7.2	33.9	8.2	3.6	59.2	+2.7	1.6 SDLP to SF
Belfast S	SDLP hold	22.2	9.1	17.2	13.9	24.5	13.0	60.0	+2.6	3.4 UUP to DUP
Belfast W	SF hold	7.9	3.1	1.8	54.2	9.8	23.2	56.4	+2.4	–
East Antrim	DUP hold	36.1	18.8	15.0	6.9	4.9	18.3	53.3	+2.7	2.5 DUP to UUP
East Londonderry	DUP hold	42.2	15.4	7.6	19.8	12.3	2.7	51.9	–3.4	4.0 UUP to DUP
Fermanagh & S Tyrone	UUP gain from SF	–	46.4	1.3	45.4	5.4	1.5	72.6	+3.6	1.1 SDLP to SF
Foyle	SDLP hold	12.4	3.3	2.3	31.6	47.9	2.6	52.8	–4.7	1.8 SF to SDLP
Lagan Valley	DUP hold	47.9	15.2	13.9	2.9	6.3	13.8	55.9	–0.5	2.0 UUP to DUP
Mid Ulster	SF hold	13.4	15.4	1.9	48.7	12.4	8.2	60.3	–2.9	0.7 SF to SDLP
Newry & Armagh	SF hold	–	32.7	1.7	41.1	24.1	0.4	64.3	+3.8	0.8 SF to SDLP
North Antrim	DUP hold	43.2	12.1	5.6	12.3	7.0	19.9	55.2	–2.6	–
North Down	IND hold	23.6	–	8.6	0.8	1.0	IND 49.2, OTH, 16.8	56.0	–0.8	–
South Antrim	UUP gain from DUP	30.1	32.7	9.8	12.9	8.2	6.3	54.2	+0.2	3.0 DUP to UUP
South Down	SDLP hold	8.2	9.3	3.8	28.5	42.3	7.9	56.8	–3.4	2.0 SDLP to SF
Strangford	DUP hold	44.4	14.4	13.8	2.6	6.9	18.0	52.8	–0.9	6.0 UUP to DUP
Upper Bann	DUP hold	32.7	27.9	3.8	24.5	9.0	2.1	59.0	+3.6	1.7 DUP to UUP
West Tyrone	SF hold	17.5	15.9	2.2	43.5	16.7	4.3	60.5	–0.4	3.8 SF to SDLP

Note: The strong second places for People Before Profit, with 19.2% of the vote in West Belfast and Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), with 15.7% of the vote in North Antrim, render the concept of swing nebulous in those constituencies. In North Down, the DUP did not contest the seat in 2010, so, again, swing is meaningless.

equally religiously mixed). There was little indication of an appetite for Westminster parties to field election candidates if the performance of the Conservative Party is any guide. Although they contested every seat except Fermanagh and South Tyrone and Belfast North, the Conservatives averaged only 1.3% of the vote and even their best performance, 4.4% in North Down, was deposit-losing.

Sectarian headcounting, for so long the dominant theme of Northern Ireland's elections, showed no sign of dissipating. Table 8.4 indicates the Unionist and Nationalist bloc voting figures. The relationship in each constituency between Protestant and Catholic community background percentages and Unionist or Nationalist bloc voting is then depicted in Figures 8.1 and 8.2.

Figures 8.1 and 8.2 plot the relationships between the percentage of Protestants in a constituency and the Unionist vote and likewise between the percentage of Catholics and the Nationalist vote. On the Unionist side, a plethora of parties make up that combined vote; the DUP, UUP, TUV, UKIP and the Conservatives, plus the support for the Independent Unionist, Sylvia Hermon. On the Nationalist side, the position is much more straightforward, a simple aggregate of the votes for Sinn Féin and the SDLP.

The correlations between the percentage Protestant population and Unionist vote and between the percentage Catholic population and Nationalist vote remain remarkably strong, virtually unchanged from the previous election. They are shown in Table 8.5.

Only East Belfast provided a significant outlier in terms of Unionist bloc voting, with a strong Alliance performance in an overwhelmingly Protestant constituency. If this outlier is removed, the Protestant–Unionist correlation moves to 0.980. West Belfast provides something of an outlier on the Nationalist side, given the strong performance of People Before Profit, which diminished the overall Nationalist vote by nearly one-quarter from 2010 and helped to ensure that the Nationalist bloc vote was less than two-thirds of votes cast, in a four-fifths Catholic constituency.

3. The campaign within Unionism

The DUP's campaign focused upon retaking East Belfast from Alliance. Considerable hostility from the DUP towards its centrist rival had been evident since Naomi Long's success in 2010 over the DUP leader, Peter Robinson, in a seat held by the DUP since 1979. This opprobrium increased markedly after Alliance's decision in December 2012 to support the Nationalist parties on Belfast city council in preventing the Union flag being flown permanently from the city hall, in favour of its display only on designated days. Alliance came under considerable pressure from loyalist groups beyond the control of the DUP from thereon, with its East Belfast office (and others) firebombed during the following 18 months. Alliance's

Table 8.4 Unionist, Nationalist and Non-Unionist/Non-Nationalist vote shares, 2015 Westminster election

Constituency	Protestants	Protestant %	Total Unionist Vote	Total Unionist %	R. Catholics	R. Catholic %	Nationalist vote	Nationalist %	No religion	Turnout %
Belfast E	69,533	75.4	19,575	49.3	11,712	12.7	950	2.4	10.5	62.8
Belfast N	46,821	45.7	19,096	47.0	48,126	46.9	17,637	43.4	6.4	59.2
Belfast S	48,630	43.7	14,685	35.7	49,025	44.0	14,962	38.4	9.5	60.0
Belfast W	15,645	16.7	4660	13.2	75,263	80.1	22,638	64.1	2.7	56.4
East Antrim	63,148	70.1	24,523	73.2	18,362	20.4	3953	11.8	8.5	53.3
East Londonderry	53,097	53.3	20,418	58.8	41,564	41.7	11,127	32.1	4.4	51.9
Fermanagh & S Tyrone	40,100	39.1	23,608	46.4	59,159	57.7	25,810	50.7	2.6	72.6
Foyle	22,193	22.0	6763	18.3	75,731	75.1	29,404	79.5	2.1	52.8
Lagan Valley	73,158	71.9	30,451	75.0	19,346	19.0	3644	9.2	8.1	55.9
Mid Ulster	30,522	30.8	14,658	35.8	66,152	66.7	24,990	61.1	2.1	60.3
Newry & Armagh	34,380	30.6	16,522	33.1	74,591	66.4	32,514	65.2	2.5	64.3
North Antrim	71,446	66.0	31,431	75.0	30,723	28.4	8068	19.3	4.8	55.2
North Down	66,618	74.4	28,344	83.3	11,269	12.6	628	1.8	11.8	56.0
South Antrim	59,349	59.8	25,258	69.6	31,619	31.9	7689	21.1	7.5	54.2
South Down	29,224	26.9	10,812	25.3	75,384	69.3	30,363	70.9	3.4	56.8
Strangford	65,353	73.1	26,026	76.7	15,447	17.3	3211	9.5	8.7	52.8
Upper Bann	58,998	50.0	28,797	61.0	51,919	44.0	15,831	33.5	5.1	59.0
West Tyrone	27,502	30.2	13,060	33.8	61,993	68.0	23,251	60.2	1.5	60.5

North Down's MP, Sylvia Hermon, was re-elected as an Independent (she stood on the same label in 2010) but can be regarded as Unionist. She was formerly a UUP MP and was not opposed by the UUP.

Source for religious composition of constituencies: Russell, R. (2013) *Census 2011: Key Statistics at Assembly Area Level*, Northern Ireland Research and Information Service Information Paper NIAR 161-13, accessed at <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2012/general/7013.pdf>, on 17 May 2015.

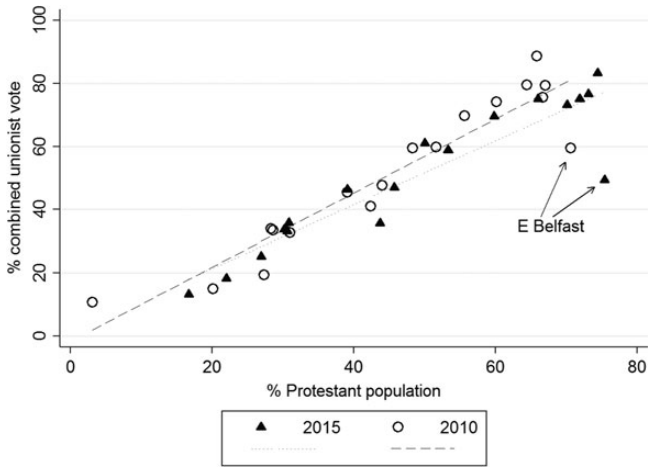


Figure 8.1 Unionist constituency vote by Protestant population, 2010–2015

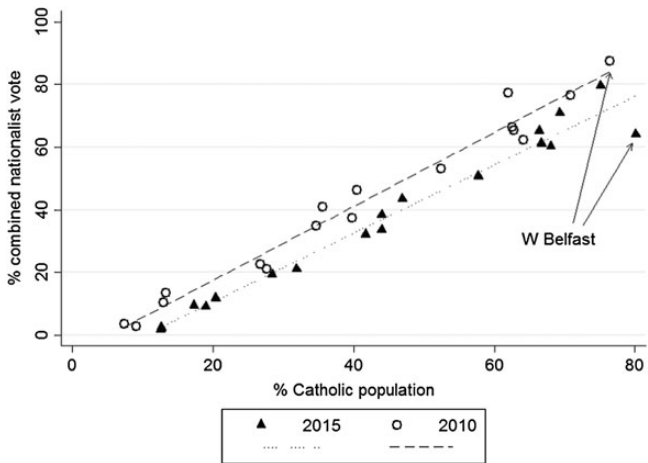


Figure 8.2 Nationalist constituency vote by Catholic population, 2010–2015

Table 8.5 Correlations between religious community background and Unionist or Nationalist bloc vote, 2005–2015

	2005	2010	2015
Catholic-Nationalist	0.975	0.987	0.985
Protestant-Unionist	0.974	0.943	0.919

consistent support for the Parades Commission's determinations on the routes of Orange marches, which had seen the North Belfast Twelfth of July return parade stopped in 2013 and 2014, provoked DUP ire. Alliance's backing for same-sex marriage was also at odds with the DUP's social conservatism. Robinson summarised the DUP's contempt for Alliance in his 2014 party conference speech, deriding the 'flag-lowering, parade-stopping, gay marriage supporting, pro-water charging, holier-than-thou Alliance Party'.⁴ Alliance's *Step Forward Not Back* manifesto⁵ contained a shared future vision (numbers in integrated schools were to double to 20% by 2020 for example) but the party, whilst performing well, was always likely to struggle to hold East Belfast against the combined forces of Unionism.

For the DUP, the recovery of East Belfast offered the prospect of additional strength through size in any post-election negotiations. The unexpected loss of South Antrim neutered the gain but the DUP ended the election as it had begun, as the fourth largest party at Westminster, a position now shared by the much-reduced Liberal Democrats. In anticipation of a possible role of kingmaker in government formation, the DUP, unlike the other smaller parties (with the exception of the Liberal Democrats), was careful to keep open the possibility of doing business with the Conservatives or Labour, although the party's members favoured the Conservatives by a ratio of seven-to-one over Labour and placed themselves considerably right-of-centre.⁶ The Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, cautioned against a 'Blukip alliance' of the Conservatives, UKIP and the DUP, a 'right-wing alliance that brings together people who don't believe in climate change; who reject gay rights; who want the death penalty back and people who want to scrap human rights legislation'.⁷ Amid the extensive television coverage afforded to smaller parties, notably in the leaders' and challengers' debates, the DUP protested at its exclusion (justified by broadcasters due to Northern Ireland's distinct party system) and demanded a Royal Commission to explore the future of the BBC.

Beyond the BBC criticism, the DUP outlined clearly what it wanted from a future UK Government. The shopping list included a demand to keep defence spending at 2% of GDP; EU treaty change to give the UK greater control over immigration and the removal of the 'spare room subsidy', more commonly known as

⁴Peter Robinson, Speech to DUP party conference, La Mon Hotel Belfast, 22 November 2014, accessed at <http://www.mydup.com/news/article/conference-2014-leaders-speech-rt-hon-peter-robinson-mla> on 22 May 2015.

⁵Alliance Party (2015) *Step Forward Not Back: Alliance Party 2015 Westminster election manifesto*, Belfast, Alliance Party.

⁶Tonge, J., Braniff, M., Hennessey, T., McAuley, J. and Whiting, S. (2014) *The Democratic Unionist Party: From Protest to Power*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

⁷'DUP Part of Right-wing Threat Warns Clegg', *Irish News*, 17 April 2015, p. 10.

the ‘bedroom tax’, even though it had not been extended to Northern Ireland anyway. The DUP’s traditional line on being right-wing on security and constitutional issues but, cognisant of a working-class support base, more centre-left on economic issues, was a useful outlook in promoting equidistance between the main Westminster parties. Local issues of importance, such as parade routes and flags, were kept hidden from view in terms of possible leverage.

Similar to the DUP, the UUP did not offer preferment for the Conservatives or Labour. The UUP manifesto also bore many similarities to that offered by the DUP, particularly regarding a reduction in corporation tax and greater local financial control, adding demands for VAT cuts for property repairs and the hospitality industry and extra funding for mental health.⁸ The party claimed the extra economic activity engendered by its tax reductions would be worth £1.4 billion against a diminished take of £500 million. The UUP’s proposals for integrated education from the age of four did not differ markedly from those of Alliance.

4. The campaign within nationalism

With the party’s focus seemingly upon the elections to the Irish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2016, the centenary of the Easter Rising, Sinn Féin’s Westminster campaign was lacklustre. It was even marked by very unusual public criticism from within, following the publication of an election leaflet promoting Gerry Kelly’s candidature in marginal North Belfast. This was the constituency where most Troubles killings occurred (577) and where sectarianism remained rawest.⁹ Attempting to unseat the DUP’s Westminster leader, Nigel Dodds, Kelly’s leaflet lacked subtlety, in deploying a pie chart showing the percentage of Catholics (46.94) and Protestants (45.67) in the constituency, taken from the 2011 census. Voters were urged, on the basis of the Catholic majority, to elect the Sinn Féin candidate to ‘Make the Change, Make History’. The figures represented the entire constituency population, but the adult demography was somewhat different, with Protestant adults still holding a slight majority. Aided by the Unionist electoral pact and splitting of the Nationalist vote between Kelly and the SDLP candidate, the DUP comfortably held the seat. Whilst any Unionist outrage might be dismissed as faux and synthetic, given Northern Ireland’s existence on the basis of a similar headcount, more significant criticism of Sinn Féin’s leaflet came from an unlikely source—two of its own members, who publicly denounced the leaflet as an

⁸Ulster Unionist Party (2015) *One Day, One Vote, One Chance for Change: Ulster Unionist Party Election Manifesto*, Belfast: UUP accessed at <http://uup.org/assets/images/uup%20ge%20manifesto.pdf>, on 22 May 2015.

⁹Accessed at <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/general-election-2015/battle-for-north-belfast-getting-vote-out-is-key-to-dodds-reelection-for-dup-31148874.html> on 12 May 2015.

‘absolute disgrace’ and the ‘very antithesis of what republicanism represents at its core’.¹⁰

Beyond the communal counting, the main thrust of Sinn Fein’s election campaign lay in the opposition to the welfare reforms being introduced at Stormont. The party had appeared to accept the UK Government’s financial package offered in the Stormont House Agreement in December 2014 and supported the subsequent preliminary legislation. The deal comprised ‘£650 m of new and additional funding; flexibilities that protect £900 m of resource spending (normally ring fenced for capital) and additional capital borrowing of up to £350 m’ with the promise that a £114 million ‘fine’ for the failure to complete welfare reform on time be reduced if completed during 2015–2016.¹¹ It was lauded in the Conservative Party manifesto as ‘a deal to help ensure that politics works, the economy grows and society is more cohesive and united’.¹²

Having appeared to acquiesce to the arrangements, Sinn Fein followed its March 2015 ard-fheis in Derry, at which the proposals had attracted minimal disquiet, by rejecting the plans and then continuing to oppose proposed Conservative welfare and service cuts during and beyond the campaign, voting down the passage of the welfare reform bill three weeks after the election and reviving uncertainty over the political institutions. The party demanded the reinstatement of £1.5 billion which it claimed had been cut from Northern Ireland’s block grant whilst advocating the devolution of powers of income tax, national insurance to the region and capital gains tax, as well as the power to set the minimum wage and end zero hours contracts. Whilst the precise timing of Sinn Fein’s apparent u-turn was odd, the party was keen to establish its anti-austerity credentials. Critics had accused Sinn Fein of opposing austerity in the Irish Republic at the same time as presiding over its implementation in the North. By now moving against welfare cuts in Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein diminished the legitimacy of the charge.

Beyond the financial issues, Sinn Fein reiterated longstanding demands for a bill of rights and an Irish Language Act remained, whilst the party also advocated gender quotas for election candidates.¹³ Sinn Fein’s advocacy of a united Ireland was expressed via a continuing commitment to a border poll on Irish unity although it remained unclear whether it would be a North only plebiscite—in

¹⁰ Accessed at <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/regional/election-diary-sf-rising-star-savages-kelly-s-sectarian-leaflet-1-6723815> on 4 May 2015.

¹¹ HM Government, ‘UK Government Financial Package to Northern Ireland’, accessed at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/390673/Stormont_House_Agreement_Financial_Annex.pdf on 21 May 2015, p. 1.

¹² Conservative Party (2015) *Strong Leadership: A Clear Economic Plan: A Brighter, More Secure Future: The Conservative Party Manifesto 2015*, London, Conservative Party, p. 69.

¹³ Martin McGuinness, ‘Standing up to the Tories’, *Irish News*, 28 April 2015, p. 11.

the gift of the British Secretary of State, certain to result in a no vote and more likely to harm the republican cause—or an all-island vote via the two jurisdictions, the latter a potentially interesting expression of sentiment regardless of the seeming impossibility of implementation. Amid talk of a hung Westminster Parliament, Sinn Fein's policy of abstention came under scrutiny. Any possibility of the party taking their seats in a British Parliament was robustly denied by Sinn Fein's Deputy First Minister and by the national chairman, Declan Kearney, the former adamant that it remained a matter of 'principle' and the latter stating that Sinn Fein would 'never' take their seats. Given the denials, which preceded entry into Dail Eireann and the Northern Ireland Assembly, the degree of credence to be afforded such protestations was open to debate, but nonetheless it was apparent that there was no movement on the subject at the present time within Sinn Fein.

The eclectic range of 'dissident' republicans long disillusioned with Sinn Fein's compromises may have been particularly sceptical about Sinn Fein's abstentionist pledge. The political dissidents had enjoyed a few modest local election successes in 2014, one even topping the poll in Derry. The paramilitary aspect of dissidence remained active and was evident in attempted bombings and death threats during the General Election campaign. The dissidents were regarded as 'still a threat' even if their campaign was dismissed as 'going nowhere' by the main Nationalist newspaper.¹⁴ The year prior to the beginning of the election campaign had witnessed three deaths related to the security situation, 73 shootings and 36 bombing incidents, with 35 people charged (from 227 arrests) under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.¹⁵ Over the five years since the last Westminster election campaign, there had been 634 shooting and bombing incidents and eight deaths. This was small-scale compared with the Troubles, but the peace remained imperfect.

SDLP policy for Northern Ireland did not differ markedly from that offered by Sinn Fein, nor did the campaign, which was also 'anti-austerity'. The SDLP emphasised how it had regularly tabled amendments to bills in the Northern Ireland Assembly that had been defeated by the DUP and Sinn Fein. Yet, whilst going into formal opposition in the Assembly remained an option for the SDLP, it was difficult to see how this alone could restore the party's fortunes. The SDLP supported greater devolution of fiscal powers and placed particular emphasis upon the need for tourism VAT to be reduced to 5% to grow the number of visitors. In pledging to form a 'Celtic coalition' with the SNP and Plaid Cymru, the SDLP

¹⁴See, for example, the editorials in the *Irish News*: 'Dissidents Still a Threat', *Irish News*, 23 April 2015 and 'Dissidents Put Lives At Risk', *Irish News*, 29 April 2015.

¹⁵Police Service of Northern Ireland (2015) 'Security Situation Statistics 2014–15', Belfast, PSNI, accessed at http://www.psni.police.uk/annual_security_situation_statistics_report_2014-15.pdf on 22 May 2015, pp. 2–4.

criticised the ‘silent partners’ of Sinn Fein, absent from Westminster.¹⁶ Only four months after supporting the Stormont House Agreement, the SDLP grandly pledged to negotiate a ‘New Economic Accord with Westminster’.¹⁷ The party’s comfortable defence of its three seats did not assuage the desire for a change of personnel at the helm. Within one week of the election, the former leader Mark Durkan and former deputy leaders Seamus Mallon and Brid Rodgers had called for Alasdair McDonnell to stand down.¹⁸ Amid geographical confinement, another shrunken vote share and the perception of better ideas, days and leaders behind it, the SDLP’s long slow decline continued.

5. Social conservatism and the moral agenda

A feature of the election campaign was the debate over social conservatism. Same-sex marriage became one of the most discussed topics. The referendum campaign in the Irish Republic on the issue, which saw a decisive endorsement (by a near two-to-one margin) of same-sex marriage, was already underway when the election in Northern Ireland took place. The DUP remained firmly opposed to revising the traditional terms of marriage. The party had already blocked the attempted introduction of same-sex marriage three times via the introduction of Petitions of Concern in the Northern Ireland Assembly. In addition, DUP ministers had opposed blood donations from gays and adoption by gay couples.

After the election the DUP leader allowed his Assembly members (MLAs) to vote with their conscience rather than a party whip on issues such as gay marriage and abortion, but the net effect would be the same. The UUP already allowed its MLAs a free vote on same-sex marriage, but only one voted in favour of the change, although he (Danny Kinahan) found it no barrier to his election to Westminster in 2015. The DUP was also prominent in backing the Christian bakery, Ashers, which had declined to bake a cake with a slogan supporting gay marriage. Shortly after the election the bakery lost the case, being found to have discriminated against its customer. The DUP promised a ‘conscience clause’ bill protecting individuals against having to act against their religious beliefs, although any legislative proposals appeared certain to flounder against the requirement for cross-community support.

For some within the DUP (but not the leadership) social conservatism offers the prospect of electoral outreach to Catholic conservatives.¹⁹ Yet this seems unlikely to

¹⁶Alasdair McDonnell, ‘Time to Choose a Better Way’, *Irish News*, 29 April 2015.

¹⁷Social Democratic and Labour Party (2015) *Prosperity Not Austerity: Westminster Manifesto 2015*, Belfast, SDLP.

¹⁸*Irish News*, ‘Durkan; SDLP Needs Change in Leadership’, *Irish News*, 15 May 2015, p. 4.

¹⁹See, for example, the comments of the former minister, Edwin Poots, in Tonge et al, *The Democratic Unionist Party*, op cit. p. 182.

yield much dividend amid an electorate still polarised amid by communal division in terms of voting patterns. Moreover, that conservative Catholic constituency is diminishing in size as liberal views spread and it is doubtful that even less socially liberal older Catholics, having endured decades of anti-Catholicism from the DUP's founder, could ever be persuaded to consider the DUP as a viable voting proposition. During the election campaign, the DUP leadership was keener to show the party as a modern force than an organisation rooted in biblical certainties. As the Unionist newspaper, the *News Letter* noted of the DUP's view of homosexuality, the party's strategy was to avoid the question altogether.²⁰ Same-sex marriage and abortion were subjects entirely omitted from the DUP's 32-page election manifesto. The DUP leadership also took care to also omit any mention of such items from its requirements of a future British Government. Obviously these 'moral' issues were devolved items (as re-affirmed at the time of the 2006 St Andrews Agreement when many members insisted the regional opt-out was crucial), so there was no particular reason for the DUP to raise them as bargaining chips. However, their omission was also a product of the DUP leadership's desire to do nothing to deter the potential suitors of its own 'civil partnership'—the Conservative or Labour leaderships—from courtship in the event of a hung Parliament. David Cameron made his distaste clear: 'I totally disagree with the DUP about this issue,'²¹ whilst not closing off any post-election deal options.

The DUP leadership's desire to keep same-sex marriage discussions off topic was soon blown off course by the comments of the party's Northern Ireland Executive Health Minister, Jim Wells, at a hustings three weeks before the election. Located very much within the religiously devoted Free Presbyterian wing of the party, Wells allegedly claimed that the children of gay couples were far more likely to be abused or neglected.²² Although he subsequently apologised, Wells was also involved in controversy over alleged criticism of a lesbian couple's lifestyle and he resigned from office. Debates over same-sex marriage featured in the subsequent televised debates between the party leaders.

Yet despite the furore, Wells' comments were unlikely to dissuade the DUP vote. Of more significance was the gradually changing internal party dynamic, imperceptible to those unwilling to take a closer look. One perceptive commentator was correct in arguing, against the flow, that 'just beneath the surface, the DUP is

²⁰Sam McBride, 'Analysis: DUP Strategy to Avoid Moral Issues in Disarray', accessed at <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/regional/analysis-dup-strategy-to-avoid-moral-issues-in-disarray-1-6712551> on 28 April 2015.

²¹*Irish News*, 'Cameron Refuses to Rule Out a DUP coalition', 23 April 2015, p. 8.

²²Accessed at <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/regional/health-minister-apologises-for-gay-marriage-child-abuse-remark-1-6707479> on 24 April 2015.

changing.²³ Whilst the Free Presbyterians, for whom the DUP was a vehicle for politicised Protestantism, remain the largest single denomination within the party, very few have joined in the last two decades and the party will gradually come to reflect a more 'normal' distribution of Protestant denominations. This change will also be facilitated by the influx of more socially liberal former UUP members who entered the party after the Good Friday Agreement. The DUP will hardly overnight become a liberal and secular entity—the current leader believes strongly in faith-derived politics informing his party.²⁴ The legacy of Paisleyism remains strong even if the influence of Paisley's Free Presbyterian Church wanes. Nonetheless, the party is undergoing change and has come some distance from the views of, for example, former senior DUP figures such as the Reverend Ivan Foster, who, in April 2015, criticised the DUP for softening its stance on the 'vile sin' of homosexuality since the days when the party was at the forefront of the 'Save Ulster from Sodomy' campaign of the 1970s.²⁵

Sinn Fein had brought proposals for marriage equality before the Assembly on three occasions prior to the election and pledged to continue reform the existing law in the party's manifesto.²⁶ During the Westminster election the party was campaigning simultaneously and successfully for a Yes vote for same-sex marriage in the Irish Republic. The SDLP also offered support for same-sex marriage, although five of the party's 14 Assembly members did not vote in the 2015 debate on the issue. The SDLP could fairly point out it was not alone in its divisions, given that Alliance, which strongly trumpeted its support for change, found three of its eight members abstaining on the same-sex marriage bill. The SDLP also took a hard line on abortion, party leader McDonnell opposing a softening of the law even in cases of lethal foetal abnormality.

Overall, the debate over social conservatism amounted to a political contest which did not replace the old Orange versus Green paradigm, but, on same-sex marriage at least, tended to replicate divisions. The Protestant and Unionist wing continued to advocate traditional social values, still more overtly on the DUP side, although even that party will thaw in due course. Both of the main Unionist

²³Sam McBride, 'Analysis: It Might Not Look Like It But the DUP is Changing', accessed at <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/regional/analysis-it-might-not-look-like-it-but-the-dup-is-changing-1-6709299> on 25 April 2015.

²⁴The current leader, Peter Robinson, insists that on a 0–10 scale where 0 equals no faith influence and 10 equals the maximum influence upon a party, faith should equal 10, but should not be derived from a particular church. See Tonge, J. *et al.* *The Democratic Unionist Party*, op cit.

²⁵Accessed at <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/regional/dup-soft-on-vile-sin-of-homosexuality-foster-1-6712547> on 12 May 2015.

²⁶Sinn Fein (2015) *Equality Not Austerity. 2015 Westminster Election Manifesto*, Belfast: Sinn Fein, accessed at <http://www.sinnfein.ie/contents/34582> on 5 May 2015.

parties regarded the issues as matters of conscience rather than formal party positions by 2015, although the DUP was still seen as a party hostile to change. In the centre, Alliance's support for same-sex marriage offered a clear choice for liberal Unionists who rejected the DUP's fusion of politics with a particular moral view. The Green Nationalist side also retained some of its longstanding social conservatism (which even Sinn Fein's left turn of the 1980s had not entirely sidelined) but this was largely on the abortion issue, with neither of the two Nationalist parties advocating a loosening of abortion legislation on the scale of the 1967 Abortion Act elsewhere in the UK, even allowing for Sinn Fein's avowed 'pro-choice' stance. However, Sinn Fein's strong support for same-sex marriage, a position backed by most of the SDLP, marked a significant contrast with Unionist positions.

6. Conclusion

The election amply demonstrated how the linkage between religious community background and voting patterns remains the strongest in Europe. For all that successive surveys indicate that the largest category of electors is that eschewing Unionist or Nationalist labels, this category is very much a minority voter species at election time. Although enjoying a modest vote rise in this contest, the main party declining alignment to either bloc, Alliance, has never achieved a percentage vote share in double figures at any Westminster election—and it was fighting its eleventh such contest. One assessment of the election asserted that 'there are a lot of shy Unionists and pro-Union supporters out there . . . maybe a bit embarrassed by some aspects and manifestations of unionism and loyalism'.²⁷ Nonetheless, it is Unionists and Nationalists who show up at the polls, to cast votes for 'their' ideological parties.

Other issues beyond the old inter-communal attachments were important in the election, although how Northern Ireland's representation might affect the parliamentary arithmetic at Westminster often overshadowed local policy discussions. Welfare reform figured prominently and the extent of devolution to Northern Ireland, particularly in respect of its (lack of) fiscal autonomy, was also a concern. There was consensus across the divide on the need for improved public services and strong support for harmonisation of corporation tax across Ireland, meaning a substantial reduction in the North.

Religiously derived issues featured in the campaign to an unusual extent. Amongst the main parties, support for same-sex marriage was offered by Sinn Fein, Alliance and the SDLP and opposed by the DUP (the UUP remained neutral although most of its elected representatives opposed the idea). Whilst moral issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion potentially provide electoral

²⁷Alex Kane, 'Unionism Was Overall Winner in the Election', *Irish News*, 15 May 2015, p. 21.

reconfigurations and new divides between social conservatives and ‘progressives’, the old Orange versus Green affiliations remain paramount and, if anything tend to be replicated via a Unionist social conservatism versus a Nationalist greater progressivism or liberalism faultline, although this division is far from absolute. There is likely to be considerable pressure placed upon the DUP and UUP on the same-sex marriage over the next few years, provoking arguments on different aspects of the issue. These go beyond the actual merit of rival positions on the issue and into consideration of, first, the isolation of Northern Ireland in comparison to the Irish Republic and the remainder of the UK, versus respect for the principles of devolved self-government and second, the relative merits of any court challenge against the democratic mandate of the DUP and UUP to resist change. Cultural wars have been dominated by the Orange-Green contests of parades and symbols since the Good Friday Agreement, but over the next few years the socio-moral arena will also be significant.

A large swathe of the electorate remains unattached to traditional Unionist or Nationalist labels and declares as non-aligned. However, this sizeable section remains less likely to vote than the ideological identifiers, making Northern Ireland elections continuing contests of mainly true believers. As for the intra-bloc contests, they merely highlighted what these election volumes have been previously asserting. There is electoral space, in the form of a substantial mildly Protestant and moderately Unionist middle-class, for the UUP to revive, as the party continues its organisational improvements. Re-entry to Westminster fulfilled one of the UUP’s immediate strategic objectives. For the SDLP, there is less electoral space to recover and the crises of leadership and organisation meant a further loss of vote share, even in an election in which a somewhat distracted Sinn Fein did not perform particularly well.

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