

# The Party Politics of Post-devolution Identity in Northern Ireland

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## Research Highlights and Abstract

- Offers one of the first detailed considerations of how political parties in Northern Ireland have adapted to the impact of the dual legitimacy of Protestant-British-Unionist and Catholic-Irish-Nationalist identities central to the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement
- Extends debates about devolution and party competition which have been centred on Great Britain to the United Kingdom.
- Outlines how the continuing bi-communalism of the electorate discourages parties from reshaping identity or chasing votes beyond the ethnic divide
- Analyses how nationalist parties, Sinn Féin in particular, have developed the rights of all citizens on the island of Ireland to be Irish, under the post-Good Friday Agreement Irish constitution
- Assesses the data indicating a modest growth of a common Northern Irish identity

*In this article we examine how party political competition in Northern Ireland impacts on understandings of national identity and citizenship both within the region and elsewhere in the UK. These dynamics can be seen in expressions of political identity and through organisational change and electoral strategies. The consociational framework in which Northern Irish parties operate is one of the most powerful dynamics and we assess how it has shaped intra-community party competition, most notably through the emergence of the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin as the strongest unionist and nationalist parties respectively. However, our analysis of campaigning and voting in the 2010 General Election and 2011 Assembly elections also shows that the transformation of party political competition in the UK after devolution is an important dynamic and one that has shaped unionist electoral strategies in particular.*

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**Keywords:** Northern Ireland; Devolution; Consociationalism; national identity

## 1. Introduction

New Labour's commitment to the devolution of political power resulted in an asymmetric quasi-federal system within the UK. Devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland involved the creation of different institutions, with varying levels of legislative power as well as differences in the electoral systems used and the number of elected representatives proportional to the population. Although a devolved body was not mooted for England, there were proposals for greater powers for the English regions. However, this policy was halted by extensive opposition in the north-east, the only region permitted to vote on proposed change.

The design of each sub-state devolutionary structure reflected different assumptions about the strength and nature of national identity and nationalist aspirations in that region.

The body of literature that has developed to address the impact of these new arrangements and institutions on political parties, both in terms of structural reform and changes in policy-making, has tended to focus on Great Britain rather than the United Kingdom (see Hopkin and Bradbury 2006; Laffin and Shaw 2007; Moon and Bratberg 2010). This is a logical approach given that Northern Ireland cannot be drawn into a comparative framework for examining the impact of devolution on the three main 'state-wide', or rather multi-region, parties. Northern Ireland has 'an entirely distinctive local party system and a form of proportional government which in principle favours a politics of localism rather than engagement with the wider issues at play in UK politics' (Jeffery 2009, 299).

Despite this, there is still scope to examine how party political competition in Northern Ireland impacts on understandings of national identity and citizenship both within the region and elsewhere in the UK. These dynamics can be seen in expressions of political identity and through organisational change and electoral strategies. These strategies are implemented within the framework of a consociational system, the logic of which encourages many of the political parties vying for power to direct much of their effort into the articulation of the interests of the ethno-national group that they claim to represent (Bardi and Mair 2008). This means that there remains a strong party political dynamic to the expression of identity within Northern Ireland.

For unionist parties this is evident in the continued divide between cultural and civic unionism, the former traditionally identifiable in the political approaches of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the latter previously more readily identified with Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). Within the Irish nationalist bloc the successful outflanking of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) by Sinn Féin has not produced a fully civic nationalist vision that can embrace the duality of nationhood on the island, or fully secured a way of accommodating unionism as a rival political aspiration stemming from a different sense of identity. Modern republicanism acknowledges unionism as a political tradition, but, in still seeking to end the 'British connection', struggles to wholly endorse the Britishness of Unionists as a political identity. We argue that these dynamics are still the key factor in shaping electoral and ideological competition at all levels, limiting the ability of political parties to de-ethnicise politics and produce genuine cross-community rapprochement.

## **2. Party Political Dynamics in the Consociational System**

The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998 used consociational principles to create a Northern Ireland Assembly dominated by a power-sharing executive and subject to voting mechanisms that require cross-community consent. Consociational settlements rely on a top-down and top-heavy system of government to generate sufficient consensus for democratic government in societies that are characterised as segmented and suffering from a lack of cross-cutting alliances and affiliations

(Lijphart 1968, 1999; Lorwin 1971). In Northern Ireland the segmented communities, whilst often religiously labelled as Catholic or Protestant, are also presented as a nationalist grouping with aspirations to the self-determination of the Irish nation on the island of Ireland and a unionist community who seek to maintain the union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. Muldoon et al. (2008) indicate how a majority of citizens continue to define themselves on a traditional religious/national axis (as British Protestants or Irish Catholics), categories that 'continue to be constructed as oppositional and negatively interdependent' (Muldoon et al. 2007).

These divisions manifest themselves clearly at the ballot box. At the 2010 general election, for example, the relationship between religious affiliation and voting patterns remained as strong as ever (Tonge and Evans 2010). At the 2011 Assembly election, only 10 per cent of Unionist voters straddled the communal divide with a lower preference vote for a Nationalist candidate. Only 20 per cent of Nationalist voters crossed to 'enemy lines' with their lower preferences. Parties act as ethnic tribunes, rallying supporters to their badge on the basis that only they can maximise the benefits for 'their' community (Mitchell et al. 2009). Electors, as rational actors, choose their party accordingly, in pursuit of those benefits. This is not a triumph of extremism given the new moderation of those ethnic tribunes, but it is clearly continuing communalism.

Consociationalists assume that strong communal identities may dissipate eventually and society will reintegrate organically, but they often remain vague on timescale and method (McGarry and O'Leary 2004; O'Neill 2009). Whilst realistic over the depth of ethnic division and the extent of loyalty to ethnic pillars, consociationalists do not offer formulas for bloc dissolution. For anti-consociationalists the strong pursuit of British or Irish identity is something that needs to be 'overcome', as if retarded (progressive 'Northern Irishness' is acceptable, as is non-identity) rather than supported or legitimised (Wilford and Wilson 2006; Wilson 2010). Yet integrationists wishing to dissolve identities are unlikely to be any more successful than republicans wishing to do similar in respect of Unionist-British loyalties. Integrationists tend to be more prescriptive in terms of societal bonding, but may also be more utopian in frontloading eradication over the management of division (for discussion, see Taylor 2009). Meanwhile, largely divorced from this (non-) dialogue amongst intellectuals over the theoretical and normative ways forward for Northern Ireland, the region's political leaders have stabilised power-sharing arrangements between unionists and nationalists, these now seemingly secure.

A tendency of consociational systems of democracy is the impulse towards ethnic outbidding, in which successful parties present themselves as the most strident defender of their group to see off the danger of being undercut by challengers (Barry 1975). The impact of this centrifugal force is seen most clearly in the way in which the fresher and more assertive brands within each community have outstripped their more moderate rivals (Mitchell et al. 2002, 24). However, these 'extreme' parties, the DUP and Sinn Féin, had to moderate their platforms. Sinn Féin substantially toned down its 'Brits Out' absolutism over many years, whilst the DUP was prepared to share power with Sinn Féin following the exit of the Provi-

sional IRA in 2005 and Sinn Féin's declaration of support for the Police Service in Northern Ireland in 2007. These changes allowed the DUP and Sinn Féin to align themselves closely to the views of median voters in their respective ethnic blocs, facilitating victory over the UUP and SDLP respectively and making them the dominant players in the Northern Ireland government (Gormley-Heenan and Mac Ginty 2008; Mitchell et al. 2009). Whilst ethnic outbidding exerts a strong pull over parties and their electoral strategies, attempts to explore more expansive visions of political and national identity within Northern Ireland have been more evident in recent years.

### **3. The DUP and the UUP: Civic and Cultural Unionism at the Polls**

On the Unionist side, the rhetoric of community defence has required a solid commitment to ensuring that Britishness will persist in Northern Ireland, both as a derivative of sovereign authority and as central focus for a sense of identity and belonging. This has been central to the DUP's success in outflanking the UUP, as the party skilfully 'articulates collective unionist memories and presents these in ways that are most meaningful for contemporary unionists' (McAuley 2010, 192). The DUP's rhetoric is steeped in the discourse of cultural unionism which evokes a sense of belonging in a loyalist people bonded by Protestantism, even in a secular age, and by events rather than territory or institutions (Graham 1997). This contrasts with the unionism of the UUP which places emphasis on the civic and political bonds of citizenship and the importance of the (British) state rather than the vision of an ethno-national community.

By dividing unionism into civic and cultural strands as we have done here and elsewhere (see McAuley and Tonge 2010) we are mindful of the risks of creating a false dichotomy. A binary divide within unionism works best as a theoretical framework when those divisions are understood, as Jennifer Todd does in her influential conceptualisation of an Ulster British and Ulster Loyalist identity, as 'ideological poles' to which individuals gravitate (Todd 1987, 2). Whilst the Ulster Unionist approach has gravitated towards a civic unionist identity and the DUP is more obviously rooted in the loyalism that underpins cultural unionism, this is not to deny the secular rational elements of the DUP or the cultural roots of the UUP, which can happen if one adopts too firm a binary approach (Farrington 2001). Intra-Unionist electoral rivalries have previously been overcome in order to try and resist either British policy, most notably after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, or republicans, via occasional tactical electoral pacts. However, whilst acknowledging that strict adherence to self-contained categories of unionism risks abstracting unionist politics from reality (Aughey 1999) one can see how these civic and cultural understandings of what it means to be unionist are a key factor in party political competition between the UUP and the DUP.

The development of the UUP as a political representative of civic unionism can be discerned in the actions of its former leader David Trimble during the peace process of the 1990s. The process created space within unionist and loyalist politics in which more open and civic visions of life in Northern Ireland could be explored (Finlayson 1999; McAuley 2003). Trimble attempted to reassure those nervous over an Agree-

ment that recognised the legitimacy of different and multiple identities, with no privileging of Britishness over Irishness beyond numerical majority. Trimble sought to present this not as the first step towards the severance of the union but as another example of how Britishness had always been able to accommodate and include, as his tribute to Edmund Burke in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech shows:

Burke, the son of a Protestant father and a Catholic mother, was a man who in word and in deed honoured both religious traditions, recognised and respected his Irish roots and the British Parliamentary system which nursed him to the full flowering of his genius. Today as we seek to decommission not only arms and ammunition, but also hearts and minds, Burke provides us not only with a powerful role model of the pluralist Irishman, but also with a powerful role model for politicians everywhere (Trimble 1998).

However, Trimble did not manage to convince enough people in the wider Unionist electorate that now was a time for accommodation and optimism. Harried by the DUP for making concession after concession, particularly as the issue of the decommissioning of IRA weapons remained unresolved, Trimble's authority was worn away by defections and open antagonism towards his decisions within the party (McAuley 2005, 2010).

Luther (1999) argues that party elites in a consociational democracy maintain their position by mobilising the subculture they represent, producing what appears to be high levels of participation but what is in fact a show of strength and factional unity. The UUP, however, was a broad coalition of groups, central to which was the Orange Order which held genuine influence in decision-making processes and both formal and informal power within the party (Patterson and Kaufman 2007). Trimble sought to reform the party, including the breaking of formal ties to the Order (although ultimately the Order jumped first) in an attempt to demonstrate that the UUP was now a modern, organised and inclusive organisation. However, doing this at the same time as the new devolved agreement was struggling meant that Trimble could not offer tangible evidence of the worth of reform (McAuley 2010). He failed to bring about an elite-led party that could participate in a top-down consociational settlement with unanimity. Instead, the UUP has exhibited the highest level of 'backbench' dissent of the parties in the executive heading the Northern Ireland Assembly (Wilford 2010).

Superseded by the DUP at the 2003 Assembly election and in a distant Unionist second place ever since, the UUP have struggled to act as a credible and coherent Unionist force. Having shared power with Sinn Féin when the Provisional IRA was still active and mainstream republicans rejected the police, the UUP struggled to criticise credibly the DUP for sharing power with a Sinn Féin which had shed both of those political albatrosses. The solution espoused by Trimble's successor, Sir Reg Empey, was to break out of this vice by forming an electoral alliance with the Conservative Party under the banner of Ulster Conservatives and Unionists—New Force (UCUNF).

The omens for this alliance, which operated for the European elections of 2009 and the General Election in 2010, seemed propitious. David Cameron's comment that 'I don't want to be the Prime Minister of England, I want to be the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom' reflected a concern that the party was becoming increasingly penned in to English victories (*The Herald* 25 July 2008). When Cameron and Empey announced their intention to explore a new era of partnership (which at the time was rumoured to include moves towards a merger) the focus on identity suggested that voters in Northern Ireland faced a choice between parochial and national concerns, with the home of national politics being Westminster:

There is a real danger that some of Northern Ireland's politicians will continue to look inwards and become 'Ulster Nationalists'. Whilst it is right that local issues such as the NHS are now dealt with at Stormont, this new era of peace and potential prosperity gives us an historic opportunity to propel Northern Ireland into the mainstream of UK politics (Cameron and Empey 2008).

However, the UUP found that the desire to restate Britishness as a civic union of citizens across the UK was not a project in which the Conservatives, or indeed the Unionist electorate, suspicious of allying Britishness to a single 'mainland' party, deeply believed.

The main problem resulted from the lack of forethought on the part of Empey and his allies on issues about power relations within the UCUNF. The partnership turned the UUP into a franchise of a powerful Conservative brand with very little in the way of autonomy or any possible deviation from policies and direction determined by the centre (Moon and Bratberg 2010). The Conservatives' control over candidate selection (seen in the removal of parliamentary candidate Adrian Watson in South Antrim after alleged homophobic comments) and the lack of scope for dissent from Conservative economic policies demonstrated to many UUP members that they must either agree with the Conservative-formulated manifesto or leave. Unfortunately for the UUP, one of those who took the decision to break away was their only sitting MP, Lady Sylvia Hermon, who retained her North Down seat in 2010 as an independent. Deschouwer (2003) identifies factors such as candidate selection and discipline as means of identifying where power lies within a party system and the operation of the 2010 election suggested that this lay in London not Northern Ireland.

When Cameron visited Northern Ireland during the general election he declared, 'I will never be neutral on the union' and averred that the Conservatives and the UUP 'passionately believe that England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are stronger together, weaker apart—and the union of our two parties strengthens those bonds' (*Irish Examiner* 5 May 2010). However, his visit was also designed to allay the fears created by other comments that suggested Northern Ireland would be receiving particular attention when it came to cutting the budget deficit by reducing the public sector. Despite New Labour's attempts to encourage the growth of a private sector, Northern Ireland's economy remains dependent on public jobs and investment (McGlynn and McAuley 2011) and cuts here seemed particularly ominous. The UUP's link to the Conservatives gifted the DUP with an opportunity to present themselves as a strongly defined ethno-regionalist party. Such parties can

utilise the strategy of portraying their rivals as the puppets of a higher level of leadership (Hough and Jeffery 2006) and digs such as 'any Ulster Unionist will answer to the Tory Party and not to you' (Democratic Unionist Party 2010) showed that this was indeed the line utilised by the DUP.

The second problem for the UUP was that whilst Conservative leadership pronouncements on Britishness and unionism seemed to offer a positive way to posit Northern Ireland's citizens as part of a wider civic community, the Conservatives did not need to be as firmly wedded to such explorations as the UUP. The emphasis on Northern Ireland joining the mainstream through this alliance meant that it was the Ulster Unionists being taken into the fold, diminishing any ideas that Britishness could be articulated and understood in Northern Ireland in a way that could influence British identity, politically or culturally, elsewhere. The adaptation of the Conservative manifesto for Northern Ireland changed the invitation of the title from that of joining the government of Britain to that of the United Kingdom. The preference for 'Britain' throughout the Conservatives' main manifesto suggested that championing the Union so strongly was not something that was required to reassure voters elsewhere in the state of a commitment to Britishness and that Northern Ireland remained forgotten and obscured for other citizens (Conservative Party 2010; UCUNF 2010).

The reaction of the Conservatives to their failure to make an electoral breakthrough (and the loss of the UUP's one Westminster seat) was striking. Bratberg (2009) identifies a degree of re-thinking and re-organisation for the Conservatives in Wales to combat their poor showing there. In Northern Ireland, however, the Conservatives accepted the lapse of the UCUNF label before the 2011 Assembly election. The only UK multi-region parties to stand at this level were the United Kingdom Independent Party and the British National Party, hoping to exploit the unionist concern with sovereignty, which has shown the DUP and TUV in particular make much of their Euroscepticism. However, with only 0.6 per cent and 0.2 per cent of the vote these parties made negligible impact. In January 2012, Conservative co-Chairman, Lord Andrew Feldman, announced that the party would establish a new Conservative and Unionist Party in Northern Ireland with 'significant powers and autonomy ... to deliver mainstream, national politics to the people of Northern Ireland' (Conservative Party 2012).

The UUP's recent forays into electoral competition have been unable to secure a wider sense of political union or soothe anxiety about the future of unionism as an identity and the UCUNF did not bear out the prediction that 'as a result of the partnership between the Conservative Party and the Ulster Unionist Party the semi-detached political status of Northern Ireland can end' (Ulster Unionist Party 2010). The way in which this semi-detached status has been presented demonstrates that the UUP's civic project skates over the issue of how decision-making processes in the UK have been altered by devolution: it is direct influence at Westminster that will address the perceived isolation and thus vulnerability of Northern Ireland. This faith in direct connection to high politics is interesting given that the Conservatives' instrumental investment in their partnership with the UUP is, despite evidence that the alliance did not mean so much for the Tories, the best that the Westminster parties have offered. The Liberal Democrats' sympathetic

connection to the non-communal party Alliance has not amounted to a great deal in terms of realpolitik and Labour's resistance to involvement in grassroots organisation was evident when the party fought a legal challenge to demands to extend membership rights to Northern Irish residents.

Current discussions about a new way forward for centre-right politics by Conservative activists in Northern Ireland have prompted talk of greater autonomy through a 'Bavarian' model of party politics (*News Letter* 17 July 2011). Under this arrangement the German Christian Democratic Union does not stand in Bavarian constituencies to clear a path for its ally the Christian Social Union which does not field candidates outside Bavaria. However, whilst such a model could attract some individual UUP supporters or another party alliance one must always remember that the UUP's chief challenge remains formulating a strategy that allows them to regain votes lost to the DUP.

In part, the logic of ethnic outbidding suggests that if the UUP wish to make up lost ground they must play the role that the DUP once played in undercutting the space for negotiation and compromise with republicanism. The protest by UUP Assembly members David McNarry (later expelled by the party) and Tom Elliot against plans for a new body to deal with controversial parades drew on rhetoric formerly familiar to the DUP, claiming that the proposal 'appeared to put Orange parades right in the cockpit of the whims of the Republican agenda, which no-one can deny has the objective of taking Orange feet off the streets' (*Irish Times* 16 April 2010). However, these MLAs are both Orangemen and such sentiments reflect a genuine anxiety that party members have demonstrated throughout the peace process about the threats to a way of life. These concerns serve as a reminder that recent UUP leadership anxieties about securing the union through institutional links are not the foremost worry for those members who fear that those outside Northern Ireland cannot genuinely understand the worth of their culture and practices.

Whilst the UUP has struggled, the DUP has consolidated its position as the largest unionist party in Northern Ireland. Where the UUP paid the price for its perceived concessions and cave-ins, the DUP's decision to enter government with Sinn Féin after the St Andrews Agreement of 2006 was presented as undertaken from a position of strength (McAuley 2010). The move was projected as a consequence of the overcoming of the republican project, which had capitulated to the endurance of British sovereignty in Northern Ireland, exemplified by decommissioning and formal support for the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

The DUP was also able to exploit another advantage over the UUP, namely that it has always been tightly marshalled by its leadership and this control has been reinforced since its rise to pre-eminence in the unionist camp with tactics such as contracts for candidates to prevent deviation from the party line (Gormley-Heenan and Mac Ginty 2008). The combination of an elite-dominated organisation and a traditional and strongly stated message of resistance to betrayal, made relevant to contemporary times, meant that the party was in an ideal position to increase its popularity within the consociational settlement it had opposed.

The party has laid stress on policies that have allowed cultural unionism to hold its own against the strength of Irish cultural identity, with achievements such as the non-appearance of an Irish language act, increased funding for the loyal orders and 'equality of funding between Irish and Ulster-Scots culture' (Democratic Unionist Party 2008). This culture is identified as a strong sense of Britishness, albeit one with elements unique to Northern Ireland and its unionist people. Such a vision of belonging fuses logically with the DUP's approach to the asymmetric nature of devolution in the UK. Peter Robinson's election literature contained the reassurance that 'I can lift the phone and speak to any Cabinet Minister or senior official in representing my constituency or the wider interests of Northern Ireland' (Democratic Unionist Party 2010). The DUP's approach to both institutional politics and cultural belonging is ideally suited to devolution, embracing both Northern Ireland's intrinsic Britishness and necessary separation from any Anglo-centric understandings of that term. However, as with the UUP, the focus is on the relationship between the centre and the periphery and not concerned with ideas of a confederation of identities and connections.

So far, the DUP has faced down the challenge of TUV. Led by former DUP member Jim Allister, TUV was formed in 2007 and attracted disaffected members of both the DUP and UUP. The strategy of TUV is to undermine the DUP for working with Sinn Féin and making supposed concessions to republicans, thus hollowing out the Union. TUV have also harassed the DUP over the non-appearance of the Unionist Academy and the British Cultural Equality Unit, which the party leader, Peter Robinson, unveiled in 2008 as a proposed means of protecting Britishness using both legal and cultural resources. Robinson told journalists: 'there has been something of a cultural war in Northern Ireland. We intend to fight back. Our unionist way of life will not be put in some drawer in the back of an office. We are British and intend to stay that way' (*News Letter* 25 June 2008). TUV have mocked Robinson over the disappearance of such proposals and have promised further 'battles against the dilution of Britishness' (Traditional Unionist Voice 2009). TUV's vote remains small; only its leader, Jim Allister, was elected to the Assembly in 2011. The party nonetheless operates to remind DUP representatives that attempts at ethnic outbidding did not cease when the DUP assumed a hegemonic position within Unionism.

The measure of our success in exposing and opposing the present regime at Stormont is the venom which we draw from Sinn Féin, as they complain about their partner in government constantly looking over their shoulder at TUV. The very least we have achieved is to keep the brakes on DUP concessions (Traditional Unionist Voice 2011).

As TUV's challenge has not produced an electoral trend towards outbidding, the DUP have been free to engage with the possibility of attracting a very different form of electoral support. Peter Robinson's speech at Iveagh House, Dublin in March 2012 built on his gestures such as attendance at a Gaelic football match and indicated a desire to build 'a pro-Union consensus with people from different religious and community backgrounds'. This consensus would bring together those who shared his unionism, based on 'history, culture and identity' and those who 'who do not share that emotional attachment', but who would see it in their 'best

social or economic interests to remain as part of the UK' (Robinson 2012). Whilst Robinson has challenged the idea that Catholic voters will not countenance support for a unionist party or the union itself (*The Times* 19 November 2011) this open and inclusive unionism, divorced from traditional identity politics, seems in the short term at least more of an attempted raid on the UUP's civic unionist base than an expectation that first or lower choice preferences amongst nationalist voters will change substantially in the near future. During the same month that Robinson delivered his lecture, Mike Nesbitt was elected leader of the UUP. Nesbitt, the first Ulster Unionist leader not to belong to the Orange Order, pledged in his acceptance speech that he wanted the UUP to 'become the party of choice for every pro-union voter in Northern Ireland, including those who still say they want a United Ireland, but privately accept there is no longer a single reason not to enjoy their continued membership of the United Kingdom' (*Belfast Telegraph* 31 March 2012).

#### 4. Ethnic and Civic Nationalism in Northern Ireland

The two main nationalist parties in Northern Ireland have been posed different challenges since the GFA. Having been responsible for devising much of the 'agreed Ireland' ideological and institutional architecture which underpinned the 1998 deal, the SDLP then faced the task of persuading the electorate that its big ideas and best days were not now in the past. For Sinn Féin, the primary task was one of capitalising on its new republican moderation to capture the support of the majority of the nationalist electorate. The ethnic 'outbidding' model applied to unionism also pertained to nationalism in terms of the need to secure communal gains.

Whilst most nationalist voters repudiated IRA violence, they nonetheless wanted a stout 'defender' of their ethnic bloc. Thus, with the Provisional IRA removed by way of the mid-1990s ceasefires and then disbandment by 2005, Sinn Féin could reap the rewards of purportedly driving the best bargains possible for nationalists within a consociational power-sharing framework which legitimised rival identities. Electoral advancement would not be attained by diminution of the Irish, nationalist (and arguably Catholic) components of the party's outlook; rather, any gain would be a product of the advancement of ethnic nationalism, but one tempered by civic components which included greater outreach to, and cooperation with, the unionist community.

Sinn Féin's electoral gains were indeed spectacular. Within three years of the signing of the GFA, the party was outpolling the SDLP. By the 2010 General Election, Sinn Féin's vote share (25.5 per cent) exceeded the SDLP's share by 9 per cent, a lead extended by a further 2 per cent at the 2011 Assembly contest. At the final General Election before the Provisional IRA ceasefires, the 1992 contest, the SDLP had led Sinn Féin by 13.5 per cent. Even more tellingly, by the time of the 2010 general election, a majority (61 per cent) of the Northern Ireland electorate believed that Sinn Féin 'has been the most effective voice for nationalists in Northern Ireland', compared to only 12 per cent believing the SDLP had fulfilled such a role (Tonge 2010). That both parties are seen as partisan nationalist voices is seen in the low figures for either—below 10 per cent—when the question was asked 'which party has been the most effective voice for *all* the people of Northern Ireland?'

Amid the perpetuation of virtually sealed electoral ethnic blocs, Sinn Féin had become the dominant voice of northern nationalist communalism, whilst the party concurrently stressed its all-Ireland structure, a feature which facilitated the capture of 14 seats in the 2011 general election in the Irish Republic, Sinn Féin's largest haul since 1923. Sinn Féin's growth in support in Northern Ireland has palpably not come via the attraction of Protestant-Unionist backing. Lower preference vote transfers from DUP voters averaged 0.2 per cent at the last four Assembly elections and UUP voters are almost as strong in their disdain, only 1 per cent transferring to Sinn Féin (Tonge and Evans 2010).

## 5. Political Identity and Acknowledgement of the 'Other Tradition'

Whilst the distinctions between the SDLP and Sinn Féin were once clear in terms of methodology and the structural basis of support, these have narrowed considerably, leaving 'ethnic delivery' as a key instrument of voter choice. Sinn Féin's vote has grown across all social classes, but it is the rise of its middle-class support that has been most striking, with nearly 40 per cent of the nationalist salariat now backing the party, compared to less than ten per cent during the 1980s (Evans and Tonge 2009). Middle-class nationalists were happy to transfer support to Sinn Féin to consolidate the party's constitutionalism and reward the eschewal of the more militant methodologies once backed by the party.

As structural identification with either nationalist party has diminished, so party choice has been more a product of ethnic tribune appeal. Ostensibly there ought to be limited utility in electoral appeals confined to the nationalist community. According to the two most recent figures, less than one quarter of the electorate regard themselves as nationalist (Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2010b; Tonge 2010) with the largest single category being those who decline to identify as either unionist or nationalist. However, an average of 90 per cent of those bothering to vote in Northern Ireland elections do so for communal parties, with Alliance and other minor non-aligned parties struggling to impact upon the electorate. The extent of communal electoral affiliation is widened beyond what one might expect from reported levels of unionist and nationalist identification by two things. Firstly, Northern Ireland's electors tend to play down their unionist or nationalist credentials in surveys (even now, Sinn Féin's support tends to be under-reported). Secondly, those declining to identify as unionist or nationalist are less likely to vote compared to those who do associate with one of the ethno-political blocs. Amongst electors eschewing unionist or nationalist labels, a very slight majority abstained at the 2010 Northern Ireland Westminster election, a non-voting rate 14 per cent higher than that found amongst bloc identifiers (Tonge 2010).

As yet there are no particular incentives for straying beyond the confessional reservoir in eliciting political support. The SDLP did attract some cross-community votes from the UUP in the early post-Agreement years, but of far greater import was the party's loss of support to Sinn Féin within the nationalist bloc. Thus the intra-bloc contest remains almost the sole concern of parties until such time as ethno-national and ethno-religious affiliations diminish—a process which the

parties are not overly hastening along thus far, notwithstanding their welcoming of support from all sections of the community.

In terms of mainstream republicanism and nationalism, Sinn Féin and the SDLP has each claimed to be the more effective provider of community spoils, usually portrayed as an 'equality agenda'. Both have also promoted themselves as the likelier vehicle of Irish unity, but with differing emphases. The SDLP's emphasis has always been upon an agreed Ireland and against 'the entrapment of a new minority' (SDLP 2011). The party leader from 2010–11, Margaret Ritchie, used her 2010 conference speech to highlight that her party was 'not afraid to say "Northern Ireland" or encounter a member of the British Royal family at a function', insisting that the SDLP 'will not deny our goal of Irish unity but we can honestly say we want this place to be a social and economic success here and now—wherever we happen to be on our constitutional journey' (Ritchie 2010). Ritchie's successor, Alasdair McDonnell, pledged to 'continue our mechanisms of reconciliation into a United Ireland so it genuinely is a New Ireland', emphasising the need for persuasion for constitutional change (McDonnell 2011). Sinn Féin's continuing commitment to a united Ireland also speaks of the need for persuasion. The party's lack of acknowledgement of a separate northern state, in its rhetorical discourse at least, ensures that the party oscillates between service of the polity, via its prominent position in the governing executive and denial of its ultimate legitimacy, via the use of the terms 'The North'—used frequently by Sinn Féin ministers in wider public discourse—or the 'Six Counties', used by Sinn Féin at their own gatherings. Sinn Féin's 'constitutional journey' needs a fixed final destination.

Both nationalist parties claim to offer a civic vision respectful of the rights, traditions and culture of the Unionist minority on the island. Ever since its first major policy document, *Towards a New Ireland* (SDLP 1972) the SDLP has emphasised the need for institutional arrangements to address three sets of relationships: those between the two communities in Northern Ireland; those between Belfast and Dublin and those between London and Dublin. Under devolved arrangements, there has been renewed emphasis upon inter-communal relations, with the SDLP placing emphasis upon the need for strategies of de-segregation. Sinn Féin has moved from ethnic republicanism towards a civic model that acknowledges the need to persuade Unionists of the merits of Irish unity. Assimilationist tendencies have been displaced by those of accommodation.

Acknowledgement of the need for cooperation between the two traditions is apparent at different levels. Amongst elite representatives, it occurs within the Northern Ireland executive and at the lower strata of the Assembly chamber. Whilst there is political grandstanding and party ministerial empire building, allied to the ethnic urges prompted by frequent commemorations of historical events beyond the chamber, the post-2007 model of devolved power sharing has been largely functional. At party level, the project for Sinn Féin has been one of Unionist outreach, in an attempt to discover and address the fears of Unionists and develop a better understanding of their identity. At the grassroots level of sectarian interface, there have been significant levels of pragmatic cooperation between republicans and loyalists to diminish inter-communal tensions. These relations have helped community relations to improve substantially over the last decade despite the non-

dilution of national identities (Knox 2010). The sum of these parts is not a shift from Irish nationalist identity or politics, but rather their promotion in more challenging forms than evident in the stalemate of conflict.

Yet there are ambiguities in the new inclusive approach to identity. Despite their repudiation of ethno-sectarianism, both parties continue to fish in the same, static ethnic pool for votes, reliant upon an Irish-Catholic-Nationalist core vote and declining to cast their electoral nets further afield. Controversies of a range of matters from flags (the flying of the Union Jack or the Irish tricolour) to displays of flowers dogged the early years of power sharing (in 2001, Sinn Féin sparked a row at Stormont by placing Easter lilies, a symbol of Irish republican sacrifice, at the front of the building, causing an 'emergency' recall of the Assembly). Such rows were infused with symbolic community identity, occurring alongside political progress (McCall 2006; Bryan and McIntosh 2007). Acceptance of a hybridity of identities, Irish or Northern Irish, tends to brake at full acceptance that Unionists are British. The SDLP has flirted with ideas of post-nationalism, particularly under the pro-EU ideas propagated by John Hume, but appears to have settled for bi-culturalism (Frost 2006) whilst simultaneously promoting reconciliation and reunification (see also McLaughlin 2011). There remains ambiguity in party discourse on Unionists over whether they constitute a tradition or part of a nation. With further to travel on this road of acceptance, Sinn Féin has displaced ethno-geographical determinism (a united Ireland compromising a united Irish people) with acknowledgement of the need for persuasion of Unionists that a united Ireland is a good thing.

The acceptance that Unionists are different and possess their own political identity is not, however, tantamount to saying that they are truly British, representatives of a different national identity on the island of Ireland, rather than being merely a very distinctive Irish political tradition. The furthest Sinn Féin goes is to accept that Unionists 'can be whatever they want to be' (Gildernew 2000). Sinn Féin's attempt to frame a Unionism that is devoid of Britishness breaks the link between political and cultural identity, a duality Sinn Féin is often keen to recognise in terms of Irishness. Placing Unionism within an Irish cultural context could be seen as part of an attempt to divorce Unionism from political Britishness.

Sinn Féin's priority is to stress the Irish identity of many citizens in Northern Ireland and to promote political rights, in order to turn nation-belonging into all-Ireland citizenship. This strategy has involved a substantial bolstering of its political representation in both jurisdictions, encouraged by the cross-border constituency switching of the party President Gerry Adams and incorporates policies which offer political resonance to the membership of an Irish nation for Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin thus advocates voting rights for Northern Irish citizens in Presidential elections in the Irish Republic and full representative rights for Northern Irish Assembly members in *Dail Eireann*, the Irish Parliament.

These struggles for political recognition of Irishness are uphill, given the reluctance of Irish political parties to intervene directly to 'spread' Irishness by, for example, operating in the North. The Irish Labour Party did offer a merger to the SDLP at the time of the GFA, but this was rejected by the SDLP. Fianna Fáil briefly considered

some kind of arrangement with the SDLP or the possibility of standing candidates in the North—but nothing came of it. Only Sinn Féin straddles the border. The consequence is the perpetuation of northern nationalist communalism, distinct from the Irish nationalism evident elsewhere on the island.

## 6. Conclusions

Considering the party political dynamics in Northern Ireland it is apparent that the consociational logic of ethnic outbidding has kept closed much of the space wherein unionist politicians could explore civic projects that could make use of a political Britishness which accommodated multiple layers of individuals' identities. The intervention, then partial withdrawal, of the Conservatives suggests that, despite continued support for the maintenance of the Union, the party envisages that the nature and significance of ties with Northern Ireland are something for those elsewhere in the UK to gauge.

For cultural unionism, dissident republican actions, along with anxieties over unionist fragmentation and the loss of Britishness, viewed through the medium of cultural symbols and practices, means the insecurity that has pervaded loyalist politics remains. TUV has failed to develop as a 'credible militant in-bloc party rival' which could deliver electoral punishment for collaboration with Irish republicanism (Tilley et al. 2008, 716). However, while recent gestures by both Peter Robinson and Mike Nesbitt suggest the possibility of electoral re-alignment for unionist parties along non-communal lines, this warm hand of friendship that is being extended to Catholic voters can arguably be understood as a new form of intra-communal competition.

Devolution has brought about a change in the respective positions of the two unionist parties, but it has not encouraged them to resolve issues of belonging and citizenship in Northern Ireland and the way in which devolved institutions have developed has not eased this task. Devolution in the UK has not been symmetric and federal in nature. Intergovernmental structures have developed but many elements of intergovernmental relations have been *ad hoc* (Birrell 2012). In addition, the British-Irish Council which now has a permanent base in Edinburgh has struggled to find a role and does not feed into any policy agenda (Nolan 2012). There is also the issue of the Scottish independence referendum, which, even if it does not produce a 'yes' vote, raises the issue of the cultural and emotional ties of Britishness which unionist politicians are still keen to champion alongside pragmatic reasons for maintaining the constitutional status quo.

Developments within Unionism have been replicated within nationalism, with the triumph of Sinn Féin, the supposed outflanking of moderates amid a 'greening' of the ethnic bloc and the articulation of Irish nationalist demands. Sinn Féin's successes have been built upon a fusion of new moderation with continuing episodic ethnic militancy. The former was displayed in the removal of the Provisional IRA, allowing Sinn Féin to make major electoral advances and the latter was visible in the dogged pursuit by the party of its 'equality agenda', a process of cultural and economic parity and the continuing opposition to a small number of contentious Orange parades.

Amid ethnic valence, Sinn Féin has been seen by many nationalists as the party better able to advance the interests of a community for which a united Ireland remains a goal, but prioritises advancement of other ambitions in the interim. For three decades, the SDLP was viewed as the custodian of civic nationalism via its strategy of an agreed Ireland so central to the GFA, but this has been challenged by the constitutional and civic forms of nationalism offered by Sinn Féin. This has acknowledged the existence of political and cultural bi-nationalism, with power sharing, outreach and local cooperation the visible manifestations of the new nationalism.

A shift from the ethnic republicanism of assimilation to the civic republicanism of acceptance of the duality of identities on the island has been a significant feature of the modern political dispensation. It has been juxtaposed with vigorous communal politics, assertions of Irishness and the attempted translation of the claims to Irish nationhood contained within the post-1998 Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution, into new political arrangements. The revisions to Article 2 and 3, agreed to overwhelmingly by the voters of the Irish Republic in the 1998 referendum, removed the pursuit of territorial Irish unity as a constitutional imperative, acknowledging that this could only come about through the consent of electorates North and South. However, the revised Article 2 also states that it is the 'entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish nation'. The nationalist parties in Northern Ireland, more especially Sinn Féin, have been keen to develop that Irish identity within the northern state. A new politics of identity has displaced the old politics of conflict, one based upon the prolonged acceptance of bi-communalism and the much longer-term aspiration of its eventual dissipation. As derivatives of different nationalities, neither political nor cultural tradition is set to bio-degrade in the immediate future, even if a significant section of the population resist the Unionist and Nationalist labels associated with the rival ethno-national forces.

The northern state has now existed for over ninety years. Secure cross-community devolved power sharing is now embedded and local political institutions have grown in importance, as part of a tri-national (British, Irish and Northern Irish) institutional framework, which has replaced the bi-nationalism of the Anglo-Irish axis of direct rule and the peace process. The regional party system meanwhile is largely insulated from the British and Irish systems. This growing institutional strength and party system separateness offer scope for the development of a common civic Northern Irishness, bonding across the old ethno-national and ethno-religious divides. Thus far however, the growth in 'Northern Irish' identity since the GFA has been modest, 28 per cent claiming such identity in 2010, compared to 23 per cent in 1998 (Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 1998, 2010a). Catholic and Protestant subscription to the identity is fairly even, but Catholics tend to emphasise its Irish component and Protestants the distinctiveness of 'Northern' Ireland, whilst those of no religion are most likely to choose this identity. There is already pragmatic cooperation and recognition of commonalities between grassroots republicans and loyalists and at elite political levels. However, bonding to the extent of the emergence of an uncontested and uncontroversial Northern Irishness may yet take several generations.

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