

A Platform for Change

**Renewing and realigning
politics in Northern Ireland**

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January 2009

Cover by Dunbar Design

Printed by Northern Whig

Photographs by Pacemaker Press

Further copies from r.wilson250@btinternet.com

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Executive summary

This paper is the result of a project set in train against a backdrop in which devolution had mostly been in abeyance since the Belfast agreement and the current devolved administration, dominated by the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin, had become deadlocked. Indeed, it had only just begun again to meet at all amid considerable public dissatisfaction about its performance.

The project sought to address the twin requirements of party-political *realignment* in Northern Ireland and a *renewal* of political participation. Its aim was to ensure that a power-sharing executive that was both committed and stable could finally be established at a future assembly election—associated with a move towards more ‘normal’ governance arrangements, with a cohesive government and an assembly opposition and a focus on ‘bread-and-butter’ issues. It was advanced by a steering group of long-standing progressive thinkers and activists in Northern Ireland, and was executed on their behalf by Robin Wilson, who has been co-leading a research team monitoring the outworking of devolution for the past nine years.

Through focus groups and individual interviews, the project found a considerable appetite for ‘change’, in the wider society and among more accommodating members of the political elite. The idea emerged through these discussions that the best way to give focus to this aspiration would be to elaborate a clear vision for change. This could be developed and embraced by organisations within civil society in Northern Ireland and could be taken up by progressive political parties and individual activists, with a view to agreeing a pre-electoral platform for an alternative governing coalition. It would be associated with proposals to make the power-

sharing arrangements more flexible and more consistent with norms of collective responsibility in government and scope for opposition and democratic alternation. A draft version of a Platform for Change has been prepared.

The proposed platform suggests that change must be away from a society which still fractures along sectarian lines to one at ease with itself, *via* a common commitment to universal norms of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, including a bill of rights based on international standards. Change must be from political competition within ‘communities’ towards competition between parties as to which can best meet public demands, with a coalition government formed after an election by an inter-party agreement that commands weighted-majority assembly support and an opposition to hold it to account.

Change must be from a cavalier attitude to the concerns of citizens’ daily lives to developing serious policy portfolios to address the big challenges—of a ‘shared future’, social inclusion and sustainable development—*via* devolved legislation implementing a programme for government. Change must be from public disengagement and even cynicism towards a re-engagement of civil-society organisations, experts and practitioners on the ground, with a revivification of the Civic Forum. And change must be from an introverted political culture to one which uses devolved power as a foundation to reach out across Ireland, the UK and Europe, developing collaborative projects and absorbing best practice.

This pamphlet has thus been published with a view to stimulating wider debate. The key question in that debate will be whether a broad civic and political coalition can indeed be united behind an agreed platform that can bring a step change in Northern Ireland politics in the years ahead.

Introduction

The welcome which met the renewal of devolution to Northern Ireland in May 2007 has gradually turned to disillusionment with the performance of the devolved administration. The parties quickly reached an impasse after power was once more transferred, notably on the devolution of policing and justice, the Irish language, the future of selection at 11 and the redevelopment of the old Maze prison site. On each issue, Sinn Féin was cast as *demandeur*, while the Democratic Unionist Party was determined to wield the veto powers it acquired in the St Andrews Agreement of October 2006 as a precondition of entry into government with SF.

This had been foreshadowed by analysis of the stances of candidates for the 2003 assembly election (Lutz and Christopher Farrington, 2006: 728-9), where DUP runners were more conservative on morality and religion than their UUP counterparts, while SF candidates were more nationalistic than SDLP competitors. The bible-based antagonism of DUP members (and now some ex-members) towards accommodating republicans in government after May 2007 and the willingness of SF to countenance that government being stymied were reflected in the five-month hiatus between meetings of the Executive Committee, which SF in turn exercised its veto to block, leaving many policy papers awaiting agreement until meetings were restored in November 2008. At the margins there has meanwhile been a disturbing growth of 'dissident'-republican activity, including attempted murders of policemen and renewed 'punishment' attacks (Wilford and Wilson, 2008c).

The Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP have not been unaffected by this polarising trend. While these parties had shown signs of coming



Running up a flag: David Cameron at the UUP conference

together after devolution was re-established, (Morrow, 2008: 70), they have also been pulled away from co-operation and towards liaison or even fusion with parties of the same nationalistic alignment—in the case of the SDLP, consideration of a relationship with Fianna Fáil (Wilford and Wilson, 2008b: 53) which was not to be realised and, in terms of the UUP, merger talks with the British Conservatives (Empey and Cameron, 2008) which were to be scaled back to a (non-devolved) electoral arrangement. This though it has been argued that the SDLP's retreat from moderate reformism since the early 70s into a nationalism dependent on Irish government support has seen the party overtaken by the traditional-nationalist SF (McGrattan, 2007) and there is a space to the social-democratic left

of SF to exploit (Murphy, 2008), and though the liberal and social-democratic wings of the much attenuated UUP have rejected the Conservative embrace (McGimpsey, 2008).

Within this context, the concrete record of the devolved administration has been particularly weak, including by the standards of its predecessor from 1999 to 2002, which itself performed poorly in terms of policy innovation by comparison with Scotland and Wales (Hazell, 2003: 290-1). The bills projected in the legislative programme announced by the executive following renewed devolution were ironically mainly required to sustain ‘parity’ with England and Wales, and the draft Programme for Government when it appeared was only 17 pages long—even though double spaced—whereas the first programme of the previous administration had amounted to nearly 70 pages (Wilford and Wilson, 2008a: 11-12, 24). Progressive policies published under direct rule—on ‘community relations’ *A Shared Future* (OFMDFM, 2005), on poverty *Lifetime Opportunities* (OFMDFM, 2006a) and on the environment *First Steps Towards Sustainability* (OFMDFM, 2006b)—were meanwhile shelved.

On the ground, there are now fully 88 ‘peace walls’ in Belfast—more than twice a previous official estimate—mainly in the north of the city (CRC, 2008), from where five local clergy wrote to the *News Letter* to bemoan the binning of *A Shared Future* (Wilford and Wilson, 2008b: 17). With the lowest employment level in the UK, those on low fixed incomes in Northern Ireland have been hit hardest by the spike in food and fuel prices (*Belfast Telegraph*, November 6 2008), yet an anti-poverty strategy became one of the sheaf of papers stuck in the pending tray during the 2008 hiatus (*Irish News*, August 12 2008)—only for the executive to decide with no publicity that *Lifetime Opportunities* should simply be endorsed after all. Even the devastating floods in August were not enough to precipitate an emergency executive meeting, while the system of autonomous ministerial fiefdoms enshrined in the Belfast agreement

meant there was no single emergency line for inundated households to phone.

Public reaction has been increasingly sour. A poll in the *Belfast Telegraph* one year on from the renewal of devolution found that 72 per cent said it had made no difference to them. The paper's political correspondent attributed this to the 'creeping paralysis' of the executive (Wilford and Wilson, 2008b: 30-1). The former editor sent an open letter to the first minister, Peter Robinson, attacking his 'dithering' government, 'dominated by two of the most authoritarian and dogmatic parties in Europe' (*Belfast Telegraph*, May 12 2008).

Ironically, it subsequently emerged that the DUP and SF had been unable to agree on the text of a glossy magazine trumpeting the first year of restored devolution—the front page was to be headed 'What has really changed since devolution?'—apparently because of a dispute over the use of Irish (Wilford and Wilson, 2008c). Frustration became particularly evident in the business community, as the failure of the Executive Committee to meet held up important public capital projects, while unemployment in the construction industry was rising rapidly (*Belfast Telegraph*, October 29 2008; *Irish Times*, November 4 2008). With winter-fuel payments to the elderly also threatened at a time of severe gas and electricity price rises, a 'can't eat or heat' demonstration of senior citizens took place at Stormont on the very day it emerged that the impasse over executive meetings had been broken.

That morning, the respected former permanent secretary Maurice Hayes had written: 'Not unreasonably, the man and woman in the street are becoming disillusioned by all this inactivity. Was it for this they endured the trauma of three or four decades of the Troubles, the intermittent shifts of the peace process, the promise of hope and the fear of failure, and the serial disappointments on the way to a new Stormont?' (*Irish*

Independent, November 17 2008). And while the decision to reconvene the executive was welcomed, the UUP leader, Sir Reg Empey, said he hoped it was not ‘simply another fudge to get us out of this latest hole’, scepticism echoed by his SDLP and Alliance counterparts, Mark Durkan and David Ford respectively (*Irish Times*, November 18 2008).

The question thus arises as to whether it would be possible to construct, at the next and/or subsequent assembly elections, an alternative, cross-sectarian political coalition, committed to progressively de-ethnicised political institutions and a substantial policy agenda. An assembly election is not due until 2011. In a context of the apparent incapacity of the ethnic forces of the DUP and SF to collaborate in government effectively—even though, ironically, they have been defined as within (DUP) or on the margins (SF) of the European family of ‘populist radical right’ parties (Mudde, 2007: 52-5) and thus readily agreed a right-wing programme—the alternative would seek to coalesce the political forces from left to centre-right, which currently do not behave in a coherent way, and to reinvigorate them from outside.

Such a coalition could stretch from left-wing former supporters of SF, baffled by the party’s dumping of the ‘revolutionary’ social agenda it rhetorically espoused in the 70s and 80s (Bean, 2007), through to natural ‘Christian democrats’ in the UUP, *via* the SDLP and Alliance. It would seek a replacement of the mandatory-coalition arrangements, which allow of no opposition or alternation, by a requirement that power-sharing governments be formed by agreement. If it could command a governing cross-sectarian majority in the next assembly, or the one after, it could isolate the DUP—though this would require removal of the communalist arrangements which effectively allow a party with a majority only within one ‘community’ to wield an absolute veto over assembly decisions.

There is always a risk, as with ex-Yugoslavia, of assuming politics in

Northern Ireland is abnormal, not because of abnormal political systems and processes but because the *people* are abnormal—victims of inexplicable ‘ancient hatreds’ (Wilson, 2008). Actually, respondents in Northern Ireland to the World Values Survey, contrary to such sectarian stereotyping, are marginally *more* capable of identifying their position on a conventional, left-right political spectrum than the global average. Indeed, the mean Northern Ireland response uniquely coincides exactly with the worldwide mean, a shade right of centre. As elsewhere, therefore, the task of assembling a progressive coalition comes down to whether the centre ground is aligned with the left rather than with the right. Realistically, however, an effective Northern Ireland version would have to stretch further towards the right than elsewhere: the region is a little more conservative than the UK average (Noël and Thérien, 2008: 36-7).

Such a realignment has been floated in studies of the northern nationalist and the Ulster Unionist parties. As to the former (Murray and Tonge, 2005: 268), it was asserted: ‘A post-nationalist, post-Unionist realignment of politics in Northern Ireland may yet emerge, in which the SDLP makes common cause with the UUP and Alliance, but this is at least one generation away and might be impossible to build under the current terms of the Good Friday Agreement.’ As to the latter (Walker, 2004: 286), it was suggested: ‘There are many blueprints for breaking the circle of this Unionist-Nationalist endgame, and the Belfast Agreement in a convoluted way is one of them, yet there will be no definitive departure of the kind desired while the community on which the UUP depends, and out of which it emerged, continues to feel that its identity and very being are gravely threatened.’

A realignment could however be hastened by disillusionment with the SF-DUP dyarchy at Stormont, if a credible agreed coalition was offered, associated with arrangements for formation of a power-sharing executive more flexible than those embodied in the Belfast agreement. And in

that context members of the Protestant community would not feel as threatened as they have by the ‘republican movement’ in both its guises. In such a context, moreover, the DUP could find itself consigned to long-term opposition, leading more moderate members back to the UUP fold—reversing the trend of recent years.

On the other side, there is evidence that SF’s support has softened as the party has so often been rendered impotent by the DUP: poll endorsement fell from 22 per cent before the assembly election to around 15 per cent in the *Belfast Telegraph* survey, conducted by the same firm, a year on from devolution, reducing it to fourth place (Wilford and Wilson, 2008b: 31). A credible governmental alternative to the DUP could reduce SF to the minor status it enjoys in the republic, albeit individual members (particularly the more social-democratically inclined) might find a home in the SDLP. While the DUP can always call on the support of a Protestant minority theologically as well as politically conservative, the large centre and left ground has not been articulated by the UUP and SDLP, confined as they have been to discrete losing battles with their respective ‘ethnic outbidders’ on an intracommunal agenda.

Disillusioned centrist supporters appear to have fed the severe decline in electoral participation since the Belfast agreement (Wilford *et al*, 2007: 115-7). These have not been picked up by Alliance as, like its family of similarly pre-capitalist liberal parties elsewhere in Europe (with the exception of the Liberal Democrats, which have attracted disillusioned Labour supporters by a more social-democratic rhetoric), it has only been able to secure a small niche vote—as captured in its widespread caricature in Northern Ireland as ‘middle class’. It too has arguably made path-dependent mistakes, like the SDLP, turning away from the wider progressive pitch it made in the late 70s and early 80s, when it was able to attract support from former Northern Ireland Labour Party voters, had a solid base in north and west Belfast and reached an electoral peak of 14 per

cent. Meanwhile, left-wing activists, drawn as elsewhere from the trade unions and the public and voluntary sectors, lack any vehicle of political expression.

The first signs of a move towards realignment were provided in the conclusion to a speech by the SDLP leader, Mark Durkan, to the British-Irish Association in Oxford in September 2008 (*Irish News*, September 6 2006). He said the ‘arguably sectarian’ system of communal designation in the Northern Ireland Assembly—the basis for the deadlocking vetoes in the executive—should be replaced in the next assembly term by a strong bill of rights. And he talked about a ‘political realignment’ more consonant with a ‘shared future’.

Mr Durkan’s BIA intervention was attacked by the SF president, Gerry Adams. Mr Adams said (*Belfast Telegraph*, September 9 2008): ‘Many nationalists will be deeply troubled by these ill considered and irresponsible comments which would effectively accept a return to unionist majority rule.’ But the deputy leader of the UUP, Danny Kennedy (2008), argued: ‘Unionists and nationalists are now sitting together in a devolved government. Now that this goal has been achieved, it is time to move towards a more normal institutional arrangement for cross-community government. Such an arrangement would require parties before entering government to agree the policy agenda they will pursue.’

The project

It was against the backdrop described in the introduction that the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust generously supported a project to explore whether Northern Ireland's party-political system could be *realigned* with a view to establishing a progressive coalition, and more flexible and functional power-sharing arrangements, *via* the next or subsequent assembly election, associated with a *renewal* of political participation in the region. The project was led by a steering group of progressive activists and intellectuals in Northern Ireland, active for many years in 'community relations', cultural politics, education, the environment and the voluntary sector yet not publicly aligned with a political party. Each acting in a personal capacity, they are:

- Dr Duncan Morrow, chief executive officer, Community Relations Council;
- Dr Dominic Bryan, director, Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University;
- Dr Neil Jarman, director, Institute for Conflict Research;
- Prof Tony Gallagher, head of School of Education, Queen's University;
- Michael Wardlow, director, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education;
- Frances McCandless, director of policy, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action; and
- John Woods, regional director, Friends of the Earth.

This work entailed:¹

- (a) individual discussions, totalling 15, with:
 - (i) party figures in the UUP, the SDLP, Alliance, the Greens and the

- small socialist groupings;
- (ii) experts on the political parties, electoral systems and electoral behaviour;
- (b) focus groups of:
 - (i) members of voluntary organisations;
 - (ii) trade union members;
 - (iii) public-sector professionals;
 - (iv) various practitioners in Derry;
- (c) collation of existing data on public political attitudes in Northern Ireland, collected in the Life and Times Survey;² and
- (d) utilisation of the substantial repertoire of data and analysis compiled by the Northern Ireland devolution-monitoring team since the inception of the project in 1999.³

These activities took place in October and November 2008. The work was conducted on behalf of the group by Robin Wilson, an independent policy analyst. He is co-leader of the devolution monitoring team and has a PhD from Queen's University (Wilson, 2008) for a thesis on the travails of power-sharing in Northern Ireland (and in ex-Yugoslavia). He helped draft the Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, which was launched by the 47 member-state foreign ministers in May 2008.⁴ He was formerly director of the think tank Democratic Dialogue and editor of *Fortnight* magazine.

Political and expert perspectives

One of the recurring themes in the interviews for this project was characterised by a UUP figure with a public profile as the need for an ‘overarching vision’ to make a political realignment possible. This would engender a ‘set of principles’ which a range of political figures could endorse and which a large swathe of the public could embrace. The parties still fought elections as if they were ‘Rangers-Celtic’ matches, he said, yet the vast bulk of issues did not divide along unionist-nationalist lines. As for the public, there had been evidence of tactical voting in the 2005 Westminster election, assisting the victory of SDLP and UUP candidates in Foyle, South Belfast and North Down.

Expressing regret that there hadn’t been such ‘centre ground collaboration’ before the last assembly election, so that the electorate had not really been offered an alternative, he said such a vision could be presented before a future assembly election, indicating that the parties involved would form a subsequent ‘partnership’, operating according to an agreed set of ‘very clear protocols’. Candidates could then not simply play the ‘orange/green card’ and would be required to develop the expertise to make arguments of a higher quality—which might, in the process, be more appealing to younger people. Transfers among individual candidates could be looked at, but the idea was that in the election the parties would still have ‘a good old go’ at each other while co-operating afterwards.

The ‘middle ground’ however needed leadership, he stressed, to better the ‘absolutely appalling’ leadership offered by the DUP and SF. In this context, like others he expressed concern about the way the St Andrews Agreement had ensured that the first minister was selected post-election from the largest party in the largest ‘designation’, as this favoured the DUP

rallying communal support on the basis that SF had to be stopped from securing that position in future elections.

Looked at from below as well as from above, there was a need for a ‘civic opposition’ of ‘critical friends’, voices perhaps articulated through a reconstituted Civic Forum. And he concluded: ‘So we need clear leadership that challenges our society to change the way we do relationships both here and on this island and between these islands ... If the UUP and Alliance and SDLP showed that level of co-operation they could create something people would be attracted to.’

This view was echoed by a UUP adviser who complained that the centre parties had shown ‘little ability or willingness to co-operate’, despite what he called ‘propitious’ circumstances. He too blamed this on the ‘lack of a strategic vision’, in the face of the ‘arrogance’ and ‘incompetence’ of SF and the DUP. But he did believe that as the UUP, Alliance and the SDLP were representatives of ‘the mainstream European political heritages’—of Christian democracy, liberalism and social democracy respectively—they could ‘offer an alternative if mobilised properly and sold properly’. He didn’t see any space in this context for any new party emerging, and others concurred in this.

He felt that the Christian democrat mantle sat easily with the UUP as it entailed a conception of ‘social solidarity’, whereas supporters might feel uneasy about aspects of UK Conservative politics in the Thatcher era. Equally, the fact that the SDLP had not in the end embraced FF suggested that social democrats in that party were stronger than some had thought. He wasn’t sure whether a transfer arrangement between the parties was feasible but the challenge was agreeing now the ‘values basis’ of an approach to the next assembly election which, while incorporating the values of each party, would critically offer an alternative. The UUP was now attracting young professionals who were centre-right rather than

overtly sectarian, who didn't have the investment in the conflict of older members and for whom 'normal politics' resonated, and he could see what he described as a hesitant pluralism emerging.

He thought it might however take an outside 'catalyst' for a new vision to emerge, even though the change would be delivered by the existing parties. It was important to 'begin the conversation' between the three parties: 'Creating that space is vital and is not happening at the present moment in time in any meaningful way.' There were enough people in the parties who wanted to do this but it was 'essential to build up trust' by getting them around the table and seeing where it led.

An SDLP MLA said she had expected after the Belfast agreement that the 'political centre' would dominate. But 'symbolic' politics had remained 'very potent' and it had been very difficult to move the agenda to 'bread-and-butter issues'. She agreed that a pre-election statement would be worthwhile, as all the centre parties concerned wanted a 'pluralist society'—though she expressed concern about the UUP's dalliance with the 'Traditional Unionist Voice' in terms of the 2009 European election. She would have no problem in that context with a mutual transfer arrangement.

A movement back to the middle ground would give the parties a more 'secular' character, though how a coalition would be agreed needed more work. But politics had become a 'spectator sport' and such a 'loose coalition' might attract people if it got off the ground.

The chair of her SDLP branch agreed that politics in Northern Ireland was 'fundamentally reactive and still conflict-based', which meant a party like the SDLP which was not 'inherently driven by the politics of conflict' found itself 'quite voiceless'. Society, however, was 'moving at a tremendous pace', as evidenced for example by enterprise innovation including

through university spin-outs: 'I think there is a totally changed climate in civil society.' And he said: 'There is undoubtedly an opportunity for a progressive political coalition in Northern Ireland.'

In this context he envisaged the SDLP transforming into a conventional European social democratic party. A consensus needed to be built on 'bread-and-butter' politics but there was 'a huge space' to fill, as the parties were working from 'a blank sheet' on most issues. Developing coalitions on these concerns and building confidence would be better than 'fighting a battle a day with the DUP and SF on sectarian issues'. Sustainable development should be top of the policy list.

If an open invitation was issued to the parties to sign a non-sectarian declaration, it could 'create a critical mass of candidates' and have a 'massive' effect. In his view, to talk of a transfer pact would 'put the cart before the horse', but the goal was to 'remove the sectarian imperative from the campaign'. There would be agreement on two or three common policy-platform areas before the election but it would still be left to the electorate to choose their preferred parties, with the latter talking to each other after the poll.

Elements of that agenda were suggested by one Labour activist, who talked about 'a small number of simple things you could do', which would make the vision 'small, compact and understandable'. He spoke of making devolved government more 'nimble' rather than 'clunkier', and making sure votes were equal in the assembly (implying an end to communal designation). He also spoke of developing the potential for civic governance at local-authority level through decentralisation of planning functions, and introducing a planning assumption in favour of *A Shared Future* allied to the desegregation of social housing.

'We just cannot,' said an Alliance MLA, 'continue in the way we work in the

executive: four parties all with their different agenda and policies.’ Unless something fundamentally different was done politics would always ‘hit a wall’ and she complained: ‘The whole thing is so damned undemocratic and artificial.’

She said that ‘at the top we need to show a vision that we want more normal politics’. Such a vision would aim to ‘heal divisions’ in a bipartisan way, with more mixed housing and integrated education, and promote economic and social stability. This would encourage people to feel less threatened and more relaxed, and allow ‘bread-and-butter issues’ to come to the foreground. She had found a ‘taste’ on the doorsteps at the last election for doing away with the ‘old brand’ of politics, but there was a need to create the environment of trust in which people would vote on issues rather than communal affiliation.

In this context, she thought Alliance needed to ‘rebrand’ itself. She looked forward to more independents standing with a ‘common sense approach’ to politics: ‘The calibre of our politicians isn’t the best, is it?’ But most interviewees did not see a significant role for independent candidates.

Another SDLP assembly member said he expected the ‘conflict-substitution process’—as against the resolution of conflict—in which the DUP and SF were engaged would mean the executive would ‘stagger on’ till 2011. But the Belfast agreement had created the potential for ‘other political formations’ and he could foresee a ‘political arrangement’ in which an alternative coalition presented itself, ‘bringing together the two traditions in a more meaningful and sympathetic way’. He looked in that context to the UUP becoming more centrist and liberal, arguing it had to ‘further embrace desectarianisation’.

Like others, he envisaged an agreement pre-election on ‘broad parameters’ rather than a ‘detailed programme’, working towards a non-sectarian

society. The SDLP and the UUP needed to be able to say there was an alternative to the political monoliths and convey a sense of ‘winnability’ which would enthruse the ‘stay-at-home vote’. He felt a transfer arrangement could be very effective in certain situations.

He referred to the speech by Mr Durkan at the BIA, in which the party leader had argued that some arrangements bequeathed by the Belfast agreement could be ‘bio-degradable’. He could foresee communal designation being abandoned after perhaps two further elections, and this theme of making the arrangements more flexible was taken up by a UUP MLA who supported an alternative, weighted-majority safeguard within the assembly. The latter also claimed there was consensus, with some caveats, around the desirability of a more streamlined set-up with fewer departments, fewer MLAs and the abolition of dual mandates.

There had been informal discussions between senior figures in the UUP and SDLP, but the potential of these had not been realised, he claimed, by the SDLP leadership in the 2007 assembly election. The problem was that the parties were still fighting intracommunal battles and in the UUP there would be resistance, particularly in the west,⁵ to co-operation with the SDLP. But if the two parties could emerge as the largest after a future assembly election they could develop a four-year plan for a centre-ground government.

The issue of government and opposition exercised a Green Party activist. He favoured ‘a call for a new democratic dispensation that went beyond the party-political ... focusing on the normal democratic requirement for an effective opposition and a prospect of [post-electoral] rotation’. He could see, *inter alia*, the Greens being ‘excited’ by that.

There were, however, sceptical views. One UUP figure felt that an opportunity for realignment had been missed at the time of the 1998

agreement, when politics might have moved from a unionist-nationalist on to a yes-no axis. Divisions in the assembly continued to follow sectarian alignments, particularly on sensitive issues, he said. And civil society had failed to make an impact, as NGOs were extremely reluctant to criticise ministers with whom they were engaging. Nor were matters helped by the media presenting elections as ‘the battle within unionism and the battle within nationalism’.

And an Alliance MLA complained that the UUP was ‘jumping between the TUV and the Tories’. Nor could he see many differences between it and the DUP. He believed the DUP and SF needed Stormont to work and there was ‘no incentive on the political class for the thing to collapse’.

Turning to the independent experts, Sydney Elliott of Queen’s University has been Northern Ireland’s leading reader of the electoral runes for decades. He pointed out that the dominance of the DUP and SF was not total: they had secured 56 per cent of the vote between them at the 2007 assembly election, so that it would only take each to drop by 3 points or more for their combined total to fall to a minority of votes cast. Moreover, turnout having fallen steadily to 62 per cent (which leaves aside those who did not even register to vote) meant a much larger group had not voted than had voted for the DUP.

The problem was that because all the other parties were divided these ‘authoritarian’ parties ‘look like blocs’. If the UUP and SDLP could achieve 25 per cent each, then a different set of criteria would be brought into play, Dr Elliott said, ‘but it’s got to catch people’s imagination’. It would require inter-party agreement well in advance of the next election, even if only a ‘tentative’ accord on some ‘bread-and-butter’ policies, and would probably take two elections rather than one. But it was worth recognising that terminal transfers in 2007 from SDLP voters had gone primarily to Alliance (22 per cent) rather than SF and that 14 per cent had gone to the

UUP, while 19 per cent of UUP transfers had been to the SDLP in turn.

Nevertheless, Dr Elliott said, he would favour a change in the electoral system, such as to the alternative vote—this would require redrawing boundaries but this could be linked to reducing the number of MLAs. He also thought a system which left arrangements more open for the formation of a power-sharing executive post-election might be required, and in that context there should be support for an official opposition in terms of resources and allocated assembly time.

He looked to the re-emergence of the old ‘third voice’ associated with the Northern Ireland Labour Party and the trade unions in this context. He could see a positive role for independents, with ‘people of ability’ including from business coming forward who hadn’t previously taken part, but it would be a matter of transforming the existing parties rather than forming anything new.

Dr Elliott’s Queen’s University colleague Rick Wilford, co-leader of the devolution-monitoring research team in Northern Ireland, said nothing was inevitable about alignments and outcomes. He pointed to how the SDLP and the UUP had contemplated going into opposition after the 2007 election. The next step would be standing on a common platform, ‘a policy-based alternative rather than a community-based alternative’. While this would be represented as an admission of defeat by their communal rivals, they could articulate it as an attempt to ‘transcend’ communalist alignments: ‘They have to make a strategic decision to strike out in a different direction ... I don’t think it can be done in one great leap. It has to be a project taken over a period.’

Party alignments were slow to change, Prof Wilford said, but this could be presented as a cross-party initiative with the implication that the participants would wish to form an administration post-election. That,

however, would require removal of the ‘corset’ of the d’Hondt rule as means of executive formation, in favour of a requirement that the new executive secure weighted-majority support in the assembly. A rejigged governance arrangement would be ‘founded on citizenship rather than communal identity’.

He singled out as a problem the uncertainty over the trajectory of the UUP, referred to above, describing the party as ‘riddled with existential doubt’. The solution, he said, had to be to celebrate ‘liberal-unionist’ values. There was the possibility of an understanding between the parties on that basis, like that which had taken place in the wider western Europe in the post-war period. The DUP’s strength was based on fear of SF and, while London and Dublin did not want to do anything that would alienate republicans, the party’s expansion beyond the current demographic bulge among youth was limited. In that context, he could not see space for a new party but did see room for an electoral pact: ‘So we’re in for a phased period of party realignment, premised on a basis that it will presage electoral realignment.’

The focus groups

The focus groups were convened the week after the election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States, so ‘change’ was the leitmotif—and, specifically, a sense that if in America the slogan was ‘yes, we can’ in Northern Ireland’s political culture it had hitherto been ‘no, you can’t’.

One participant in the voluntary-sector group linked the Obama victory to the sense in 1998 that ‘hope’ might also triumph with the Belfast agreement. Another, noting Obama’s mobilisation of grassroots activism and engagement of people who had not voted, said that it was harder now to enthuse people in Northern Ireland in the context of disillusionment but ‘hope and vision are at the heart of this’.

Identifying the audience for this within the region, a third referred to the floating and the non-engaged, civil-society minded individuals, supporters of Alliance, supporters of the SDLP and the UUP and ‘socialist’ supporters of SF. A fourth said it was important to identify what the ‘change’ message would be and how it would happen.

It was suggested that this was about ‘societal’ and not just ‘policy’ change. The chair of the group, an experienced director of a major voluntary organisation, said however that while the voluntary sector was good at pursuing particular issues of concern it was not good at developing a corporate voice. And a minority view was expressed by one participant, who believed that engaging with the parties of power—which in his area meant the DUP—was the best option to pursue.

The trade unions also have self-denying ordinances about engaging in

anything ‘political’. But in the trade union group one official spoke of a feeling of ‘extreme frustration’ which he believed was ‘shared by many’ at what he described as the lack of progress at Stormont. He said he would personally be interested in being part of a ‘broader front’.

Another said the problem from a trade union point of view was that there wasn’t a progressive alternative to support but while Unison was the only significant union in Northern Ireland with a political affiliation the unions could support broad progressive policy initiatives. He pointed to the ‘Better Life for All’ campaign of the 1970s.

A union activist said it would be worth pursuing the ‘centre-left’ political



Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness arriving for their first executive meeting after the hiatus—against a backdrop of ‘extreme frustration’

option. If there was a proper plan, co-ordination and relationships were established it could become more than a theoretical possibility, he said. Another participant looked to the emergence of social-partnership arrangements, describing these, as evidenced in the republic, as the only way to address critical challenges, such as Northern Ireland faced in terms of competitiveness and sustainable development.

In the public-sector group, where the individuals involved tended to have had close contact with politicians at various levels, one leading local-government official bemoaned a 'complete and utter lack of leadership'. Politicians were 'looking over their shoulder' and were unwilling to take 'courageous steps' or even to be 'intellectually curious', she said. Perversely, devolution with its attendant divisions had made the atmosphere in local government 'more entrenched'.

A retired senior area board official said that while politicians said they merely reflected the views of the populace, if they gave positive leadership people would follow them. He felt however that if the SDLP were to endorse an alignment with the UUP and Alliance, in his (SF-dominated) area it would be subject to a 'campaign of vilification'.

A senior civil servant said: 'It's a very immature political system and the politicians are very immature and they're behaving very immaturity.' Elaborating, she contrasted the 'collective, cabinet-style government' in Scotland and Wales with the system for executive formation in Northern Ireland, which did not allow of joined-up action across departments. While there was a 'pandering' to the 'harder line' agenda, there was a sense of a lack of delivery.

A former senior official complained of the absence of a 'policy community' in Northern Ireland, which made it difficult for parties to differentiate themselves on policy grounds. (This echoed concerns expressed by

the political interviewees about the absence of party-related think-tanks.) The local-government figure said the political game needed to become ‘What’s the future for citizens?’ There was a need to ‘give an alternative’, she said.

In the Derry focus group, disappointment with the current arrangements was expressed in both intellectual and moral terms. As to the first, one former political adviser at Stormont bemoaned what he called ‘the nonsense that passes for a Programme for Government’ and said what was needed was a ‘challenge function’ driven by civil society, for example by getting people in the trade unions together ‘to begin to create an alternative viewpoint’.

The moral claim, which came from a church worker, was that the ‘peace process’ had proved ‘deeply corrupt, deeply dishonest’, in that various ‘fudges’ had ‘put off the day of reckoning’ but now ‘the chickens have come home to roost’. He instanced the failure of the first and deputy first ministers to agree on a single commissioner for victims and their appointment, *faute de mieux*, of four of various persuasions. He spoke of his ‘frustration’ in ‘constantly looking for leadership’, which he defined as ‘dealing in hope’. He too complained of politicians looking over their shoulders and a reconciliation practitioner pointed out: ‘When you’re looking over your shoulder you can’t see the way ahead.’

Combining these concerns, a trade unionist present complained of the absence of opposition, of how the Belfast agreement was ‘cementing’ ethnic identities and how the parties continued to differentiate themselves along these, rather than socio-economic, lines. He echoed the idea of formalising social-partnership arrangements, as in the republic, urged in the trade union group, and saw Northern Ireland being redefined in terms of this and the Nordic social model. This led to a call to reactivate the Civic Forum, in a streamlined form but accorded more respect than before.

Another reconciliation practitioner said that what Northern Ireland needed was an ‘Obama moment’. The political adviser described the first and deputy first ministers as ‘yesterday’s men’ and said it was time to ‘challenge the paradigms’, with a ‘platform for change’ which would ‘engage the disengaged’. This should be developed by the unions, business and the voluntary sector, but it needed a ‘champion’ to take it forward.

Public opinion

The onset of what became known as the Northern Ireland ‘peace process’ had the paradoxical effect of enhancing polarisation in the region as violence was winding down. Substantively, in the 1990s the governments in London and Dublin widely endorsed the terms ‘unionist’ and ‘nationalist’ as ‘legitimate ways to define the two communities in Northern Ireland’, including in the Belfast agreement (Hayes and McAllister, 1999: 39). This despite the ideological and antagonistic character of these labels—as against individuals being objectively categorised, as with fair-employment legislation, as having Protestant or Catholic backgrounds. As the expert on global ethnic conflict Stefan Wolff (2006: 55) puts it simply, ‘Different ethnic identities can, and in many cases do, peacefully coexist in the same state; different nationalisms cannot.’

Procedurally, the process was characterised by the ‘private reason’ which accompanies *in camera* discussions, in which participants bargain rather than deliberate, and can pursue sectarian rather than publicly defensible claims (Chambers, 2004: 405). By contrast, the prelude to the power-sharing experiment of the early 1970s was marked by a process of public deliberation, with a widely disseminated green paper, a white paper and an act, and debates in the Dáil as well as at Westminster (Wilson, 2008).

The result of the ‘peace process’ was a predictable tightening in the public mind in the respective relationships between seeing oneself as Protestant or Catholic, British or Irish and, most importantly, unionist or nationalist. Hayes and McAllister (1999: 37) thus found that Protestants were more likely to think of themselves as British and unionist in 1994 (the year of the ceasefires) and in 1998 (the year of the Belfast agreement) than they would have done in 1989; the same was true in reverse for

Catholics, identifying more strongly as Irish and nationalist in those years. Hayes and McAllister (*ibid.*: 35) described this process in terms of the strengthening of ‘strong pro-state’ and ‘strong counter-state’ positions, against the ‘weak pro-state’ and ‘weak counter-state’ competitors—hardly conducive to a functioning devolved polity, still less to reconciliation.

These changes in public opinion were to be manifested in the political arena by growing support for the ‘strong pro-state’ and ‘strong counter-state’ parties, the DUP and SF, by comparison with their UUP and SDLP rivals. Moreover, according to the former US envoy to Northern Ireland Mitchell Reiss (2008), these parties were themselves legitimised by the UK government’s disposition towards them: ‘The peace process devolved into an exercise in serial concessions and indulgences, first to Sinn Fein and later the DUP.’ The following table shows the results:⁶

Election	DUP		UUP		SDLP		SF	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1997 Westminster	107348	13.6	258349	32.7	190814	24.1	126921	16.1
1997 council	99651	15.8	175036	27.9	130387	22.6	106934	16.9
1998 assembly	145917	18.0	172225	21.3	177963	21.9	142858	17.6
2001 Westminster	181999	22.5	216839	26.8	169865	20.9	175392	21.7
2001 council	169477	21.4	181336	22.9	153424	19.4	163269	20.6
2003 assembly	177944	25.7	156931	22.7	117547	16.9	162758	23.5
2005 Westminster	241856	33.7	127314	17.7	125626	17.5	174530	24.3
2005 council	208278	29.6	126317	18.0	121991	17.4	163205	23.2
2007 assembly	207721	30.1	103145	14.9	105164	15.2	180573	26.2

In turn, these voting trends were inexorably to undermine the position of the first minister appointed after the Belfast agreement, David Trimble,

with the consequent institutions collapsing in October 2002—by which time the atmosphere around the executive table was described by one minister as ‘poisonous’ (Wilford *et al*, 2007: 123). And they ensured that little more than a year after devolution was eventually re-established in May 2007 the power-sharing executive stopped meeting for five months, with relationships among ministers described—respectively by a republican and a unionist columnist—as ‘dour and dire’ and characterised by ‘personal loathing’ (Wilford and Wilson, 2008c: 27).

There was no iron law behind these developments, however, and they are not irreversible. A common mistake in politics is to assume the future will be the same as the past—a mistake the US Republican Party made in failing to meet the challenge from Mr Obama, in the context of the collapse of neo-liberal ideology following the crisis of the financial markets.

One of the difficulties politicians driven by ethnic concerns face is the pressures on citizens of the concerns of daily life. After the renewal of devolution in 2007, the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey did find that devolution of policing and justice—the main stumbling-block in the prolonged hiatus in executive meetings in 2008—was widely seen as the primary constitutional issue to be addressed. But respondents heavily prioritised policy concerns like the economy and the health service:⁷

Do you think it is more important that the Assembly spends its time dealing with policy issues or that it spends its time dealing with constitutional issues (%)?	
Policy issues	65
Constitutional issues	12
Both equally	20
Don't know	3

These ‘bread-and-butter issues’ tend in more normal times to erode commitment to the ideological positions of ethnic politicians (Brubaker, 2004). The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey also found that more respondents were identifying themselves once more not as unionist or nationalist but ‘neither’. The ‘neither’ option may gain further support in the future, as among younger cohorts it is more popular:⁸

Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a unionist, a nationalist or neither (%)?							
	Unionist						36
	Nationalist						24
	Neither						40
		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Unionist		25	28	26	41	44	49
Nationalist		27	24	24	22	22	25
Neither		48	48	49	37	34	26

The picture in terms of Britishness and Irishness is also not as clear-cut as it is usually taken to be. The section of the Belfast agreement on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland (NIO, 1998: 2) has mostly been considered in terms of its reiteration of the ‘consent principle’, that whether the region remains part of the UK or becomes part of a united Ireland will be decided by plebiscite. But that section also refers to the right of everyone in Northern Ireland to be ‘Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose’.

For the first time in 2007, the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey asked a question modelled on Luis Moreno’s sensitive elucidation of the overlapping of national affiliations in Spain (Moreno *et al*, 1998). This

explored whether, say, in Catalonia, respondents felt Catalan only, more Catalan than Spanish, equally Catalan and Spanish, more Spanish than Catalan or Spanish only. The Northern Ireland results were:⁹

Some people think of themselves first as British. Others may think of themselves first as Irish. Which, if any, of the following best describes how you see yourself (%)?

Irish not British	18
More Irish than British	17
Equally Irish and British	17
More British than Irish	24
British not Irish	10
Other	4

Interestingly, when respondents were asked how their father and mother would have identified themselves in this regard, the responses were much more bunched towards the exclusive ends of the spectrum.¹⁰ Whereas unionism and nationalism are mutually exclusive ideologies, ‘Britishness’ and ‘Irishness’ are not necessarily so opposed. Those who are only willing to conceive their identity as ‘Irish not British’ or ‘British not Irish’ could hardly find any common ground, but the 58 per cent embracing both identities in some combination ought to be able to rub along together if the political institutions and party system are sufficiently conducive.

Nor is national identity the only or even the most important aspect of individuals’ identity. An older NILTS question, last asked in 2001, found that when respondents were asked to describe *themselves*, in each case they were more likely to refer to their position in the family, and next to their class or their gender, than to their national identity.¹¹

The leading social thinker Ulrich Beck (2005: 92) has argued that in earlier centuries European states learned to accommodate different religious affiliations by ensuring a separation of church and state. This allowed the state to be impartial between religions, in a spirit of tolerance—a lesson Ireland north and south was only to learn in the latter half of the last century, with respectively the civil-rights movement of the late 60s and the removal in 1972 of the constitutional reference to the special position of the Catholic Church. In today’s context of globalisation and mass migration, Beck argues that multi-national states are the norm and so a similar separation of ‘nation’ and state needs to take place, in a project he describes as ‘constitutional tolerance’. The now widespread acceptance of the most controversial element of the state in Northern Ireland, the reconstituted police service with its neutral symbolism, is a good example of how this works: it allows individuals who may have an Irish and/or a British identity to feel equally at ‘home’ with and in the service.

For all it was hugely controversial in the past—among Catholics given the folk-memory of second-class citizenship and among some Protestants who favoured ‘integration’ with Great Britain—devolution to Northern

Which of the following has the most influence/ought to have most influence over the way Northern Ireland is run (%)?

	Has most influence	Ought to have most
Northern Ireland Assembly	36	68
UK government at Westminster	45	11
Local councils in Northern Ireland	7	11
Irish Government	2	3
European Union	3	2
Other	1	1
Don't know	5	3

Ireland, especially given wider UK devolution, is now also accepted across the political spectrum. It is worth recalling that devolution with a power-sharing executive was only supported by the SDLP and Alliance before the Belfast agreement, yet now all parties must pay lip-service to it. Devolution is a more popular constitutional outcome than a united Ireland or direct rule put together,¹² and there is a widespread belief that—whatever its failings—the Northern Ireland Assembly should be at the centre of political life, as the 2007 NILTS also demonstrates.¹³

These data suggest a solid foundation in public opinion for a party-political system which was no longer polarised around unionism *versus* nationalism but which provided a framework of constitutional tolerance, accommodating Irish as readily as British citizens, in which the political agenda could move to ‘bread-and-butter issues’ *via* more flexible and resilient power-sharing arrangements.

Devolution: the evidence

The experience of devolution since the Belfast agreement has been closely monitored as a result of Northern Ireland's participation in a UK-wide social-science research project, monitoring the outworking of devolution since 1999 and co-ordinated by the Constitution Unit at University College London.¹⁴ During that time there have been fully 32 Northern Ireland monitoring reports,¹⁵ which also address north-south co-operation in Ireland, 'east-west' relationships across these islands and engagement with the European Union. In this context Northern Ireland's performance can be benchmarked against that of the devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales, in terms of policy substance and democratic style.

On the substance, this research has highlighted a paradox: Northern Ireland, while enjoying similar policy autonomy under the Belfast agreement to that in Scotland, has failed to use that autonomy really to 'make a difference'—as the programmes for government of the first devolved administration proclaimed in their titles—from direct rule. The Northern Ireland Programme for Government (Northern Ireland Executive, 2008) is organised around the system inherited from direct rule of 'public service agreements' with individual departments, rather than innovative policy programmes. PSAs were introduced in Whitehall by the then chancellor, Gordon Brown, so that he could control domestic policy from the Treasury while Tony Blair was prime minister; they have no logic in a devolved context and were scrapped in Scotland after devolution.

By contrast, the Scottish Programme for Government (Scottish Government, 2008) is centred on new policies requiring legislative approval by the Scottish Parliament. A study of health care across

England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has explained the paradox by linking policy innovation to political pluralism (Greer, 2004: 160):

Northern Ireland's unusual history and political structure has created politics that almost eliminate the potential pluralism of devolution—neither formal institutions nor the structure of politics create a pluralist political sphere in which advocates of different policies can contend ... The institutional design of devolution lures parties into government by granting them great executive powers in their departments and little formal accountability to the Assembly or the public, and then makes collective decisions nearly impossible. The Northern Irish party system is remarkable because the Unionist-nationalist cleavage obliterates right-left cleavages; two Nationalist and several Unionist parties compete to best and most vociferously represent their communities.

On the style, during the 1998 talks leading to the agreement, much to the chagrin of an observing senior official, the 'institutional design of devolution' mainly took place in just one night of negotiating the structures for executive formation, within days of Good Friday (Wilson, 2008). Essentially, the SDLP's demand for a power-sharing cabinet was spatchcocked with the UUP's proposal of an assembly with committee chairs distributed by d'Hondt (who would act as heads of departments) to engender a power-sharing executive appointed by d'Hondt—an arrangement unique in the world and yet to be copied, a decade on, despite much international interest in the Northern Ireland 'model'.

Collective responsibility in government has therefore been absent, whereas the 1974 power-sharing executive agreed on that principle at its first meeting. While in Scotland, there is just one permanent secretary who can direct the civil service to act in an holistic way, in Northern Ireland each departmental permanent secretary can reject a direction from the head of the civil service if he or she gets ministerial cover so to do (Wilson, 2008).

An unintended effect of this arrangement has been that, since any party with at least 10 per cent support should be represented in an executive with ten departments, there is effectively no opposition in the assembly (outside the efforts of Alliance). Interviews with MLAs have highlighted how this means that assembly committees always carry a majority of members of executive parties and thus by and large do not exercise the power ascribed to them under the agreement—to propose legislation, for instance. A further paradox is thus that, while devolution in Scotland was widely discussed in terms of fostering a strong parliament and wider public engagement, the political style of the Northern Ireland institutions has conformed to the Westminster mould of executive domination (Wilford and Wilson, 2001).

A still further unintended effect of the d'Hondt arrangements has been to make it impossible for citizens collectively to change the government if they do not believe it has performed to their satisfaction. As one former senior official centrally involved with the 1974 power-sharing experiment has put it (Wilson, 2008), 'I think the almost total inclusion now enjoined upon us by law is inherently undemocratic and unstable ... I feel very strongly about it and here we are with virtually no opposition, with no recourse to the basic democratic device [where] ... after a few years you throw the rascals out. Now, we have a situation where in theory you throw the rascals out and you get the same rascals back again.'

A third paradox is evident. Although Northern Ireland's devolved autonomy should allow for extensive policy collaboration with the republic, as well as policy exchange with the other UK jurisdictions, this has not been developed to its full potential of a cosmopolitan set of engagements, including with the wider Europe. The former taoiseach Garret FitzGerald has said that 'the inward-lookingness of the north is quite extraordinary and the contrast between this outward-looking state and the north is incredible' (Wilson, 2008).

Despite the removal of the republic's territorial claim over the north in 1999 and the ending of the IRA 'campaign' in 2005, there remains vestigial DUP hostility to 'north-southery'. Yet the evidence of the experience of north-south co-operation since 1999 has been positive (Coakley *et al*, 2007), and there is much undeveloped potential for collaboration for mutual benefit and to realise the wider goal of reconciliation (Co-operation Ireland, 2007).

What seems to have happened is that the continuing dominance of politics by antagonism between unionists and nationalists has meant that each has cancelled the other out, with the risk that devolution becomes *involution*. So, for example, while Scotland and Wales have joined the RegLeg network of European regions with primary legislative powers, which embraces powerful players like Catalonia, Northern Ireland has yet to do so.

All these problems have been encapsulated in the prolonged periods when the power-sharing executive established by the Belfast agreement has simply failed to function. Due to the delay in establishing the post-agreement institutions and their subsequent serial suspensions and collapse, the executive only functioned for 40 months—one third—of the first decade after the agreement. And while the record has been better since May 2007, the five-month stand-off in 2008 betrayed the continuing underlying difficulties, most notably the absence of trust between the parties.

More positively, the ending of the hiatus was widely seen as a response to public pressures, manifested in a series of angry editorials in the *Belfast Telegraph*, lobbying by business organisations and a wider public demeanour described by the political editor of BBC Northern Ireland as 'sick and tired' of the stalemate (*Newsline 6.30*, November 17 2008). A senior Dublin official involved in the preparation of the Belfast

agreement has confided (Wilson, 2008): 'Like a lot of people, I think I would like as a citizen to see changes to the current model. I doubt if the current model is in the long term democratically desirable or a particularly good idea from an administrative point of view either.'

Conclusion

The data considered in the previous sections bear out the need for, and the potential of, a step-change in the politics of Northern Ireland if this is not to be associated with chronically sub-optimal outcomes for the region's long-suffering citizens. They also suggest that there is a foundation in public, expert and moderate political opinion for co-operation on, and civic engagement with, major policy issues.

The key challenges facing Northern Ireland are clear, now that the smoke of the 'troubles' has cleared. They are its vertical division along sectarian lines and its horizontal division between social classes, which give the region its still ghettoised 'feel', despite all the changes which have taken place, as well as the key challenge which faces every citizen of the world—the multiple risks to the future of the planet (Beck, 2009). These should set the demanding agenda for a genuinely democratic—and genuinely shared—devolved administration, plugged into wider Irish, UK and European policy networks, to address in an energetic and evidence-based manner.

A scenario has been painted through which the necessary political realignment would take place over perhaps two assembly elections, reconfiguring and expanding the centre ground. This would be associated with proposals to move the power-sharing arrangements from the lottery of the d'Hondt rule to an agreed coalition, which would represent Protestants and Catholics as equal citizens but which need not include all parties on either side of the communal divide. One device to ensure such a coalition was indeed egalitarian—rather than with Catholic politicians making up the numbers, as the DUP's favoured 'voluntary' coalition implies—would be a requirement to secure a secular weighted majority in the assembly,

post-election, for a government to be formed.

It is also evident, however, that such a change will not come from the political parties in and of themselves but will need to be brokered *via* impartial forces within civil society. And one way to do so would be to establish what one participant in this research described as a Platform for Change—the task of renewal thus comes to the fore. At the heart of such a platform would be an inspiring vision, which could re-engage citizens with politics in Northern Ireland and could provide the ‘glue’ for a political realignment.

The vision would have a compelling moral message—that governance arrangements for Northern Ireland can not be based on endless private horse-trading in the name of *Realpolitik*. It would stress the indispensability of the secure foundations of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. It would recognise the imperative of intercultural dialogue and inter-communal agreement—in particular, about the formation of a governing power-sharing coalition (and opposition) in a manner consistent with universal norms.

Intellectually, the platform would identify broad policy programmes to set Northern Ireland on a track to the three Ss of a shared future, social inclusion and sustainable development. Effective political change takes place through the generation of a strategic consensus, widely supported in society at large, which sets the terms of political trade for years and even decades—one thinks of the way the Swedish welfare state was constructed, for example (Trägårdh, 2007)—and which survives the tactical shifts inevitably associated with changes in government. There would, as demonstrated, be widespread public support for this line of march.

Finally, in governance terms the platform would indicate that time has long passed the conventional ‘national question’ by and that now the

British-Irish choice is one for both-and, rather than either/or, solutions—that the key requirement is to look outward rather than to continue to navel-gaze. And it would sketch a more participatory arrangement for the involvement of civil-society organisations, through a revitalised and streamlined Civic Forum and a commitment to social partnership. A draft of what this platform might look like is included as an annex.

It should not be overly difficult to secure the endorsement of a wide range of civic-minded, public-spirited individuals for such a platform. This would not require them to sign up to support any individual party, or combination of parties, but in turn it could be taken up by the more accommodating (and more radical) parties as the raw material of a political realignment.

Indeed, it could spur the process by which these parties become more clearly ‘normal’, indicating that the ‘troubles’ with their polarising logic are politically, as well as physically, finally over. It could stimulate the SDLP to rediscover its post-nationalist and reformist 1960s origins and to foreground its social-democratic commitments, and provide the UUP with a centrist and Christian-democratic *raison d’être*, something it has lacked ever since it lost its monopoly control of Stormont in 1972 and the associated powers of communal patronage (Patterson and Kaufmann, 2007).

All of this requires widescale public debate. This booklet has been produced with a view to stimulating that debate. The key question to be decided will be whether a broad civic and political coalition can indeed be united behind an agreed platform that can bring fundamental change to Northern Ireland in the years ahead. While the substance is necessarily and entirely open to argument, the evidence of this project has been that, in principle, the answer is clearly yes.

Annex: a draft Platform for Change

The citizens of Northern Ireland have endured much since the outbreak of the ‘troubles’ in 1969. There is a deep yearning to put behind us not just the violence of the past but also the deep sectarian divisions which still bedevil this society. These prevent us moving forward to the future marked by reconciliation and greater social comfort which our young people expect.

While the Belfast agreement raised deeply felt hopes that a new future was ahead, disillusionment grew as the post-agreement institutions were more often in abeyance than functioning. Political commitment to the common good was indefinitely postponed in favour of a sustained communalist agenda, frustrating public aspirations for the focus to shift to day-to-day economic and social concerns.

It is time for a step change in the politics of Northern Ireland.

Change must be away from a society which repeatedly fractures along sectarian lines towards one at ease with itself. That means a common, cross-party commitment to universal norms which any citizen can support and which offer security to all. Democracy, human rights and the rule of law are not bargaining counters to be traded for partisan advantage: they alone ensure a framework of constitutional tolerance under which all can shelter, irrespective of what passport they carry.

All parties aspiring to government must support these norms if they are to prove capable of working with others in stable and viable power-sharing arrangements which enjoy public confidence. Political differences must be resolved through democratic deliberation, not through public

stand-offs followed eventually by private deals. The bill of rights promised in the agreement must finally become a reality, based firmly on international minority-rights standards. And the rule of law, enforced by impartial policing, must replace the ghettoisation of the socially disadvantaged in fear behind ‘peace walls’.

Change must be away from political competition within ‘communities’ towards competition between parties as to which can best meet public demands through devolved legislation to implement a Programme for Government. Parties need to explore before assembly elections common platforms which can offer citizens real choices as to alternative coalitions on offer.

There must be a loosening of the institutional straitjacket bequeathed by the Belfast and St Andrews agreements to allow citizens to ‘turf the scoundrels out’ and for real opposition and accountability to emerge, protecting power-sharing by requiring agreed coalitions to secure weighted-majority support in the assembly. The bill of rights must obviate the need for the distasteful stigmatisation as ‘orange’ or ‘green’ of elected representatives—who should address the concerns of the wider public, not just sectarian clienteles. New political alignments must have space to flourish, so that they can displace and eventually obliterate sectarian mindsets.

Change must be away from a cavalier attitude to the concerns of citizens’ daily lives to parties developing serious and evidence-based policy portfolios. These need to address three key challenges:

- how Northern Ireland can become a tolerant, intercultural society—a shared future—in particular by promoting integrated life, work and education;
- how brute-luck social disadvantage can be tackled—social inclusion—in particular by investing in child development and the social economy; and

- how the region can contribute to bequeathing a liveable world—sustainable development—in particular through reducing greenhouse-gas emissions and embracing environmental technologies.

These challenges are interconnected. Tolerance can not be cultivated in a society marked by steep inequalities. The social solidarity necessary for an inclusive society, equally, can not stem from segregation. Reducing greenhouse-gas emissions requires that we rise to seeing ourselves as citizens with global responsibilities, not mere Catholics and Protestants, and entails eliminating fuel poverty through retrofitting homes. Tackling them together will be critical to placing Northern Ireland on a path from stagnation to social, economic, cultural and environmental modernisation.

They can not however be met by government alone. Change must be away from a scenario of public disengagement and even cynicism towards finding solutions in the expertise and experience of civil-society organisations, academics and practitioners. Partnership will be essential to translate policies into practical difference on the ground. The Civic Forum needs to be reactivated, but on a streamlined basis organised around the main social partners of the trade unions, business associations and the voluntary sector. This would be an ideal venue to address the requirements of fairly distributed revenue-raising, as well as the potential for expenditures, in an honest and transparent way—for which the adoption of populist stances at home while demanding more money from London is a demeaning substitute.

These challenges can also not be met within a politics confined to Northern Ireland. Change must be away from an introverted political culture hopelessly out of touch with the cosmopolitanisation of everyday life towards an outward-looking perspective. This would use devolved power as a foundation to reach out across Ireland, across the UK and across Europe, developing allies and collaborative projects and absorbing

best practice from wherever it can be found. Co-operation must be pursued without ideological restriction with other jurisdictions throughout these islands and beyond.

This is an ambitious agenda. But a critical mass of individuals and organisations, within civil society and political society, can begin to translate it into the reality of a better life for all. A step change can be achieved—as long as we step up together.

Endnotes

¹ To maximise frankness, it was agreed that the comments made in the interviews and focus groups would not be attributable.

² See www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/.

³ See www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/devolution/devo-monitoring-programme.html.

⁴ available at

www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/White%20Paper_final_revised_EN.pdf

⁵ Patterson and Kaufmann (2007) chart tensions in the post-war Unionist Party, in which members in the border counties tended to be more committed to sectarian defensiveness.

⁶ table derived by Prof Wilford

⁷ data at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2007/Political_Attributes/DAYPOL2.html

⁸ data at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2007/Political_Attributes/UNINATID.html

⁹ data at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2007/Identity/IRBRIT.html

¹⁰ data at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2007/Identity/FIRBRIT.html and

www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2007/Identity/MIRBRIT.html

¹¹ data at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2001/Political_Attributes/IDENT1.html,

www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2001/Political_Attributes/IDENT2.html and

www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2001/Political_Attributes/IDENT3.html.

¹² data at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2007/Political_Attributes/NIRELND2.html

¹³ data at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2007/Political_Attributes/INFNI2.html and

www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2007/Political_Attributes/OUGHHTIN2.html

¹⁴ It has been variously funded by the Leverhulme Trust, the Economic and Social Research Council, the Ministry of Justice and government across the territorial jurisdictions.

¹⁵ The recent reports are at www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/devolution/devo-monitoring-programme.html. The earlier series is at

www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/devolution/dmr99-05.htm.

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