

Devolution in Northern Ireland

Devolution in Northern Ireland is a special, and increasingly rare circumstance: special because it is bound up with the peace process which has unfolded since the mid-1990s; rare because the Northern Ireland Assembly has been suspended periodically since powers were transferred to it in December 1999, then uninterrupted since October 2002. Continued suspension reflects a failure of trust between Northern Ireland's unionist parties and Sinn Féin, the political party associated with the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and now the leading party of the Irish-nationalist tradition in Northern Ireland.

Support for Devolution

Significantly the failure of the parties to make devolution work is not matched by large or growing antipathy to devolution among the Northern Irish. The most popular of the range of constitutional options in Northern Ireland is devolution on a 'parliament' model of legislative plus taxation powers (Table 1). If support for a less powerful form of devolution (the 'assembly' option of 'limited law-making powers') is added, then devolution had become the majority choice by 2003, though with more support among Protestants than Catholics.

Table 1 Constitutional Options in Northern Ireland

	2001			2003		
	All	Protestant	Catholic	All	Protestant	Catholic
Independence	10	8	13	9	6	12
Devolution (Parliament)	31	47	14	30	37	18
Devolution (Assembly)	12	18	4	22	31	9
No devolution	13	17	7	12	17	7
Unification with Republic of Ireland	21	1	49	17	2	38

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

Even though Catholic preferences for the unification of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland remain strong, Table 1 shows some evidence of a strengthening support for devolution from 2001-3. That finding is confirmed in Table 2, which shows significant public support for the Assembly having more influence, compared to Westminster, over the way Northern Ireland is run, and in this case across the religious communities and most strongly among Catholics. Catholics are more likely than Protestants to trust the Assembly to 'work in Northern Ireland's best interests'. Neither community has much trust in the UK government: 41% of Catholics and 49% of Protestants felt in 2003 that, at best, the UK government worked in Northern Ireland's best interests 'only some of the time', and 22% and 25% respectively 'almost never'.

Table 2 Which institution ought to have most influence over the way Northern Ireland is run? (2003)

	All	Catholic	Protestant
NI Assembly	50	55	46
UK government	18	8	27
Local government	15	15	16
European Union	4	7	1
Other/Don't Know	12	16	11

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

These data suggest there is some basis, across communities, for a re-launched devolution process to take root. However community relations – indices of the willingness to have

integrated cross-community housing, education, public services and so on – actually worsened during the period when devolution was in operation, and have only improved since devolution was suspended for the long term late in 2002 (Table 3). There is a sense that these trends in community relations reflect the way political parties and their leaders used the Assembly to highlight starkly drawn identities and the incompatible constitutional demands that flow from them – *either* the Union with Great Britain *or* a united Ireland – rather than taking the opportunity to transcend traditional divisions and make devolution work.

Table 3 Community Relations between Protestants and Catholics (2001-4)

Compared to five years ago ..	2001	2002	2003	2004
Better	28	30	44	56
Worse	18	23	11	7
About the Same	49	43	40	35
Other/Don't Know	6	5	5	2

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

Electoral Polarisation

One outcome of that ‘either-or’ politics – exacerbated by cycles of painstaking negotiations on re-launch dashed at the last minute by unresolved questions of trust among political elites – has been electoral polarisation. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) has lost credibility among the Protestant community, allowing the more intransigent Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) led by the veteran Ian Paisley to become the largest unionist party. At the same time the centrist nationalist party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), has lost ground to Sinn Féin.

Table 4: Electoral Polarisation in Northern Ireland 1997-2005

Election	DUP (%)	UUP (%)	SDLP (%)	Sinn Féin (%)
Westminster 1997	13.6	32.7	24.1	16.1
NI Assembly 1998	18.0	21.3	21.9	17.6
Westminster 2001	22.5	26.8	20.9	21.7
NI Assembly 2003	25.7	22.7	16.9	23.5
Westminster 2005	33.7	17.7	17.5	24.3

Institutional Performance and Deficits

The Belfast (or Good Friday) Agreement of 1998 set out an ambitious institutional template for devolution designed to provide cross-community safeguards through a power-sharing – or ‘consociational’ – form of government. That form of government did produce important policy innovations, especially in the field of equality policy, but did not have enough time in operation to establish a clear record. Indeed it was hampered even when in operation by the structures established by the Agreement. Our research shows that four aspects of the Agreement had the effect of incentivising rather than constraining antagonism between political elites:

- the restatement of the ‘consent principle’ confining constitutional options to the ‘either/or’ choice, to be determined by simple-majority plebiscite, thus encouraging a sectarian-headcount approach to politics (as reflected in the excitement over the religious breakdown in the 2001 census);

- the reaffirmation of the single-transferable vote for assembly elections, which allows and encourages candidates to be elected by mobilising core votes within a particular community rather than providing incentives for cross-community electoral mobilisation;
- the requirement that assembly members ‘designate’ themselves as ‘unionist’, ‘nationalist’ or ‘other’ thereby consolidating communalist mindsets and preventing any possible realignment along more conventional left-right lines (simpler weighted majority rules could have appeased fears of majority rule by the largest, i.e. Protestant, community);
- the appointment of ministers one-by-one by an allocation mechanism (the d’Hondt proportionality rule), which encouraged them to think of their departments as individual ‘fiefdoms’ and worked against the ‘joined-up government’ and collective responsibility that might have glued the power-sharing government together and provided a model for a wider reconciliation.

There appears to be little prospect for any substantial revision of these mechanisms, with the UK and Irish governments and key players in Northern Ireland, notably Sinn Féin, wedded to the 1998 Agreement.

Only limited change can be expected from the Review of Public Administration initiated by the Assembly in 2002, which was announced as an initiative for the modernisation of a system of public administration frozen and distorted by the long history of the ‘troubles’. But the eleven Northern Ireland Executive departments and their agencies were declared off-limits, with the focus limited to quangos and local government, and the process was entrusted to officials rather than an independent commission of inquiry.

The result, announced by direct-rule ministers in November 2005, was that a few additional powers will be conferred on fewer, and larger – in many views more remote – local authorities, which will still account for only a small fraction of public expenditure in the region. Worse, the make-up of the envisaged seven councils was immediately denounced by all the major parties bar Sinn Féin as likely further to divide Northern Ireland into sectarian blocs, west and east of the river Bann.

Prospects

Our findings do not offer encouraging reading for governments in London and Dublin wedded to a strategy of reviving devolution on the basis of the 1998 Agreement. For the densely interlocked, power-sharing institutions set out in that agreement to work requires a willingness among political parties, especially the biggest parties from the unionist and nationalist traditions, to cooperate across the community divide (see Box 1).

Box 1 – Preconditions for Power-Sharing

‘A necessary condition for the mitigation of conflict in deeply divided societies is the existence, or creation, of a centrist core of moderates—drawn both from elites and from the broader civil society—that adheres to rules and norms or pragmatic coexistence with other groups and can withstand the pressures of extremist outbidders that seek to mobilize on divisive themes for their own power-seeking aims.’ (Timothy Sisk)

That prospect has become less likely amid the electoral polarisation which has seen the more centrist SDLP and UUP overtaken by less accommodating ‘outbidders’ in the form of Sinn

Féin and the DUP. Our research on the activist grass roots of unionism suggests that the shift from UUP to DUP reflects longer term social changes which have undermined a tradition of deference among unionists and favour the populist appeals of the DUP over strategies of accommodation (unfortunately we have no equivalent research on the nationalist grass roots).

Table 5 Views of DUP Voters in 1998 and 2003

	1998	2003
Believe that nationalists have benefited a lot more from the NI Agreement	66	72
Support North-South bodies	21	39
Support Assembly	69	73
Support power-sharing	35	71
Support the guarantee that NI will remain part of the UK as long as the majority of people in NI want this	98	97
Voted 'yes' for Agreement / would vote 'yes' now	15	20
Believe that DUP party leaders should be willing to compromise	30	38

Source: ESRC Northern Ireland election studies

That picture, however, is qualified by the views of the wider body of DUP voters as revealed in our 2003 Northern Ireland Assembly election survey (Table 4). On most indices in Table 4 there are signs of movement towards a position favourable to a relaunch of devolution, with notably strong support for the Assembly itself, a doubling of support for power-sharing, and a growing endorsement of compromise.

Yet those signs of movement reinforce the point made above: while people in Northern Ireland are favourably disposed to devolution, their political leaders may not be minded to take the steps that would make devolution work. They remain bound up in a continuing 'either-or' battle about the UK versus a united Ireland. In the present circumstances, in particular in the absence of a commitment to cooperation between Northern Ireland's two largest parties, DUP and Sinn Féin, that would appear to mean continued direct rule by Westminster.

If devolution is to be restored to Northern Ireland at some point, our research would suggest that two related political shifts will be required. First, it will be essential to revisit the architecture envisaged by the Belfast Agreement to ensure the institutions incentivise conciliatory rather than confrontational political behaviour. Secondly, there must be a strong commitment to address the simmering resentments in the wider society which a 'peace process' focused narrowly on the political elites has done little to address – building on the policy framework on community relations, *A Shared Future*, launched in March 2005.