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2. **FULL REPORT OF RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND RESULTS:**

**'THE ROLE OF 'EXTRA-CONSTITUTIONAL' PARTIES IN THE
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY.**

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Background

The project examined the extent to which loyalists and republicans are prepared to co-operate within the Northern Ireland Assembly, by analysing the relationship between the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and Sinn Féin within the devolved institutions. Of the 108 members of the legislative Assembly (MLAs), elected in May 1998, Sinn Féin have 18 representatives and the PUP have two. Sinn Féin's Assembly representation was sufficient for the party to be awarded two ministries (Education, and Health, Social Services and Public Safety) under the D'Hondt mechanism of ensuring cross-community representation on the Executive.

Two Sinn Féin MLAs sit on each of the ten departmental committees, except Regional Development, on which there is only one Sinn Féin MLA. Sinn Féin members chair the Finance and Enterprise committees. The PUP is represented on two departmental committees (Regional Development and Social Development). Sinn Féin is also represented within each of the six standing committees of the Assembly; they are joined by the PUP on the 'Committee of the Centre' and the 'Audit Committee'.

Objectives

The overarching aim of the research project was to examine the extent of co-operation between loyalists and republicans, as represented by the PUP and Sinn Féin, within the Northern Ireland Assembly. The project aimed to discover what factors enhanced or inhibited such co-operation and whether the Assembly acted as an institutional facilitator, or barrier, to such a far-reaching development. Within this broad aim, the project had the following specific objectives:

- (1) To explore the extent to which the PUP and Sinn Féin offer a common political agenda;
- (2) To examine which aspects of the Northern Ireland Assembly (e.g. departmental committees; the civic forum; informal MLA alliances; attendant cross-border bodies) offer the greatest prospects for co-operation;

- (3) To analyse how both parties envisage the future development of Northern Ireland's devolved institutions;
- (4) To assess the extent to which both MLAs from either use models of institutional co-operation to promote replication among supporters from republican and loyalist communities (the 'spillover' effect). Alternatively, is such co-operation prompted from below by a 'grassroots' thawing of relations between the two communities?

Each objective was fulfilled in that the project yielded information on each aspect of the role of extra constitutional parties within the Assembly. This information is analysed in the results section below. The embryonic and fragile basis of the Assembly means that further charting of republican-loyalist co-operation is required.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted during summer 2000 with 16 PUP members, including both MLAs and 14 party executive members and/or councillors. Further interviews were held with 22 Sinn Féin members (10 MLAs). The interviews covered a core fifteen questions relating to perceptions of the Assembly; the role of departmental committees and discussions of relations with the PUP/Sinn Féin, compared to other parties. It was felt that qualitative data was a much more useful and thorough means of information gathering than quantitative techniques in respect of MLAs. There were several reasons for this: the imbalance in representation between the two parties; the ability to gain much more information through long interviews (average one hour) and; the ease with which the project could be extended by deploying qualitative data gathering methods to tiers 'below' the Assembly, notably councillors and officers from both parties.

Thus several Sinn Féin councillors were interviewed, to examine their views on how republican-loyalist co-operation on local councils might best be transferred to the Assembly. A wider questionnaire survey of MLAs across all parties may have some value in examining their views for the likelihood of republican-loyalist, or unionist-nationalist, co-operation. Quantitative data gathering was used via a questionnaire survey of PUP members (n. b. an ongoing survey of Sinn Féin members was commenced under the co-applicant's ESRC 'New Nationalism in Northern Ireland' project R000222668, with questions on attitudes to devolved institutions and cross party co-operation to be incorporated).

The questionnaire survey of PUP members involved a pilot of 100 questionnaires, distributed to a random sample of one-sixth of the party's membership. 56 replies were received. A further 250 questionnaires were then issued, with replies to be collected unopened at PUP HQ, 182 Shankill Road, Belfast, with an approximately similar response rate recorded. During the

loyalist feud, however, the HQ was attacked and gutted by the UFF, and the questionnaires destroyed. Following the recently agreed loyalist paramilitary 'truce', it is hoped to restart the questionnaires during the next month.

Results

There was wide agreement that the establishment of a devolved administration in Northern Ireland through a new Assembly rests at the convergence of the differing dynamics represented in the Irish peace process. This was instituted as part of the 'Good Friday Agreement' (GFA), under which the Assembly has full legislative and executive authority in respect of those matters previously within the remit of 6 Northern Ireland government departments. (These being the Department of Agriculture; Department of Economic Development; Department of Education; Department of the Environment; Department of Finance and Personnel; Department of Health and Social Services).

On 25th June 1998, members were elected to the Assembly by proportional representation (Single Transferable Vote) from the existing 18 Westminster constituencies. Under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Assembly was given power to make acts within its legislative competence and operates, where appropriate, on a cross-community basis. It is headed by a First Minister, a Deputy First Minister and up to 10 ministers with departmental responsibility. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, however, remains responsible for Northern Ireland Office matters not devolved to the Assembly, including policing, security policy, prisons and criminal justice.

Results at this stage concerning the workings within the Assembly are necessarily preliminary. The Assembly was suspended by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland from 11th February to 29th May 2000, due to the lack of progress on arms decommissioning. When, following negotiations, the suspension was lifted and the Assembly began work again on 5th June 2000, it immediately found itself embroiled in such divisive issues as the future of policing and the flags issue. Further, the Assembly so far, has passed only one substantive piece of legislation.

Accordingly, the researchers were obliged to slightly broaden the scope of the project, also analysing the views of Sinn Féin and PUP members outside the Assembly of their expectations of co-operation between republicans and loyalists. This additional research was conducted through semi-structured interviews and a pilot survey of PUP members.

Such additional research was adversely affected by the loyalist feud between the UVF/PUP and UDA/UFF/UDP in the late summer and autumn of 2000. During this time, seven people were killed, including members of the party we were surveying, and around 650 families were forcibly re-housed (see also 'Methods' section, for impact upon our quantitative data collection).

Tentatively, the research project refutes the idea that the consociational form of political agreement forged in Northern Ireland necessarily leads to a freezing of ethnic bloc rivalries. The

research also questions the validity of the model that assumes that intra ethnic rivalries will lead to a hardening of unionist-nationalist contests due to the electoral imperative of parties being seen to 'defend' their bloc. The research instead argues that there is some scope for 'rainbow coalitions' within the Assembly. Given this background, we would make the following observations regarding the four main objectives of the project:

Objective 1: To explore the extent to which the PUP and Sinn Féin offer a common political agenda.

The return of devolved government to Northern Ireland has enjoyed much popular support, but the new political institutions remain brittle. Northern Ireland's politics remains dominated by the search for a stable political settlement and a working inclusive set of political arrangements.

Recent dramatic political changes have been reflected in the fragmentation of Unionism. Central to the PUP's development are the reconstruction of relationships, not only with other Unionists, but also with the 'traditional enemy', Sinn Féin. This is particularly important in terms of the possible development of a 'new politics' in Northern Ireland (see below).

Under the influence of its current leadership, the PUP has grown from a single branch of around thirty members located in Belfast, to structured party with a claimed membership of around 600, organised across eleven branches. One of those interviewed, now a leading party member and elected representative, explains the party's development as follows:

(T)he PUP originated out of a necessity, because particularly in the working class communities, loyalist viewpoints weren't being represented, particularly on social issues. There was a wide gap between what we would see as a middle class unionist party on one side and a fanatical fundamentalist DUP on the other side. What we needed was a party with new ideas. (PUP Interview 03).

Indeed, the interviews revealed a consistency in the belief that Unionist politicians had largely absolved themselves of many social and economic responsibilities, by giving primacy to the constitutional issues. This was reflected in several interviews that articulated a growing sense of awareness that the 'Stormont system' had failed. This has led, not just to a reassessment of the Unionist leadership, but for some, to a complete reassessment of what loyalism means. Further, PUP many activists argued that the intransigence of sections of political Unionism, (particularly the Democratic Unionist Party), throughout the peace process, has been detrimental to the loyalist community. A large majority (87.5) of the PUP membership surveyed voted 'yes' in the May 1998 referendum.

Hence, the PUP came to the Assembly supporting the idea of 'shared responsibility' between the 'two traditions' as the basis for a solution. Several of those interviewed spoke of the

possibility of a 'politics of realignment' between the Protestant working class and the Catholic working class.

In the past, many in the Protestant working class have steadfastly refused to believe that it was possible to seek any political accommodation with Nationalists. Further, any left of centre articulation of social and economic issues was often seen as a direct challenge to Unionist control of the Northern Irish State itself. For the leadership of the PUP an important stated goal remains, an injection of working class politics to get people to rally around social and economic issues. As one MLA expressed it:

The only vehicle which will I think destroy the budding cultivated flower of sectarianism is class politics and we've got to replace that sectarianism (and) at some future date actually create real alignment in politics on economic and social issues, as opposed to the divisive religious and constitutional. (PUP interview 16).

One of the most important aspects of the PUP activists interviewed was an almost uniform justification of the willingness to enter into debate with the traditional 'enemies of Ulster'. Indeed, of those surveyed, almost three quarters of PUP members (74.1%) believed that Sinn Féin should be allowed to participate in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

This willingness to engage political opposition, even with those constructed as traditional enemies, (and in some cases literally so), directly marks out the PUP and its supporters from other strands within Unionism. Until extremely recently the open expression of such a political stance would have been untenable from a representative of working class loyalism.

In this sense the PUP has provided focal points for increasingly coherent social, economic and political challenges within unionism. From within the PUP interviews, for example, there are claims for the need for direct state intervention in key areas of the economy and a clear emphasis on the need for strong state support for the health and social security services. This particularly apparent in higher education, where several interviewees echoed the party line in advocating a full return to state subsidised funding to the equivalent levels of 1979.

PUP members also expressed distinct views on other social issues. Unlike most ethnic bloc parties in Northern Ireland, many interviewed expressed a desire to promote women's issues. Indeed, almost half of the PUP executive committee is made up of women. The PUP is also one of the few political organisations, certainly amongst Unionism, which has been supportive of Gay and Lesbian rights and which is candidly 'pro-choice' on the abortion issue. Most of those interviewed were sympathetic to such causes. Such views are far from primary to traditional expressions of Unionist ideology.

As several of those interviewed noted there are widespread feelings from within the Protestant working class that they are in political decline and psychological retreat. Hence, the PUP

has been relatively successful in drawing support especially from that section of the community normally disengaged with politics. Well over eighty per cent (88.7) of PUP members have never previously been a member of any political party in Northern Ireland. Several interviewees recognised this social base, as for example, in the following:

It's predominantly working class people who votes for the PUP, but then again ...you just can't say that it's all loyalist working class or it's all, because it's not. We're attracting academics ... all sorts of people because they got us as a new party saying new things, so that's what we're gearing for, we don't want to be known as just a working class party or just a loyalist party. (PUP Interview 03).

These shifting contours of unionist identity are extremely important for the possible future direction of politics. The traditional construction of a 'British' identity by Ulster loyalism, has not only included, but also absorbed a multitude of other key identities, such as gender, geographical location, sexual preference, class identity, and so on. These have been organised into a collective political discourse. The PUP may provide the dynamic to begin to separate these key identities, and to reformulate its central components. This may form the basis for the creation of alternative formulation of a new politics.

There are, however, still obvious limits to this. One area that PUP members do not exhibit change is in their primary sense of national identity. The majority (62.5) still identified themselves as 'British'. While others have adopted such hybrid labels as 'British-Irish' (23.2) and 'Northern Irish' (10.7%), there is little evidence of movement in this core self-identifier.

Likewise, Sinn Féin MLAs conceded no ground on questions of national identity. They accused the PUP of being confused on what constituted their Britishness. The Unionist promotion of Ulster-Scots, within the Culture Arts and Leisure Committee and more widely within the Assembly, was seen as evidence of such insecurities. Sinn Féin MLAs were divided on whether there were any positive aspects of Orange culture.

Sinn Féin MLAs remain sceptical of the overall rationale of the leftist agenda of the PUP. Nonetheless, Sinn Féin MLAs believed that common agendas could be forged on specific items. One such area was education. Sinn Féin MLAs were hostile to the 11+ examination and university tuition fees. Such views were also reflected in the PUP's membership. Understandably, Sinn Féin's control of the education ministry and presence on the HE committee led to a belief that the party would shape the educational agenda. The PUP is unrepresented on either committee.

Sinn Féin has attempted to restate its left of centre credentials during the past 18 months, notably with the emphasis upon a republican labour agenda at its 2000 ard fheis. Whilst still incoherent as to whether genuinely redistributive policies and equality are attainable within the state of Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin's priorities of expansionist housing programmes; the removal of

educational selection and the establishment of a strategic framework for the expansion of public services are items in accord with the PUP's agenda.

Clearly, Sinn Féin and the PUP offer political agendas which, whilst diametrically opposed in constitutional terms and in assertions of national identity, have much in common in respect of socio-economic agendas. The possible abolition of the 11+ examination also reveals considerable intra party division. With Sinn Féin's control of the education ministry, the PUP's support for abolition offers the possibility of a cross community, class based alliance with republicans. Certainly in interviews there were no strong objections expressed by the PUP leadership to co-operation at this level.

Objective 2: To examine which aspects of the Northern Ireland Assembly offer the greatest prospects for co-operation.

Most committee work has been concerned with statutory rules. Relations between Sinn Féin and the PUP are generally recognised as cordial, notwithstanding historical aspects, such as sectarian killings, which gave Sinn Féin members 'major reservations' about dealing with the PUP at the outset.

Within departmental committees, there is an anxiety to achieve consensus, fostered by the committee clerk, and the option to formally record dissent has been avoided. Zero-sum game loyalist-republican sectarian politics have been rare, although there have been tensions on the Social Development Committee. Here, Sinn Féin argue that the PUP (represented by Billy Hutchinson) has concerned itself with 'maintaining territory' for its supporters in respect of regeneration projects in north Belfast (interview, Michelle Gildernew, SF MLA, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, 28 June 2000).

Within the Assembly itself, all of Sinn Féin's MLAs declared themselves closer to the PUP than their fellow nationalists within the SDLP. Most attribute this to the similarities in class background between themselves and PUP MLAs. Each MLA conceded, however, that there were important political variations within the SDLP, with Mitchel McLaughlin, in particular, stressing the importance of not treating parties as a 'monolith' (interview 28 June 2000).

Likewise the PUP leadership expressed a willingness to form co-operation and some sense of common agenda arising from a similarity of class background. One leading member put this forcibly when he was asked to identify possible areas of similarity with Sinn Féin in the Assembly:

Well, where I suppose we might agree with them (Sinn Féin) is that we are absolutely opposed to the eleven plus and that the process of selection is something that needs serious thinking about. We're the only unionist party by the way who oppose the eleven plus. We're the only unionist party who actively promote gay and lesbian rights. We're the only unionist party who, in fact, we may well be the

only party, who confirmed our commitment to pro choice in the abortion debate. So therefore it isn't simply just this Prod thing for us, it is not that. It's about, if this is a chance to build the parameters of a sensible modern wholesome society then f**** sake let's do all of it. (PUP interview 16).

Futher, within the Assembly, Sinn Féin MLAs were hostile to the idea of electoral pacts with the SDLP. The concept of pan nationalism was decisively rejected. This view was held because of Sinn Féin perceptions of SDLP disinterest in the equality agenda and the view that the SDLP has 'bottled' negotiations on Strand 2 of the Agreement, diminishing its all-Ireland dimension (interview with Pat Doherty, MLA, 27 June 2000).

Other Sinn Féin MLAs argued that the SDLP was weakest on the equality agenda (interviews with Alex Maskey, SF MLA, West Belfast, 20 May 2000; Mary Nelis, SF MLA, Foyle, 28 June 2000). The failure of the SDLP to support Sinn Féin's proposals for a Women's Department or the establishment of a Minister for Children came in for particular criticism.

Objective 3: To analyse how both parties envisage the future development of Northern Ireland's devolved institutions.

Both parties saw the civic forum as the aspect of the new institutions most likely to foster the development of cross-community consensus. Equally, both parties have been disappointed with its construction, arguing that it will become a middle-class talking shop. The GFA says little about the construction of the forum, declaring merely that it will be consultative. The Agreement allows the First and Deputy First Minister to establish guidelines for the selection of civic forum members.

In common with the PUP, Sinn Féin believed that representatives from the 'voluntary sector' would include cross community former prisoners groups into the forum and create greater consensus. The party is critical of the extent of business representation within the forum (interview with Mary Nelis, SF MLA, 28 June 2000). Sinn Féin argue for a devolved model for the civic forum, with a such forums based in each constituency. This decentralised model has attracted some sympathy from the PUP.

Despite the barriers, Mary Nelis and other MLAs insisted that 'cross party class alliances would form'. These alliances would cover a wide range of issues including gender. Nelis asserted that she could 'do business' more easily with Billy Hutchinson (PUP) on gender issues than with the 'middle class professionals of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition'.

The issue of abortion divides Sinn Féin (unlike the PUP, which is clearly 'pro-choice'). Two MLAs described their own party's position as 'ambiguous'. Sinn Féin MLAs preferred a non-literal reading of the GFA in terms of its future development. The party's MLAs offered a model of future cross-border co-operation based upon economic logic, which would override the

formal requirements for Assembly approval for further expansion of the all-Ireland dimension within the GFA.

For Sinn Féin's MLAs the question of permanent commitment to the Assembly and co-operation with loyalists was ranged against the promotion of participation to the party base as a tactic designed to achieve transition to unity. The Party Chair, Mitchel McLaughlin, emphasised the tactical flexibility of the party in arguing that even abstentionism from Westminster was a 'tactic not a principle for republicans' declaring that abstention reflected merely the fact that there was 'no value in participation at Westminster'.

While there is also commitment to the Assembly by the PUP, there is concern regarding the wider political agenda. Hence, several interviewees referred to Sinn Féin's perceived tactic to 'narrow the ground of unionism by the use of the in your face street politics', while David Ervine has spoken of being 'sucked out of the process by Sinn Féin's actions' (NI Assembly Official Report [Hansard], Monday 24 January 2000). This dovetails directly with some of the issues below.

Objective 4: To assess the extent to which both MLAs from either use models of institutional co-operation to promote replication among supporters from republican and loyalist communities.

Public co-operation with republicans remains difficult for the PUP, which is sensitive to criticisms concerning developing closer relationships with Sinn Féin. In particular, it is vulnerable to its local rivals the Ulster Democratic Party and the Democratic Unionist Party. The broad politics of internal unionist criticism of the PUP can be set out as follows. The PUP has bought into the current political settlement which is merely part of a broader strategy to persuade Unionists to accept the greening of their cultural and political identity that will ultimately render a transfer of sovereignty inevitable, through a concealed process of unification.

This is countered directly by the views from PUP supporters. Indeed, almost two-thirds of PUP members agreed that the Union between the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland is 'as strong as ever'. Over 80% of PUP members, however, also rejected the idea that the peace process has moved Northern Ireland into greater Union within the United Kingdom, although given the devolution of powers and legitimation of the pursuit of Irish unity by nationalists, this is unsurprising. Most PUP members appear to believe that the GFA is sufficient to maintain the Union, upholding the consent principle and therefore the Union, rather than significantly altering Northern Ireland's constitutional position.

Many PUP members, however, refute the 'equality agenda' as projected by Sinn Féin and the notion of discrimination against Catholics. PUP members divided almost equally on whether Catholics and Protestants were treated equally today. Almost half believed that employers were more likely to give jobs to Catholics in contemporary Northern Ireland. The attitude towards the

notion that Catholics remain 'second class citizens' can be clearly seen in the following from PUP executive member:

I think that the second class citizenry that Sinn Féin would argue about is that of attitude, because the structures in society are definitively not sectarian ... the issue of equality I don't think is anywhere near as high or should be anywhere near as high on Sinn Féin's agenda. (PUP interview 16).

PUP members remains hostility to Sinn Féin's wider political agenda. No PUP members listed Sinn Féin among their leading seven vote transfer preferences. These tensions became particularly manifest when the PUP perceived that Sinn Féin were acting out of narrow interests. An example, was found amid the row that developed after ministers McGuinness and de Bruin ordered their civil servants not to fly the flag as part of the Coronation Day celebrations. This was seen by the PUP as yet another case of Sinn Féin's 'in your face politics' and a lack of sincerity about bringing about conflict resolution. As one PUP executive member put it:

Most people could live with Sinn Féin Assembly members as Assembly members representing their constituency, but when they took executive positions, they represented everyone. So, whenever they went into a position in the executive and did what they did about the flags and then were prepared to sit on committees with RUC members ... Well it was clear they won't represent unionist, so therefore they won't perform their executive role. (PUP Interview 09).

For Sinn Féin, there is little or no electoral damage from association with loyalists, proving such links do not diminish the party's 'green' credentials in terms of intra ethnic bloc rivalry with the SDLP.

In terms of stabilising Northern Ireland's devolved institutions, the areas of commonality between Sinn Féin and the PUP are apparent, although, as reserved items, there is little scope for meaningful co-operation. Both parties continued to regard the issue of decommissioning as an artificial barrier to political progress. Both parties accept the need for reform of the RUC, although there are significant divisions among the PUP membership. Nor are the parties hugely divided over the third contentious area of Orange parades, although, again, PUP members are divided over compromise on this issue.

Conclusions

Overall, the following conclusions can (tentatively) be drawn:

- There is genuine scope for cross-community informal co-operation between Sinn Féin and the PUP, most notably on issues of education, health and social services and, to a lesser extent, on housing.
- The two parties have similar views on how the Assembly should work. They are keener on building devolution from below, developing models of republican-loyalist co-operation on local councils and wish to devolved the powers of the civic forum to the local level.
- The consociational model of democracy imposed within the GFA should not be held responsible for the development of more vigorous ethnic bloc rivalries. It has been demonstrated elsewhere that the 'greening of the SDLP' occurred after the collapse of an experiment in consociationalism in 1974 (Evans, J. Tonge, J. and Murray, G. 'Constitutional Nationalism and Socialism in, *Northern Ireland: the Greening of the SDLP*, in Denver, D. et al., *British Elections and Parties Review* 10. Ethnic bloc divisions exist independently of Assembly arrangements. The Assembly does not preclude their dismantling, nor reinforce such division. For their part, Sinn Féin MLAs see pan-nationalism, insofar as it existed, as a construct of the peace process, not a consequence within the Assembly.
- The degree of potential Sinn Féin-PUP co-operation is such that it should assist when parallel consent or weighted majority voting rules are deployed within the Assembly. There may be sufficient consensus within the Assembly to make the deployment of such rules rare, as on many issues (for example, tuition fees and the 11+) divisions within parties are greater than those between parties. This conclusion, however, needs a broader based assessment of MLAs to be sustained with confidence.
- Co-operation at Assembly level between republicans and loyalists may have a spillover effect, but it is premature to assume this in the short term. The extent of hostility to Sinn Féin in respect of voting preferences displayed by PUP members is indicative of the need for a substantial thawing process. It also reflects the gulf in constitutional agendas and indicates the continued importance of such questions.