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Pragmatists versus dogmatists: Explaining the failure of power-sharing in Northern Ireland during the 1970s

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This article argues that the failure of Northern Ireland's first power-sharing executive, and subsequent attempts to restore power-sharing during the 1970s, was the result of conflicting attitudes towards devolution among Northern Ireland's politicians. Traditional ideological divisions between nationalists and unionists were not the primary barrier to creating and sustaining cross-community institutions, as stressed in accounts of this period premised on consociational theory. Drawing extensively from archival sources, it argues that the split between the pragmatists from both communities, prepared to compromise their core principles and accept power-sharing devolution within a United Kingdom (UK) framework, and the dogmatists (both nationalists and unionists) who refused to contemplate any compromise to their core position prevented a consensual political settlement emerging during the 1970s.

### *Introduction*

Between 1921 and 1972, Northern Ireland's devolved administration was led, exclusively, by the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). In 1972, Northern Ireland's parliament, Stormont, was prorogued by the British government amidst a deteriorating security situation (Hennessey, 2007). However, devolution returned to the region in January 1974. Following protracted negotiations in 1973, nationalist and unionist politicians agreed to form the region's first power-sharing executive. On 28 May 1974, however, the executive collapsed in the face of a political strike organised by the Ulster Workers' Council (UWC). The UWC comprised loyalist paramilitaries, Protestant trades unionists, and unionist politicians opposed to the Sunningdale Agreement (Anderson, 1994; Fisk, 1975). The Sunningdale Agreement,

concluded in December 1973, cemented the power-sharing structures in Northern Ireland, and provided for the establishment of a Council of Ireland to facilitate co-operation between the executive and the government of the Irish Republic (Faulkner, 1978, pp. 202-25). In the aftermath of the strike, direct rule from London was reintroduced. Further attempts to restore devolution to Northern Ireland were made during the 1970s, but these efforts came to naught.

Several attempts have been made to explain both the failure of the first power-sharing executive, and subsequent attempts to restore power-sharing in Northern Ireland during the 1970s. Explanations premised on consociational theory dominate the scholarly literature. Consociational structures involve the imposition of elite power-sharing between competing groups to regulate conflict in a divided society (Lijphart, 1969; see also Bogaards, 2000). Consociational power-sharing is premised on the notion that ethnic cleavages are durable. It is not the only kind of power-sharing, however. Power-sharing can also be integrationist. Integrative power-sharing is designed to reward moderates, and encourage co-operation across communal lines (Dixon, 2005; Horowitz, 2001; Wolff, 2006).

In the Northern Ireland case, consociationalism refers to power-sharing between Irish nationalists and British unionists. Scholars analysing Northern Ireland through the prism of consociationalism, such as Kerr and O'Leary, focus on the ethnic divisions between Irish nationalists and British unionists (e.g. McGarry and O'Leary, 1995; 2004).<sup>1</sup> These divisions, it is argued, require enforced power-sharing structures to regulate the political conflict in the region. Advocates of consociationalism claim that it was only when the British, and to a lesser extent, Irish, governments pursued a solution based on consociational principles, by

imposing power-sharing, that the conflict could be regulated (O'Leary, 2003; Tannam, 2001; Kerr, 2005; O'Duffy, 2007).

A dominant trope in this literature is that power-sharing could have succeeded during the 1970s if the British Labour government had imposed it (Kerr, 2005; 2011; O'Leary, 2004). This argument is made despite the widespread opposition to such a settlement of most unionists, and indeed militant republicans. Nevertheless, Harold Wilson's Labour government is chided by Kerr for abandoning power-sharing, ostensibly as a prequel to extricating itself from Northern Ireland (Kerr, 2011, p 13). Likewise, O'Leary accused Wilson's administration of 'abject spinelessness' during the UWC strike (O'Leary, 2004, p. 196). These scholars therefore presume that the failure to successfully regulate the divisions between British unionists and Irish nationalists by imposing power-sharing explains the collapse of the first power-sharing experiment and the persistence of the conflict thereafter. Their logic appears to be that because quasi-consociational power-sharing structures play a role in regulating political divisions in Northern Ireland (in a totally different context) a similar settlement could have been arrived at much earlier. It was only when the British (and Irish) governments 'learned' how to regulate the conflict, that a solution became possible (Tannam, 2001).

This article argues that explanations influenced by consociational theory misinterpret the political dynamics within both nationalism and unionism during the 1970s. It demonstrates that neither the ethnic differences nor the alleged governmental inaction stressed by the consociationalists properly explains the collapse of power-sharing, and the subsequent failures to restore it during that decade. Exploring political attitudes towards devolution offers an alternative explanation for the failure of power-sharing. The main obstacle to power-sharing was

the gulf between the pragmatists on both sides, prepared to compromise core ideological principles, and the dogmatists who refused to countenance any diminution of their objectives. Pragmatists were willing to accept power-sharing within a UK framework; dogmatists, including those who favoured devolution, were not. Dogmatic unionists sought the exclusion of nationalists from government and the restoration of the pre-1972 unionist dominated parliament, while dogmatic nationalists violently pursued a united Ireland against the wishes of the majority.

It is important to note that the terms 'pragmatist' and 'dogmatist' do not reflect a value judgement on the part of the author. Classifying a person or group as 'dogmatic', in particular, might be construed as pejorative, or imply that a certain policy position may have been motivated by intransigence rather than political logic. To reiterate: the terms are used merely as a way of explaining particular political divisions between those who were prepared to countenance a diminution in their core ideological goals and those who were not. It is important to note, also, that dogmatism was not always synonymous with support for violence: the vast majority of dogmatists actually opposed it.

Cillian McGrattan has rebuked consociationalists for failing to engage with the increasing body of documentary evidence in British and Irish archives (McGrattan, 2010a).<sup>2</sup> This article, by contrast, extensively interrogates this material as well as party policy documents and contemporary newspapers. It refutes the claim that power-sharing could have been imposed during the 1970s. Such an argument ignores empirical evidence to the contrary, particularly the extent of popular opposition to power-sharing. It also presumes homogeneity within nationalist and unionist political blocs, when instead these groups were internally divided. By focusing on the secondary cleavage of attitudes towards devolution, the article

demonstrates both the commitment to power-sharing devolution of successive British governments and that government inaction, or failure to learn, cannot explain the failure of power-sharing initiatives during the 1970s (Tannam, 2001; Cochrane, 2013, pp. 95-6).

### *The collapse of the executive*

In November 1973, following discussions led by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, a power-sharing executive was formed comprising the UUP, the constitutional nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and the non-sectarian Alliance Party (McDaid, 2013, p. 24).<sup>3</sup> This represented a considerable moderation in policy on behalf of both the UUP and SDLP. Following the collapse of Stormont, both parties published dogmatic policy documents, which appeared to eschew compromise.

In September 1972, the UUP ruled out power-sharing with those whose 'primary aim' was to take Northern Ireland out of the UK (UUP, 1972). This policy was influenced by pressure from Ulster Vanguard, an anti-reformist faction within the UUP. That same month, the SDLP published a document calling for a 'new' united Ireland, free from British interference (SDLP, 1972). More extreme parties on both sides, including the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Provisional Sinn Féin (PSF), also rejected a power-sharing settlement. The DUP, at this time, favoured integration with the rest of the UK (Walker, 2004, p. 213). Nevertheless, the following year, both the UUP and SDLP leaderships pursued a more pragmatic approach, and displayed a willingness to share power.

This moderation was forced upon the parties by the policies of the British government. In March 1973, the Conservative government published a White Paper

entitled the *Northern Ireland Constitutional Proposals*. The White Paper sought the restoration of a devolution to Northern Ireland, but not if the government was supported by only one section of the community (McDaid, 2013, p. 17). This meant that devolution could not return in the absence of power-sharing.

The UUP leader, Brian Faulkner, refused to reject the White Paper out of hand. This prompted the departure of Ulster Vanguard from his party. Vanguard formed a new party, the Vanguard Unionist Progressive Party (VUPP), and promised to wreck the power-sharing Assembly (Ulster Vanguard, 1973). A further split developed in the UUP in advance of Assembly elections in June 1973. Ten of the UUP's thirty-nine candidates refused to support Faulkner's seemingly ambiguous position regarding power-sharing. This group was led by Harry West, a former Stormont minister (McDaid, 2013, p. 19). The UUP's unwieldy party structure made it particularly susceptible to splits and factionalism. Its governing body gave delegates from the Orange Order who may have been affiliated with other parties a say in influencing policy (Walker, 2004, p. 262).<sup>4</sup>

Faulkner had stated that the UUP would not share power with any party whose 'primary objective' was breaking with the UK. This left the possibility of power-sharing open, since Faulkner argued that breaking the union could not be the 'primary objective' of a party willing to operate within a devolved UK administration (Faulkner, 1978, p. 194). This was unacceptable to West's grouping. Nevertheless, the majority of the UUP followed Faulkner into the power-sharing executive.

A majority of unionists, however, including West's faction of the UUP, rejected the new institutions. Ian Paisley's DUP was the most dogmatic unionist group. It refused to countenance the notion of Catholics in government. DUP member T. E. Burns informed the Prime Minister, Edward Heath, that 'it was impossible to get on



with Roman Catholics whose attitude was feckless and irresponsible.’ Paisley was equally uncompromising, claiming that loyalists could only be reassured if Catholics became ‘fully integrated in the political life of the Province’ (National Archives (TNA), Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) 87/283, note of a meeting between the Prime Minister and leaders of the Democratic Unionist Party, 29 August 1973). This would effectively have necessitated the SDLP renouncing its (constitutional) nationalism and becoming unionists.

The power-sharing administration was also attacked by dogmatic nationalists. The political wing of the Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA), the Republican Clubs, criticised the ‘British imposed’ Sunningdale settlement (Sinn Féin Official/Northern Republican Clubs, 1973). Meanwhile, Provisional Sinn Féin (PSF) accused the SDLP of becoming the ‘New Unionist Party’, for sharing power with the UUP (*An Phoblacht*, 8 March 1974). More ominously, PSF’s ‘colleagues’ in the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) scorned the executive, and continued its indiscriminate campaign of violence throughout its tenure (English, 2003, pp. 165-6). Loyalist paramilitaries did likewise.

These events demonstrate that the most important obstacle to power-sharing was not the ethnic divisions between Irish nationalists and British unionists stressed by consociationalists (O’Duffy, 2007). A power-sharing executive was formed comprising members of these two groups in accordance with government policy. Rather, it was the internal divisions *within* these groups that undermined the prospects for power-sharing. Pragmatists on both sides recognised that devolved power-sharing within a UK framework was the only alternative to direct rule. Dogmatists must also have recognised this, but continued to pursue unrealistic, hard-line goals. These internal divisions assumed greater significance following the

Sunningdale agreement in December 1973 and the executive's accession to office in January 1974.

The extent of dogmatic opposition to the power-sharing executive became apparent just over a month after it took office. In February 1974, Edward Heath called a general election in the UK in the midst of a dispute with the National Union of Mineworkers. In Northern Ireland, however, the election was contested solely on the basis of support for the Sunningdale agreement. It provided the executive's opponents with an opportunity to undermine its authority, and stoke unionist fears about the proposed Council of Ireland. Anti-Sunningdale unionists (DUP, VUPP, unpledged UUP and independents) organised under the banner of the United Ulster Unionist Coalition (UUUC), and won eleven of the twelve Northern Ireland seats. Only one pro-power-sharing candidate was elected, the SDLP leader, Gerry Fitt. Thus, whilst a majority of unionists sought the return of devolution, most would forego this if it meant power-sharing or closer symbolic co-operation with the Dublin government.

The general election seriously damaged the executive, but its fate was sealed by the paramilitary-backed UWC strike in May 1974, the zenith of anti-reformist unionist unity (See Anderson, 1994; Fisk, 1975). The UWC demanded fresh Assembly elections in light of the February election results. Fears of the proposed Council of Ireland, which had been much trumpeted by the SDLP, were also significant in garnering unionist support for the strike (Aveyard, 2012, p. 532). The UWC claimed the proposed Council of Ireland would place Northern Ireland under the 'shackles of Rome.' Northern Ireland was, the UWC asserted, 'the last bastion of the Protestant Faith left in Europe', which was what the strike was 'really about' (*UWC News Sheet*, No. 15, May 1974).

The strike gathered widespread support in the unionist community, and the executive collapsed just two weeks later, to the delight of both loyalists and militant republicans. The British Prime Minister arguably ensured the success of the strike, with what he later admitted was a 'provocative and bitter' speech on 25 May. Wilson accused unionists of 'sponging on Westminster', whilst simultaneously assaulting the democratic institutions of the British state. His remarks caused a surge in support for the UWC (Wilson, 1979, p. 76).

Militant republicans, notably the PIRA, had undermined the executive by its campaign of violence, particularly intense in border regions (Patterson, 2013). A contemporary British Army report claimed that 'terrorists operating from the Republic' caused a surge in violence in these areas, which further undercut unionist support for the new institutions (Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), Office of the Executive (OE)1/28, Reynolds to Goddard, 30 January 1974). PSF also castigated the SDLP for participating in the executive, labelling it as a 'gang of self-seeking individuals' that had failed to bring Irish unity any closer (*An Phoblacht*, 31 May 1974).

Michael Kerr has argued that the executive might have survived had the Labour government taken firmer action against the UWC strike: 'In failing to uphold constitutional government in Northern Ireland, Wilson was rejecting the idea that the British could or should provide a solution to Ireland's ancient troubles, either by imposing power-sharing or through some other form of direct rule from Westminster' (Kerr, 2011, p. xiv). This echoes the argument of McGarry and O'Leary (1995, p. 362), who claim that the change of government in Great Britain in February 1974 adversely affected the executive's chances of survival. However, there is no persuasive evidence to support their claims.

More recently, Feargal Cochrane has asserted that Wilson's government abrogated its responsibility by its 'failure to confront the hard-line loyalists and support the power-sharing executive.' Cochrane claims that Wilson had little political capital in the executive and left it to 'wither and die' (Cochrane, 2013, 95-6). These arguments are an extension of the logic of consociational accounts of the Northern Ireland conflict: that enforcing power-sharing in the 1970s might have 'regulated' the conflict. But elements within both ethnic groups were already prepared to share power: this was no longer the key obstacle to progress.

These explanations conflate what consociationalists believe to be the root causes of conflict with the reasons why it persisted. Their arguments take little account of popular opposition to power-sharing, and the fact that power-sharing was not, in itself, a peace process. Therefore, it was opposition from dogmatic wings of both unionism and nationalism (some of which took a violent form) that scuppered the chances of power-sharing, not the government's failure to impose it. Likewise, republican and loyalist violence continued despite the executive. And, as Kerr (2011, p. 246) acknowledges, loyalists celebrated the executive's collapse 'as if it was VE day.' Republicans, likewise, delighted in the executive's demise. Imposing power-sharing in these circumstances may only have worsened the violence. In the aftermath of the UWC strike, the split between pragmatists and dogmatists on both sides became more pronounced.

### *The Constitutional Convention*

Despite the success of the UWC strike, the government reaffirmed that power-sharing was an absolute requirement if devolution was to return. In the immediate aftermath of the strike, the Prime Minister wrote to his Principal Private Secretary

explaining that 'realism suggests that power-sharing is an objective we must continue to proclaim' (TNA, Prime Minister's Office (PREM)16/148, Wilson to Robert Armstrong, 30 May 1974). Privately, Wilson informed opposition leader, Edward Heath, that Labour would not 'countenance anything resembling a return to Stormont' (TNA, PREM16/149, Note for the record, meeting between the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition, 3 July, 1974). This was confirmed that same month, when the government published its White Paper, *The Northern Ireland Constitution*. The document unambiguously stated that there 'must be some form of power-sharing and partnership because no political system will survive, or be supported, unless there is widespread acceptance of it within the community'. This required participation 'by the whole community' (Northern Ireland Office, 1974).

Consistent with this approach, the White Paper outlined the government's plans to hold a Constitutional Convention, comprising local politicians, under the chairmanship of Sir Robert Lowry, 'to consider what provisions for the government of Northern Ireland would be likely to command the most widespread acceptance throughout the community there.' A repeat of the 1973 settlement was still desired, but it was recognised that there was 'little prospect' of this happening (NIO, 1974). Wilson realised that there was little likelihood of the Convention succeeding. Indeed, the Cabinet Secretary informed him it was 'likely to fail' (TNA, PREM 16/151, Northern Ireland: Future Trends of Policy (IRN (74) 22), 23 October 1974). Nevertheless, the plans proceeded, with Convention elections held in May 1975. The primary electoral battle was between the parties prepared to embrace compromise and those that were not.

The SDLP's Convention election manifesto sought to reassure unionists that it had no wish to force them into a united Ireland. The document stressed power-

sharing and an Irish dimension, but also recognised the 'British dimension' in Northern Ireland. Any solution, it stated, 'must take account of both' (SDLP, 1975a). Most unionists, however, were unconvinced: in the subsequent election, the UUUC won 46 of the 78 Convention seats. Parties willing to compromise, on both sides, received approximately 42 per cent of the vote; dogmatists, however, were in the majority with approximately 56 per cent of the vote.<sup>5</sup> The proceedings of the Convention illustrate further the widening gulf between the dogmatic and pragmatic camps, and how important intra-group divisions were in the failure to find a power-sharing solution.

Consistent with its manifesto, the SDLP largely maintained a conciliatory tone during the Convention. Gerry Fitt stated that his party was dissatisfied with the 'long distance' government under direct rule. What the region needed was 'Northern Ireland people to represent the interests of their own constituents ... irrespective of party political differences' (*Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention – Report of Debates* (Convention Debates), 8 May 1975, p. 5). Both Fitt and his party colleague, Ivan Cooper, called for a strong legislative assembly, with power-sharing at every level (Convention Debates, 28 May 1975, p. 55).

Even John Hume, often classified as one of the party's more nationalist members, publicly supported Fitt's position. Hume called for the replacement of direct rule with 'direct rule by the people of Northern Ireland through their own administration' – effectively a return of the Sunningdale package (Convention Debates, 19 June 1975). Further attempts to reassure unionists were made the following month, when Fitt confirmed that the SDLP accepted 'that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom' (Convention Debates, 1 July 1975, p. 379). More remarkably, the party publicly recognised the 'financial and economic advantages

which Northern Ireland presently derives from its membership of the United Kingdom' (SDLP, 1975b). Thus, whilst ultimately favouring a united Ireland, the SDLP was realistic enough to accept that this was unachievable for the foreseeable future. Instead, it pursued the compromise settlement supported by the British government, of power-sharing devolution within the UK. Only some unionists, however, were prepared to accept the SDLP posed little actual threat to the union.

The former Chief Minister of the executive, Brian Faulkner, was one such unionist. His Unionist Party of Northern Ireland (UPNI), formed in September 1974, supported the return of devolution and believed in sharing power with the SDLP, 'right at the top level'.<sup>6</sup> Faulkner was convinced that 'if the majority in Northern Ireland thought that the province was positively going to remain in the U.K., then that majority would overwhelmingly support a government with responsibility shared between the two main communities' (O'Connor and Kiely, 1975). Faulkner, having governed with the SDLP, believed in its commitment to working for the benefit of Northern Ireland within agreed devolved structures. Other unionists, however, were in no mood for compromise.

Faulkner's successor as UUP leader, Harry West, favoured the return of devolution, but only without power-sharing (Convention Debates, 17 June 1975, p. 231). He argued that any executive should function in the 'normal British way': the largest party should attempt to form a government, coalitions should be voluntary, and there should be an opposition. In a reference to the SDLP, West warned that unionists would 'not be prepared to tolerate any constitution which, by some contrived arrangement, places on the ultimate steering wheel of government the hand of anybody who is not acceptable to the majority' (O'Connor and McKittrick, 1975). The majority, however, clearly wanted devolution to return. Fearing a loss of

support, the ever-populist DUP renounced integration and proclaimed its support for the return of Stormont-style devolution. Paisley castigated the Wilson administration, which he accused of governing Northern Ireland 'in a manner worse than the Colonies' (Convention Debates, 17 June 1975, p. 240). He ruled out power-sharing since the 'people of Northern Ireland had rejected the S.D.L.P.'s demand to be in the Cabinet' (O'Connor and McKittrick, 1975).

The VUPP was divided on policy during the Convention. A majority of its members, such as Belfast's Reg Empey, sought the return of devolution. Others, such as Kennedy Lindsay, flirted with the concept of dominion status for Northern Ireland (Convention Debates, 17 June 1975, p. 240). What united the vast majority of VUPP members was their dogmatic opposition to power-sharing. However, the party leader, William Craig, caused consternation when he joined the ranks of the pragmatists by publicly supporting the formation of an emergency coalition with the SDLP. The SDLP's conduct at the Convention convinced Craig that it was prepared to accept 'the decision that Ulster remains inside the United Kingdom for as long as the majority of our people want that' (Convention Debates, 1 October 1975, pp. 337-8). Craig's plan was denounced by Paisley and most members of the VUPP. His plan was also unacceptable to the SDLP, since it did not constitute power-sharing as of right (McLoughlin, 2010, p. 75). Nevertheless, Craig continued to advocate the idea, and, consequently, ended his political career in failure.

In November 1975, the Convention published its report which, unsurprisingly, reflected the wishes of the UUUC majority. It rejected power-sharing and called for both the return of a Stormont-style, majority rule legislature and increased representation for Northern Ireland at Westminster (NIO, 1975). In an attempt to salvage something from the proceedings, the Secretary of State, Merlyn Rees, held



a series of inter-party discussions and reconvened the Convention in February 1976. However, the UUUC was no less dogmatic in its opposition to sharing power with the SDLP.<sup>7</sup>

Kerr has suggested that the UUUC had no 'practical or ideological points of opposition to the idea of forming a coalition government' during the course of the Convention (Kerr, 2011, p. 305). However, most of its members had denounced Craig's voluntary coalition proposals. Indeed, Paisley informed the Convention Chairman that 'in the UUUC there was insuperable opposition to SDLP in the Cabinet' (PRONI, CONV/1/2, Chairman's meeting with Dr Paisley, 6 September 1975). Likewise, as Kerr notes, Paisley suggested that SDLP members would have to abandon their Irish passports and swear an oath to the state to be acceptable in government, which in effect meant the UUUC was ideologically opposed to forming a coalition government with anyone other than political unionists (Kerr, 2011, p. 306).

The UUUC's dogmatism was matched by republican paramilitaries during this time. Despite the PIRA engaging in discussions with the government during the so-called 'truce' of 1975-76, the republican movement refused to accept anything less than its key demand: the withdrawal of British forces from Northern Ireland (Taylor, 1997; compare Ó Dochartaigh, 2011). Indeed, the ceasefire, which was marred by breaches and intra-republican feuding, may only have lasted as long as it did because the PIRA took seriously the suggestion from British interlocutors that the government was willing to consider withdrawal. This was designed to keep the PIRA in negotiations for as long as possible, diminishing its military capacity without making serious concessions. As Merlyn Rees later noted, 'we set out to con them, and we did' (Ryan, 1994, p. 58).

Despite the bitterness inspired by the Convention, there were still those, on both sides prepared to embrace compromise in the hope of finding a solution. The dogmatists, however, numerically stronger, continued to press for total victory.

### *The aftermath of the Convention*

The period following the Convention has been portrayed as one where the positions of both nationalist and unionist parties became more hard-line. Cillian McGrattan (2010, p. 105) has also argued that the SDLP (in concert with the Irish government) pursued 'maximalist policies that were at odds with the sentiments of the unionist community. Further, it has been claimed that despite repackaging some of its policies, the SDLP reverted to a more nationalist ('green') outlook (Bew and Patterson, 1985, pp. 98-9). Contemporary evidence, however, demonstrates that events were more complicated than these accounts suggest. Certainly, the SDLP was divided, and some its membership favoured calling for a British statement of intent to withdraw from Northern Ireland. Overall, however, it never fully abandoned a policy of power-sharing within the UK. Neither did pragmatic unionists, notably Brian Faulkner's UPNI. Only dogmatic unionists, and paramilitary groups, continued to reject compromise.

There were some policy divisions within the SDLP. Some favoured calling for a British declaration of intent to withdraw from Northern Ireland. In January 1976, Gerry Fitt informed Sean Donlon of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs that around 'seven members of his party might possibly go for the declaration of intent idea'. Fitt himself, however, was against it. He also felt confident of 'the complete backing' of his deputy John Hume in this attitude (National Archives, Ireland (NAI), Department of the Taoiseach (DT), 2006/133/691, Note by Sean Donlon: Northern

Ireland, 8 January 1976). The SDLP still sought compromise with unionists. In February, it published an advertisement in the unionist *Belfast News Letter* calling for partnership between the two traditions, and reaffirming its 'full support for the police in impartially upholding law and order' (*News Letter*, 4 February 1976).

Some insight into the SDLP's strategy can be gleaned from a meeting between Hume and Austin Currie with senior Irish officials in March 1976. Hume informed the Dublin officials that the SDLP hoped to capitalise on divisions within loyalism over the question of the acceptability of continuing direct rule:

There was a lot of fermentation on the loyalist side. Direct rule was bound to create divisions among them. There was a strong stream of thought which favoured resistance to letting the British deny them devolved government and an ascendancy of power. The SDLP strategy was to exploit these differences in the hope that there would be an increasing clamour for the return of devolved government even on a partnership basis (NAI, DT, 2006/133/691, Note by Sean Donlon: Northern Ireland, 8 January 1976).

Most unionists, however, were unmoved by the SDLP's tactics. Before the second session of the Convention commenced, Paisley informed the chairman that the UUUC was not even willing 'to discuss the question of power-sharing' (PRONI, CONV/1/3, meeting with UUUC leader, 19 January 1976). And in early February 1976, he asked the Secretary of State 'to knock SDLP's heads together and tell them to forget about power sharing' (PRONI, CONV/1/3, meeting with UUUC leaders, 9 February 1976).

Later that month, the SDLP met face-to-face with UUUC leaders. Gerry Fitt asked if the UUUC would ever countenance sharing power with his party. Harry West informed him they would not do so 'now and as far as he could see ahead.' By

contrast, John Hume claimed (earnestly or not) that even if the SDLP could form a majority administration with the UPNI and Alliance, it would still seek the UUUC's participation in government, although it is impossible to judge the sincerity of this claim (PRONI, CONV/1/3, meeting between SDLP and UUUC, 12 February 1976). The policy of the UUUC was designed to break the SDLP's resolve, forcing it to accept a return of the old Stormont. West informed Sir Robert Lowry that the UUUC believed the 'SDLP were just about to crack and would cave in as the end of the Convention approached. They would soon be out of job and would grasp at anything' (PRONI, CONV/1/3, meeting with UUUC leaders, 16 February 1976).

Neither the SDLP, nor the British government, however, would accept a settlement without power-sharing. With little chance of the gulf between the sides narrowing, Rees revoked the Convention on 4 March 1976. Its report, calling for a return to Stormont, was ignored by the government (McDaid, 2013, p. 176).

Some unionists, notably Faulkner's UPNI, were still willing to share power with the SDLP (NAI, DT, 2006/133/691, Note by Sean Donlon: Northern Ireland, 8 January 1976). Faulkner attempted to convince the UUUC that despite the SDLP's, 'long term aspirations', it had 'realised that a United Ireland was not on in the foreseeable future.' They were 'loyal and able colleagues', who adhered to the principle of collective responsibility in government. Harry West's dismissed Faulkner, claiming that the SDLP were 'Republicans determined to destroy Northern Ireland' (PRONI, CONV/1/3, meeting between UPNI and UUUC, 5 February 1976). William Craig, meanwhile, insisted that the minority could not be 'fobbed off' with anything less than full ministerial responsibility in any administration. However, his insistence that power-sharing was widely supported in the community seems naively optimistic given the attitudes of the UUUC. Thereafter, the gulf between Faulkner, Craig, and

the UUUC widened. Paisley castigated both men for advocating working in government with the SDLP (Kiely, 1976). He had earlier claimed that: 'if you lie down with republican dogs, you'll rise with republican fleas' (*Irish Times*, 22 January 1976).

Despite the UUUC's anti- power-sharing stance, talks between the SDLP and the UUP occurred between April and September 1976. During the discussions, both parties stated their preference for the return of devolved government with more powers than the Sunningdale Assembly (McKittrick, 1976). However, the talks were dropped by the UUP because of its membership's refusal to consider power-sharing (O'Connor, 1976). Despite unionist intransigence, the SDLP continued to espouse power-sharing within a UK framework.

At its 1976 conference, the party restated its commitment to power-sharing, and was not dogmatic about the form it should take. Party chairman, Denis Haughey, confirmed that the SDLP was 'prepared to talk to any group of elected representatives at any time about any framework of government either inside or outside the U.K.' (SDLP, 1976). Furthermore, the previous month, the SDLP affirmed that Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK for as long as the majority so wish (*Irish Times*, 17 November 1976). Despite the party's obvious frustration with unionism, a motion calling for a British declaration of intent to withdraw was narrowly defeated (*Irish Press*, 6 December 1976).<sup>8</sup> The following year, however, the party's frustration increased, inspired by dogmatic unionists.

Elements within the UUUC, particularly Paisley and Baird, pressured the government to implement the Convention report. However, the UUUC was beginning to show signs of possible collapse. Some senior UUP members advocated administrative rather than legislative devolution (Kaufmann, 2007, p. 108). This scheme was the brainchild of Westminster MPs James Molyneux and Enoch

Powell (Jackson, 2003, p. 284). Administrative devolution was an attempt to reconcile Powell and Molyneaux's preference for closer integration with the devolutionist desires of the party rank-and-file. Overall, however, the UUP remained committed to the return of a parliament resembling the old Stormont – which, as Prime Minister James Callaghan confirmed, could only occur if power-sharing returned (House of Commons Debates, 24 November 1976, vol. 921, col. 35).

The UUP's governing body, the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC), stated that many unionists could not view anything but Stormont as 'being a lawful government'. It compared unionist trauma at losing Stormont to 'that of the citizens of Prague who wakened one morning to find Russian tanks in their streets (UUC, 1977a).' Echoing Paisley, it likened direct rule to colonial government, not 'answerable directly' to Ulster's electorate (UUC, 1977b).

Some dogmatic unionists decided to directly challenge the government in May 1977, in the form of the United Unionist Action Council (UUAC) strike, organised by Paisley and Baird, which sought tougher security measures against republicans. The strike, however, collapsed in just ten days; there were three deaths. It was not supported by the UUP, the Orange Order, or much of the unionist public (Patterson and Kaufmann, 2007, p. 249). The power-station workers, whose support proved decisive during the 1974 strike, refused to participate unless the 'people of Northern Ireland had showed themselves clearly in favour of the strike' (McKittrick, 1977a). James Molyneaux condemned the UUAC's 'campaign of anarchy' as 'an exact parallel' of the civil rights demonstrations of 1968 and 1969 (O'Clery, 1977a).

The collapse of the strike demonstrated the tensions within unionism between those prepared to confront the government in pursuit of devolution, and those increasingly content with direct rule. Rees's replacement as Secretary of State, Roy

Mason, took a tough line against the IRA. This was welcomed by unionists. He also oversaw the 'Ulsterisation' of the security forces, which began under Rees. The policy led to considerable short-term security successes, assuring Mason's popularity among unionists (Lee, 1989, p. 451). Despite opposing the strike, the UUP was no less dogmatically opposed to power-sharing than the UUAC.

Molyneaux even blamed the SDLP for initiating the campaign of terrorism blighting Northern Ireland in 1969 (a year before its formation). Under 'no circumstances', therefore, would the UUP share power with nationalists (Hennigan, 1977). Against this background, it has been argued, the SDLP reverted to a more traditional nationalist position (Tonge, 2002, p. 70).

At its 1977 conference, the SDLP endorsed the policy document entitled *Facing Reality*. It called for an inter-governmental approach to the Northern Ireland problem. Journalist David McKittrick wrote that the document, with its emphasis on cross-border approaches, was intended to unite diverging views within the party. It satisfied 'the withdrawal boys because they see it going some way towards their point of view', whilst the anti-withdrawal faction accepted it 'because it stops short of calling for withdrawal' (McKittrick, 1977b). Nevertheless, it again emphasised that power-sharing (or partnership) must be at the heart of any political settlement (SDLP, 1977a). This echoed the SDLP's local election manifesto which championed the 'partnership' strategy over 'the domination of one tradition over the other', which could only result in further violence (SDLP, 1977b). In any case, neither dogmatic unionists, nor militant republicans, were persuaded by the SDLP's case.

*The triumph of the dogmatists*

In an attempt to seize the initiative, Roy Mason tried to devise a new form of interim devolution that might progress towards full devolution in the future (*Irish Times*, 24 November 1977). This would involve the 'transfer of real powers to a partnership administration', with a 'fair share' of these powers 'going to the minority' (PRONI, CENT/1/7/6, Note of discussions on politics between Mr Mason and Mr Judd and Irish Ministers, 5 May 1978). However, the UUP rejected the proposals as inadequate, whilst the SDLP held firm in its desire for a 'power-sharing government' (O'Clery 1977b; McKittrick 1977c). As the New Year began in 1978, the gulf between the pragmatists and dogmatists was as evident as ever.

This trend was typified by the dogmatic unionists, who remained resolutely opposed to any form of power-sharing. The UUP's governing body, the UUC, continued its opposition to power-sharing. This was partly explained by the increasing acceptance of direct rule among unionists. Roy Mason's 'approach to security', was 'more constructive and realistic' than his predecessor, Merlyn Rees. The UUC commended Mason for his 'sympathetic understanding of the tribulations of the Ulster people' (UUC, 1978). This did little to diminish the dogmatic opposition of most unionists towards power-sharing, which considerably increased frustration among the SDLP and its supporters.

SDLP frustrations were also roused by the statements of politicians from the Republic, who seemed unsympathetic towards nationalist demands. Garret FitzGerald, for example, claimed to have informed 'Protestants from the Shankill' road that the Republic was "so partitionist a State that Northern Protestants would be bloody fools to join it" (*Irish Times*, 12 February 1978). Thus the SDLP occasionally faced indifference from the political classes in the Republic, at a time when it was trying to ward off the challenge of PSF in nationalist areas (Murray and



Tonge, 2005, p. 55).<sup>9</sup> Republican prisoners were engaged in a 'dirty protest', against the revocation of 'Special Category' status for those convicted of politically motivated offences (PRONI, NIO, 12/68A, the protest in the Maze prison, 9 October 1978). This high-profile protest caused serious difficulties for moderate SDLP supporters, whose members suffered attacks from PSF supporters in areas such as North Belfast. The party chided PSF for its violent behaviour, noting that there was 'something dangerously irrational about people who protest about the ill-treatment of prisoners by brutally attacking and kicking members of the SDLP at a peaceful political meeting.' The party further condemned the PIRA's unjustifiable 'campaign of murders' (SDLP, 1978). More serious politically, however, was the continued hostility which the SDLP was subjected to by unionists, who refused to countenance a role for nationalists in the future governance for Northern Ireland.

The UUP party conference of 1978 only served to confirm the widening gulf between pragmatists and dogmatists. James Molyneaux reiterated calls for administrative devolution, in the form of an upper tier of local government (*Irish Times*, 21 October 1978) The UUP, however, remained committed to a majority-rule system. Indeed, the 'very word "power-sharing" was enough to evoke growls of disapproval from the delegates, and there were no suggestions, public or private ... of any other way of involving non-Unionists either in local government or a devolved parliament' (O'Clery, 1978a). Roy Mason, who was reportedly sympathetic towards unionism, had earlier noted how 'intransigent' the UUP had been in refusing to 'consider anything other than the majority Convention Report' (PRONI, Central Secretariat (CENT)/1/7/6, note of discussions on politics between Mr Mason and Mr Judd and Irish Ministers, 5 May 1978). In such circumstances, it is not difficult to

comprehend why the SDLP's rhetoric began to harden, as evident at its party conference the following month.

The SDLP's 1978 conference passed a motion declaring that British disengagement from Northern Ireland was 'both inevitable and desirable.' Nevertheless, party front-benchers, such as Austin Currie, stressed that this was not a call for immediate disengagement. To do so before creating 'stable political institutions in Northern Ireland would be disastrous' (O'Clery, 1978b). Despite this call, the SDLP had not abandoned power-sharing within the UK. Gerard Murray has argued that the party was simply 'reappraising its method of achieving this policy' (Murray, 1998, p. 61). Indeed, as P. J. McLoughlin (2010, pp.86-8) has pointed out, the motion itself stated that British disengagement should only occur as part of an overall solution with 'guarantees for both traditions in the North.' The party's emphasis on a new, British-Irish approach to the problem was understandable, given the stance of dogmatic unionists. It also helped the SDLP fend off the challenge of the Irish Independence Party (IIP), which was little more than a non-violent version of PSF. However, the majority of unionists had already decided to dogmatically pursue the return of Stormont at all costs.

This was confirmed in early 1979, when UUP rejected Roy Mason's above-mentioned interim devolution proposals (McKittrick, 1979). Nevertheless, the British Labour government remained committed to the principle of power-sharing. At a meeting on 17 January 1979, Mason informed the Irish foreign minister Michael O'Kennedy that 'what we want – and we can be in agreement with you on this – is the establishment of a devolved government in Northern Ireland on a basis which both parts of the community can sustain and support. This means a partnership government with safeguards for the minority.' Further, Mason unequivocally ruled out

a return to the old Stormont system. Unionists, he stated, 'now realise that they will not get a return to majority rule. This is a tremendous advance, for majority rule is, after all, the democratic norm' (PRONI, NIO/12/138, note by K. G. Jones, meeting between Mr O'Kennedy and Secretary of State, 17 January 1979). Most unionists, however, were determined that a Stormont-style system would be restored. The UUP 1979 conference heard motions demanding the 'same measure of self-government as was enjoyed in the peaceful years 1922-69' in Northern Ireland (UUP, 1979).

On 3 May 1979, Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives ousted Jim Callaghan's Labour administration in the Westminster elections. The Northern Ireland party manifestos discussed their respective views on power-sharing. Unionist parties supported devolution, but opposed power-sharing. The SDLP was accused of shifting further towards the 'green end of the spectrum'. However, whilst open to exploring options such as federalism, and taking an increasingly critical view of British policy – which it was felt gave a guarantee to unionists and fuelled their intransigence – the party and its members left the option of devolution within the UK open. This was in contrast to its rivals the IIP, which 'continued to hard on [sic] their single theme of British withdrawal' (PRONI, CENT/1/8/17, Election Manifestos', (25 April 1979), Memorandum by A. Huckle). The Conservative government, however, was committed to power-sharing devolution.

At a meeting between Humphrey Atkins and Irish government ministers in June 1979, the position of the SDLP was discussed. Atkins stated that 'both the Conservative Party manifesto and the Queen's Speech' made clear that his government was 'committed to establishing some form of devolved government in Northern Ireland and his party's credentials were good in that respect.' However, he

asked that Irish ministers refrain from making statements referring to 'power-sharing' since 'unionists in general, and the DUP in particular, were forced into their corners by such talk.' His aim was to 'reassure both communities in the Province and move gradually towards a political forum acceptable to both' (PRONI, CENT/1/8/44, Note of Meeting in Dublin between the Secretary of State and Ministers of the Government of the Republic of Ireland, 27 June 1979). Most unionists, however, rejected this approach, and the stalemate continued. Despite this, a small minority of unionists continued to support power-sharing.

In the summer of 1979, the UPNI publicly stated its continued commitment to power-sharing with nationalists who were prepared to work within a UK framework. The party leader, Anne Dickson, said the UPNI would 'strive for agreement between the political parties that will allow all Ulster men who accept the constitution and support the forces of law and order to have the opportunity to participate in government' (Nolan, 1979).<sup>10</sup> Whilst the UPNI only attracted minor electoral support, it was not the only political grouping which contained pragmatic unionists. The cross-community Alliance party, whose membership primarily comprised moderate unionists, also continued to favour power-sharing devolution. Its leader, Oliver Napier, called on the government to attempt to create 'structures of devolved government which guarantee[d] full participation to all major sections of the community' (*Irish Times*, 24 September 1979).

Thus, the division between the two primary ethnic blocs was by no means total. And, despite the late 1970s being described as a period during which the SDLP underwent a 'greening' process, and its rhetorical allusions towards a (highly conditional) British disengagement, that party continued to pursue power-sharing within the UK (Murray and Tonge, 2005, p. 61).<sup>11</sup>

SDLP policy documents published throughout 1979 confirmed its commitment to partnership government with unionists. Its Westminster election manifesto stated that, since 1973, the party's policy had not changed 'because the problem [had] not changed' (SDLP, 1979a). Partnership between the two traditions in Northern Ireland, and between both parts of Ireland, the Sunningdale formula, was strongly desired. Some months later, the party published an extensive document which re-examined its present policies entitled *Towards a New Ireland: A Policy Review*. Here, whilst calling for 'joint Anglo-Irish action' to break the political impasse, the emphasis remained on power-sharing within Northern Ireland. The SDLP's approach necessarily meant 'partnership between the differing traditions in the North, and partnership between both parts of Ireland'. It was not 'irrevocably committed to any one system of power-sharing', but sought the removal of guarantees for one section of society and a commitment to achieving a situation in which there were 'guarantees for all' (SDLP, 1979b). In this, the SDLP retained its pragmatic approach – a willingness to compromise its united Ireland ideology through the acceptance of power-sharing devolution within the UK.

The approach of the SDLP was in sharp contrast to that of dogmatic nationalist parties such as the IIP and PSF. The latter consistently espoused its *Éire Nua* policy, adopted in 1971, which sought British withdrawal, and the creation of an independent, federal, socialist Ireland. By this stage, its hard-line republican rival, OSF, had abandoned its dogmatic opposition to the Sunningdale formula and clarified its willingness to work towards a '32 county democratic socialist Republic of Ireland through a devolved government within Northern Ireland buttressed by an extended bill of rights' (PRONI, CENT1/8/17, election manifestos, A. E. Huckle, 25 April 1979). However, the genuineness of its commitment was questionable given

the refusal of its military wing, the OIRA, to desist from terrorism (Rekawek, 2011). The SDLP was thus, in real terms, the only nationalist party earnestly committed to working peacefully with unionists within a UK framework. Most, but not all, unionists, however, did not reciprocate.

### *Conclusion*

Examining the attitudes of various political groups towards devolution during the 1970s provides a fresh way of interpreting how the Northern Ireland conflict evolved as it did. Discussions about Northern Ireland's constitutional future echoed wider debates about devolution in Great Britain during that decade, although the form they took in Northern Ireland was, given its particular circumstances, quite distinct (Mitchell, 2009; Bogdanor, 2001). Such an examination has demonstrated that the existing accounts of the Northern Ireland conflict, inspired by consociational theory, are in need of revision. The primary source evidence challenges the assumption that the historic divisions between nationalists and unionists were the most significant barrier to the creation of a power-sharing settlement.

Rather, the division between pragmatists prepared to work within the parameters established by successive governments and accept power-sharing devolution within the UK and dogmatists who were unwilling to do so was a greater obstacle. The pragmatic bloc included the SDLP, the dominant voice of Northern Ireland nationalists at this time. That party was willing to shelve its goal of a united Ireland in exchange for a share of power in a devolved UK administration for Northern Ireland. Whilst there was some hardening of the SDLP's rhetoric, and considerable debate about the policy of pursuing power-sharing, this is best understood in context of dogmatic unionists' 'reluctance to accept the principle of

power-sharing' (Murray and Tonge, 2005, p. 60). This was 'inevitable', but did not mean the abandonment of a willingness to accept power-sharing within the UK, had this been available (McLoughlin, 2010, p. 88). In this, the party had significantly moderated from its 1972 position, when it sought joint British and Irish sovereignty in Northern Ireland. The pragmatic faction also contained some unionists, including most of Faulkner's former pledged UUP group, which later became the UPNI. Moderate unionists within the Alliance party were also prepared to accept nationalists in government, within a devolved UK administration. Pragmatic unionists recognised that accepting nationalists in government was the only way of securing the return of devolution and a meaningful say in the affairs of Northern Ireland.

This British commitment to power-sharing was true of successive Westminster governments, both Labour and Conservative (Aveyard, 2012; McDaid, 2013). Cillian McGrattan has claimed that the main theme in British policy towards Northern Ireland during this period and beyond was the 'absence of a long-term or consistent policy vision on the part of the British government' and an 'overabundance of competing voices within the decision making apparatus' (McGrattan, 2010b, p. 89). And Brendan O'Leary has suggested that Thatcher favoured the full 'administrative integration' of Northern Ireland with the rest of the UK, with no serious consideration of Irish nationalists (O'Leary, 1997, pp. 663-4). Neither of these views, however, accord with the archival evidence presented here. Indeed, even after the 1970s, the Thatcher administration refused to restore devolution which did not 'provide a worthwhile role for the minority community', whilst being 'broadly acceptable to the people of Northern Ireland as a whole' (PRONI, CENT/1/8/44, record of Secretary of State's meeting with the Irish Foreign Minister, 13 October 1980).<sup>12</sup>

However, whilst a majority of nationalists were part of the pragmatic bloc, the opposite was true of unionists. The majority of the UUP, DUP and VUPP sought the return of devolution, but only if it was the same kind of devolution as pertained under Stormont. This meant there could be no role for nationalists, even the non-violent SDLP which, as Faulkner had pointed out, had already proven itself capable of working for the benefit of Northern Ireland. This, in effect, ensured the continuance of direct rule, since the government would not allow a settlement along the lines preferred by dogmatic unionists.

Ironically, other members of the dogmatic bloc were unionists' sworn enemies, the hard-line republicans of PSF and the PIRA and the IIP. These groups sought British withdrawal from Northern Ireland, and the PIRA pursued a campaign of often indiscriminate violence to achieve this aim. Thus, power-sharing did not fail simply because of government inaction or a lack of commitment to the concept, as argued by Kerr and O'Leary. Blaming the government ignores the fact that most unionists opposed power-sharing, opposition hardened by republican violence. The SDLP's presentation of the proposed Council of Ireland as a body more threatening to unionist interests than was actually the case also heightened opposition to the overall settlement. Power-sharing failed because of determination of dogmatists, on both sides, to defeat it. This grouping included both terrorists and democratic politicians (Kerr, 2011).

This is not to suggest that ethnic cleavages are unimportant to understanding Northern Ireland's conflict. Recent research indicates that ethnic identities continue to manifest themselves clearly in electoral competitions today (McGlynn et al., 2014). Nor is it suggested that the current institutions, based on consociational principles, have not provided a workable institutional framework for co-operation between



nationalists and unionists (although the current institutions were the product of protracted negotiations in the context of paramilitary ceasefires). What is at issue is the *explanatory* utility of consociationalist scholarship. Evidence from the 1970s demonstrates that such consociational accounts fail to fully understand the nuances of the region's ethnic politics during the 1970s. At a time when Northern Ireland is being held as an example for the resolution of conflicts in other divided societies, a fuller understanding of these nuances is all the more necessary.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> McGarry and O'Leary have themselves highlighted shortcomings in 'classic consociational theory', but are 'critical consociationalists, not anti-consociationalists'. See (McGarry and O'Leary, 2006, pp. 249-277).

<sup>2</sup> Consociationalism has also been critiqued for both its conceptual fluidity and tendency to reinforce division rather than promote integration. See e.g. (Dixon 2005, pp. 357-67).

<sup>3</sup> Alliance was, de facto, a moderate unionist party that attempted to bridge the sectarian divide. The other non-sectarian party was the Northern Ireland Labour Party, which was pro-power-sharing. However, it attracted even less support than Alliance, an average of 1.7 per cent support in all elections it contested during the 1970s, and failed to make a significant impact in debates about Northern Ireland's future.

<sup>4</sup> The DUP, by contrast, was unencumbered by the UUP's anomalous structure, and its policy was firmly under its leader, Ian Paisley's, control. See Bruce, 2007, pp.

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<sup>5</sup> ARK, Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention Elections, 1975. Available from: <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/fc75.htm> (accessed 1 March 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Faulkner had resigned as UUP leader in January 1974 having lost an Ulster Unionist Council vote on the ratification of the Sunningdale Agreement. However, he remained in post as Chief Executive until May 1974.

<sup>7</sup> There were suggestions, in December 1975, that Craig's power-sharing proposals were merely tactical. He: 'still wanted the form of government advocated in the UUUC report, but was prepared to accept a voluntary coalition with SDLP for a few years in order to get it.' See PRONI, CONV/1/ 9, Maurice Hayes to Ian Burns, 5 December 1975.

<sup>8</sup> The motion was opposed by John Hume. See, McLoughlin (2010, p. 82). The southern opposition party, Fianna Fáil, called for such a declaration the previous year, thus the SDLP policy towards Irish unity was officially more moderate than that of a party in the Irish Republic, (*Irish Times*, 30 October 1975). Gerry Fitt chided the Fianna Fáil leader, Jack Lynch for advocating withdrawal, claiming Lynch had 'put himself in the Provisional I.R.A. camp' in so doing, (*Irish Times*, 3 November 1975).

<sup>9</sup> Fianna Fáil's ambiguous position towards the SDLP can be seen in their chiding of Jack Lynch for pushing the Irish dimension 'into the background' in 1979 (*Irish Times*, 23 November 1979). There was a gulf between Fianna Fáil's rhetoric in opposition and their Northern Ireland policy in government. The Irish government's European Court of Human Rights case against the British government regarding the torture of detainees in Northern Ireland arguably masked covert improvements in British-Irish relations, particularly security, under the 1973-77 coalition government (Patterson, 2013). And it did not equate to a desire for British withdrawal. It was regarded by the British as an irritant, and difficult to reconcile with Dublin's largely

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helpful approach on other matters (TNA, PREM 16/520, North–South security co-operation, minute by ROI department, 10 September 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Dickson replaced Faulkner as UPNI leader, following his untimely death in 1977.

<sup>11</sup> See also Bew and Patterson’s (1985, p. 99) critique of the ‘agreed Ireland’. Their critique is valid at the ideological level, but it ignores the party’s willingness to work within a UK framework.

<sup>12</sup> The following year, a briefing note for Atkins, prepared prior to his meeting with US Vice-President George H.W. Bush, confirmed this was government policy. It stated that ‘The unionists would like us to revive the devolved system – with a permanent unionist majority – which prevailed for 50 years before 1972; but that we will not do, since it would be totally unacceptable to the Catholics.’ Likewise, the government was ‘not prepared’ to move towards Irish unity ‘against the will of that [unionist] majority.’ See PRONI, NIO/12/197A, draft note, Vice-President Bush, 3 July 1981.

<sup>13</sup> For a critique, see O’Kane, 2010; Wilson, 2010.

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