

## **Trailblazers and Cassandras: ‘Other’ Voices in Northern Ireland**

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When a power-sharing executive was finally appointed in Northern Ireland in November 1999, under the provisions of the 1998 peace agreement, a tribute article was printed in the *Belfast Telegraph*. It was a voice from the past saluting the ‘men and women of good will in Ulster who have worked persistently for peace and community harmony amid those sad forces of violence and hatred which argue persistently for the opposite’.<sup>1</sup> The author of the article, Brian Walker, was the founding chairman of the think tank ‘New Ulster Movement’ which operated from 1969 – 1975, disseminating arguments of ‘peace and sanity’. In their time, the New Ulster Movement was instrumental in developing common ground ideas of power-sharing and ways forward. However, not many will remember or recognise the contributions made by this think tank or later similar actors like Democratic Dialogue, contributions which are nonetheless implicit in present day solutions and form an important part of the historical account and intellectual understanding of ‘the troubles’.

For there is a position that is barely audible in the politics of Northern Ireland, a position where important, would-be participants are not picked up by public microphones trained on the ethno-national zero-sum game.<sup>2</sup> This position is the space traditionally occupied by ‘the bridge-builders’, ‘the middle ground’, and now the designated ‘other’ in the current political arrangements.<sup>3</sup> It is a position – or rather a range of positions – circumspect by the refusal to self-identify as unionist or nationalist, occupied by people who do not necessarily or primarily subscribe to the ‘two communities’ or ‘two nations’ analysis. Subsequently, they are positions that have been marginalised in media, political, and academic discourses, dominated by the two exclusive narrative laureates of unionism and nationalism. This duopoly of public discourse is reinforced and perpetuated by the square focus on the political economy and the constitutional question in the public sphere.

In what is largely interpreted to be an ethno-national conflict, there are many structural, material and ideological factors contributing to the dislodged position of voices coming from outside the unionist and

nationalist establishments. As a result, empirical reality in Northern Ireland is often used to underscore the irrelevance of these moderate middle ground, or rather, common ground actors. This article will outline a thumbnail sketch of three areas in which ‘other voices’ are sidelined, silenced or ignored: in terms of political discourses; community discourses; and wider public/academic discourses. It will argue that a sequence of silencing is taking place, amounting to a hegemony in which actors are dismissed if they speak or move outside the reigning duopoly of discourse. Furthermore, that the arguments and ideas put forward by ‘other’ voices are often appropriated by the dominant discourses, then debased and reassigned to form part of, and reinforce the accepted narratives.

As a form of empirical retort the article will then go on to examine the analyses and contributions generated by two think tanks simultaneously purporting to steer clear of the dominant sectarian divide and bridge the gap between civil and political society: The New Ulster Movement (1969-1975), and Democratic Dialogue (1995-2006). Reviewing their explanations of conflict and proposals for solutions will substantiate an alternative account of the problem and hear from these ‘other’ voices how they interpret the conflict and what they see as the obstacles for its solution in a nascent conflict and a nascent peace process, respectively.

Of course, precedence does not imply causality. Nevertheless, there are at least two scenarios in which we should pay attention to these other voices:

1) If they are able to identify problems and articulate solutions which are then absorbed into the dominant blocs and adapted by the major players, they are surely worth investigating. This is what we might call the trailblazer scenario, where these other voices clear conceptual paths for later political actors to follow.

2) On the other hand, in what we might call the Cassandra scenario, these other voices may have been utterly ignored by the powers that be. In this case, given that the issues addressed and the remedies proposed by these other voices continue to be topics of concern, then they are worth listening to because they represent a more clear-sighted position.

The power of such ‘other’ voices has received very little attention as their position has rarely been at the centre of constitutional politics. Their inclusion here is an attempt to refocus and reestablish their contributions as a link between the civic and political arenas, drawing on the wider variety of arguments and rich layering of languages that can be generated outside the sectarian and political zero-sum game. These arguments have equally been a consistent part of the political culture in Northern Ireland and continue to be relevant for the achievement of compromise and the

implementation of future shared policies. In this sense, the middle ground not only provides mucilage for compromises made between the main blocs,<sup>4</sup> they may also provide blueprints for the road further ahead.

### **Ignoring the 'Others'**

There are three main sites in which 'other voices' are construed to be insignificant: In terms of the party political arena, in terms of community and in terms of discourse and ideas:

#### 1. Party Politics

In political terms the main party of the middle ground is the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI). During the course of conflict they have moved from a moderate, reconciliatory unionist position ('unionists without sashes') to a position, which is self-consciously neutral on the constitutional question and opposed to the conception of 'mutually exclusive identities'.<sup>5</sup> APNI has never polled more than 14.4% (in the local election of 1977) and is currently hovering around the 7-8% mark.<sup>6</sup>

The comparatively meagre results at the polls are routinely taken as proof that a political middle ground hardly exists or at least evaporates when the populace is turned into voters. It has also paved the way for a 'dual ethnic party system' interpretation of the political culture in Northern Ireland.<sup>7</sup> In dual ethnic party systems, multi-ethnic parties are displaced by parties that hold exclusive ethnic appeal. In Northern Ireland the unionist and nationalist parties have traditionally behaved more like factions or interest groups than as parties with a political vision for the whole of society. With very few voters floating between the unionist and nationalist blocs, the important objective of elections have been to mobilise the 'faithful' rather than to reach across the divide.

This political zero-sum game of bloc politics has been reinforced by British policy, which has tended to be more accommodationist than integrationist,<sup>8</sup> that is to say, primarily accommodating the parties in direct competition for political and material resources. The preferred mode of engagement has been political elite negotiations, which, as Donald Horowitz has argued, privileges ethnonationalist actors.<sup>9</sup> Increasingly, the peace process has revolved around establishing power-sharing between only two mutually exclusive positions, rendering the middle ground largely irrelevant.

While the Alliance Party has never decisively broken the mould of the dual ethnic party system there are however some indications that the party

political centre ground might not wither away. Often, APNI has survived on second preference votes, suggesting that they succeed in attracting cross-community support. Furthermore, after 40 years without Westminster representation,<sup>10</sup> Naomi Long was elected as an APNI MP in the general election of 2010, giving the party a voice at the heart of the British political establishment. The same year APNI leader David Ford was appointed as Northern Ireland's first justice minister in 38 years, giving the party a high profile as well as a controversial (and therefore publicised) position.

It is, however, also the case that people subscribing to what could be called a 'cross community' tradition often eschew conventional party political engagement in favour of civic engagement. The integrative approach has often found more fertile ground in the voluntary sector or working directly with community relations.

## 2. Community Relations

From the Community Relations Commission (est. 1969) to the Community Relations Council (est. 1990) there has been a concerted 'top-down' effort to promote better relations and respect for cultural diversity in Northern Ireland. Throughout the conflict this has been supplemented by an equally concerted 'bottom-up' effort from voluntary organisations.

However, the common ground is also challenged in terms of civil society and community: 40 odd years of violence and sectarian intimidation have made mixed communities cleanse and contract into exclusive ethnic enclaves where 'chill factors' such as flags, painted kerbstones and murals are used as territorial markers. 'Peace walls' and dual carriageways physically separate neighbourhoods and make them into ethnopolitical cul-de-sacs. While Belfast was never an integrated city, it is now more acutely divided. Profound segregation in terms of residence, worship, politics and education has made it difficult for common ground actors to manifest their presence. This has been taken as proof of the insignificance of the common ground in community terms.

Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly a significant part of the population in Northern Ireland who do not subscribe to one of the two exclusive identities, a third 'cross-community' or 'pluri-vocal-community' consisting of other ethnic minorities, people in mixed couples, people from mixed backgrounds, people from outside of Northern Ireland and people whose political proclivities do not necessarily correspond with their ethnocultural background. This is certainly borne out in recent Northern Ireland Life and Times polls where up to 43% describes themselves as 'neither unionist nor nationalist'.<sup>11</sup> However, it is difficult for people with layered identities to

find a space in which to live, engage, exchange and express themselves in terms of political and civic community. Where shared space does exist it is either commercialised (e.g. the city centre in Belfast) or depoliticised – as expressed in the quote 'The middle classes went out to play golf during the Troubles and never came back'.<sup>12</sup>

Building bridges between the conflicting communities has been notoriously difficult in Northern Ireland. As Wilson and Tyrrell have demonstrated, people who work on a cross community basis can be distrusted and even hated.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the former Democratic Unionist Party leader Ian Paisley famously declared that the one thing a bridge and a traitor had in common was to cross over to the other side. From political geography we know there is a certain desire 'of those who promote ethno-sectarianism [. . .] to silence cross-community narrative due to the threat they pose to the edifice of community devotion and spatialised cultures of belonging'.<sup>14</sup> Political actors actively use fear of 'the other' in order to mobilise and preserve one-dimensional political identities and spatial belonging. Cross-community narratives are marginalised by more comprehensive sectarian interpretations. Consequently, there is not a big arena within which to articulate non-sectarian beliefs.

A persistent and central theme in common ground politics has been the promotion of integrated education as a means to retard the formation of bipolar stereotypes, foster mutual respect and overcome differences.<sup>15</sup> As early as 1973 child psychiatrist Morris Fraser argued that integrated education would allow the vicious circle of prejudice and stereotyping to be broken<sup>16</sup> and more recent research also suggest that attendance at a religiously integrated school promotes a less sectarian approach on national identity.<sup>17</sup> There is a growing public support and demand for integrated education,<sup>18</sup> but the number of available schools remains severely limited by logistic difficulties (where to place them in a highly segregated environment), deep-seated institutional opposition from the churches and widespread political inertia. In this way, spatial and institutional segregation (underpinned by educational and de facto housing policies), converge in negatively impacting the ability of cross community schemes to effect change.<sup>19</sup>

Importantly then, political and community divisions intersect. Recent studies have found that although politicians agree that 'a shared future' should be the object of government policy, they take a gradualist and long view when it comes to developing and implementing policies, expressing worries that a shared society might compromise cultural traditions.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, it can be argued that the consociational analysis, upon which the current peace agreement rests,<sup>21</sup> overstates differences and

silences commonalities. It manages simultaneously to squeeze ‘other’ positions from the top-down (institutionalising political power-sharing between two cemented ideologies) and the bottom-up (interpreting the problem as arising from entrenched ethno-national group identities over which the individual is given no choice). Idealistic attempts at replacing identity politics with liberal democracy and constitutional questions with bread and butter issues, have gradually been devalued, as focus has shifted from building a structural solution on the moderate centre ground (in the 1970s) to staking the peace process on wholly distinct political and paramilitary elites (since the 1980s and 1990s respectively).

### 3. Public Discourses

In terms of public narratives, empirical data and academic analyses the middle ground is at once ridiculed and ignored. They are pejoratively called the ‘let’s just get alongers’; ‘affluent, patronizing do-gooders’; ‘talking heads’; ‘anaemic unionists and nationalists’, (suggesting that you can only ever be versions of the reigning categories, never outside them).

Statistical data often inflate the existence of two communities. In the 2001 census 14% of people ‘failed’ to state their religion. But after an administrative reassignment this number was reduced to 3%. The reasoning behind reassignment is of course to get a more detailed picture of community background for the benefit of public bodies administering anti-discrimination procedures,<sup>22</sup> but it effectively drowns out a range of other voices and is in fact in breach of the Council of Europe’s charter on protection of national minorities.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in the Sutton index of deaths,<sup>24</sup> casualties of the conflict in Northern Ireland are recorded as ‘Protestant’, ‘Catholic’ or ‘not from Northern Ireland’. This categorisation encapsulates perfectly the one-dimensional perception of identity, which is constantly and discursively reproduced. Composite identities are considered to be either non-existent, subordinate to the main dichotomy, or foreign.

Academic interests in Northern Ireland have tended to favour conflict positions rather than compromise positions. Academic research has often focused on the social pathology of division in Northern Ireland and the dynamics of conflict while less research has been done for example on why many people continue to express a preference for integrated education and living in mixed residential communities despite the protracted political conflict and violence.

Although it has been long established that very few academics stand over the traditional unionist and nationalist narratives of conflict,<sup>25</sup> many

academics still write off the common ground because they do not offer an explanation of 'how we got here'.<sup>26</sup> Others criticise what they call the 'neutral integrationist' or the cosmopolitan perspective for not grappling with the realities of division, that is, for not sufficiently addressing the respective allegiances of the national communities and not presenting a convincing alternative, thus merely distracting from a comprehensive solution.<sup>27</sup>

Spearheaded not least by the impressive categorical work of political scientists Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry<sup>28</sup> (themselves building on the seminal work of John Whyte), interpretations of the origins of conflict and its corresponding solution are constantly grouped into unionist and nationalist discourse coalitions. While the unionist/nationalist divide is politically fundamental, arguments are regularly established across it. Constantly assigning arguments to unionist and nationalist discourses distorts what these positions have in common across this fundamental divide and locks very diverse actors into dual forms of subjectivity that are not always coalitions of the willing.

In many other societies, the primary reference point of social class has often concealed cultural and ethnic divisions. In Northern Ireland, the opposite has been the case. The analytical entry point has more often been the role of constitutional preferences and ideology (as in unionism and nationalism) in securing domination in relations between different cultural/ethnic groupings, resulting in the relative backgrounding of other dichotomies (e.g. gender and class).

Furthermore, empirical and analytical acceptance of bipolar differences begins to converge as consociational theory has been positioned as an increasingly appropriate framework for ethno-national conflict management (if not conflict resolution).<sup>29</sup> Following the trajectory of O'Leary and McGarry's work, in particular, consociationalism has moved from description to prescription, from empirical to normative theory.<sup>30</sup>

From these broad examples it can be suggested that forces lining intra communal coherence and stressing inter-communal division combine to stifle the common ground agenda. There is thus good reason for the narrow focus on the duopoly, but this focus risks distracting from the continuous presence of common ground actors. Though regularly considered irrelevant for the reasons listed above 'other' voices are worth considering in part precisely for these reasons. In a context where positions outside the reigning duopoly are subject to massive systemic forces squeezing them on political, community and discursive grounds, it will not do to simply join in ignoring them.

## **Other Voices: The New Ulster Movement**

The period from the late 1960s onwards was a time of hardening attitudes. Themes of disloyalty, discrimination, violence, and suppression seemingly made crosscutting alliances contract to exclusive communities, and rational-visceral violence framed the political and communal room for manoeuvre. At a meeting in February 1969, the New Ulster Movement (NUM) was founded. It professed to be ‘a political movement and not a political party. It did not seek immediate political power but wanted to act as a non-sectarian catalyst, aimed to influence political power and generate rational political ideas’.<sup>31</sup> Their goal was threefold: they campaigned against all forms of extremism and for genuinely progressive reform in Ulster and focused especially on official action towards community reconciliation. In their first year of existence they attracted a membership of 8,000 and established branches that covered 41 constituencies.<sup>32</sup>

In May 1969 they proposed a nine-point programme to the new incoming Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Major Chichester-Clark, which included: reform of the RUC; disbandment of the Special Constabulary; the setting up of a Central Housing Authority; repeal of the Special Powers Act; the setting up of a Community Relations Board and neutral community centres; severance of the Ulster Unionist Party’s link with the Orange Order; and action against both extremist Protestant and Republican organisations.<sup>33</sup> They lobbied the Conservative leadership at Westminster (against extremism and injustices); the American Consul-General (to correct the highly inaccurate and inflammatory propaganda circulating in the USA); they submitted reports to the Cameron Commission in 1969, the Crowther (later Kilbrandon) Commission and to the Constitutional Convention of 1975.

One thing that is immediately obvious from these listed activities is that they espouse issues that are a cross section of what would later be exclusive nationalist and unionist causes. Furthermore, as had also been the case in the civil rights movement they combined constitutional questions with civic society concerns and addressed both internal and external dynamics of conflict.

Although these political ideas traversed party and community lines, they were by no means uncontentious (in fact that made them even more contentious). Founding member Honor Rudnitzky describes in her memoirs<sup>34</sup> how her involvement in the NUM elicited sharp and aggressive responses. As membership grew, so did the scores of anonymous letters. She was routinely accused of being a ‘fenian lover’ and a traitor. Her children called the collection of anonymous letters ‘Mum’s file of vile

bile'. Added to the letters were death threats to chairman Brian Walker and routine heckling of members on their way to school and work. Through meetings and letters to the *Belfast Telegraph*, the NUM tried to rally 'the silent majority' against what was conceived to be minority extremist positions. However, there was a general feeling that it was all very well for people who live in nice safe areas like Lisbane to encourage people to speak out, but things were different in places like Ballybeen. Such anecdotal evidence picks up on a couple of points made in the previous section, notably, the profound intra-communal pressures to align with an unidimensional classification of belonging.

### **Suitable Forms of Government in a Divided Society**

In their publication, *Northern Ireland: a Divided Community* from 1971, the NUM located the problem as being a) socio-economic (high unemployment and lack of prosperity); b) psychological (deep rooted fears and resentment); and c) politico- structural (the wrong model of government).<sup>35</sup> Two possible strategies to take Northern Ireland out of its impasse were suggested by NUM in 1971: The first was to alter the party system to make the Westminster model more workable, the second was to abandon the Westminster model and move to some other system more suited to the situation in the province.<sup>36</sup>

Weighing up the pros and cons of international comparative models, the NUM made a strong case for proportional representation in parliament, as well as potentially in government. What they discouraged and rejected as an alternative was 'weighted representation for minorities',<sup>37</sup> partly, because it was not considered sufficiently democratic, but more importantly because such guarantees 'tend, by the very fact that they are designed to protect community groups, to emphasise community divisions'.<sup>38</sup> They speculated that this would mean that every MP would have to declare himself Protestant or Catholic, which in turn would emphasise a line of cleavage which, in their view, 'should in every possible way be bridged over'.<sup>39</sup>

At this stage theirs are very much suggestions that do not attempt to grapple with the original roots of conflict, but are primarily concerned with handling the evolving situation.<sup>40</sup> That is, a procedural versus a substantial analysis. Remedies were considered in a Northern Ireland context with the emphasis on reform of institutions and structures, and they underscore forcefully the need for 'equality of citizenship'<sup>41</sup> so all minorities have access to power and are actively involved in running the province. There is a strong concern to invigorate the political realm not least with input from

civil society and not to focus on differences but rather to stimulate common ground.

### **Political Culture**

There is, however, also very early on a certain despair in the face of the immovable political culture in Northern Ireland. The NUM describes it as 'the straitjacket of history'.<sup>42</sup> What it refers to here is the sterile way in which political leaders prefer to preserve their political party or group in a manner detrimental to the common good of the whole community. As a parting sigh in their pamphlet on the Northern Ireland Programme of Reforms, it is said that:

NUM can see no evidence that the present structure in which two majority parties are subject to vigorous pressure from extremist groups at their flanks, can ever generate the calibre of creative, dynamic leadership which we need in order to make the reform programme the basis of a new Ulster.<sup>43</sup>

This of course is an early indication of the perils of the moderate middle ground; assuming that reform in itself, hermetically sealed from the grander discussions of external associations and historical 'rights', might secure a stable platform from which to take possible further steps.

By late 1971 the downward spiral of politics and security in Northern Ireland had almost completely disillusioned the NUM. They now found that 'no "reshuffling of the cards" by coalitions or re-alignments is likely to unite the middle ground, isolate the extremists or produce the will for political reconciliation and social reconstruction'.<sup>44</sup> At least two elements were missing if a new spirit of political reconciliation were to have any prospect: a higher quality of political leadership which could fasten on the area of common ground; and the capacity of parliamentary structures and institutions to provide the climate and conditions of good government.<sup>45</sup>

### **Political Leadership**

The way forward in Northern Ireland is subsequently outlined in the eponymous pamphlet. Here they first assert that parliament is largely a discredited institution, because it on the one hand responds to pressures and situations instead of taking the lead and initiative and on the other hand is subjected to the abstentionist policy of the opposition, which plays into the hands of extremists. The NUM at this point had completely lost faith in any possible internal sharing of power. Even if the government genuinely

wanted to share power, they did not believe that it would have either the capacity or the opportunity to do so. As a consequence they advocated the suspension of Stormont for a period of 3 years,<sup>46</sup> and radically proposed commission rule by a form of meritocracy. Because they rejected 'direct rule' or any rule 'by a team of Englishmen,' they instead advanced the possibility of 'eminent Ulstermen – [. . .] in industry, trade unions, the professions and education' appointed for the three-year term of office.<sup>47</sup> The commission would include Catholics as well as Protestants. There should also be an 'Advisory Council,' which would be appointed with special emphasis on professional politicians and include the extremes in the shape of Republicans and the Paisley/Boal alliance.<sup>48</sup> The focus on common ground, and political will clearly establishes that change and reconciliation is thought by the NUM to be a matter of choice, not a fated historically determined impossibility. However, at the same time they consider proroguing institutions and erecting new structures to allow for that change to be unavoidable.

Their name, 'The New Ulster Movement', contained of course the scope of their political project. This was not a group of people who had their focus fixed only on the larger national identity; theirs was a project, which paid particular attention to the province. They stated time and again that the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as part of the UK should be acknowledged and not contested but always accompanied it with demands for the removal of injustices. As such they remained among the strongest critics of traditional unionism, although their stand on the constitutional issue would always allocate them in the unionist camp.

### **Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland**

At a very early stage, the NUM proceeded to set out the objections, which many northerners felt towards the concept of a united Ireland<sup>49</sup> and in this presented moderate unionism with a voice. They encouraged 'anti-partitionists' to take heed of their views because 'if they are unable to convince us, they are unlikely to convince anybody who is not already on their side'.<sup>50</sup> Objections centred on the economy, religion, the clash of national sentiments, the cult of physical force, and administrative difficulties.

They especially expressed concern that there was little attempt in the south to empathise with the feelings of nationality held by the majority in the north, and argued that there was no reason to assume that all the inhabitants of the island should share the same loyalty to Ireland over Britain. They forwarded the standpoint that a future united Ireland would

not only be a plural society (which southern opinion was ready to concede) but would have to be accepted as a *multinational* society.<sup>51</sup>

In a summary of difficulties that might arise in such a scenario (including the position of the Irish language, flags, and anthems), the proposition of Irish re-entry into the Commonwealth was reiterated in order to balance out allegiances. Without accepting a united Ireland in principle, the NUM set out the minimum conditions on which unity might be workable, but also drew the Irish commitment to unity into question. As they saw it, Irish governments had nearly ‘always taken the line most likely to widen the rift between the two traditions in Ireland’.<sup>52</sup> NUM speculated that a united Ireland had been seen as the only way of securing justice for the minority in the north, but continued to argue that if this justice could be obtained by a restructuring of institutions in the north so as to guarantee a sharing of power, the strength of the case for a united Ireland would be altered.

### **The Legacy of the NUM**

As these examples from the pamphlets suggest, the NUM is on to some inherent political dilemmas in Northern Ireland at a very early stage. Precisely because they are not dependent on the electorate, they are at liberty to explore and seriously discuss the implications of untraditional frameworks and even scenarios that are not their preferred outcome. Their introduction of the benefits of comparative politics is one of the earliest of its kind, certainly predating thinking in the British government and the other political parties. Throughout its existence, it aspired to canvas grassroots and make an imprint on policymakers, providing an important link between civic and political society.

The three central goals of campaigning against all forms of extremism; campaigning for genuinely progressive reform in Ulster; and, especially, focusing on official action towards community reconciliation would come to underlie most non-territorial, moderate compromise positions to later emerge. In 1975 and 1976 it made its last important indentations on Northern Irish politics, when they submitted a collection of ideas to the Constitutional Convention<sup>53</sup> and outlined the parameters of the debate for an independent Northern Ireland.<sup>54</sup>

The NUM pamphlets are important in any account of the conflict, not only because they continually asserted alternatives to entrenched communal positions, but also simply because so much of their thinking perseveres in present-day compromises. Many of their proposals may be said to be, in equal amounts, daring, ingenious, creative, fanciful, and

naïve. But they in any case certainly contributed more than an annex to the erected house of arguments and as such were instrumental in broadening the orders of discourse. Much of this new discourse was of course also retained and propagated within the Alliance Party which was formed from a split within the NUM in 1970.

When the NUM was wound up in 1976 the remaining chairman Brian Walker went on to become head of Oxfam and the movement donated the rest of their funds to the Corrymeela Community, an organisation devoted to peace-building and reconciliation.

### **Other Voices: Democratic Dialogue**

In 1995 the think tank *Democratic Dialogue* (DD) was established. DD aspired to realise the full potential of the post ceasefire era by engaging the citizenry in public and reflective debate about future policies. Believing that this was a new situation that would both permit and require new thinking, DD seized the occasion to let ideas walk in the procession of politics. The rationale was that any new assembly would consist of politicians who had been preoccupied with a single issue for the previous generation and would therefore have very little to say about social and economic issues in a post-cold war, globalised context. DD would serve the twin purposes of enabling political accommodation and bringing forward neglected areas of policy.<sup>55</sup>

One of the pivotal ideas was to challenge the tenets of the political culture in Northern Ireland. That meant seriously questioning the mode of governance, elite accommodation, the principle of consent (see below), as well as the questions of pluralism and parity of esteem. These were all discursive concepts that had long been in use, but rarely questioned beyond the outright acceptance or rejection of them as appropriations of unionism and nationalism respectively.

During the peace process, a hegemonic and almost naturalised discourse on how to address difference, envisage relationships and conduct change had been erected. DD saw many of these preconceived and preserved ideas as detrimental to the achievement of true reconciliation and set about to actively unpack and dislodge them.

### **The Principle of Consent or Sufficient Consensus**

The principle of consent had been present in both constitutional proposals and agreements since 1973. It states in slightly varied forms that the present status of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom can only be

changed subject to the agreement and consent of the majority of the people in Northern Ireland. It is, of course, a way of recognising a possible dynamic without delegitimising the status quo. But as DD argue it also perpetuates the conventional either/or constitutional choice: a United Kingdom versus a United Ireland. Nationalists perceive of the principle as a ‘unionist veto’ on their political aspirations, while unionists might fear that demographic trends will turn the principle into a vehicle for their demise. As such it evacuates the arena for accommodation and militates against innovative constitutional thinking.<sup>56</sup> The consent principle operates on a prior acceptance of a majoritarian concept of democracy, which is in itself problematic in differentiated societies, not least Northern Ireland. Furthermore, it offers only the replacing of one sovereign power with another. It does not provide a locus for an alternative layering of identity or any layering of identity for that matter, just the same old stark choice between British or Irish.

Challenging the consent principle, DD suggests instead the application of the concept of *sufficient consensus* (first proposed by the Opsahl Commission, 1993). That is, that a majority of the parties at the talks, deemed to represent a majority of the electorate overall and a majority of the electorate in each main religious community, must agree to any deal. Importantly such an even-handed constitutional status would have to go beyond the ‘either/or’ towards an ‘and’. The principle of consent is trapped within the limits of the conventional discourse. It merely counterposes the competing self-determination claims.

What DD considers in constitutional terms is a new orientation to the special status of Northern Ireland and to difference per se. To expatiate the idea they prepared a draft constitution, which set out Northern Ireland as a ‘multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic society.’ It described Northern Ireland as a ‘unique region in the islands of Britain and Ireland, and within the European Union.’ Being as it were ‘[Equally] [. . .] part of the state of the United Kingdom, alongside England, Scotland and Wales [. . .] and by the same token, part of the nation of Ireland.’<sup>57</sup>

This is clearly an attempt to benefit from a political cross-fertilisation, regionally, isles-wide, and internationally, both in terms of gaining legitimacy and as a celebration of diversity. However, the assumption across Britain’s constitutional policy in Northern Ireland had long been that only two groups were in conflict<sup>58</sup> – a majority and a minority community – and that the minority community should be accommodated in terms of cultural and political aspirations.<sup>59</sup> This is what has since been interpreted as a consistently consociational approach to power-sharing, although that particular term does not appear in political discourses and constitutional

documents.

### **Parity of Esteem Revisited**

The surge in debates on nationalism occasioned by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of eastern European countries had given rise to a 'politics of recognition' in multicultural societies in the early 1990s.<sup>60</sup> In Northern Ireland (hardly a newcomer to identity politics), this had developed into a concept of 'parity of esteem,' which was first mentioned in constitutional policy in the Framework Documents (1995). It was understood to be a measure of equality and mutual respect but was quickly usurped by adversarial actors to make partisan claims. This became especially apparent in the Drumcree stand-off where marchers and resisting residents both invoked their right to 'parity of esteem' to legitimise their case.

In a report from 1997 entitled *With All Due Respect – Pluralism and Parity of Esteem*, Democratic Dialogue argues that part of the problem with the concept (indeed of many of the conceptual problems in Northern Ireland's constitutional policy) was that it was ill-defined (potentially all things to all people) and was imported with no regard to the wider international debate on the politics of recognition.<sup>61</sup> The aspiration of policy science that 'sound policies must be based on an analysis of the situation – that is both empirically well grounded and theoretically defensible'<sup>62</sup> – has often been ignored in the constitutional policy devised for Northern Ireland. 'Parity of esteem' falls easy prey to the mutually exclusive interpretations of the 'two communities' and unless defined in a broader context holds no sway in proposing a constructive way forward.

What DD suggested instead was to highlight a strand of identity formation, which stressed individualism over unionism and nationalism. This would require a completely new language in which it was possible to venture beyond a mere balance of power between antagonistic groups.<sup>63</sup> Drawing on Laclau, Habermas, and Ingram, they argued in favour of a position that distinguishes the *universal* principle of equality from the *particular* conceptions of the good. Focusing only on the former renders us 'group blind' whereas focusing only on the latter leads to relativism.<sup>64</sup> The challenge is to develop a scheme of rights in which everybody enjoys equal freedom of expression, individuality, and power.<sup>65</sup> In such an *ideal speech situation*<sup>66</sup> it would be possible 'to re-present the concept of parity of esteem in the language of opportunity and choice for individual citizens, rather than as a clash between ideologically armour-plated, collective political protagonists'.<sup>67</sup> Even if most people would continue to adhere to a

singular identity, there would be at least the possibility for reflexively constructing more complex, multiple identities from the cultural repertoire available to them.

What DD strives to achieve is the simultaneous possibility of celebrating differences as well as the potential to transcend them. This approach is of course open to some criticism, first and foremost that reducing parity of esteem to an equality of individual rights evacuates the concept of any useful distinctive meaning, thus deliberately silencing the claim which it is intended to establish – that the two major communities should enjoy some measure of equal recognition.<sup>68</sup> However, what this type of critique fails to acknowledge is that the point is to prepare a road to reconciliation – a redress of the political culture, which is capable of doing more than just keeping the balance. What DD want is to take the process from ‘peace-making’ to ‘peace-building.’ DD raises the issue that the conflict in Northern Ireland is addressed in a way that is insular (applying concepts with no regard to a wider international context), yet not particular (applying concepts with little consideration of their consequences in the specific empirical context). The DD approach to rights should be read in conjunction with their proposals on consent (outlined above), as a comprehensive attempt at shifting the political culture onto different ground. It requires a vision of pluralist democratic politics, to which I will now turn.

### **Elite Accommodation Versus Associative Politics**

Although Democratic Dialogue recognises that ‘the imposition of a *reasonable and responsive* solution from above may be a necessary first step towards a more permanent settlement’,<sup>69</sup> they are also anxious that it should not become an exclusively top-down passive revolution. Likewise, elite accommodation might provide an initial focal point for negotiations, but carries no seed for common community construction. Both these presuppositions that have long been part of the British government’s policy on Northern Ireland (of an imposed framework for a solution in tandem with elite accommodation) arguably need a counterweight anchored in civil society to constitute a comprehensive and viable framework.

DD grounds this approach within international debates of governance that challenge assumptions that politics can and must only take place within formal political institutions.<sup>70</sup> What they explore explicitly is what role the voluntary sector and the individual citizen might play in terms of partnerships with a new political dispensation or even under continued direct rule.<sup>71</sup> This type of politics would embrace networking and clustering

at local (including cross- border) levels, where the emphasis would be on participatory politics and building consensus. It would be based on a politics of 'civic principles' instead of a politics of 'belonging.' This means that identity would be considered malleable and changing with shifting circumstances, instead of fixed and subject to historic destiny.<sup>72</sup> The potential arising from civil society in acting as a counter-force to the boundary reinforcing dynamics of separate state development has been explored since the early 1980s,<sup>73</sup> but the overall picture remains one in which elite accommodation plays a leading role, most notably in the increasingly predominant deference to what has been interpreted by academics to be a consociational framework for a solution.

### **The Legacy of DD**

The position of DD is consistent with a persistent 'third' or 'other' position in Northern Ireland. It stresses civic, not ethnic factors; it employs an international framework (both ideational and institutional) instead of merely an internal or bilateral one; it does not deconstruct the historic legitimacy of Northern Ireland but focuses on reconstructing a society which can contain oppositional pulls without elevating them to central stage; it advertises a strong civic input into politics. As such they do some of the theoretical and practical footwork, which is the logical implication of the evolving conflict resolution and constitutional policy. The rightful coexistence of separate aspirations increasingly assumed in the interpretation of conflict requires a rethinking of identities or at least identifications, which has yet to be articulated.

Before DD was wound up in 2006 due to lack of further funding, they managed to introduce forward thinking on issues that were peripheral in the political economy of 'brink politics' at the time, but are central to political debate now. Most notably they put forward suggestions of how to deal with the past,<sup>74</sup> as well as on how to approach reconciliation and a shared future.<sup>75</sup> This work (like the work of the New Ulster Movement in its time) was remarkable not least because it anchored the local political discourse in wider international debates amidst an otherwise very insular and self-centered political culture.

There is no shortage of criticism of these cosmopolitan and post-nationalist positions, which have been dismissed as 'the class consciousness of the frequent traveller'.<sup>76</sup> While the 'other' voices have argued that processes of identification are plastic and interrelated, ethno-national entrepreneurs have been able to substantiate that ethno-national divisions seem to be unchangeable and natural. In this respect the 'other'

voices' focus on procedural rather than substantial (in this case ethno-national identity) issues continues to make them a political sideshow.

## **Conclusion**

Obviously, the common ground is not simply one constant alternative position or voice. One of the main differences between the New Ulster Movement and Democratic Dialogue, for example, is the context of their establishment. Where the New Ulster Movement was founded as a direct response to the degeneration of society into violence, Democratic Dialogue seized their opportunity in the absence of violence – after the ceasefires. Reading across the documents, across time, it is furthermore evident how the common ground, integrationist argument has matured and become even more cosmopolitan. What the think tanks did have in common was the aspiration to generate, articulate and disseminate rational political ideas in a torrent of discord whether of a violent or political nature, or both. The most important thing they had in common, however, is the challenge posed by the magnetic field that is the political culture in Northern Ireland. The widespread empirical and analytical acceptance of the poles of unionism and nationalism means that all positions respond to them, much in the way that iron filings align in a magnetic field. Rather than creating new positions the filings, or in this case 'other voices', are forced to form elongated clusters in relation to the mutual attraction of the two opposite poles. This is of course also a general analytical point for political theory, that bipolar epistemologies thwart the possibility for introducing new arguments and positions. The difficulties of the integrationist common ground in breaking the political mould also highlights the inherent tensions between negotiated consensus building processes and a more normative and cosmopolitan approach.

From this emergent analysis of the New Ulster Movement and Democratic Dialogue documents, it is clear that they attempted to address structural, institutional and ideological dynamics of conflict. It is, however, also clear from the current constitutional arrangements that they did not wholly succeed in circumventing the reigning dichotomy and move decisively towards integrationism. The value of the consociational approach in Northern Ireland is still largely considered to be that it eliminates fear by balancing forces, while integrationism seeks to destroy the magnetic force of polarisation.

While a reigning dichotomy is not necessarily a direct silencing or muting of 'other voices' it does tend to make what they are saying moot points, that is, potentially debatable but no longer practically applicable.

What they are proposing and arguing is not disappeared, but realigned. There is not so much a culture of silence surrounding the common ground as a certain selective and sectarian hearing. However, in order to rise to current political challenges like the issue of how to deal with the past, how to move beyond entrenched government or how to ensure a shared future it is perhaps worthwhile to sound out the historical and contemporary 'other' voices for carefully thought out and non-aligned ideas.

## Notes and References

- 1 Brian Walker, 'Tribute to those who "kept faith through the dark days"', *Belfast Telegraph*, 28 December 1999.
- 2 The 'zero sum game' basically refers to competitive situations where strictly opposed interests means that one side's loss is inevitably considered another side's gain. See for example J. Neumann, and O. Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944/1953). In the case of Northern Ireland this zero-sum game is played out between the unionist and nationalist politico-cultural traditions.
- 3 Upon taking their seats in the assembly, members must designate themselves as 'unionist', 'nationalist' or 'other'. While this is necessary to ensure a cross community majority on all controversial issues, it has serious repercussions for those registering as 'other'. Under the current legislation the 'others' cannot veto any legislation, nor is a majority of 'other' votes necessary to make decisions on controversial issues.
- 4 As suggested by Paul Arthur, *Special Relationships* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2000) 46-47.
- 5 Alliance Party Manifesto 2004:1.
- 6 <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/>.
- 7 For an explication of an 'ethnic dual party system see Mitchell (1995) with a qualification of 'ethnic tribune parties' in Mitchell et al. 2009.
- 8 Michael J. Cunningham, *British Government Policy in Northern Ireland 1969-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).
- 9 Horowitz 2004: 72-3.
- 10 The Alliance Party briefly had Westminster representation from 1973-1974 when an MP elected for UUP defected and joined AP.
- 11 <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results/polatt.html#conpref>.
- 12 Said by Bill Wolsley, entrepreneur and owner of the Merchant Hotel and Little Wing pizzeria chain 2011 'Belfast one city conference'.
- 13 Derrick Wilson and Jerry Tyrrell, 'Institutions for Conciliation and Mediation', *Facets of the Conflict In Northern Ireland*, ed. Seamus Dunn (London: Macmillan Press, 1995) 234-35.
- 14 Peter Shirlow, "'Who Fears to speak": Fear, Mobility and Ethno-sectarianism in the "Two Ardoynes"', *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 3.1 (2003): 87.

- 15 John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).
- 16 Morris Fraser, *Children in Conflict* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973) 135.
- 17 Bernadette C. Hayes, Ian McAllister and Lizanne Dowds, 'Integrated Education, Intergroup Relations, and Political Identities in Northern Ireland', *Social Problems* 54.4 (2007): 454-82.
- 18 A recent Ipsos Mori poll showed that almost 9 out of 10 support integrated education. *Attitudinal Survey on Integrated Education*, (Belfast: The Integrated Education Fund, 2011).
- 19 Colin Know and Joanna Hughes, 'Crossing the Divide – Community Relations in Northern Ireland', *Journal of Peace Research* 33.1 (1996): 84.
- 20 Gillian Robinson, Frank Foley and Georgina Owens. 'Politicians and Community Relations in Northern Ireland', *A Sustainable Peace - Research as a contribution to Peace-Building in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Community Relations Council: 2008).
- 21 The idea of Consociational democracy was originally introduced by Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart in an article from 1969: Arend Lijphart. 'Consociational Democracy', *World Politics: A Quarterly Journal of International Relations* 21 (1969): 207-25. It has since been propagated as an appropriate model (with some modifications) for the current political arrangements in Northern Ireland, conversely, the suitability of the model has been severely challenged. (For a comprehensive debate of consociationalism in the context of Northern Ireland see Rupert Taylor, ed. *Consociational Theory*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).
- 22 Paul Nolan *Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report* (Belfast: Community Relations Council, 2012) 31.
- 23 Article 3.1 of the charter states that: 'Every person belonging to a national minority shall have the right freely to choose to be treated or *not to be treated* as such and no disadvantage shall result from this choice or from the exercise of the rights which are connected to that choice.' [My italics].
- 24 An updated version of the index can be found on <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/sutton/>.
- 25 See, for example, John Whyte, (1990)
- 26 Jonathan Tonge, *The New Northern Irish Politics?*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2005) 84.
- 27 Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry, *Explaining Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1995) 364-66.
- 28 Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry. *Explaining Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1995).
- 29 However, in more recent work McGarry and O'Leary have contended that consociation will ease the path to a shared Northern Irish identity if the current political institutions endure. John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, 'Power shared after the deaths of thousands' in *Consociational Theory*, ed. Rupert Taylor (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009) 83.
- 30 Rupert Taylor, ed. *Consociational Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009) 83.
- 31 NUM 1972: 1.
- 32 Letter to NUM members outlining the work of the movement in its first year, Public Records Office Northern Ireland, ref (D3159) 2.

- 33 Letter to NUM members outlining the work of the movement in its first year, Public Records Office Northern Ireland, ref (D3159) 2.
- 34 Honor Rudnitzsky, *An Old Wife's Tale* (Belfast: Lisbane Press, 1995).
- 35 This pamphlet was drafted by John Whyte, who later developed it into the formative book *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).
- 36 *Northern Ireland – A Divided Community*, (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1971a) 2.
- 37 *Northern Ireland – A Divided Community*, (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1971a) 12.
- 38 *Northern Ireland – A Divided Community*, (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1971a) 12.
- 39 *Northern Ireland – A Divided Community*, (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1971a) 13.
- 40 Although in a later publication, *Ireland – Towards the Return of the Rule of Law*, (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1972) 3, they argue that the root of the conflict was the breakdown of the rule of law witnessed in both 1912 and 1916, which led to partition and the consequential legacy of violence and the different attitudes to the legitimacy of each part of Ireland.
- 41 *The Northern Ireland Programme of Reforms* (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1971b) 8.
- 42 *The Northern Ireland Programme of Reforms* (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1971b) 8.
- 43 *The Northern Ireland Programme of Reforms* (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1971b) 9.
- 44 *The Way Forward in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1971c) 2.
- 45 *The Way Forward in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1971c) 2.
- 46 *The Way Forward in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1971c) 8.
- 47 *The Way Forward in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1971c) 8.
- 48 *The Way Forward in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1971c) 8-9.
- 49 *Two Irelands or One?* (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1972).
- 50 *Two Irelands or One?* (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1972) 1.
- 51 *Two Irelands or One?* (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1972) 6.
- 52 These lines included tariff barriers, breakage of the Commonwealth link, legislation enshrining Catholic attitudes on divorce and contraception, neutrality, compulsory Irish language, etc. *Two Irelands or One?* (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1972) 13.
- 53 *A Challenge to Statesmanship*, (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1975).
- 54 *Independence for Northern Ireland? A Good Idea? A Silly Idea?* (Belfast: New Ulster Movement, 1976).
- 55 Author's interview with Robin Wilson, Belfast, 2 August 2005.
- 56 *Making 'Consent' Mutual* (Belfast: Democratic Dialogue 1997) 3.
- 57 *Making 'Consent' Mutual* (Belfast: Democratic Dialogue 1997) 16-17.
- 58 See, for example, Sara Dybris McQuaid *Ideas as Practicalities – A Discursive Exploration of the Relationship Between Academic Output and Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland*, unpublished PhD thesis (Belfast: Queen's

- University, 2009).
- 59 For a typology of ethnic management strategies, see John Coakley, 'The Resolution of Ethnic Conflict: Towards a Typology', *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique* 13.4 (1992): 343-58.
- 60 Charles Taylor 'The Politics of Recognition', *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 25-74.
- 61 Tom Hennessy and Robin Wilson, *With All Due Respect – Pluralism and Parity of Esteem* (Belfast: Democratic Dialogue, 1997) 6.
- 62 Robert E. Goodin, *Political Theory and Public Policy*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 7.
- 63 Hennessy and Wilson (1997) 29.
- 64 Hennessy and Wilson (1997) 29.
- 65 Attracta Ingram suggests (1) that citizens are to be treated as equals from the point of view of politics; (2) that certain liberties, such as the liberty to practice a religion, are of fundamental importance; (3) that disagreement about the fundamentals of human existence is to be tolerated (even regarded as a good thing) rather than stamped out by force. Attracta Ingram, *A Political Theory of Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 97-98.
- 66 A concept developed by Jürgen Habermas, guided by the following principles for communication: 1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse. 2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever. 2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse. 2c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires and needs. 3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2) (1980: 86).
- 67 Hennessy and Wilson (1997) 31.
- 68 Norman Porter develops an alternative concept of 'due recognition' in *Rethinking Unionism – An Alternative Vision for Northern Ireland*, (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1996) 184. It is specifically this concept that is critiqued in Simon Thompson, 'Parity of Esteem and the Politics of Recognition', *Contemporary Political Theory* 1. 2 (2002): 207.
- 69 Hurst Hannum (1996), quoted in Hennessy and Wilson (1997) 107.
- 70 Paul Hirst, *Associative Democracy: New Forms of Economic and Social Governance*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).
- 71 *Making Democracy Work: Participation and Politics in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Democratic Dialogue, 1998) 3.
- 72 *Making Democracy Work: Participation and Politics in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Democratic Dialogue, 1998) 6.
- 73 See for example John Whyte, 'The Permeability of the United Kingdom-Irish border: a preliminary recognisance', *Administration* 31.3 (1983): 300-15.
- 74 *Future Policies for the Past* (Belfast: Democratic Dialogue, 2001), *Recognition and Reckoning – The Way Ahead on Victims Issues* (Belfast: Democratic Dialogue, 2003).
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- 76 Craig Calhoun, 'The class consciousness of frequent travelers: Toward a critique

of actually existing cosmopolitanism', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.4 (2002): 869- 97.