

ARTICLE

The Northern Ireland Peace Process and the Nationalist Political Parties: A Shift Toward Consociational Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an analysis of Northern Irish nationalist political parties between 1980-94 in relation to British attempts to craft power-sharing, or consociational, decision-making institutions. Since the 1970s successive British governments attempted to form a cross-community coalition government to achieve political stability in the divided province. This paper argues that for a long time there were obstacles inherent in the party system that prevented nationalists from taking part in such government. The moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) was less willing to take government responsibility because it was conditioned by Sinn Fein's (SF) electoral challenge. Party system fragmentation combined with ideological polarisation was not conducive to power

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sharing. It also argues that power sharing became a more viable option after 1994 as a result of changes in the party system involving the integration and legitimisation of the anti-system party. Even though this analysis is limited to the nationalist bloc, it will be argued that its findings have party system wide implications: A polarised multiparty system is unlikely to support consociationalism and that deep changes to the nature and orientation of the party system need to occur before rival political élites can compromise.

THE THEORETICAL DEBATE AND RIVAL EXPLANATIONS

While some maintain that consociationalism is not appropriate to manage political instability in Northern Ireland, it has been the preferred option of the British government and the majority of scholars interested in the conflict (McGarry, 2002: 1-36). For Lijphart, consociationalism is viable for deeply segmented societies and is defined in terms of four general characteristics: grand coalition, segmented autonomy/federalism, proportional representation electoral law and minority veto (Lijphart, 1968: 68). The grand coalition, an executive that contains representatives of all the segmented groups, is a central feature of Lijphart's theory along with the adoption of special majorities in parliament. Both serve to undercut the centrifugal tendencies inherent in divided societies such as Northern Ireland.

Also, Lijphart lists eight conditions conducive to power sharing. The most important ones being a balance of power among the segments with no segment having a hegemonic position; a multiparty system with parties that are representative of the segmented groups and; a history of compromise among the segments (Lijphart, 1975: 99-100).

Lijphart was originally very sceptical of the prospect for power sharing in Northern Ireland given the numerical disparity between nationalists and unionists and because the latter sought to maintain majority rule (Lijphart, 1975: 100). Lijphart's conducive conditions, however, have been widely disputed in the political science literature by authors that have emphasised the importance of alternative conditions (Barry, 1975: 393-412). O'Leary, for instance, argues that consociationalism is possible 'only by élites

sufficiently motivated to engage in conflict regulation.’ He also argues that ‘consociation is favoured where political élites enjoy predominance over a deferential and organisationally encapsulated following’ (O’Leary, 1989: 575). Nordingler makes a similar argument stating that the degree of autonomy of the political élites vis a vis social groups is also a necessary condition for the success of conflict management in divided societies (Nordingler, 1981: 225). Pappalardo maintains that consociationalism is possible only in cases where party leaders exercise an iron law of oligarchy over their followers that are integrated by institutionalised parties (Pappalardo, 1981: 385).

Although I do not dispute that Northern Ireland parties have had difficulty imposing pacts that are binding on their mass base (i.e., Sunningdale), I believe that there is an additional conducive condition to the establishment of consociationalism that the literature has failed to consider and that is relevant to Northern Ireland. This condition is that only moderate multiparty systems support consociationalism, whereas polarised party systems undermine it. Hence party system change, meaning ideological depolarisation, legitimisation of the anti-system parties and centripetal rather than centrifugal pattern of party competition, needs to occur before rival political élites can reach accommodation. Party leaders are not always free to adopt the consociational approach since certain conditions may prevent consociationalism even if party leaders wish to use it. This paper will demonstrate that party system transition away from polarised pluralism, even if currently still an open-ended process, has been the central conducive condition that facilitated the nationalist bloc during the 1998 accommodation.

RESEARCH PLAN

The transition, intended as the process leading to party system change, and party system change, defined as the transformation from one type of party system into another (Mair, 1989: 254), are considered in this analysis as key factors contributing to improve the prospects for power sharing in Northern Ireland. The first phenomenon differs from the second because it is not as comprehensive and it cannot preclude a reversal of political development to an earlier condition, i.e. polarised pluralism. It is an intermediate point between two different types of party systems. Party system change on the other

hand is a seismic type change such as the shift from polarised pluralism to moderate multipartitism.

Two sets of indicators will be used to track the evolution of the party system and specifically of the nationalist bloc:

- the parties' policy positions,
- party institutionalisation (Panebianco, 1988: 55).

Policy positions are an important measure of polarisation because they allow to determine the parties' ideological distance from each other and from the political centre and will be identified by reviewing party documents such as major speeches, policy papers, interviews of party leaders, and electoral campaign themes. In particular, the analysis will focus on the nationalist parties evolving position with respect to three key issues:

- political violence,
- majority consent principle,
- political alliances.

With regard to violence, the analysis will focus on whether nationalists support violent means to achieve union between Ulster and the Irish Republic. Political consent means whether nationalists accept the premise that change to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland can come about only if backed by a majority of Northern Ireland voters. This implies that for change to take place a sizable portion of the Protestant majority has to favour it. The focus on political alliances will determine whether nationalist parties develop over time coalition instead of blackmail potential. This implies a move away from rigid and inflexible policies in favour of a more pragmatic approach.

Institutionalisation means party consolidation into a hierarchical, rational and bureaucratic organisation. It is especially relevant for anti-system parties because one of its consequences tends to be a gradual process whereby ideological goals are displaced in favour of more practical ones such as winning elections. The institutionalisation process

will be analysed by presenting data on the evolving organisational complexity within nationalism captured by growth in the number of party branches and incumbency in local councils. Involvement in local government, in particular, is potentially beneficial to the constitutional evolution of anti-system parties allowing them to build a stake in the political system (Knox, 1990: 25).

In the next section, after a brief introduction on the Northern Ireland party system, I present a detailed analysis of the political evolution of the nationalist parties divided in three phases: Radicalism, dialogue, and endpoint. We will be seeking answers to such questions as what factors derailed the early attempts at power sharing? What factors changed the political landscape in the 1990s? Is there a certain condition that is necessary for the emergence of consociationalism?

THE EVOLUTION OF THE NATIONALIST BLOC

Since the collapse of Stormont in 1972 the Northern Ireland party system has been a case of polarised pluralism. These systems are based on triangular interactions between a centre grouping that faces bipolar opposition of an anti-system nature, meaning that the opposition would not settle in changing the government but the very system of government. There are two distinctive features of polarised pluralism; multipartitism and ideological polarisation (Sartori, 1976: 130-71).

Multipartitism is witnessed by the fact that both blocs do not have hegemonic parties. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) faces competition from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and from loyalist fringe groups, while SF rivals the SDLP. But political fragmentation, which by itself would not necessarily undermine stable government, is coupled by ideological polarisation between and within the blocs.

The national identity cleavage and the dispute over the existence of Northern Ireland separate unionists from nationalists, while within bloc competition separates moderates from extremists on both sides. This last rivalry, based on the ideological distance between

moderate and extremist identities, is the most destabilising one because it limits the moderate's ability to come to terms with the other side. Ideological distance fosters within bloc competition and produces the centrifugal dynamic of Northern Irish politics. In Ulster the moderates are found within the SDLP, the Alliance Party and the UUP, while SF and the DUP have historically shared an outright opposition to a cross community based executive and their main goal has been to prevent consociationalism. This scenario differs from the cases of successful consociationalism such as Austria from 1945 to 1966, Switzerland since 1943, Belgium since 1918 and the Netherlands from 1917 to 1967. In these countries the government parties played a hegemonic role within their subcultures and the party system dynamics were also different from those of Northern Ireland since they were not of a polarised nature (Dreijmanis, 1982: 255).

Radicalism, 1980-84

During the 1980s the Northern Ireland party system experienced an increase in support for political extremism. Two factors were responsible for this development. The first was endogenous to the party system and was caused by the Irish government's opposition to the Falklands War. The British and Irish governments, which had previously collaborated on Northern Ireland, now had different positions on the war and were less willing to collaborate and reach an accommodation amongst unionists and nationalists. The second factor was of an exogenous nature and had to do with the growth of centrifugal forces within the nationalist bloc. The early 1980s witnessed the progression of SF as an emerging electoral force. SF obtained 10.1 percent of the vote for the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1982 and 13.4 percent of the vote, including the West Belfast seat, in the 1983 Westminster general election. The SDLP received 18.8 percent in 1982 and 17.9 percent in 1983.

In April 1982 the UK Secretary of State James Prior presented the White Paper on Northern Ireland's constitutional future. Prior supported devolution for Ulster with the formation of a 78 member local assembly drawn from the province's political parties. In the first stage, parties would draft plans for government. Then, the power-sharing

executive would be formed comprising both moderate unionists and nationalists and Britain would then transfer a wide range of autonomous power to the assembly itself. The SDLP decided to contest the elections but boycott the assembly's discussions. The decision reflected a compromise solution, brokered by party leader John Hume, between moderates, which favoured full participation and power sharing with unionists, and the nationalist faction that wanted an outright boycott of the Prior plan and the elections. The SDLP's party statement said that the plan could not be accepted by nationalists because it did not take into account the Irish dimension, meaning closer relations between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic (*The Globe & Mail*, 4 September 1982).

This position must be seen as a reaction to SF's political mobilisation and the corresponding SDLP desire to show its nationalist credentials to the voters. Prior to these developments, the SDLP had sought to involve unionists in power sharing. In contrast to its predecessor, the Nationalist Party, the SDLP had abandoned abstentionism and had been more than willing to work within the confines of the Northern Ireland political system in an attempt to reform it. But the rise of SF along with the timid reforms proposed by Prior had forced the SDLP to take a more radical stance. The hunger strikes of 1981, led by Bobby Sands, unexpectedly led SF into electoral politics. The republican movement was able to portray the political nature of the conflict to international opinion as well as broaden the conflict itself to include electoral politics. The hunger strikes had further polarised Northern Ireland's public opinion into two homogeneous groups. This allowed SF to mobilise an electoral constituency that previously had shown little interest in voting such as the unemployed, young people and workers. But its electoral success was also due to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's intransigence against prison strikes. Her position was not viewed positively by nationalists. As a result, SF had become a threat to SDLP dominance, gaining 40% of the Catholic vote.

SF campaigned on an abstentionist platform that did not recognise the legitimacy of Northern Ireland. The party's main campaign themes were the demand for rapid constitutional change followed by the immediate British withdrawal from the North. For SF both political demands were to be taken by the British government against the will of

the unionists. To help achieve these goals, SF aimed to supplant the SDLP as the primary voice of nationalism. The SDLP reaction to SF's success was to reject the republican mandate by claiming that it only represented a protest vote against British policy. Hume said that Catholics were alienated and that the rise of SF was a symptom of malaise within nationalism rather than outright support for the republican movement. As a result, the SDLP sought the help of the Irish Republic in developing proposals to reduce nationalist discontent. This determined a policy shift for the SDLP because it now placed power sharing on the backburner.

In 1983, the Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, the Labour party, and the SDLP met in Dublin at the New Ireland Forum to discuss the future of Northern Ireland. It was an attempt to improve the SDLP's electoral fortunes at the expense of SF by showing to the northern minority that constitutional politics was capable to generate political reform.

The Forum's end result was a report which presented three potential solutions to the conflict--a unitary Irish state, a federal Irish state, and joint British-Irish authority over Northern Ireland (New Ireland Forum Report, 1984). It was a major publicity coup for the SDLP which demonstrated that it possessed the clout to achieve political progress. But success came at a price for the SDLP because its position was similar to SF's abstentionism. There was no clear distinction between the positions of the two parties as both rejected the British proposals. Thus the rise of SF had forced the SDLP to take a strong nationalist stand and move away from potential talks with unionists. The increasing ideological polarisation within the nationalist bloc had submerged the moderate tendencies and had favoured hard-liners that rejected compromise.

Dialogue, 1985-88

The British and Irish governments were confronted with a growing level of support for SF within the nationalist community. The SDLP began to believe that a power sharing government without SF's participation would be prone to collapse under pressure from both loyalists and republicans. Based on these considerations, both governments decided to enter into negotiations, which resulted in the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA). Thus, this

second phase was characterised primarily by collaboration between the two governments aimed at reducing nationalist discontent. The constitutional changes enacted by the British government also had an impact on the power balance between the SDLP and SF strengthening the former at the expense of the extreme nationalists.

The AIA, signed in 1985, established an Inter-Governmental Conference to deal regularly with political and legal matters, security issues, and cross border cooperation. The Conference, to be attended by both British and Irish government representatives, gave a consultative role to the latter in Ulster's affairs. The agreement encouraged power sharing but this time the British government, having seen all attempts at voluntary consociation collapse, was willing to coerce both blocs to agree to a settlement (O'Leary, 1989: 562-88). It also stipulated that many of the functions of the Inter-Governmental Conference, and thus the role of the Irish Republic, would be transferred to a local Northern Ireland government if unionists agreed to form a coalition with the SDLP.

With the AIA the British government had recognised the Irish dimension to the conflict, thus strengthening the bargaining power of the SDLP. The moderate nationalists were not only expected to receive an electoral boost from the agreement, but could also operate more freely to seek internal compromise.

On the electoral front SF's vote began to weaken. On 15 May 1985 the District Council elections were held. The SDLP improved its share of first preference vote, but lost two seats (down to 101). Contesting local government elections for the first time, SF won 59 seats and received 11.8 percent of first preferences. In January 1986 the SDLP picked up an additional seat at Westminster when the bi-elections were held as unionists resigned their seats in opposition to the AIA. In the 11 June 1987 Westminster general election the SF vote declined to 11.4 percent. The SDLP was the main beneficiary of the election increasing its vote to 21.1 percent.

If, however, the SDLP had more room to manoeuvre and no longer risked being overtaken by SF, its leaders were convinced that the long-term success of the agreement

depended upon the willingness of the British government to deliver political and social reform. Hume stated that political progress could take place only if AIA delivered on the issues of social justice and rights for the minority community (*Irish Times*, 16 Nov. 1985a). Seamus Mallon, the leader of the SDLP's nationalist faction, stressed that peace had to be based on a just settlement (*Irish Times*, 16 Nov. 1985b).

The events of 1985 revealed the lack of options available to SF. Both governments and the SDLP had refused to talk to SF without a preventive Irish Republican Army (IRA) cease-fire. The only people willing to talk to SF were the extreme left representatives of the British Labour Party which sympathised with the republican cause. But Labour was out of power and the SF interlocutors represented a minority opinion within that party with no political clout. Thus, one of the main objectives of the AIA had been achieved: to isolate SF and stunt its electoral progress.

But contrary to the British government's intent, in the two years that followed the signing of the agreement the SDLP's interest in power sharing decreased even more substantially as a result of unionist opposition to AIA and the lack of substantial reform. The Protestant community had organised strikes and protests led by both the UUP and the DUP. The parties were reacting to the massive discontent within the Protestant community against AIA by taking a hard-line position against it.

To placate unionists, the British prime minister had been very reluctant to initiate major reform in Northern Ireland, as urged by the SDLP and the Irish government. Moreover, by 1988 it was clear that the AIA had weakened but not completely eroded SF's base of support that remained committed to republican objectives. Thus a stalemate had developed at the electoral level since the SDLP remained the leading nationalist force, but could not discount SF's mandate. Most importantly even with a reduced mandate 'SF has been able to exert electoral pressure on the SDLP to prevent it entering an accommodation with unionists' (Dixon, 2001: 297).

As a result of SF electoral resilience coupled with unionist unwillingness to form a

power-sharing government, the SDLP was forced to reassess its strategy and endorse a stronger nationalist position. As Patterson asserts 'the AIA, which had been seen as a measure to isolate SF, in less than 3 years, came to produce radically different results. It had shifted the ideological balance in nationalist Ireland in a direction which SF could only welcome' (Patterson, 1997: 203-04).

By 1988 the SDLP was holding out for more concessions on the sovereignty issue having moved away from a mere internal solution. Austin Currie, a moderate party leader, said that the SDLP had no 'ideological attachment toward devolution' (*Fortnight*, August 1987: 7). While another elected representative stressed that a mere internal solution such as power sharing did not have the breadth and scope to cure the ills of Northern Ireland's society (*The Irish Times*, 4 Nov. 1989). The party now demanded more forcefully a stronger institutional link between Ireland and Ulster as part of a political settlement. The electoral standstill between the SDLP and SF brought the party to enter into dialogue with SF to draw it into the constitutional process and to convince republicans that the armed struggle was an obstacle to a united Ireland. This dialogue took place amid heavy criticism from the British government which stated that the SDLP should not be speaking to the violent fringe.

In the SDLP-SF meetings of 1988, the SDLP contended that Ulster's Protestants have veto power over the future of Northern Ireland's constitutional position by virtue of their numbers, while SF opposed such a veto. (1) The other major issue of disagreement was the SDLP insistence that since the AIA was signed in 1985, Britain's role in Northern Ireland had been a neutral one. SF contested this position arguing that maintaining that Britain 'is now a neutral party to the conflict....ignores all the historical evidence of British domination in Ireland and is wholly contradicted by events of the past 20 years' (*The Irish Times*, 6 Sept. 1988a). Both parties agreed that the Irish people as a whole had a right to self-determination, but the SDLP also stressed that political violence was the fundamental obstacle to a settlement with the unionists. The SDLP asked SF whether for republicans political violence had brought the prospect of a united Ireland any closer (*The Irish Times*, 6 Sept. 1988b). SF denied that this was the real issue and argued that

violence was necessary to force the British out (*The Irish Times*, 6 Sept. 1988c). Hume pointed out to SF that if the IRA ended its violent campaign, the SDLP would form with SF a nationalist alliance which would also include parties from the Irish Republic. The formation of such a political grouping was touted as an effective instrument to pool political pressure against the British government. The talks ended without an agreed course of action between the parties, but revealed that changes were taking place in SF policy. In 1987 SF had published *Scenario for Peace*. This document still focused on traditional republican objectives, but it also argued that these goals could not be attained with the traditional means employed by the IRA. SF recognised the need for a broad alliance in support of national unity (see Rolston in Teague, ed.19187: 67). But the document failed to specify that violence would have to end given that the moderates would refuse to side with SF while IRA activities continued. SF also still refused to deal with the Protestant community opposition to a united Ireland. The SF manifesto for the 1987 Westminster general election stated that the British government should:

‘declare that its military forces and political administration and system will remain only for as long as it takes to disarm and disband the Royal Ulster Constabulary and Ulster Defence Regiment, transfer power to sovereign authorities, and withdraw.’ (*For Freedom, Justice, Peace*, September 1987).

During the SDLP-SF talks divisions over political strategy resurfaced within the SDLP. Sections of the party opposed the talks maintaining that the SDLP should be negotiating with unionists rather than with SF. Despite these divisions, the majority of the party took the position that ‘politically the positions of the SDLP and SF are not unduly removed from one another and are bridgeable’ (*The Irish Times*, 19 September 1988d). Thus the SDLP’s focus was now developing a nationalist coalition as opposed to following the British track focused on power sharing.

By the end of 1988 it was clear that the architects of the agreement had not achieved their

stated goal of improving prospects for political reconciliation between the two communities.

Endpoint, 1989-94

In the first half of the 1990s Northern Ireland witnessed an increased level of violence by both loyalist and nationalist paramilitary groups. The British and Irish governments promoted dialogue among the constitutional parties to produce a settlement as well as to isolate the extremists. Nationalist voters expressed their desire for peace by supporting the SDLP at the expense of SF. In the June 1989 elections for the European Parliament the SDLP obtained 25.5 percent of the vote, while the SF vote slipped to 9.1 percent. The SDLP won 21 percent of the vote at the 1989 District Council elections, while the SF vote slipped to 11.2 percent. In the 1992 Westminster general election the SF vote declined to 10 percent from 11.4 percent in 1987 and the party lost the West Belfast seat. The SDLP gained 23.5 percent of the vote making further gains against SF.

In January 1990 Peter Brooke, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, announced that the British government would begin all party talks to facilitate power sharing. In the Brooke talks the British and Irish governments met with all constitutional political parties to hammer out a settlement. Both sides offered different solutions. On one hand, unionists wanted to devolve power to an Ulster assembly and reduce the role of the Irish Republic in Ulster's affairs. On the other, the SDLP was interested in expanding the role of the Irish government in the North. The talks collapsed because the unionists could not agree to a power sharing government with a substantial Irish dimension to satisfy the SDLP. Without the SDLP, any agreement emerging from the Brooke initiative would not have sufficient nationalist support and therefore would not be conducive to a settlement. The talks were resumed by a new Secretary of State Patrick Mayhew in April 1992 but ended in November with no agreement among the parties.

The failure of the talks forced the SDLP to deepen its dialogue with SF to find a common ground among nationalists. SF had feared that the Brooke initiative might succeed and

thus further isolate republicans. The 1989 SF annual conference had been dominated by two defensive themes - the IRA's pledge to avoid civilian deaths, and SF's need for political allies (*The Economist*, 4 January, 1989).

Gerry Adams, the SF party president, told republicans that violence alone would not bring about a united Ireland and that SF needed to develop alternative strategies. Thus, as Feeney asserts 'SF wanted to cooperate with the SDLP and the Irish government. Most of the proposals in SF's documents suggested joining together in some way to agree to a strategy or to confront the British diplomatically' (Feeney: 2002: 357). Party leaders recognised that for political progress to occur, SF needed to become part of a broader alliance.

This strategy change had also an impact on SF's political thinking. In September of 1992, in a significant policy shift, SF acknowledged that Protestants in the North could not and should not be coerced into accepting a united Ireland. The reappraisal, contained in a peace policy document written by the North's SF chairman, Mitchel McLaughlin, stressed that the republican movement's quarrel was with the British state, not with Protestants (*Towards A Lasting Peace in Ireland*, May 1992). The plan asserted that 'democracy and practicality demand that this ratification be done in consultation with the representatives of the Irish minority – the Northern unionists – as well as the representatives of the Northern nationalists' (*Towards A Lasting Peace in Ireland*, May 1992).

McLaughlin also stated that there was a convergence of opinion between his party and the SDLP on the view that divisions could not be healed by violence and in calling for Britain to show it was pro-active in pursuing peace and democracy in Ireland. (2) This policy shift was fairly significant given that the republican movement, up to the early 1990s, had not bothered to grapple with unionist political aspirations and how they would represent an obstacle to unification even if the British state eventually decided to withdraw from Northern Ireland.

SF policy no longer supported the traditional republican rejection of political alliances

with other strands of nationalism. It also no longer called for a short timetable for British withdrawal. This change prompted *The Economist* to write:

‘SF used to demand immediate British withdrawal. Now it envisages a longer, perhaps 30-year, process. It used to deny the Irish government a role on the grounds that it was not legitimate. Now it accepts that the British and the Irish must co-operate over withdrawal; it might even accept some form of joint sovereignty between the two as an interim measure’ (*The Economist*, 20 November, 1993a)

Prior to these developments, the SDLP had sought to accelerate change by issuing a peace proposal. Hume’s document centred on three key issues: First, the Irish people as a whole had a right to self-determination. Second, the British role in Northern Ireland was that of a neutral mediator between the two communities. Third, nationalists needed to win over unionist consent with regard to future constitutional changes (A Strategy For Peace and Justice in Ireland, May 1991). This plan was meant to be the basis for an agreement between the two strands of nationalism and an early draft of a settlement proposal between nationalists and the British state.

Following the publication of the document, Hume began another round of talks with SF to pursue an end to violence. The result of which was a June 1993 SDLP-SF joint document proposing joint authority over Northern Ireland. It stated that republicans would be willing to agree to an IRA cease-fire in exchange for a British declaration that would accept the will of the majority in Northern Ireland if it favoured unity with the Irish Republic and a reiteration that Britain had no strategic interest in Northern Ireland (*The Economist*, 2 Oct. 1993b). Both parties agreed that the Irish people had a right to self-determination and recognised that this could be exercised only by agreement. The SDLP had held this position since the beginning, but SF had refused to accept that unity could only be achieved by peaceful means. Both parties also recognised the necessity of unionist consent toward constitutional change. In addition, nationalists stressed that they were willing to consider interim arrangements before achieving the goal of Irish unity.

Although the document did not betray the nationalist aspiration of a united Ireland, it did make important concessions on the constitutional issue. Both parties accepted the need for interim arrangements and called indirectly for power sharing with unionists.

These policy revisions on the part of SF had brought about a major change. SF moderated its demands in an attempt to reverse electoral decline and regain the political initiative and this created an opening for consociationalism. The British and Irish governments responded in a positive manner to the SDLP-SF joint document by issuing on 15 December 1993 the Downing Street Declaration which was greeted by the SDLP with great enthusiasm, while SF did not reject it outright and asked for clarifications. The most important points reflected concepts expressed in the Hume/Adams document and are as follows: the British government reiterated that it had no strategic reason to be in Northern Ireland; that it was open to constitutional change provided a majority of the people of Ulster were also in favour of such change; and that a united Ireland was a legitimate objective provided it was pursued by peaceful means (Arthur, 1994: 219).

This document sparked an intense debate within SF around the likely outcome of the peace process. While for most of 1994 events moved very slowly, the SDLP urged both governments to move ahead quickly in the bid for peace. On 31 August 1994 the IRA called a complete cessation of military activity, thus providing a way for SF to enter into peace talks. This was quickly followed by the Joint Framework Documents, issued by both governments, which called for power sharing between nationalists and unionists and for the creation of all-Ireland institutions with executive power. The basic outline of what later became the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and the power sharing coalition had been laid out in this document.

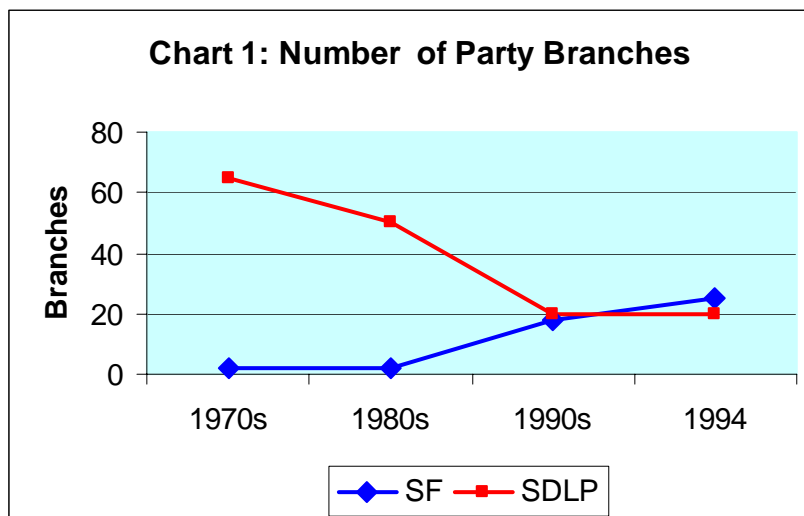
In the meantime on the electoral front in the 1993 District Council elections the SDLP won 22 percent of the vote, while SF reversed the negative trend by gaining 12.4 percent. In the 1980s SF had gained a stake in constituency politics through participation in tenant's associations, the management of community centres, and other functions carried out by its constituency representatives. Since SF first became involved in local

government its councillors demonstrated a willingness to occupy positions of power and responsibility which clashed with the movement's overall abstentionist policy toward British institutions. The following examples highlight SF's desire to use local authorities to serve constituents and consolidate its administrative power:

- a) In 1985 SF won a High Court injunction forbidding a unionist controlled council from holding meetings and excluding SF representatives (*Financial Times*, 4 June 1985).
- b) In 1992 SF pushed for a complete overhaul of the Belfast City Council committee system that allowed SF councillors to become committee members for the first time (*The Guardian*, 9 December 1992).
- c) SF also formed a government coalition with the SDLP in Magherafelt, a small, predominately Catholic town (Knox, 1994, 10).

These examples are a first indicator of party institutionalisation and they highlight SF's willingness to be part of the political process.

Another indicator of institutionalisation is political incumbency in local government. Between 1985 and 1993 18% (9 out of 51) of SF councillors had held their seat for three terms, while 53% (27 out of 51) had held it for two terms.

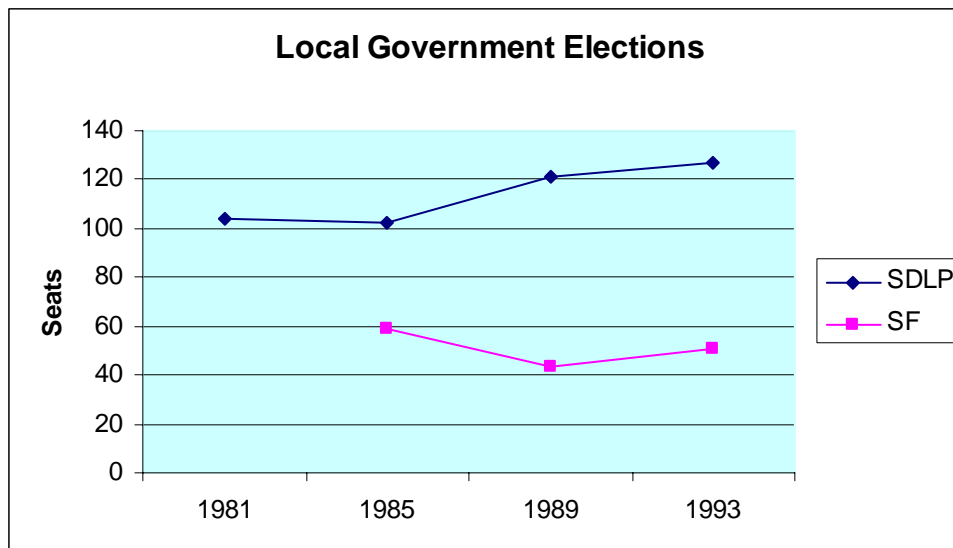


Sources: An Phoblacht/Republican News (1980-1994) O'Connor Fionnuala (1993): 42

In other words, these councillors were becoming professional politicians with a major stake in the party organisation. SF was evolving similarly to the SDLP, which had been created to cohesively organise nationalist politics. The SDLP took inspiration from continental mass parties having a membership organisation, a party statute, an annual conference and local branches. During the 1985-1993 period 40% of the SDLP's councillors had held their seat at least three terms, while 46% held it at least two terms.

(3)

SF was also making progress in another aspect of institutionalisation by adding more party branches in the North. In the early 1980s SF had a very limited infrastructure, but by 1994 it had a total of 25 local branches. (4) Whilst the SDLP which in the early 1970s had 65 party branches by 1993 had 20 (O'Connor 1993: 42).



SF's 1993 positive electoral showing and the work of its representatives highlighted the inherent contradiction in the dual track strategy of supporting violence and participating in electoral politics. IRA violence and botched operations, for instance, damaged SF's credibility when it demanded more investments in Catholic areas. Moreover, continued support for IRA violence excluded SF from negotiations with the British state and the other parties.

During the 1990s the prevailing trend was the reduction of ideological polarisation as both nationalist parties adopted more conciliatory policies. Moderation was the result of several factors. First, both the British and Irish governments became more involved in devising a framework acceptable to both sides which addressed the internal (power-sharing) as well as the external (constitutional position) dimension. In addition they adopted a strategy of legitimisation of the anti-system party to draw it into the political process rather than to ostracise it. Second, SF's failure to overtake the SDLP as the primary voice of Irish nationalism generated an internal debate 'questioning of the long war or attrition strategy designed to wear down British government resolve to stay in Northern Ireland' (Darby, 2002: 22). Party leaders realised that violence led to the exclusion of SF from the political process and damaged its chances to grow. Thus, they began to look more favourably to a non-violent political strategy based on a nationalist coalition with the SDLP. Third, most importantly, the SDLP's strategy to bring SF into the political process played a central role in changing the policies of the anti-system party and transforming the dynamic of the nationalist bloc. With SF no longer bent upon vetoing SDLP compromises, the nationalist bloc presented a united front in support of a compromise solution. This allowed the SDLP/SF alliance not only to bring SF out of the cold but also to win major policy concessions from the British government.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that a polarised party system is not conducive to consociational democracy and that without party system change Northern Ireland is unlikely to experience political stability. The analysis of the political evolution within the nationalist bloc has first shown how the mobilisation of the anti-system party destabilised the nationalist bloc by radicalising the SDLP. The rise of SF not only moved the SDLP further apart from unionists, but also undermined SDLP party cohesiveness causing greater policy differentiation between its moderate and nationalist wing. SF emerged as an electoral party at a time of high political tension and was primarily responsible for the collapse of power sharing attempts in 1982, 1985 and 1991. This same centrifugal

dynamic was responsible for bringing down the cross community executive in 1974 when the loyalists' mass strike combined with republican violence forced moderate unionists to resign from government. Time and again the politics of outbidding of anti-system parties, promising unworkable solutions, have worked to outflank and undercut the moderates in their bids to reach accommodation.

Second, the analysis has also shown that Northern Ireland's best chance for political stability resides in the democratic evolution of its anti-system parties. As SF's political culture evolved and moved away from radical positions it shifted both the pattern of nationalist party competition (centripetal vs. centrifugal) and bridged the ideological distance with the SDLP. By 1994, at least on the nationalist side, the degree of polarisation had been drastically reduced and the party system had evolved away from polarised pluralism based upon two rival poles of opposition. By 1994 both nationalist parties were ready to deal with unionists to find an internal political compromise thus paving the way for power sharing. Thus, while on the nationalist side the move away from the traditional dynamic of polarised pluralism had laid the groundwork for what ultimately led to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Assembly, a similar process has still not happened within unionism.

The party system wide implication of this paper is that the same pressures against compromise previously experienced by the SDLP are now being felt by the UUP. This is because the transition away from polarised pluralism has been a one-sided process. The DUP so far has stated that it is not fully supportive of power sharing with nationalists. It remains an anti-system party bent upon challenging the whole system of government (*The Guardian*, 10 May 2004). As a result, the UUP has been torn between the willingness to compromise with nationalists and the necessity to show voters a tough, hard-line policy to stop the haemorrhage of votes to the benefit of the DUP. If the DUP refuses to move toward moderate shores, Northern Ireland is likely to remain unstable with the lingering possibility of reverting back to a fully polarised pluralist party system. The ultimate implication of this paper is that consociational democracy is best for segmented societies, but when the party system is of the pluralist polarised variety it will

not be conducive to consociationalism. In such context, where polarisation cannot be cured by consociational elite practices, policy makers should refrain from going for broke seeking a grand coalition, but rather seek to first alter the nature of party competition.

NOTES

1. 'The consistent republican and democratic view that the root cause of the conflict in Ireland is to be found in the British government's denial to the Irish nation of its right to national self-determination.' (*Irish Times*, 6 September, 1988: 6).
2. 'We must be realistic enough to accept that, in the event of a British withdrawal, part of this island will be inhabited by more than 900,000 people whose whole history, aspirations, culture and sense of stability have been formed, nurtured and reinforced within a British political, intellectual and emotional environment.' (SF Publications, *Towards A Lasting Peace in Ireland*, 1992: 4).
3. Electoral data from <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/>
4. Data collected from a review of *An Phoblact/Republican News* between 1980-1994.

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