



## **The Repositioning of Irish Nationalism in Northern Ireland**

An Examination of Consociationalism and Devolution in Identity Change

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### **Abstract**

Survey evidence has demonstrated that support for a united Ireland from Catholics in Northern Ireland is markedly declining. Simultaneously, electoral support for the secessionist Sinn Féin party has substantially risen in the region since the signing of the peace agreement in 1998. Critics have attributed Sinn Féin's electoral growth to consociational power sharing, which they argue rewards ethnic hardline parties. At the same time, many of these critics predicted that consociationalism would exacerbate secessionist sentiment within nationalism, a prognostication that is now contradicted by the survey data. In analysing this paradox, we argue that we are not witnessing the switching of identities – from Irish nationalism to UK unionism – but the repositioning of Irish nationalism from a secessionist movement to a substate nationalism mobilizing for more resources within the framework of devolution. In explaining this, we illuminate how liberal consociationalism, allied to devolution, rather than making identities inflexible, if the right endogenous and exogenous supporting factors are mobilized, can lead to their repositioning within a regional rather than zero-sum national context. Further to this, we compare the roughly analogous impact of devolution on identities in Northern Ireland with Scotland and, to a lesser extent, Wales.

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## 1. Introduction

In June 2011 the results of the annual Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT) were published. The Northern Irish media and politicians quickly identified the result of one question in the survey as salient: ‘the long-term policy for Northern Ireland’.<sup>1</sup> The result revealed that 33 per cent of Catholics who completed the survey desired the unification of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland, a rapid decline of 14 per cent in four years (see Table 1). This outcome appeared to spawn a severe crisis for those actors demanding Irish unity, especially Irish nationalist political parties, since religious ascription has typically been seen as coterminous with national identity in the divided region.

**TABLE 1. Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. Module: Political\_Attitudes Variable: NIRELND2**

Do you think the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be (in per cent of the Catholic population)

<i>Catholic Preferences</i>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>To remain part of the UK with devolved government</b>	35	37	39	46
<b>To remain part of the UK with direct rule</b>	4	7	8	6
<b>To reunify with Ireland</b>	47	39	40	33
<b>Independent State</b>	6	8	5	4

In response, Irish nationalists quickly disputed the results by claiming the survey sample was unrepresentative as it was said that many Irish nationalists refused to complete the survey, and that such surveys are unreliable indicators of political behaviour (see Davenport 2011). Instead, they pointed to the Irish nationalist vote in elections, particularly the electoral rise of Sinn Féin since 1998 (see Table 2), a party that vigorously asserts the politics of Irish unity as its fundamental policy. By way of reaffirming their secessionist credentials, Sinn Féin (2012) later responded by outlining seven key steps to create Irish unity.

<sup>1</sup> The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (2011), Module: Political Attitudes (NIRELND2)

Moreover, the NILT survey exposed a mass of apparent contradictions: while more than half of Catholics stated a preference for maintaining the link with Britain, only 1 per cent claimed to be unionist or would consider voting for unionist parties; and that while only a third aspire to a united Ireland, 54 per cent consider their primary identity as Irish nationalist. Of equal note, the survey revealed that only 6 per cent of Catholics wished '[t]o remain part of the United Kingdom with direct rule' and the preferred option for 46 per cent was '[t]o remain part of the United Kingdom with devolved government'.<sup>2</sup>

**TABLE 2. Sinn Féin's performance in the Northern Ireland Assembly elections**

Northern Ireland Assembly Elections	Sinn Féin Vote
1998	142,858 votes, 17.63%, 18 seats
2003	162,758 votes, 23.5%, 24 seats
2007	180,573 votes, 26.2%, 28 seats
2011	178,224 votes, 26.9%, 29 seats

Neither is there any imminent sign of communal cleavages fundamentally weakening in Northern Ireland. Only 1 per cent of first preference Catholic votes go to UK unionist parties and vice versa concerning Protestants voting for Irish nationalist parties. Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided society (Nagle and Clancy 2010), in which it appears that, especially for the young, 'increasing segregation rather than integration is the norm' (Hayes and McAllister 2012: 2). A majority of people live in residential districts that are overwhelmingly either Protestant or Catholic, less than 7 per cent of children attend integrated schooling, '[a] majority of individuals confine their living arrangements and social interaction networks exclusively to their own community' (Hayes and McAllister 2012: 8), and there are high levels of marital homogamy, which do not appear to be decreasing.

<sup>2</sup> Direct rule refers to the system through which Northern Ireland is governed solely by UK government at Westminster. It is also important to note that the NILT survey changed in 2007. Previous surveys had provided a simple either/or question on the long term future of Northern Ireland. The 2007 question, however, included options on 'direct rule' and 'devolution', which means that it is slightly problematic to try to ascertain a longitudinal analysis of opinions.

Despite these concerns, there appears a long-term change in national belonging for Catholics in Northern Ireland. In 1998 survey results revealed that only 19 per cent of Catholics wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK and that while the Catholic electorate has grown by circa 2 per cent since 2001, the total number of Catholics voting for nationalist parties has dropped by a similar figure (Nolan 2012: 125). Given these figures, it is unsurprising to read commentators concluding that the NILT results illuminate a 'radical shift in the ways religious, national, and political identities are aligned' (Nolan 2012: 144) in the region. As such, the apparent shifting contours of identity exposed in the NILT survey since 1998 reminds us to adhere to Kalyvas's (2008: 1043) warning that we should not 'treat ethnic groups as unitary actors and ethnic identities as given ex ante, automatically salient, fixed ... and predictive of individual political behavior'. Rather than places in which homogeneous, antagonistic and mutually exclusive renderings of ethnic identity are apparent, divided regions can provide dynamic political and social contexts wherein such identities can be transformed and reimagined. Such a perspective profoundly challenges a body of literature that casts scepticism on the capacity of ethnic and ethnonational identities to be reconstructed once mobilized. It is often said that, especially in regions experiencing protracted inter-communal violence, ethnonational identities become hardened, relatively stable and therefore largely resilient to transformation, at least in the short-to-medium term (Van Evera 2001, McGarry and O'Leary 2009).

The expectation that ethnonational identities in violently divided regions are durable can often lead to the design of specific institutions to ameliorate chronic conflict. In particular, the implementation of consociational power sharing in violently divided regions is broadly based on the premise 'that communal or ethnic divisions are resilient rather than rapidly biodegradable, and that they must be recognized rather than wished away' (McGarry and O'Leary 1995: 338). Consociationalism's capacity to regulate conflict stems from how it accommodates the divergent ethnonational aspirations of rival groups in the institutions of governance, including proportionality in public resources and appointments (Lijphart 1977). Pertinently, as a historically violently divided region, Northern Ireland came under the influence of consociational frameworks with the implementation of the Belfast Agreement, a peace accord signed in 1998.

While consociationalism is the main institutional framework for conflict regulation in Northern Ireland, it has also come under severe censure from critics (Wilson and Wilford 2003, Shirlow and

Murtagh 2006, Taylor 2006, Horowitz 2008, Dixon 2012). They accuse consociationalism of acting out a self-fulfilling prophecy by being the agent responsible for the increasing hardening of identities, engendering spirals of ethnic outbidding and even encouraging secessionism. For some critics, by seeking to accommodate the competing self-determination claims of nationalists and unionists, the consociational agreement represents little more than a 'holding operation' that is 'unlikely to last' (Nairn 2001: 35) before being torn apart by the centrifugal motion of separatist nationalism. Through accommodating an 'either-or constitutional choice between a United Kingdom and a United Ireland', Northern Ireland's consociational agreement is said to fuel secessionist desires (Wilson and Wilford 2003: 7).

Given the claim that consociational institutions entrench ethnonational identities and exacerbate the politics of secessionism in divided societies, in this paper we address these salient issues:

1. Rather than axiomatically hardening, can identities in violently divided societies be ameliorated or softened? As such, what might be the endogenous and exogenous conditions that promulgate ethnic identity transformation in violently divided regions?
2. If support for Irish unity among Catholics in Northern Ireland is diminishing what implications does this have for both the dominant ethnonational explanation of conflict in Northern Ireland and its regulation through a consociational framework?

By way of an explanatory framework we hypothesize whether consociationalism allied to regional devolution provides a logical context for the paradoxical situation of contemporary Irish nationalism: the hardline secessionist Sinn Féin party have become electorally dominant within the nationalist bloc yet most Catholics are relatively happy with the current constitutional position of Northern Ireland. In this synopsis, consociationalism has led not to the complete erosion of Irish nationalism; instead, it has been unwittingly redirected. Specifically, Irish nationalism has changed from a secessionist movement to a form of substate nationalism mobilizing for greater resources and recognition within the context of UK devolution.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, while Irish Catholics continue to vote for hardline nationalist parties, this is not necessarily to be made consonant with the desire

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<sup>3</sup> Substate nationalism refers to minority national groups located within a larger state and which mobilizes behind nationalist political parties. These groups do not necessarily desire independence, but may wish to have their distinct national identities to be accommodated within the existing state. Examples include the Quebecois in Canada, the Scots and Welsh in Britain, the Catalans in Spain, and the German minority in South Tyrol (Kymlicka 2007: 68).

for Irish unification. As such, Irish nationalists, while voting for parties who they believe will act as strong defenders of their ethnic interests in the public sphere against unionists, are relatively content with the constitutional status quo (Mitchell, Evans and O'Leary 2009: 402).

Such an analysis would appear to support the optimistic analyses of many proponents of consociationalism and group-based rights more generally. It has been argued that consociationalism 'is more likely to transform identities in the long run' (McGarry 2001: 124) and that 'the dissolution of (undesirable) collective identities and antagonisms may be more likely to occur after a period of consociational governance' (O'Leary 2005: 19). The normative proposition for why consociationalism can 'provide a hospitable environment for the erosion of difference' (Coakley 2009: 145) mainly relates to how intercleavage cooperation at the elite level can contribute to the gradual fostering of communal trust at the grassroots. On a normative level, it is proposed that the equal recognition of group identities within the polity creates a sense of security and confidence within groups, which inexorably leads to a more vibrant and flexible sense of ethnic belonging (Kymlicka 2007).

As part of the introduction of consociational power sharing to Northern Ireland, another possible contributing factor driving changes within substate nationalism concerns the project of devolution, which has been rolled out across the UK since 1997. In this dynamic, the devolved regions of UK (Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) have witnessed broadly analogous processes. That is the secessionist nationalist parties of the respective regions have become electorally dominant, especially since 2007. Yet while some commentators have speculated that this trajectory is evidence of secessionist nationalism on the march (Bogdanor 1999, Nairn 2001), survey data shows that there is no great alacrity of the voters in these regions to desire secessionism.

Thus, rather than based on a primordialist conception of ethnic identity, which acts to promulgate ethnic antagonism, liberal consociationalism, within the framework of federalism or devolution, can, if the correct supporting endogenous and exogenous factors are mobilized, contribute to ethnonational conflict management by creating a context for identities and politics to be more tied to regional rather than zero-sum, competing national contexts. However, while consociationalism and devolution provide an important engine for the repositioning of nationalism, it is also critical to see this dynamic within an historical context. In particular, rather than dominated by the poli-

tics of secessionism, Irish nationalism in Northern Ireland has equally been about the accommodation of group-based rights for nationalist identities.

The article is organized as follows. First, we review the main debates concerning the potential construction and reconstruction of ethnicity. Second, we explore what role consociational institutions may play in either the hardening or softening of ethnic identity. Third, as a way of exploring ethnic identity change, we examine and resolve an apparent paradox: how the ethnonational cleavage is currently fossilized in Northern Irish regional electoral politics and yet the number of Catholics who support the notion of a united Ireland is declining. To deal with this apparent puzzle, we look at the specifics of regional devolution as applied to Northern Ireland, and how devolution in conjunction with consociationalism, can possibly ameliorate secessionist identities.

## **2. Ethnic Identities and Change**

The idea that ethnicity is somehow primordial, that ethnic groups exist as a fact of nature, enmeshed in human biology and thus exogenous to social pressures, no longer holds. Ethnic identities, hence, 'are not stamped in our genes' (Van Evera 2001: 20), but individuals have multiple identities, and their mode of ethnic identification is malleable depending on external forces. Because ethnic identities are 'the products of human action and speech ... as a result they can and do change over time' (Fearon and Laitin 2000: 848).

Yet, as a number of theorists have noted (Fearon and Laitin 2000, Horowitz 2002, Varshney 2002: 28, Wolff 2006: 36), in some respects the heuristic gap between constructivism and primordialism may not be as great as it is often assumed. While it is agreed that ethnicity is often constructed for various purposes, at the same time ethnicity is experienced by group members as 'primordial attachments' which they attribute to a 'natural affinity' (Geertz 1973: 259). Fearon and Laitin (2000: 848) have also termed 'everyday primordialism' to describe how many people take for granted the naturalness and unchanging essence of their ethnicity. Smith (1998: 58) has also written of a 'participants' primordialism', which is not that the 'world is constituted by a primordial reality'; only that 'many of us believe in primordial objects and feel their power'. Such beliefs in the primordial quality of identity make ethnicity appear resilient once formed and less prone to reinvention for any political purposes.



The rigidity of ethnicity once constructed appears particularly salient for so-called violently divided societies, especially those regions fractured by violent self-determination claims. Van Evera (2001: 20) claims that 'ethnic identities, while constructed, are hard to reconstruct once they form ... the conditions needed for reconstruction are quite rare, especially in modern times, and especially among ethnic groups in conflict'. Writing on Northern Ireland, McGarry and O'Leary (2009: 17) assert that ethnic identities in the region have become 'inflexible, resilient, crystallized, durable, and hard'. Notably, when identity is being constructed it is typically portrayed as being hardened rather than depoliticized or softened. For instance, in a longitudinal survey of identity in Northern Ireland, Todd *et al* (2006) found that when informants changed their ethnic encapsulation it often resulted in the identity being strengthened rather than weakened.

Lustick's (1979) classic definition of a deeply divided society provides some insight into why ethnic identity may be seen as a hard category. These societies are those in which ascriptive ethnic ties have generated an 'antagonistic segmentation of society, based on terminal identities with high political salience, sustained over a substantial period of time and a wide variety of issues' (Lustick 1979: 325). As such, all political and cultural issues are reduced to the position of the ethnic cleavage, identities are cross-indexed by ethnic groupness and intercommunal boundaries are sharp enough so that 'membership is clear and, with few exceptions, unchangeable' (Lustick 1979: 325). The hardening of group identities can be further seen as the result of psychosocial processes as long-standing animosities rooted in a perceived threat to identity and survival are reinforced by high levels of violence and the direct experience of atrocities. The conflicting groups' animosity, perception of enmity, and deep-rooted fear and hatred of the other exacerbates the level of division and segregation in divided societies – ranging from residential districts, schooling, marriage and socializing – creates a system in which intergroup contact is minimized and mutual distrust and fear prevails.

Yet, while identity is often 'hard' in divided societies, it is not the case that this is in the nature of things; ethnic identities and groups are purposely constructed so that they appear to be 'primordial objects'. In many cases, such divisions are the legacy of colonial *divide et imperia* and the ensuing collision of native/settler (Guelke 2012). Moreover, while differences are present between groups, at various junctures, depending on political relations between groups, these differences can be downplayed, rendered insignificant or articulated as inherently antagonistic (Nagle 2009).

Theorists who emphasize how ethnic identity can be constructed often point to the role of so-called 'ethnic entrepreneurs'. Gagnon, for example, (2004: 10) notes how Slobodan Milosevic constructed 'ethnicity as a hard category, and ethnic groups as clearly bounded, monolithic, ambiguous units'. Similarly, in ethnic democracies, ethnically based candidates and parties 'may use populist rhetoric to exploit, and thereby heighten, social tensions, ethnic hatred, and the politics of fear' (Norris 2008: 28).

While it is clear that a hard concept of ethnicity can be constructed, the issue is to what extent it can be reconstructed once politically mobilized into ethnonational secessionist movements, especially given the intractable character of these conflicts? It is clear that identities are less durable than often assumed; ethnic identities can be depoliticized, softened and ameliorated and to simply assume the contrary is little more than primordialist logic. As Kalyvas (2008) argues, constructivism would be theoretically meaningless if it only predicted a hardening of ethnicity during civil war. If this were so, it could be 'safely downgraded into a simple mechanism of primordialist dynamics' (Kalyvas 2008: 1046). Instead, 'identities do not always remain stable and fixed during the conflict; if they do change, they may soften rather than only harden' (Kalyvas 2008: 1045).

This leads us to asking: what are the endogenous and exogenous dynamics that can lead to identity change within nationalist movements? In particular, we analyse whether secessionism can be redirected into a broad acceptance of substate nationalism within the context of regional devolution, and supported by exogenous actors and consociational power sharing. It is to the role of consociationalism in ameliorating secessionist identities that we turn to now.

### **3. Consociationalism and Ethnicity**

The degree to which ethnic identities can be engineered to undergo change and amelioration is at the core of contemporary efforts to design institutional structures appropriate for the mitigation of violent conflict. One reason for this is that ethnic and ethnonational conflict are largely seen as about contested senses of identity (Azer 1990, Burton 1990, Rothman 1997). Although asymmetrical differences between groups, in terms of resources, may underpin ethnic differences, such grievances alone are not predictive of secessionist conflict (Collier 2010). Where applicable, grievances appear more pronounced in divided regions where the minority group are excluded from

their share of political power and their cultural identities are proscribed. This distinction and examination of the complex interplay between identity-based conflicts and those based on resources is well theorized. Rothman (1997), in particular, distinguishes identity-based conflicts from interest- or resource-based conflicts, which are relatively concrete and well defined with outcomes bounded by the resources at stake (e.g. wages, land, military power).

The diagnosis that the Northern Ireland conflict is ‘fundamentally rooted in ethno-national antagonism’ (McGarry and O’Leary 1995: 855) led to a prognosis that centred on the recognition and accommodation of group identities. Indeed, the frameworks that the British and Irish government have implemented, or attempted to implement, in Northern Ireland since the early 1970s broadly reflect the conflict’s ethnonational provenances. Consociationalism was suggested as fit for Northern Ireland as a form of democracy and conflict regulation because it is seen by consociational advocates as typical of ‘deeply divided societies, where divisions are longstanding and when there is intra-group violence’ (McGarry 1998: 860). In a divided society, like Northern Ireland, the predominant cleavage is ethnonational meaning that voters rarely shift across cleavages so that the competition for power and votes occurs almost exclusively within ethnonational blocs. In a Westminster-style majoritarian, ‘first-past-the-post’ electoral system, which had been in existence in Northern Ireland from 1921 to 1972, the majority unionist bloc controlled political power at the expense of the minority nationalists.

Beyond this, for those actors proposing the consociational remedy, it was assumed that the two ethnonational groups contained distinct cultural identities, which should be awarded ‘parity of esteem’ through the provision of public resources. Much of the language underlying ‘parity of esteem’ fundamentally derived from theories of multiculturalism, especially the ‘struggle for recognition’, the intersubjective recognition of group identities (Taylor 1994: 25) This politics of recognition became a norm in public policy throughout the 1990s, especially within the EU and European Council as these institutions sought to accommodate substate national minorities (Kymlicka 2007). Such policies were of particular appeal for nationalists in Northern Ireland, given how their symbols had been historically proscribed from the public sphere.

However, while Northern Ireland was seen to be a divided society *par exemplar* – ‘the most ambiguous example of a plural society ... in the western world’ (Lijphart 1977: 134) by consociational

theorists, a consociational arrangement collapsed in the 1970s. This led to the claim that many of the key conditions needed for consociationalism to flourish were absent from the region (Lijphart 1975). However, Lijphart's analysis assumed that Northern Ireland was riven by ethnic or religious divisions rather than characterized by an ethnonational dispute over national self-determination. Simple power sharing in such societies may not be enough for the contending groups – especially for secessionist minorities – who view consociationalism as essentially integrationist because it maintains the territorial integrity of the existing state. As such, for consociationalism to be effective in Northern Ireland, 'it had to be supplemented by key binational institutions that squarely addressed the national dimension of the conflict' (McGarry and O'Leary 2009: 26).

The Belfast Agreement of 1998 encompassed a number of extra features that went beyond 'classical consociationalism' leading to the revised model being labelled 'consociationalism plus' or 'complex consociationalism' (McGarry and O'Leary 2009). Recognizing that the conflict in Northern Ireland is fundamentally over competing nationalisms, the Agreement recognized the two groups' self-determination claims, the need to share political power, as well as 'parity of esteem' for their cultural identities. Addressing the exogenous aspects – the trans-state character of the conflict – the Agreement reconfigured the structural relationships between nationalists and unionists and their respective kin states. This meant that the Republic of Ireland dropped its irredentist claim over Northern Ireland in exchange for 'cross border' institutions between it and Northern Ireland. Furthermore, provisions were made in the Agreement for the reform of policing, demilitarization and the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons.

A fundamental issue stimulated by consociational governance in Northern Ireland, and divided regions generally, is how power sharing impacts upon ethnic identities and divisions. Proponents of consociationalism claim that 'it is more realistic to accept that different groups will continue to exist than to seek the "deconstruction" of group ties' (McGarry 1998: 860). At the same time, consociationalists also wish to reserve an emancipatory potential for power sharing regarding how it can transform or depoliticize ethnic identities in the long run. One particular reason why consociationalism might achieve this in Northern Ireland is due to how it is mainly a 'liberal' rather than a 'corporate' consociation. Corporatism 'accommodates groups according to ascriptive criteria, and rests on the assumption that group identities are fixed, and that groups are both internally homo-

geneous and externally bounded' (McGarry and O'Leary 2007: 675).<sup>4</sup> Northern Ireland's consociationalism, alternatively, is promoted as essentially liberal in that it allows agents to self-determine identities: it 'rewards whatever salient political identities emerge in democratic elections, whether these are based on ethnic groups, or on sub-group or trans-group identities' (McGarry and O'Leary 2007: 675). In theory, ethnic cleavages could disappear if people simply stopped supporting ethnically based parties or disidentified from existing ethnic encapsulations.

The hope that consociationalism in Northern Ireland would lead to the depoliticization of ethnicity or even the amelioration of antagonistic identities has been severely challenged by a number of critics. To start, consociationalism and its proponents have been accused of 'primordialism' (Dixon 2012) for supposedly accepting the fixity and permanence of ethnicity as well as for designing a system which even further institutionalizes ethnicity. Consociationalism has also been accused of engendering a poor quality of democracy (Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009: 192). The use of vetoes is seen as expediting policy logjams and ethnic brinksmanship, which can lead to a hardening of ethnic politics rather than cooperation.<sup>5</sup> Critics further argue that consociationalism has generated fierce distributive, intercommunal conflicts over public resources (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006, Horowitz 2008).

As proof of consociationalism's centrifugal dynamic critics have claimed there is clear evidence of increasing ethnic polarization in Northern Ireland (Dixon 2012, Hayes and McAllister 2012). The relatively low threshold required for candidates to be elected to office is seen as encouraging ethnic entrepreneurs to use the politics of communal fear (Wilford and Wilson 2006). As such, consociationalism expedites rounds of 'ethnic outbidding' in Northern Ireland, which has led to the eventual electoral victory of the hardline parties of nationalism and unionism (Wilford and Wilson 2006: 8), leading to 'a coalition of the extremes' (Collier 2010: 57), the DUP and Sinn Féin. Equally important, by seeking to accommodate mutually exclusive aspirations for nationhood, the electoral rise of Sinn Féin since 1998 is read as evidence of how consociationalism fuels independence

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<sup>4</sup> Corporate consociations contain features which self-determine group identities in the polity. For example, some consociations have obliged voters to select candidates only within their own ethnic segment and cross-community parties have been proscribed. Corporate consociations also often have ministerial seats and other public positions allocated in advance of elections (e.g. Ta'if, Dayton, Cyprus (1960) and Burundi) (Nagle and Clancy 2012).

<sup>5</sup> There have been policy logjams and vetoes used in the power sharing executive in reference to policing and justice, schooling, the Irish Language Act and community relations policy (Nolan 2012: 119-20)

movements. Writing on Sinn Féin, Shirlow and Murtagh (2006) claim that ‘they have won political support through the contention that the Agreement will lead to a united Ireland’.

#### **4. Defenderism and Kin-state Ambivalence**

The idea that consociational arrangements naturally strengthen secessionist claims, on the basis of Sinn Féin’s vote in Northern Ireland since 1998, is deeply problematic and misreads nationalism in Northern Ireland and in general. To begin with, although nationalism – classically defined – refers to ethnic movements designed to ‘render the boundaries of a nation congruent with those of its governance unit’ (Hechter 2000: 7), nationalism often remains a dormant property within ethnic groups and many members feel ambivalent about secession. Although many violent conflicts are seen as secessionist, for many members of minority groups, independence or reunification is not always their prime concern. They may more realistically desire the recognition and accommodation of their national identities and ethnopolitical concerns on a basis of relative parity with the dominant group, or to have some degree of autonomy within the larger state.

Evidence of this can be seen in the context of Northern Ireland in various ways, paradoxically even in militant secessionist organizations. For example, rather than gaining strength from the secessionist desires of the nationalist population, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) were more based on a ‘defenderist’<sup>6</sup> position: the Provisional IRA emerged in response to the needs of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, with the goal of a united Ireland as secondary for most individuals who joined the IRA in the early 1970s (Alonso 2007).

Similarly, many conflicts immediately prior to the outbreak of the ‘Troubles’ (1969)<sup>7</sup> in the region were over the display of nationalist symbols and identities, such as the flying of national flags, as well as on-going concerns about discrimination (Purdie 1990). Problematically, the public display of nationalist symbols and identities were practically proscribed by the unionist authorities. Such displays were read by the unionist authorities as indicative of emergent secessionist mobilization. Essentially, nationalists were ‘securitized’ by unionists as they were seen as a mortal threat to the

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<sup>6</sup> In a historical sense, ‘Defenderism’ refers to oath-bound, secret Catholic agrarian societies that used violence to advance and defend Catholic interests from the late eighteenth century onwards.

<sup>7</sup> The ‘Troubles’ is a popular term for the outbreak of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland in 1969, which eventually led to the mobilization of the IRA and its campaign of Irish unification.

very survival of the state. Under extreme conditions of securitization the capacity of the minority group to politically mobilize is severely limited, its political parties may be banned, minority leaders may be placed under secret police surveillance or even arrested without trial, and the raising of minority demands in public fora may be proscribed (Kymlicka 2007: 119-20). Although all of these extreme conditions of securitization were not present in Northern Ireland, the banning of nationalist symbols and identities in the public sphere added to nationalist grievances.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, there is an important proposition here: the recognition and accommodation of group identities may be more important to members of minority groups than outright secession. Secession, while desirable for many is at the same time often viewed with a high degree of ambivalence by group members. They are fearful about the potential violent, social and economic instability that could be provoked by secession. Equally so, nationalists can be alienated from the movement when secessionist hardliners use extreme violence and sectarian rhetoric. For instance, Todd *et al* (2006: 338) found that while IRA violence and emotive campaigns like the Hunger Strikers of 1981 could harden identity, at the same time it could cause 'alienation from nationalism and Irish identity' for some individuals.

Another factor that can dampen secessionist identities is the shifting relationship between kin state and kin group. Minority national groups may suspect that the kin state is at best ambivalent about unification. The kin state may worry about the costs – financial and human lives – associated with absorbing disgruntled members of a group who simply refuse to accept secession. Another problem is that a considerable population of the kin state view the region of their kin group as somehow different or having something of an anomalous identity than themselves.

This ambivalence has certainly characterized the Irish nationalist experience. Although the Irish state once claimed territorial sovereignty over the 'six counties' of Northern Ireland, which they defined as part of the nation, the historical record demonstrates that this was little more than rhetoric and realpolitik meant that successive Irish governments were never truly committed to unifi-

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<sup>8</sup> The Flags and Emblem (Display) Act (NI) of 1954, which forbade the public display of so-called 'provocative emblems' in Northern Ireland. This Act had the de facto intention of proscribing the use of nationalist symbols in public space without needing to formally specify nationalist symbols.

cation (English 2006).<sup>9</sup> Pertinently, the issue of Irish unification looms low in the list of issues that concern voters and political parties in general elections in the Republic of Ireland (English 2006: 425-6), and Sinn Fein's electoral profile in the Republic hovers around 10 to 15 per cent.

Conversely, while a kin state may be ambivalent about the secessionist wishes of its kin group, the kin group can also change its view on independence and its relationship with the kin state. To some extent this has occurred between Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In particular, while from the mid-1990s onwards the Irish Republic's startling economic success – given the sobriquet of the 'Celtic Tiger' – made Irish unification seem appealing, its drastic economic meltdown in the late 2000s put back even further Northern Ireland as a significant electoral issue in the Republic while simultaneously dulling the allure of unification for Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland (see McDonald 2011). Perhaps due to this kinship ambivalence, there has long been in Northern Ireland a strong sense of regionalism, a regional identity distinct from the rest of Ireland and the 'mainland' UK, and this is common to both nationalists and unionists. This sense of shared regional identity has historically been imagined in the arts. Two of Northern Ireland's most celebrated poets – John Hewitt and Seamus Heaney – evoked through their verse the image of a shared Northern Irish or Ulster identity. In 1949 Hewitt wrote: 'Ulster considered as a Region and not as the symbol of any particular creed, can command the loyalty of every one of its inhabitants' (cited in Kearney 1997: 106). While there is little political will for an independent Northern Ireland or even as a region of the EU, as many as 29 per cent of respondents in one survey identified themselves as being 'Northern Irish', as opposed to British or Irish (Muldoon *et al* 2009).

Thus, secessionism as a primary identity of Irish nationalism has rarely been a stable or homogenous product. Ethnonationalism, therefore, can, at different junctures, be a secessionist movement or one that is largely content with being awarded strong group-based rights that protect its interests and identities within the context of the existing state. The final part of the paper looks at how consociationalism allied to devolution, in the context of Northern Ireland, possibly encourages the politics of regional substate nationalism rather than secessionist mobilization, which is often pre-

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<sup>9</sup> Research has convincingly demonstrated that successive Irish governments were secretly opposed to Irish unity (English 2006). Indeed, when the British government once threatened to withdraw from Northern Ireland, leaving the Republic of Ireland the option of unification, the Irish government sought the help of the US to pressure Britain into staying (Bew 2007: 516-8)



dicted by critics of both ethnofederalism and consociationalism. Towards this, we examine some of the policy preferences of Sinn Féin, the so-called 'extremist' representatives of secessionist nationalism.

## 5. Devolution and consociationalism

As noted earlier, consociational power sharing in itself may be inadequate in regions defined by secessionist disputes, since it may appear to ethnonational minorities as too integrative by consolidating the territorial character of the state. In such regions, consociationalism needs to be complemented by some form of self-governance and/or trans-state institutions that create links between ethnonational minorities and their kin state. As such, the granting of some form of regional self-governance has come to be seen as a method to peacefully accommodate minority nationalist desires. As Gurr (1993: 301) states: the 'recent historical track record shows that, on balance, autonomy arrangements can be an effective means for managing regional conflicts'.

Yet this claim is not settled. One reason for this is that the term territorial self-governance masks a fair degree of different constitutional structures. At one end of the spectrum, some regions (e.g. Basque Country, Greenland and Aceh) have been granted a high degree of autonomy to control their own affairs, including tax raising powers, control of the security forces, justice system and local civil service. At the other end, some regions have been endowed with a weaker version that limits powers. Moreover, scholars have argued that rather than stemming secessionist mobilization, territorial self-governance (TSG)<sup>10</sup> is a vehicle that can further expedite it (e.g. Snyder 2000).

In a wide ranging analysis of the role of federalism as a means to mitigate violent conflict as part of peace agreements, Lake and Rothchild (2005) argue that in the short run territorial decentralization 'can be a valuable tool in the transition to peace because it can serve as a costly signal of moderation by the political majority, when offered, can help allay minority fears about its likely treatment in the future'. However, the authors stress that it is not decentralization itself that contributes towards conflict mitigation; rather, it is the offer of territorial decentralization by the majority which reveals their apparent benign intentions. Yet the long term viability of this solution is threatened by the fact that few states follow up with the offer and instead gravitate towards con-

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<sup>10</sup> TSG is a term borrowed from Stefan Wolff (2009).

solidating centralization, a process that exacerbates minority fears and strengthens the hand of secessionist extremists. Given the problems of creating durable territorial decentralization, Lake and Rothchild (2005: 111) have identified what they consider to be the extraordinary conjunction of conditions only under which decentralization can enduringly flourish, few of which, they claim, are ever present in the aftermath of ethnic conflicts.

Notably, it can be argued that the combination of extraordinary conditions specified by Lake and Rothchild (2005: 111) are in some way present in Northern Ireland: multiple ethnonational groups cohabit the same national space; no ethnonational group can achieve decisive control over the region; each group is led by representatives willing to accept the cultural identities of the other; and democracy is robust. As such, Northern Ireland has some important characteristics conducive to some form of territorial self-government.

Firstly, rather than an ethnonationally homogenous territory, Northern Ireland is a region hosting two conflicting ethnonational groups. As consociationalism underpins governmental relations between the groups, the sharing of power allied to the safety net of respective vetoes guarantees that no one group can dominate the polity. Moreover, both unionists and nationalists are largely proponents of some form of TSG for the region as it places a number of key decisions and resources at their disposal. Thus, both groups have reason to be in favour of regionalism. Equally important, as we shall see, the centre, rather than trying to repatriate powers, the national government in Westminster is dedicated to some limited form of self-government across the main national regions of the UK. Indeed, the preference of UK governments concerning Northern Ireland is not to integrate Northern Ireland but to promote devolution within bounds. Secondly, rather than simply believing that the other group can be integrated or have their cultural identities marginalized from the public sphere, both nationalists and unionists, albeit reluctantly, through signing up to the Belfast Agreement accept the validity of each other's national aspirations and identities. Finally, although power sharing in the region underwent a number of collapses and hiatuses in the aftermath of the Agreement the power-sharing government has consolidated since its resumption in 2007 and the major nationalist and unionist parties in the region are committed to democratic means.

It is worth noting, however, that Northern Ireland was granted devolution in 1998, the weakest form of TSG. The devolved Northern Ireland government still remains subservient to Westminster in policies concerning defence, immigration, international and foreign relations, taxation, borrowing and Europe. Devolution is therefore an explicitly constitutional and legislative act which involves 'the transfer to a subordinate elected body on a geographical basis, of functions at present exercised by ministers and Parliament' (Bogdanor 1999: 2), but crucially without theoretically compromising the legal sovereignty of the Westminster parliament. Of equal importance, devolution in Northern Ireland was not wholly granted as an instrument of bringing peace to the region; it was part of a package of introducing devolution across the UK, including Scotland and Wales.

Despite these points, it is beyond question that when devolution was granted to Northern Ireland in 1998 it was viewed by the UK government as a critical component of peace, and was thus bound up with the Belfast Agreement and its consociational framework. The British government hoped that devolution would be acceptable for both nationalists and unionists in the region. To deal with separatist nationalists, devolution would peacefully accommodate their national identities and give them a say in regional politics. For reformist unionists it was a means to gain some regional powers within a reconstructed state, yet simultaneously retaining the jurisdiction of the state. Both sides, therefore, could present devolution as increasing the democratic representation of their respective groups while concurrently strengthening their national aspirations.

The hope that devolution would cool secessionist mobilization and bring about a form of moderate substate nationalism content to remain in the union appeared to have been dealt a grievous blow in 2007. The elections across the UK that year witnessed the rise of votes for the Scottish National Party (Scotland), Plaid Cymru (Wales) and Sinn Féin (Northern Ireland), all of whom entered their respective regional governments on the basis of promoting secessionism. Since then, the gathering strength of these parties in their respective regional governments, especially in Scotland, has led one commentator to summarize much thinking on the issue as teleological: 'a one-way process that seemingly can have only one conclusion – breakup and separation' (Curtice 2011: np).

Despite this prognostication, the long-term dynamic of devolution across the UK is unclear. One reason for this is due to the asymmetrical fashion that devolution was introduced to the substate

national regions. In Scotland, which has been granted more powers than the other regions, survey data shows that Scots are increasingly more likely to think of their primary identity as Scottish rather than British.<sup>11</sup> In Wales, which was given lesser powers than Scotland or Northern Ireland, a reverse dynamic is witnessed, as the Welsh are feeling more likely to view themselves as British first rather than Welsh and only 11 per cent of those surveyed in Wales indicated that their constitutional preference was for independence.

Notwithstanding the evidence pointing to the strengthening of Scottish nationalism and Scottish identity – especially as the Scottish National Party (SNP) increased their vote in 2010 to become the majority party within the regional Scottish parliament – there is no correlation to show that Scots have increased their desire to become independent (Curtice 2011). The Scottish Social Attitudes survey, which has been tracking constitutional preferences in Scotland on a regular annual basis, read support for independence to be at 32 per cent in 2011, though the figure has consistently been lower in previous surveys. Thus, there ‘is no evidence that the SNP’s electoral success either coincided with, or was followed by, any increase in support for independence’ (Curtice and Ornston 2011: 2). Despite relative coolness for secessionism, the Scottish Social Attitudes survey reveals that up to 74 per cent of Scots want the Scottish government to have the most influence over the running of the country rather than the UK government at Westminster. Instead of desiring outright independence, Scots appear to prefer the option of expanding the powers granted to the Scottish government. This option has been called ‘Devolution Max’ as it entails full fiscal autonomy for Scotland by allowing the Parliament to raise all its own taxes and run its own welfare system while sharing with the UK government issues related to defence, overseas aid and foreign affairs.

Notably, a slightly lesser dynamic is present in Northern Ireland. The power-sharing government, led at executive level by Sinn Féin and DUP, has called for more powers from Westminster. In September 2011 the power-sharing government successfully argued for taking control of air passenger duty for long haul flights out of Northern Ireland. However, the main area in which the Northern Ireland government has sought to extend its powers is corporation tax. While Northern Ireland’s closest neighbour – the Republic of Ireland has been able to set the low corporation tax of

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<sup>11</sup> Only 19 per cent of Scots surveyed stated that their primary identity was British compared to 52 per cent of English whose primary identity is British (see: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/oct/06/survey-uk-identity>).

12 per cent, Northern Ireland is wedded to the UK's rate of 28 per cent. As such, Northern Ireland's political parties and business community have argued that this disadvantages the region insofar as it loses competitiveness with the Republic in trying to attract high-value Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Research in favour of reducing Northern Ireland's corporation tax to 12 per cent in line with the Republic has argued that the reduction would create over 184,000 new jobs by 2030 and recover an initial loss of £150 million in reduced corporation tax within six years. While the UK state has made efforts to conduct enquiries as to the relevant constitutional changes to be made to allow the Northern Ireland government to set its own corporation tax rate, it has also said that in the event of this being passed Northern Ireland would lose a considerable portion of its subsidy from Westminster (Smyth 2012).<sup>12</sup>

There are a number of important issues revealed by the cross-party support for the campaign to have corporation tax set by the Northern Ireland government. First, similar to the dynamic in Wales and particularly in Scotland, devolution sets off a train of events in which the regional governments mobilize to demand ever increasing powers to be devolved, yet at the same time support for outright secession does not increase and can even wane. Thus the publics of devolved regions demand more regional powers, even autonomy, without being willing to bear the costs of secession. Certainly, research has shown that as more powers are devolved to Scotland, Scots 'are more secure and settled within the UK' (Carrell 2011: np). Second, fighting to increase devolved powers can provide a focus for nationalist and unionist political parties to cooperate in the context of power sharing. As such, devolution creates a context in which party mobilization is fundamentally situated in the regional and local rather than primarily over the broader constitutional question.

This dynamic can be witnessed in the changing policy positions of Sinn Féin, the largest Irish nationalist party in Northern Ireland. While Sinn Féin once refused to even recognize the existence of Northern Ireland, which it called a 'failed statelet', it now campaigns to have more powers devolved to the region. This change of emphasis is perhaps most evident in its shifting, reformist

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<sup>12</sup> Northern Ireland receives circa £9 billion per annum block grant from the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer. Under European Union rules any reduction in corporation tax in Northern Ireland would have to be accompanied by a reduction in the block grant from Westminster. The UK Treasury currently predicts the costs of a tax cut to the block grant could reach £500m (Smyth 2012).

economic policies. From 1979 to 1986 Sinn Féin's socioeconomic strategy was contained within the hybrid nationalist and socialist ethos of 'Eire Nua' ('New Ireland'), 'a broad outline based upon a 32-county agrarian economy within a federal structure' (Tonge 2006: 39). Sinn Féin's militant partners, the IRA, waged an economic war on the region by bombing businesses and financial districts and even abducted and killed business leaders (Adshead and Tonge 2009: 183). Yet, since devolution in 1998, and despite Sinn Féin's outwardly socialist and secessionist identity, the party has campaigned for not only the reduction of corporate tax for the region, but also for greater levels of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and other ostensibly neoliberal policies, like Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) to help with the construction of public projects. This transformation in economic policy has not gone unnoticed by unionists: 'once, republicans were committed to bombing businesses and stopping economic growth in the Province; now, it is hoped that they are committed to building economic growth' (Moutray 2007: np).

Sinn Féin (2012) vociferously argues that their politics is delivering a united Ireland. They claim that by strengthening local devolved powers, especially in regards to economic policy, they are creating a gradualist trajectory in which the various mechanisms and institutions that uphold the union are loosened. For instance, in its campaign to reduce and harmonize corporate tax with the Republic of Ireland, this will show that 'partition is wasteful and inefficient and duplicates government and public-service structures; it imposes an unnecessary administrative burden on those wishing to do business in both jurisdictions' (McCann 2008: np).

Yet, by entering a consociational power-sharing government within the framework of devolution, Sinn Féin has entered a game in which their politics primarily focuses on the local rather than the national. As such, Sinn Féin has forged a strange dynamic with its electorate in which they unwittingly satisfy this constituency rather than fundamentally orient their optimal needs towards secession. It mobilizes for more powers to be devolved to the power-sharing government as its electorate desire a party who can defend their interests in the public sphere against unionists while simultaneously providing for more powers and resources to be placed at their disposal. At the same time, through doing this, by ensuring that nationalists feel secure in that their interests are well represented in the regional polity, the desire for secession is concomitantly weakened.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper started with the results of NILT survey, which revealed that Northern Irish Catholic preferences for a united Ireland were at an all-time low, an outcome that appears to deal a grievous blow for secessionist Irish nationalists. Paradoxically, at the same time, since 1998 Sinn Féin, a secessionist party, has become the largest Irish nationalist party in Northern Ireland at the expense of moderate nationalist parties (Mitchell, Evans and O'Leary 2009). In seeking to analyse this paradox, we have asked to what extent liberal consociationalism allied to devolution may have contributed to the repositioning of Irish nationalism away from secessionism towards substate nationalism. Secessionism is no longer the primary goal of Catholics in Northern Ireland; electoral and survey data points to the conclusion: nationalists are relatively content with the constitutional status quo but they desire strong representatives who will stand up for the perceived rights, especially in regards to identity and resources. We have argued that a fundamental dynamic driving this is liberal consociationalism, backed by positive exogenous actors, within the context of devolution.

Critics of consociationalism and/or devolution have variously accused it of entrenching sectarian identity and furthering secessionist aspirations. Though power sharing, according to Rothchild and Roeder (2005), may have short-term benefits for peace by providing incentives for warring parties to enter government, in the long-term it empowers ethnic elites by providing incentives for them to press ever radical, secessionist objectives. Consociationalism, according to critics, is not only based upon a primordialist and segregationist logic that identities are fixed, but it also acts as an identity concrete mixer to further harden ethnicity, it builds a structure that appears to almost completely disavow the potential for individual agency and for ethnicity to change or ameliorate.

Yet, as we have illuminated in this paper, although consociationalism and devolution can reward secessionist parties, it does not necessarily reward their secessionist aspirations. While consociationalism/devolution may favour the mobilization of secessionist political parties, because they are able to present themselves to their electorate as the best defenders of the 'community', at the same time it incentivizes parties to mobilize on local and regional politics, thus satisficing their group's desire for strong representation without requiring secession. At the same time, it is doubtful whether consociationalism will, in the short-to-medium term, terminally erode ethnic cleavag-

es in the region, bring about shared civic identity that supersedes existing ethnic divisions, or reconciliation.



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