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Travail écrit : "Stormont's ugly scaffolding : How the Northern Irish political institutions reinforce "green and orange"voting."

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Faculté : Faculté de Droit, de Science Politique et de Criminologie
Diplôme : Master en sciences politiques, orientation générale
Année académique : 2022-2023
URI/URL : http://hdl.handle.net/2268.2/18570

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LIÈGE université Droit, Science Politique & Criminologie

Final Dissertation:

Stormont's ugly scaffolding: How the Northern Irish political institutions reinforce 'green and orange' voting.

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August 2023

Word count: 21,214 words (excl. bibliography and appendices)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone who has been integral to the development of this dissertation, and integral to my studies up to this point. A special word of thanks to my dissertation promotor, Prof Julien Pomarède, and the two readers, Ms Juliette Renard and Ms Nelly Gérard for all their help in the completion of this the dissertation, and many thanks to Prof Jon Tonge, Ms Liz Kimmins MLA, Ms Helena Young, and Prof Jennifer Todd for taking the time, in spite of their busy schedules, to be interviewed for the benefit of this research.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the reasons as to why the electorate of Northern Ireland continues to vote by their constitutional preference (for the state to remain a constituent country of the United Kingdom or as part of a unified Ireland with the Republic of Ireland). By speaking to academics knowledgeable in the field of Northern Ireland politics and political representatives of parties present in the Northern Irish government at Stormont, this research discovers that Northern Irish voters continue to vote by constitutional preference both as a result of the consociational setup of government, and a lack of party-political engagement across the divide with voters of other identities. What results is a political structure wherein voting behaviour remains heavily embedded within the political socialisation related to the voters' community background.

1. INTRODUCTION

Image: Laverty (2012)

The above is a digitally altered image used in an opinion piece in the *Belfast Telegraph* by John Laverty, entitled "DUP and Sinn Féin are the Rangers and Celtic of Northern Ireland politics" (2023). The picture depicts the leader of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party, Jeffrey Donaldson MP in a Glasgow Rangers soccer jersey, and the Northern leader of Sinn Féin, Michelle O'Neill MLA in a Glasgow Celtic soccer jersey. By using this image, Laverty is showing that, just as the city of Glasgow contains two opposing soccer teams, whose support originates from family links and backgrounds going back multiple generations, Northern Ireland now contains two large parties between whom the citizens must choose their allegiance in accordance with their community background. This differs from the situation in previous years, where political party support was spread much more evenly among different parties within both communities.

Northern Ireland is historically a divided society composed of two ethnonationalist blocs- the Protestant-unionist-loyalist community and the Catholic-nationalist-republican community. After years of intercommunity tensions and conflict, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 secured a power-sharing Assembly and Executive at Stormont, the seat of the Northern Irish government. This power-sharing arrangement is based on the principles of consociation- a concept used to establish power-sharing within deeply fragmented societies, in order to manage conflicts by ensuring a proportionally represented parliament, a *grand coalition* government, and mutual veto rights for the different groups in society. These consociational arrangements were famously described by former deputy First Minister Mark Durkan as the "ugly scaffolding" of the Good Friday Agreement (McDonald, 2008)- safeguarding mechanisms in place which ensure fair representation and power-sharing among Northern Ireland's opposing communities, yet which in turn freeze societal divisions by pigeonholing

the population into either a unionist (orange) or nationalist (green) bloc, with little room left for those who do not align themselves with either side- the rather reductionist 'other'.

Prior to the most recent election to the Northern Ireland Assembly in May 2022, preelection opinion polls revealed that the voters' main priorities when voting are overwhelmingly the 'bread-and-butter' issues such as the public healthcare system (the National Health Service), the state of the economy, and recovery from the Covid-19 crisis (Institute of Irish Studies, 2022). In general, a voter's view on the constitutional position of Northern Ireland, the retention of the state as a constituent country of the United Kingdom or the reunification of the state with the Republic of Ireland to form an all-Ireland Republic, is revealed as quite a low priority for voters originating from all three blocs (unionist, nationalist, and 'other'). Nevertheless, in elections, more than 80% of voters consistently vote for parties within their own community of origin (Tonge, 2023), with 70% of those asked agreeing that politics in Northern Ireland remains sectarian (Institute of Irish Studies, 2022). As a result of this paradox, where the electorate's political priorities do not seem to correspond to their vote choice, the following research question can be raised:

"Why does the Northern Irish electorate continue to vote by constitutional preference?"

This research thereby intends to examine the root causes of why voters in Northern Ireland have continued, 25 years on from the establishment of normalised and power-sharing governance at Stormont, to vote for intracommunity parties, and by extension constitutional preference, and not for parties originating from other communities, even if these parties of another community designation have political platforms or policies which align more so with the voters' ideological stances or preferences.

The hypothesis which this research will focus on in response to the research question above is:

"The electorate of Northern Ireland continue to vote by constitutional preference due to the consociational setup of government and a lack of party-political engagement across the community divide."

In such a way, this research intends to uphold the proposition that the consociational arrangements of government in Northern Ireland, such as community designation of parties and a mandatory power-sharing coalition has, whilst bringing a certain stability to politics, also ensured that the ethnonationalist divide has been solidified by dint of officially recognising the existence of fragmented communities, thus requiring the electorate to vote for parties from within their own community as 'ethnic tribunes'. Furthermore, the argument will be made that a lack of engagement from political parties within the 'other' community (nationalist parties engaging with unionists and unionist parties engaging with nationalists) has also led to the electorate voting primarily by constitutional preference, regardless of other voting priorities, as they are not exposed to the policies and ideas of parties from outside of their own bloc. Other lines of investigation which will help this research shed light on voter preference and bloc identification include the level of party engagement with those of newer transversal ways of self-identification outside of the 'green and orange blocs' such as immigrants and members of ethnic minorities, and the role of the media in reinforcing community-linked divisions, which in turn lessens a voter's propensity to vote for parties outside of their own community.

To investigate the above hypothesis, this research will conduct interviews with leading academics in the field of Northern Irish politics, and representatives of Northern Ireland's main political parties in order to illustrate the research question, the analysis of which will help to answer the hypothesis, which in turn will show whether Stormont's "ugly scaffolding" has reinforced 'orange and green' voting in Northern Ireland, 25 years on from the Good Friday Agreement, and whether the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin have become the Celtic and Rangers of Northern Irish politics.

2. NORTHERN IRELAND IN CONTEXT

Before assessing the research question, knowledge of the complex background in which the Northern Irish political structures find themselves is necessary, in order to understand the context in which the hypothesis is framed.

2.1 The creation of Northern Ireland

The island of Ireland had been a subject of British rule since the Norman invasion of 1169 (Ross, 2006). After centuries of varying degrees of British control on the island, the Act of Union in 1801 officially cemented Ireland as a constituent country of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The country was thereafter largely controlled from Westminster, with minimal input from an administration in Dublin.

The Irish struggle for independence gained momentum following the 1916 Easter Rising, an attempted coup on the British institutions in Dublin. Though the rising failed, the execution of its leaders created popular resentment against British rule. The War of Independence proper began in 1919. While the vast majority of the Irish population, who were predominantly of the Catholic faith, supported Irish independence, the Protestant minority in the northeast of the country preferred that Ireland be kept under British control, to protect them, in the view of Hill (2001), from what they saw as subjugation by the Catholic majority.

In 1921, the Anglo-Irish agreement was signed, giving independence to 26 of the 32 Irish counties as the Irish Free State, a sovereign state within the British Commonwealth, akin to Australia or Canada (Ross, 2006). The Free State eventually gained complete independence, becoming the Republic of Ireland in 1949. Meanwhile, the six northeasternmost counties formed Northern Ireland, which would remain as a constituent country of the United Kingdom. These counties were selected as their population together formed a Protestant majority.

The Northern Irish government, unique for its level of autonomy among the four United Kingdom countries, was thereafter run as a "Protestant parliament for a Protestant people", with laws in place such as electoral gerrymandering and weighted franchise practices in favour of business owners, to ensure ethnoreligious domination over the territory (Taylor, 2014).

2.2 Two communities

Northern Ireland has since its creation been described, both popularly and academically, as containing two distinct "blocs" or "communities" (Cooley, 2021). These communities, described as ethnonationalist or ethnoreligious in nature, may be seen using the tradition societal cleavages model as religious, political, or (historically) socioeconomic.

On one hand, there is the *unionist* community. This portion of the population generally originates from a Protestant family background, often describe their primary identity as British, and wish to retain Northern Ireland's place as a country of the United Kingdom. On the other hand, there is the *nationalist* community, who originate from a Catholic family background, often describe their primary identity as Irish, and wish to see the North reunified with the Republic in order to form a united, independent Ireland. The two blocs have begun to be labelled, primarily in the media, in recent years as the "PUL" (Protestant-unionist-loyalist) and the "CNR" (Catholic-nationalist-republican) communities (Brewer, 2018).

Though the recognition of these two communities is firmly embedded within Northern Irish discourse, it is important to emphasise that to simply silo a population into one of these two groups is to make a sweeping generalisation (O'Leary and McGarry, 2016). Evidently, there are people of a Catholic background who wish to see Northern Ireland remain in the United Kingdom, Protestants who long for a united Ireland, and indeed those who see themselves as primarily "Northern Irish" in identity. Nevertheless, topics of debate in Northern Ireland often remain entrenched in a so-called "Green (CNR) vs. Orange (PUL)" context, with Jackson (2023) deducing that it was "the power of religion which created Northern Ireland, and the power of religion which has been threatening ever since to tear the country in half".

2.3 The Troubles

Beginning in the late 1960s, demands from the Catholic minority for equality and civil rights within a Northern Irish state, such as "one-man-one-vote" and an end to electoral gerrymandering, led to protest and civil disobedience. Loyalist (more radically minded unionists) opposition led to retaliatory violence from republicans (idem for nationalists); and the British Army was deployed to calm the situation in August 1969 (McKittrick and McVea, 2000). This led to a resurgence in paramilitary violence from the Irish Republican Army (IRA) who fought a guerilla campaign against the army with the goal of securing Irish reunification (Taylor, 2014). This ethnonationalist quasi-civil war, known euphemistically as *The Troubles,* lasted for almost 30 years, and led to the deaths of over 3,500 people, including almost 2,000 civilians (Sutton, 2023). During this time, the Northern Irish government was abolished, and direct rule from Westminster was installed, with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland assuming responsibility for its internal affairs (McMahon, 2008).

Though effectively ended with ceasefires in 1996 and solidified in the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement of 1998, the ramifications of the Troubles have continued to a lesser extent in the years since. Particularly within deprived urban areas, paramilitaries continue to operate in the guise of drug dealing, racketeering and prostitution (Simpson, 2022). Furthermore, the threat of intercommunity violence continues to surface periodically, particularly in recent history in relation to the Northern Ireland Protocol agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union (Pogatchnik, 2021).

2.4 Devolution and Power-Sharing

In order to normalise intercommunity relations, reestablish a functioning government, and legitimise the "peace process", local political leaders alongside representatives from the British, Irish, and American governments, entered multiparty talks from 1996 onwards. On 10th April 1998, the Belfast Agreement (1998) was signed. The signing of what was to be known as the Good Friday Agreement marked an important juncture in Northern Ireland's history, with the British Prime Minister Tony Blair famously stating that he felt "the hand of history" upon his shoulder (McKittrick and McVea, 2000). The requirements of any agreement which had to be met in order to be deemed acceptable by all parties concerned are articulated by McMahon (2008) as needing to provide mechanisms to:

- determine an acceptable form of power-sharing in which both communities are proportionally represented;
- retain and legitimise Northern Ireland's link with Great Britain;
- define an acceptable role for the Republic of Ireland within Northern Ireland.

The Good Friday Agreement, which effectively provided a structure for the governance of Northern Ireland, contained an unprecedented level of compromise for both sides (Tannam, 2001). Nationalists were appeased with the withdrawal of the British Army and the abolition of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, to be replaced with a new Police Service of Northern Ireland. Meanwhile, unionist concerns were eased with the agreement of the Republic of Ireland to surrender its constitutional claim on the island of Ireland (Montgomery, 2021). Furthermore, a significant concession came in the early release of most prisoners convicted of paramilitary-related offenses during the Troubles (Tannam, 2001). In regard to the mechanisms of government which were outlined in the Agreement, the following institutions were founded:

- a devolved Assembly at Stormont (the seat of politics in Belfast), which elects 108 (later 90) Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) using the single transferable vote (STV) form of proportional representation (PR), resulting in 18 constituencies electing six (later five) MLAs each to the Assembly;
- an Executive comprising of a First and deputy First Minister (possessing equal powers) and ministers, allocated in proportion to the electoral strength of the political parties in the Assembly using the D'Hondt method of allocation;
- the creation of the British-Irish Council, a body which retained Northern Ireland's link with Great Britian by furthering cooperation among all government administration in the British Isles;
- the creation of the North-South Ministerial Council, which brought together ministers of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to develop cooperation within the island on areas of mutual interest.

Furthermore, the *Principle of consent* term included within the Good Friday Agreement asserted the right of self-determination: that the people alone, without external impediment, may exercise their right to decide on the constitutional future of Northern Ireland, be it as part of the United Kingdom or as part of a united Ireland (Montgomery, 2021). This allayed both unionist concerns about the prospect of an immediate united Ireland, and nationalist concerns by legitimising their aspiration for reunification (McMahon, 2008).

With all the principal parties bar the Democratic Unionist Party signing the Agreement, a referendum was held on 22nd May 1998 to assess public support for the Agreement, which would thereafter lead to its implementation). Ultimately, 71.1% of the electorate voted in favour of the Agreement, and elections to the first Assembly were held on 25th June 1998.

2.5 The political parties of Northern Ireland

On reviewing Northern Ireland post-Troubles, five political parties can be identified as having a consistent presence. Though other parties have had politicians elected to the Assembly and district councils (local authorities), the mechanisms of the D'Hondt system mean their proportional strength have never been strong enough to earn them a seat at the Executive.

Unionist-designated parties

1. The Democratic Unionist Party

The DUP was founded by Rev Ian Paisley in 1971 in opposition to the Official Unionist Party's apparent concessions to the Catholic minority (Tonge et al., 2014). Vehemently opposed to any appeasement of the nationalist cause, the party was well-known through the Troubles as a party

of protest, taking hardline stances against republican paramilitarism, and against any dialogue with its representatives. In addition to its hardline approach to unionism, the party also became known for its strong socioreligious stances, related to Paisley's establishment of the Free Presbyterian Church. As such, Paisley spearheaded the "Save Ulster from Sodomy" campaign in the 1980s against legalisation of homosexuality, and infamously denounced Pope John Paul II as the "antichrist" during his address to the European Parliament in 1988 (Southern, 2010).

As the only leading political party to take a stance against the Good Friday Agreement and the institutions established therein, the DUP was resolute in its opposition, particularly to forming a government with Sinn Féin (Tonge et al., 2014). Emerging as the third largest party (second largest unionist party) in the first Assembly with 20 seats (NI Assembly, 2003); the DUP nominated two ministers to the Executive, as it was entitled to do, though refused to work face-to-face with Sinn Féin, thus boycotting meetings of the Executive (Southern, 2010).

In the 2003 election, the DUP emerged as the largest party of the Assembly, though political stalemate continued for four more years. In 2007, following the St. Andrew's Agreement (2006), the DUP entered government with Paisley as First Minister. This represented, in the words of McMahon (2008), a significant *volte face* for a party whose resistance to power-sharing was central to its party policy.

2. The Ulster Unionist Party

The UUP has its origins in the Official Unionist Party, the ruling party of the Northern Irish government from its foundation until the return of direct rule from Westminster. Centre-right in orientation, the UUP enjoyed almost hegemonic control over Northern Ireland, with all six Prime Ministers from 1921 to 1972 being Official Unionists (Walker, 2004).

Throughout the Troubles, the UUP remained the leading unionist party, adopting a firm stance against paramilitarism, and was seen as the natural "party of government" in contrast to the adversarial DUP. Though firmly opposed to republican violence, the UUP, particularly under the leadership of David Trimble, was open to discussion with all actors in a bid to end the conflict, and in 1998, Trimble was one of the architects of the Good Friday Agreement (McKittrick and McVea, 2000).

Following elections to the first Assembly, the UUP emerged as the largest party with 28 seats, thus nominating Trimble as the First Minister (NI Assembly, 2003). Nevertheless, following the 2003 Assembly elections, the UUP dropped to the second largest party in the Assembly, three seats behind the DUP, with prominent members such as Jeffrey Donaldson and Arlene Foster defecting to the DUP (McMahon, 2008). After the 2007 election, the party dropped to third position with a loss of nine seats.

Nationalist-designated parties

1. Sinn Féin

Sinn Féin began during the Irish struggle for independence in the early 20th century as the party of the Irish revolutionaries. Reemerging as a political force in the 1960s, the party remained steadfast in its clear goal of British withdrawal from the island of Ireland and the establishment of a socialist all-Ireland Republic. The party under the leadership of Gerry Adams was strongly associated throughout the Troubles with the IRA (Taylor, 2014); and was interpreted by its critics as the "political front of the IRA".

Following the IRA ceasefires of the mid-1990s, Sinn Féin entered all-party talks with the aim of achieving its goals "through the ballot box" (Tonge, 2002). After much in-party debate, the party supported the Good Friday Agreement, agreeing to oversee the disarmament of republican paramilitaries and accepting the *principle of consent* for Northern Irish self-determination. This was a significant step for the party, as it had the most to lose from the talks process and any resulting settlement (McMahon, 2008).

With the Assembly running, Sinn Féin moved from a pariah on the margins of the political framework to active involvement in the Stormont institutions. The party eventually emerged as the largest nationalist party (third largest overall) in the 2003 Assembly elections, and in 2007, Martin McGuinness, a former IRA commander, assumed the position of deputy First Minister, a situation almost inconceivable ten years prior (Taylor, 2014).

2. The Social Democratic and Labour Party

The SDLP was formed in 1970 as a party representing the civil rights campaigners of the late 1960s, advocating for the fair treatment of Catholics within a Northern Irish state (McMahon, 2008). Though overtly nationalist with an ultimate objective of achieving a united Ireland, the party was founded primarily to support the rights of nationalists in a power-sharing Northern Ireland, and was resolutely opposed to paramilitary violence.

Seen as centre-left in orientation, the party quickly became the major party of moderate nationalism in Northern Ireland, with its heads John Hume and Seamus Mallon routinely calling for increased inter-party dialogue, and indeed facilitating talks with Sinn Féin in a bid to end republican violence and to bring Sinn Féin into the mainstream of politics (Tonge, 2002).

In 1998, the SDLP gained the highest number of nationalist seats, and was thus eligible to nominate a deputy First Minister, which it did so with Seamus Mallon (NI Assembly, 2003). However, just as the UUP lost support due to the rise of the DUP, so did the SDLP with the rise of Sinn Féin, dropping to fourth position by 2007, and relinquishing the deputy First Minister title.

Non-designated (Other) parties

The Alliance Party

The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland is the only "Other" (neither unionist nor nationalist) party to have nominated a minister to the Executive (Garry, 2016). Founded in 1970 as a liberal, centrist party, Alliance took most of its support from moderately minded unionists, who were uncomfortable with the sectarianism in practice in Northern Irish politics, and who wished to see inclusivity and constitutional politics returned.

Though founded as quietly unionist (albeit with support from both communities), Alliance formally dropped its support for the union following the Good Friday Agreement-thus becoming "non-designated" (Tonge, 2023). In such a way, the party has no constitutional aspirations for Northern Ireland either way, instead advocating for effective power-sharing governance of the state in the here and now.

Growing in support in the years since the establishment of the Stormont institutions, Alliance has since 2006 taken a seat in the Executive as minster in the Department of Justice

(McMahon, 2008); seen due to the sensitive nature of Northern Ireland as a department best suited to a party with neither unionist nor nationalist alignments.

2.6 The political landscape today

Today, the political landscape of Northern Ireland looks vastly different from how it did in 1998. The most recent Assembly election of May 2022 returned Sinn Féin as the largest party in the Assembly with 27 out of the 90 seats available (Tonge, 2022a). This was symbolically significant, as it was the first time that a nationalist party had ever been Northern Ireland's largest party in its 100-year history. The DUP, the largest Assembly party from 2003 onwards, dropped to second position. In another first, Alliance came third in the election, gaining 9 seats for a total of 17. This marked the first time that Alliance had come higher than fifth in the results, overtaking the UUP and SDLP.

As the leader of the largest party, Michelle O'Neill MLA is assumed First Minister-designate, the first nationalist to do so, with an MLA of the DUP, presumably Paul Givan, to be deputy First Minister. Nevertheless, due to the DUP's refusal to enter Stormont in protest of the Northern Irish Protocol agreement, Northern Ireland has been left without an Assembly, Executive, or government ministers since the election. This marks only the latest impasse, as Northern Ireland had also been without a government from 2002 to 2007, and 2017 to 2020: about 36% of the time since the institutions were formed in 1998 until now (Judge, 2022). Though ostensibly the DUP boycott of Stormont concerns the Protocol, which it fears leads to European interference in Northern Ireland and division between Northern Ireland and Great Britian, some critics also point to a DUP unwillingness to serve as a deputy to a nationalist First Minister (despite both positions being of equal standing) (Manley, 2022); or indeed, DUP discomfort over its deputy First Minister being seen as subordinate to a female politician (Breen, 2023).

In 2023, as in many periods since the setting up of the Stormont institutions, the Northern Irish political landscape is again in deadlock, with the Executive departments largely run by unelected civil servants without ministers in place. The British government's Sectary of State for Northern Ireland, Chris Heaton-Harris, has the current task of raising revenue for a state without a devolved government to decide on financial matters for itself (McCormack, 2023). If the Stormont institutions are to return in autumn, as some analysists predict, will require, as with all issues in Northern Ireland, complex and lengthy interparty talks.

3. STATE OF THE ART

A broad range of literature may be found on researching voting choices and political behaviour in Northern Ireland, particularly why the electorate continues to vote by constitutional preference. Firstly, literature on the mechanisms of consociation in practice in Stormont can exemplify some theoretical reasons as to why this practice may be institutionally embedded. Secondly, investigating the views of voters, by means of pre-election polling and election outcomes can demonstrate if indeed this practice takes place. Thirdly, looking at the importance of community identity, or lack thereof, in Northern Irish politics can shed a light on bloc allegiance to community-designed parties. Fourthly, an interesting line of enquiry can be made by looking at Northern Ireland's 'new' voters: immigrants and ethnic minority communities; and lastly, the role of the media in inciting a 'green versus orange' debate may be able to explain why the constitutional question remains so significant vis-à-vis vote choice.

3.1 Consociation in action

To see the mechanisms of consociation in practice in Northern Ireland, a useful handbook is *Consociation and Voting in Northern Ireland* (Garry, 2016). Here, Garry articulates that the Stormont institutions clearly represent a consociational case, as they contain all four tenants of consociationalism in terms of (1) proportionality in the legislature; (2) a grand coalition; (3) mutual veto rights; and (4) cultural autonomy.

In regard to the proportionality aspect, this is recognised firstly by use of PR-STV, which guarantees that each party's strength in the Assembly is representative in proportion to the electorates' preferences. This ensures that there is not a hegemony of one community's parties over a constituency. Garry additionally writes that this proportionality is 'liberal' rather than 'corporatist' in the sense that electors themselves are not categorised according to a criterion, so all voters receive the same ballot paper and are free to indicate their preferences in any way they like (for example, a nationalist party as their first preference and a unionist party as their second preference). In such a way, PR-STV in Northern Ireland gives more freedom to voters to express a range of political choices.

Following this, a grand coalition in the form of power-sharing Executive is ensured as when MLAs are elected to the Assembly, they must register themselves as either unionist, nationalist, or 'other' (*Community designation).* Through this, the position of First Minister is given to an MLA of largest party in the Assembly (until 2006, the leader of the largest party of the largest designation), and the position of deputy First Minister is given to an MLA of the largest party of the second-largest designation. Afterwards, ministerial positions are allocated in proportion to each party's strength in the Assembly. To exemplify, the Executive of the sixth Assembly from 2020 to 2022 contained First Minister Arlene Foster (leader of the largest party, the DUP), deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill (leader of Sinn Féin, the largest party of the second largest designation), three other ministers of the DUP, three other ministers of Sinn Féin, and one minister each representing the UUP, the SDLP, and Alliance, all in proportion to the parties' strength in the Assembly.

Mutual veto rights are demonstrated in the *petition of concern,* a mechanism whereby 30 MLAs can agree to petition for a matter to be passed by the Assembly via a *cross-community vote,* which requires a majority of both nationalist and unionist MLAs to vote in favour of the matter, thus ensuring that key decisions are made on a cross-community basis.

Furthermore, Garry outlines that cultural autonomy is safeguarded most obviously in respect to education, whereby, although a small number of integrated schools exist, the government funds both Catholic Church-controlled schools for children of Catholic backgrounds, and state schools for children of Protestant backgrounds.

A paper which discusses the single transferable vote (STV) aspect of Northern Irish consociation is *Effects of the Single Transferable Vote on Political Parties and Divided Societies* by Copeland (2010). An interesting observation is that the STV system has a significant impact on the strategies of political parties, as the requirement for candidates to reach a certain threshold of votes in order to be elected means that candidates are incentivised to adopt more moderate and inclusive approaches, in order to appeal to a broader spectrum of the electorate (in Northern Ireland's case from across the community divide).

In such a way, consociationalism may actually lead to a situation whereby the unionist/nationalist parties are encouraged to bring their politics more towards the centre, as the preferential system of STV means that voters are invited to state their preferences for candidates on the ballot paper, rather than simply marking one candidate as their favourite. This signifies a requirement on the parties to try to capture the lower order preference of the voter, as the threshold for election is rarely met on the first count alone. The desire of candidates to receive lower order preferences therefore leads to more centrist party platforms and policies, as taking more extreme views will often only appeal to a smaller section of the election. While Copeland's article does discuss a moderation of party platforms, as indeed is evidenced in Northern Ireland, the paper overlooks whether this moderation is done in order to appeal to a broader voting base in the divided society as a whole (both the unionist and nationalist communities), or solely members of the same community who may vote for different parties of the same community (such as the DUP appealing to UUP voters). If parties are trying solely to appeal to voters of their own community, then it stands that STV encourages more intracommunity 'tribal' voting, with parties not seeing the need for engagement across the divide.

An article by Jarrett (2016), *The Single Transferable Vote and the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland,* also refers to the STV voting system in place in Northern Ireland. In the article, Jarrett argues STV has had a negative electoral impact on non-designated parties such as Alliance, and by extension, on the possibilities of cross-community vote transfers, as voters who give a nationalist or unionist party their first preference generally only make intra-bloc transfers, thus disadvantaging Alliance. This paper therefore affirms the argument that STV serves to reinforce ethnonationalist allegiances when voting, as the electorate are more strongly inclined to give their lower order preferences to parties of the same designation. Jarrett surmises:

> There is strong evidence within unionism and nationalism of voters remaining in-bloc when transferring. […] As very few voters transfer from unionist to nationalist parties and vice versa, Northern Ireland's four main ethno-national parties acquire the vast majority of their inter-bloc lower order preference votes from first preference voters of cross communal party candidates.

Jarrett, among others, demonstrates that as community identity therefore remains a strong indicator of how voters will give their lower order preferences in the PR-STV elections for the Assembly, there is undeniable evidence of strong intra-bloc transfers, with few transfers given

to parties from the 'other side', despite their policies on non-constitutional issues. This suggests that the consociational setup of the Northern Irish government reinforces tribal politics, as voters, by extension of the obligation of self-designation of the MLAs, are siloed into their distinct community, and therefore see it as unnatural to give a preferential vote to a party across the divide.

3.2 The views of the contemporary electorate

To identify both the intended voting preferences and the issue-priority preferences of the Northern Irish electorate, a pertinent opinion poll is the April 2022 Tracker and Attitudes Survey, conducted by the Institute of Irish Studies (IIS) of the University of Liverpool, in conjunction with the Irish News (2022). This survey was held in mid-March 2022, weeks before the May 2022 election to the seventh Northern Ireland Assembly. In the survey, 1000 respondents of unionist, nationalist, and neither unionist nor nationalist, groupings (all of near equal size) were asked about party preference, the most important issue for the respondent ahead of the election, the state of devolution, their view on Irish reunification, and their parties of second preference transfer.

A key finding of the IIS survey concerns issue preference of voters, as seen in figure 1. When asked: *What is the most important issue that concerns you?* the issue ranked most highly for unionist respondents was the economy (29.8%), the same for the 'neithers', at an even higher percentage (35.5%), whereas for nationalists it was health (33%). On the whole, the issues of health, the economy, and Covid recovery, ranked as the issues which the respondents prioritised. This therefore illustrates an image that voters of all community backgrounds have similar issues deemed the most important when surveyed.

Issue Preference

Table 3: What is the most important issue that concerns you?

	Unionist	Nationalist	Neither Unionist nor Nationalist
Health	25.5	33.0	29.7
Covid Recovery	9.5	11.9	8.7
Economy	29.8	30.2	35.5
The Protocol	20.9	2.1	3.6
Employment	2.8	3.2	5.1
Education	1.5	2.1	2.2
Environment	2.5	1.4	1.8
Housing	2.2	2.8	3.3
Equality	0.3	1.4	0.4
Crime	0.3	1.4	2.2
Legacy issues	0.3	0.4	
Gender issues	0.3	0.4	
Disability issues	0.3	1.4	1.4
Immigration	1.5	2.5	0.7
Constitutional Issues	0.9	1.4	
Other (Please specify)	1.2	4.6	5.4

Figure 1: Institute of Irish Studies, 2022.

A very obvious outlying result of this question, however, is the issue of the Northern Ireland Protocol, which 20.9% of unionist respondents deemed the most important issue, the third most

important issue for unionists overall. Meanwhile, for nationalists and 'neithers', the issue ranked lowly, at 2.1% and 3.6% respectively. This therefore may indicate that the Protocol is a uniquely 'unionist problem', which renders indifferent to nationalists and 'neithers'.

The final interesting finding of this question is the status of constitutional issues, which only 0.9% of unionists and 1.4% of nationalists stated as the most important issue. This consequently suggests that Northern Ireland's constitutional position, be it as part of a united Ireland or as part of the United Kingdom, ranks very low in voter priorities when at the ballot box.

This view of the prioritisation of 'bread-and-butter' issues over Northern Ireland's constitutional future is reinforced by the statement: *The next Executive should prioritise jobs, health, and welfare over constitutional issues,* to which, as displayed in figure 2, 72.8% of unionists, 79.8% of nationalists, and 79.5% of 'neithers' either strongly agree or agree. This strengthens the view that the electorate would rather the Executive work on issues such as health or the economy, and leave constitutional issues as a lower-priority issue.

Table 25: The next Executive should prioritise jobs, health and welfare over constitutional issues.

	Unionist	Nationalist	Neither Unionist nor Nationalist
Strongly agree	39.2	46.9	46.6
Agree	33.6	32.9	32.9
Neither agree nor disagree	14.8	15.4	12.3
Disagree	7.1	2.8	4.3
Strongly disagree	3.4	1.0	1.1
Don't know	1.9	1.0	2.9

Figure 2: Institute of Irish Studies, 2022.

Rather surprisingly, the percentage of the respondents strongly agreeing with the aforementioned statement is higher in the nationalist column than the 'neither' column, with both being higher than the unionist column. Likewise, many more unionists either disagree or disagree with the statement than nationalists or 'neithers', this may allude to a view that unionists are more concerned about strengthening Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom, than nationalists are in their concern for achieving a united Ireland, which may be in reference to the Protocol issue.

Despite these findings, an interesting deduction can be made when the respondents were asked to whom they intended giving their second preference vote in the upcoming election (figure 3). From this question, it is found that 71.6% of those who planned on giving their first preference to the DUP intended on transferring to fellow unionist parties (UUP: 49.7%, TUV: 21.2%, NI Conservatives 0.7%). Equally, those who planned on voting for Sinn Féin as their first preference, 55.8% intended on voting for a nationalist party as their second preference (SDLP: 49.3%, Aontú: 0.5%, People Before Profit: 6%). It must be noted that the percentages of 'Not decided' or 'No transfer' are quite high for voters of first preference to these parties too, which is possibly because Sinn Féin and the DUP, as the two largest parties, are more likely to run as many as three or four candidates in each five-seat constituency, therefore lessening

the need for the voter to give an 'other-party preference'. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the majority of voters of both the largest nationalist and unionist party intended on giving their second preference vote to parties of the same designation. This therefore raises the question of *why,* considering that the constitutional question ranks so low as the respondents'' most important issue.

Table 58: Which other party will you transfer your 2nd preference vote to

	DUP	SF	SDLP	UUP	Alliance	TUV	Green	PBP
DUP		2.0	5.3	17.0	2.8	40.0	3.1	
SF	0.7		15.8		9.2	2.5	18.8	26.7
SDLP	6.6	49.3		7.0	26.6	2.5	3.1	20.0
UUP	49.7	2.5	10.5		16.5	20.0	3.1	
Alliance	4.6	13.4	43.4	31.0			46.9	
TUV	21.2	1.0	2.6	22.0	1.8			
Green	2.0	10.9	1.3	2.0	18.3	2.5		20.0
Aontu		0.5						
NI Conservatives	0.7	1.0	1.3	3.0	0.9			
PBP		6.0	6.6	3.0	5.5		9.4	
Not Decided	6.0	9.0	6.6	7.0	17.4	17.5	9.4	13.3
No Transfer	8.6	4.5	6.6	8.0	0.9	15.0	6.3	20.0

Figure 3: Institute of Irish Studies, 2022.

A further finding is an apparent favouring of the more 'moderate' unionists and nationalist voters with the centrist Alliance party. A plurality of both UUP and SDLP voters planned on transferring to the Alliance party, rather than to the DUP or SDLP respectively. This may therefore indicate that more moderately minded unionists and nationalists see Alliance, a non-designated party, as their party of second choice, rather than the more explicitly 'tribal' parties.

Other key results of the IIS poll are that over 70% of each community agreed that *the politics of Northern Ireland remains sectarian* and that 65.8% of respondents disagreed that *politicians have moved beyond the divisions of the past.* The conclusion which one may therefore arrive at is that there is a recognition of the electorate that Stormont politics is still embedded in 'green versus orange' tribalism, and while the constitutional position of the state does remain quite low in voters' priorities, they are still overwhelmingly inclined to transfer their lower preference voters to parties of the same community designation. Thus, while the electorate may not strictly continue to vote by constitutional preference, they nevertheless persistently vote within the 'bloc' with which they identify, meaning ethnonationalist divisions are still firmly embedded in Northern Irish voting. The evidently strong Alliance support among those who would primarily vote SDLP or UUP, the two 'moderate' designated parties, also shows that there is perhaps a third bloc emerging, a centrist bloc whose more immediate priority is to deal with the here-and-now issues in Northern Ireland.

Literature which sheds a light on how Northern Ireland's voting has developed following the most recent Assembly election is *Voting into a Void? The 2022 NI Assembly Election* by Tonge (2022b). Three developments articulated by Tonge as being evident in the election are (1) the completion of Sinn Féin's ascent from one-time IRA political outlet to the

largest party in Northern Ireland; (2) considerable unionist opposition to the EU Northern Irish Protocol; and (3) the continuing rise of Alliance, the only party to gain seats by more than doubling its tally.

Insofar as nationalism is concerned, Tonge states that the confirmation of Sinn Féin's movement from "pariah to poll-topper" is shown in its growth of more than 100,000 votes since the first Assembly election in 1998, at a time when the SDLP was outpolling Sinn Féin by two-to-one among the nationalist population. Indeed, the 2022 election represented a new Assembly low for the SDLP both in terms of its votes and the seats won. This therefore points at a complete movement of the nationalist vote towards the Sinn Féin 'camp', to the detriment of SDLP.

In unionism, Tonge opines that the division between the DUP on one side, and the UUP on the other vis-à-vis the Protocol represents the "most significant fault line within unionism since its fracture of the late 1990s". Indeed, the UUP's more moderate stance in its opposition to the Protocol saw the party "marooned" to its second lowest ever share of unionist votes for an Assembly election. Again, this points to a movement of unionist voters towards the DUP, to the determinant of the UUP.

The rise of a third bloc is also alluded to by Tonge, who speaks of the election confirming the rise of Alliance, now the third largest party in the Assembly, and who draw upon support from Protestant, Catholic, and non-religious identifiers. Tonge writes that the growth of Alliance has been helped by its considerable "lower preference transfer-friendliness", receiving transfers from various sources, mostly the UUP (23%), Sinn Féin (21%) and the SDLP (16%).

Tonge concludes his analysis by stating that it reordered the top two designated parties in Northern Ireland, while also "illuminating the growth of a substantial centrist force beyond unionism and nationalism" in the form of Alliance. Nevertheless, Tonge reminds the reader that a combined 83.7% of votes cast went to either pro-united Ireland or pro-Union candidates, implying that "the centre ground of the non-aligned has still to bare many of its electoral teeth".

3.3 Identity politics in Northern Ireland

A range of academics, such as Todd, J. (2021), Hayward and Komarova (2014), and Mitchell (2007) speak of the significance of identity within Northern Irish politics, and subsequently the impact of identity on the electorates' voting behaviour. Garry (2016) elaborates on this by stating that elections are often fought on ethnonational lines, with voters from each community only voting for parties which explicitly represent 'their' respective community. This, in turn, also leads, in respect to intra-bloc party competition, to 'ethnic outbidding' where parties who market themselves as the firmest advocates of their community's political positions often win over the voter, leading to the electoral decline of more moderate parties. In terms of this ethnonationalist model of party choice, Garry uses the graph below (figure 4) to explain how religious identification (be it Catholic or Protestant) leads to a choice of party bloc, and then to a choice within that party bloc. Crucially, Garry's argument is that party choice of the electorate is determined intra-bloc, as opposed to inter-bloc: one makes the choice of supporting

nationalist, unionist, or 'neither' parties, and then makes the choice of their party preference within that bloc.

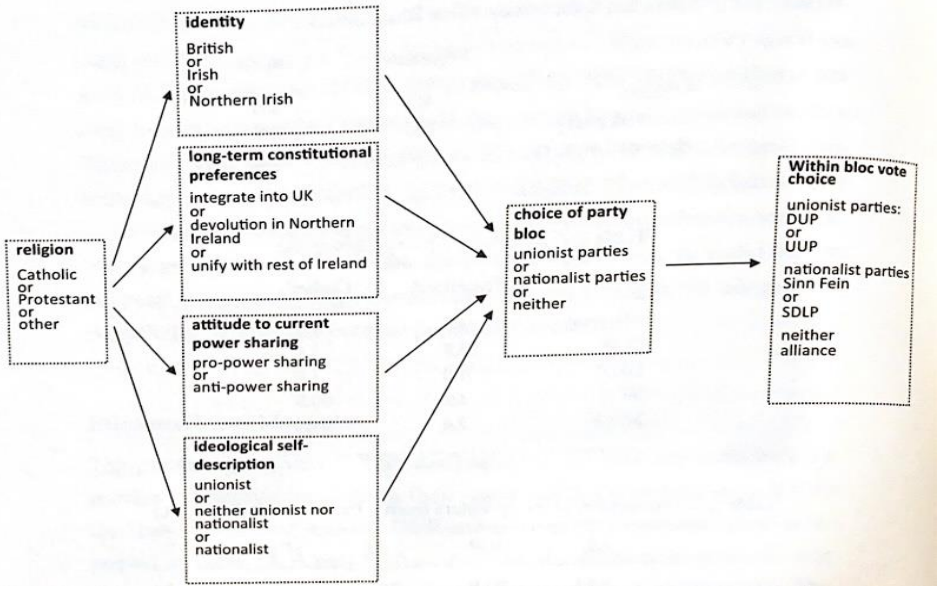

Figure 4: Ethnonational model of party choice (Garry, 2016).

So, once a voter decides which bloc they 'belong' to, how does community identity play a role in vote choice within the bloc? Analyses from Evans and Tonge (2009) and Tilley and Evans (2011) have shown that Sinn Féin and the DUP have reputations for being more ideologically economically leftwing than their respective intercommunity rivals. Furthermore, Tilley and Evans' analysis shows the DUP and Sinn Féin to be more attractive to younger and working-class voters than their rivals, this is especially true of the gap between the nationalist SDLP and Sinn Féin. Nevertheless, the standard socioeconomic left-right divide is regularly conflated with the constitutional question in Northern Ireland (Tonge, 2023).

Generally speaking, the notion is often made that nationalist parties have more liberal attitudes in regard to social issues such as LGBTQ rights and a woman's reproductive rights, whereas unionist parties tend to be more right-wing in respect to these issues. When it comes to voter choice within blocs vis-à-vis the 'moral' dimension of party support, research from Mitchell and Tilley (2004) reveals that more socially liberal Catholics tend to vote for Sinn Féin as opposed to the SDLP, meanwhile this trend is stronger in the unionist community, where Protestants with more authoritarian and traditional attitudes (social conservatives) tend to vote in favour of the DUP over the UUP. Reviewing issues of 'morality' such as LGBTQ rights and abortion access is pertinent as it can be argued that 'green versus orange' manifests itself rather as 'liberal versus conservative' in this respect, meaning that there should be, theoretically, a possibility of the socially conservative DUP receiving votes from a conservatively minded Catholic population, and equally liberally minded unionists voting in favour of Sinn Féin or the SDLP. Indeed in 2012, the then-DUP leader Peter Robinson made the case that the DUP should and could do more to entice religious Catholics over, given that none of the main nationalist parties had socially conservative party platforms (McAdam, 2012). Nevertheless,

Thomson (2016), among others, show that in regard to 'non-sectarian' controversial issues, the DUP on the whole does not collect votes from conservative nationalists, with this population still favouring the SDLP. Equally, few socially liberal unionists see Sinn Féin as their party of preference, with many of them instead erring towards Alliance, seeing it as a socially liberal party which, at the least, does not advocate for a united Ireland (Murphy, 2023). The recent push towards social liberalism within the UUP, headed by the leaderships of Mike Nesbitt and Doug Beattie does not seem to have attracted as many young liberal voters as the party had hoped, with Alliance instead capturing this vote (Thomson, 2016). In such a way, even beyond the constitutional issues of 'green and orange', evidence shows that electorate (in the case of nationalists) is going to stay within their bloc, and (in the case of unionists) is unwilling to vote for parties explicitly outside their bloc, instead favouring non-aligned parties.

Another paper which explores the complexities of the relationship between party choice and identity in Northern Irish politics is *The Party Politics of Post-Devolution Identity in Northern Ireland* (McGlynn et al., 2012), in which the writers explore how parties have adapted their positions in order to accommodate the electorate's evolving sense of identity. The article finds a practice of 'ethnic outbidding' at play, which is partly due to the implementation of consociationalism in Northern Ireland:

> A tendency of consociational systems of democracy is the impulse towards ethnic outbidding, in which successful parties present themselves as the most strident defender of their group to see off the danger of being undercut by challengers […] The impact of this centrifugal force is seen most clearly in the way in which the fresher and more assertive brands within each community have outstripped their more moderate rivals.

Accordingly, the certainty of knowing that there will be a unionist party and a nationalist party in Executive has made the parties change their strategies in an attempt to be seen as the party most perceived of representing the interests of their community in the Executive- the capacity to act as an "ethnic tribune party" (Garry, 2016). To do this, both 'extreme' parties- the DUP and Sinn Féin- have had to moderate their platforms: Sinn Féin doing this by massively toning down on their- in the words of McGlynn et al.- "Brits Out" policies and the DUP by embracing the ideas of power-sharing and cross-community cooperation. Mitchell et al. (2009) and McGarry and O'Leary (2009) have stated that this attempt at 'ethnic catch-all voting' has meant that intra-bloc party competition has moved from being issue-based (relating to constitutional matters) to valence-based (relating to the party's ability to efficiently and robustly represent their community in the Executive). Consequently, there is little room for parties to seek inter-bloc support, as they have identified intra-bloc support as their main voting base; the notion of becoming an ethnic catch-all party of all voters in their community.

3.4 Northern Ireland's 'new' voters

Aside from enticing voters due to social attitudes, political parties may also look at attracting immigrants or those from minority ethnic communities; those who have not grown up in Catholic or Protestant community backgrounds, and therefore are not embedded in the ethnonational cleavage in which the 'native' population has been for generations. As Northern Irish remains an overwhelming homogenous society, with only 3.4% of the population belonging to an ethnic minority group (NISRA, 2022), the voting preferences of ethnic minorities and immigrants in Northern Ireland is interesting, as the results may well prove critical to the unionist or nationalist bloc in any future referendum. Voicu and Comşa (2014)

identify three key aspects in the engagement of immigrants in the voting process of their host country as: (1) exposure to and understanding of the host country's political environment, which is aided by factors such as length of residence, social interactions, and media exposure; (2) the immigrants' resilience and ability to overcome potential barriers such as educational attainment or linguistic differences; and (3) whether immigrants can bring with them political engagement fostered in their native country, and integrate it into their host country.

There is little literature written on Northern Irish political parties' engagement with ethnic minorities, however, *Political Parties and Minority Ethnic Communities in Northern Ireland* by McGarry et al. (2008) investigates attempts of the parties to address ethnic minority community issues by focusing on the language employed by parties in their election manifestos. The paper acknowledges that there may be a difference being 'saying and doing' regarding language used in party manifestos vis-a-vis issues such as equality, immigration, racism, and culture, whereas in practice, the parties have generally neglected dealing with such issues. Furthermore, a cynicism exists in contemporary political discourse, with critics interpreting parties as simply 'chasing votes' by superficially mentioning ethnic minority issues within their literature. Consequently, further investigation can be made into how Northern Ireland's parties engage with ethnic minority and immigrant groups, as these are the groups not as inclined to inevitably vote by constitutional preference.

3.5 The role of the media

Northern Ireland's print media is, like so many other aspects of life, divided along community lines, with local newspapers seen as either 'nationalist' or "'unionist', which differentiates them from British newspapers, which have socioeconomic left or right orientations. The largest selling newspaper in Northern Ireland is the Belfast Telegraph, consumed by 11% of the population (Ofcom, 2022); and seen as having a moderately unionist outlook. The second largest, the Irish News (5%), is openly an Irish nationalist newspaper, albeit with liberal unionist columnists, while the third largest, the Newsletter (3%), has a British unionist alignment. In his paper using the 2011 Northern Ireland marching season as a case study, Ferman (2013) takes the examples of the Irish News and the Newsletter as the state's two "ethnic newspapers", and analyses how the newspapers' coverage and respective media narratives of the marching season, seen as a contentious event with often strong ethnonationalist or sectarian sentiment, can influence public understanding of sensitive issues in Northern Ireland related to national identity and cultural events.

By exemplifying the marching season, which was covered in "vastly different ways" by the two newspapers, Ferman argues that readers of ethnic newspapers are influenced by the newspapers' viewpoint in regard to the issue: whether the marching season be seen as a parade or a riot. As nationalists consume media from a nationalist stance, and unionists consume media from a unionist stance, the public's preconceived ideas of sensitive issues are reinforced by primarily engaging only in similar viewpoints, thus seeing the "other side" in a negative light. Evidently, this leads to a certain prejudice at elections as the print media has portrayed the culture of the 'other community' as generally negative.

Television, as the most used platform for accessing the news in Northern Ireland, at 80% of the population (Ofcom, 2022), must take a more objective approach in reporting contentious or sensitive issues related to identity, as its output is more tightly constrained by regulators such as Ofcom. Of particular interest is how public service broadcasting, in the form

of the BBC, may influence voting preference. Ramsey (2016) details how the BBC has been available in Northern Ireland since the 1920s, and that its own dedicated radio station, BBC Radio Ulster, has been in operation since 1975. BBC Radio Ulster now has the highest audience reach of any network radio station in the United Kingdom. As one of the most respected and trusted news organisations in the world, Ramsey conveys how the BBC must navigate in its "civic engagement journalism" the complexities of a society marked by deep ethnonationalist divisions. In particular, the paper outlines that the coverage broadcasted by the BBC must balance a need to be reflective of the divisions present in Northern Ireland, while also being careful to avoid any further polarisation by provoking tribal tensions too heavily.

The delicate situation in which the BBC as a public service broadcaster finds itself is highlighted in a lecture by Porter (2010), *The role of the media in post-conflict societies: A contemporary look at Northern Ireland*, in which she quotes the Director General of the BBC when talking to its Northern Ireland controller in the 1940s:

> Try and get the people talking to one another about their problems in Northern Irland, but remember, Northern Ireland is the one region of the BBC in which, out of exacerbation from broadcasting, people might kill each other, and this you must avoid.

Porter states that in the early days of the Troubles, community divisions were reported with the view of *terrorism as cause*, reporting of the 'who, what and where' of the conflict, but leaving out the 'how' and the 'why'. In the 1990s, with the emergence of peace talks, this paradigm of reporting switched to *balanced sectarianism,* in which fair and objective news would be achieved if both sides of the divide were allowed to speak. While this policy was seen as an important contribution to the 'peace dividend' of moving Northern Ireland to a peaceful civic society, Porter does identify a problem of *balanced sectarianism* being that, if both sides are explicitly highlighted, old stereotypes and divisions are reinforced; to be objective and fair, one must emphasise that there are two sides. This has a negative impact on the electorate's party preferences, as they consequently feel obliged to belong to one "side" of the debate, which limits their inclination to consider parties beyond their own community.

An interesting facet of the media picked up on by Porter is *The Nolan Show*, the most listened-to radio programme in Northern Ireland, broadcast on BBC Radio Ulster every weekday morning and presented by Stephen Nolan. The basis of this show is that members of the public call in to give their opinions on the political topics of the day, while also having the chance to speak directly to politicians who appear on the programme. Throughout the show's time, it has broken many major political stories, such as "Irisgate", a scandal in which DUP MLA Iris Robinson's extramarital affair and financial impropriety were uncovered, and the "Cash for Ash" controversy, which, in part, brought down the Stormont Executive in 2017 (Rice, 2020). Porter conveys *The Nolan Show* as creating a new populist paradigm in the Northern Irish media against the political elite, by Nolan himself using populist rhetoric to get the public engaged in the stories and presenting an "every man's perspective" on the news. His slogan of "Get the news, make the news, be the news" encourages listeners to contact the show with their own stories- thus, instead of informing the public of the news in an objective way, he is instead letting people make the news. Indeed, a politician told Porter in her research that there are employees in Stormont whose job it is every morning to listen to the show in order to gauge the political pulse of the country.

The author presents an issue here with the "biggest show in the country" in that, instead of "giving people what they need, not what they want", *The Nolan Show* has allowed the public to make 'orange and green' issues the principal stories of the day, rather than stories about the health service or the economy. This, in turn, reinforces the sectarian divide by stoking tensions and pitting one community against the other in regard to issues such as identity or culture.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical frameworks within which the research question of why the Northern Irish electorate continue to vote by constitutional preference can be looked at within the scopes of both power-sharing theories, and theories of electoral participation and preference. To quote Horowitz (2004): "Most divided societies have crafted no institutions at all to attend to their ethnic problems", yet Northern Ireland presents a unique case insofar as theories of the aforementioned domains are concerned, as the institutions in place have been crafted primarily and specifically with the objective of catering to the ethnic problems present in society.

4.1 Theories of power-sharing in divided societies

According to academics such as Bogaards (2019), two theories dominate literature over effective power-sharing in divided societies: consociationalism which advocates for group representation in power-sharing coalitions, and centripetalism (closely related to integrationalism), which instead recommends institutions which promote multiethnic parties. Though often seen as opposites, both theoretical models are frequently discussed in relation to Northern Irish power-sharing.

4.1.1 The consociationalist model

The most obvious theory of power-sharing, with the most numerous examples across the world, is consociationalism, a theory developed by Arend Lijphart (1969;1977;1991). Due to the theory of crosscutting cleavages, one would expect countries with deeply fragmented societies, such as Belgium or Switzerland, to exhibit great instability within their national governments, however they do not, due to the consociational model at work (Lijphart, 1969). This model is said to produce "fragmented but stable democracies", by the political elites of the country making "deliberate efforts to counteract the immobilising and destabilising effects of cultural fragmentation", in order to "achieve a degree of political stability quite out of proportion to its social homogeneity".

Lijphart (1977) attributes four key characteristics to a democracy in order to implement consociationalism as: (1) a *grand coalition,* where the elites of each pillar in the fragmented society come together to share power over the society, due to the dangers of non-cooperation; (2) *mutual veto mechanisms,* where consensus is needed among each pillar in order to pass legislation affecting all society; (3) *proportionality,* where members of the institutions are elected in proportion to their relative strength among the population; and (4) *segmental autonomy,* whereby each pillar in society is given a level of autonomy in order to protect their community's identity and culture. As previously mentioned, Northern Ireland in its devolved government is often deemed a consociation, as it contains examples of all four of these characteristics in its institutions, with writers such as Garry (2016) calling the state a "clearly consociational case".

McGarry and O'Leary (2004) state that proponents of the consociationalist theory praise consociationalism for its mutual accommodation, as it encourages negotiation, and dialogue among different groups, which can foster a culture of cooperation and mutual understanding over time. Furthermore, inclusivity is guaranteed by the consociationalist model as all groups in society are including in the state's governance, giving a representative voice to minority groups. Furthermore, a safeguarding of the rights of minority groups is protected in consociational structures, which may otherwise be threatened in a majoritarian system.

Nevertheless, the same authors also detail aspects of consociationalism which its opponents use to critique the theory. These include the reinforcement of group identities, as instead of encouraging cooperation and the growth of a central, inclusive identity, the formal recognition and institutionalisation of different pillars in society only serves to entrench group identity and subsequent divisions. Furthermore, the need for consensus and the use of veto rights render the passage of legislation slow and gridlock frequent as the different pillars are obliged to negotiate and compromise, impeding government efficiency. Additionally, consociationalism runs the risk of 'essentialism', whereby the different communities' respective identities are simplified and pigeon-holed, leading all political discourse into a 'tribal war' of sorts.

4.1.2 The centripetalist and integrationalist models

A theory "dramatically different in its prescription" to consociationalism vis-à-vis power-sharing is the centripetalist model (McCulloch, 2014). Centripetalism was developed by political scientists such as Horowitz (1985) in order to describe institutions that provide incentives for the electoral success of cross and multiethnic parties and candidates. The aim of such being to change the nature of ethnic politics in deeply fragmented societies by encouraging moderation and the growth of a central identity. Reilly (2012) states that centripetalism is associated with institutions that encourage *vote pooling*, where politicians seek support outside their own community in order to win elections, therefore voters are invited to exchange votes across group boundaries. In such a way, politicians are obliged to be dependent on cross-community support in order to get elected, thus encouraging them to moderate their stances.

Unlike with consociational theory developed by Lijphart, which has been evidenced in the power-sharing institutions of countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon, and Belgium, centripetal institutions are rather rare, with Reilly (2001) deducing only varying levels of the theory in countries such as Sri Lanka and Papua New Guinea.

Related to the theory of centripetalism is that of integrationalism, expanded upon by political scientists such as McGarry and O'Leary (1990). As with centripetalism, integrationalism focuses on the creation of a unified identity for the fragmented state, encouraging individuals from the different pillars to adopt a common set of cultural norms and practices. Proponents of internationalism also believe that social cohesion can be achieved by minimalizing group divisions and reducing the potential for ethnic conflicts. Most differently to consociationalist theory, integrationalists believe that the creation of uniform institutions and policies which apply to all citizens irrespective of community affiliation, institutional homogenisation, can ensure equal treatment of all citizens, unlike in consociationalism, where community differences are recognised and institutionalised. Unlike Garry (2016), certain academics such as Dixon (2005) have claimed the Northern Irish institutions as rather an integrationalist variant of power-sharing, rather than consociational in nature.

Critics of the integrationalist model may nonetheless point to the potential suppression of minority cultures and marginalisation of those who do not wish to conform to the new central identity, and also that integrationalism may create a sentiment of exclusion for those who feel their individual group identity is not acknowledged in the power-sharing government.

4.1.3 The peculiar case of Northern Ireland

Northern Irish power-sharing represents a peculiar case, as it appears that both theories, often thought of as opposites, are at play in its institutions. Stormont can clearly be seen as a consociation due to its adherence to many of Lijphart's key characteristics of consociational democracy, yet it also contains some features of centripetalist theory, such as the use of a 'liberal' representation voting system which may encourage vote pooling (which indeed Lijphart (1991) warned against); the possibility of politicians to appeal to voters outside of their own community designation, which has, as the literature shows, led to a moderation of party political platforms, as advocated for by centripetalists.

Dixon (2005) opines that both consociationalists (who he terms segregationists), and integrationalists support the Good Friday Agreement and power-sharing in Northern Ireland: the former, as they believe that conflict is best managed through the segregation of the different communities and their consolidation into pillars on which leaders can build a settlement, and the latter, as they believe that power-sharing will lead to the integration of the communities into a "Northern Irish identity". Indeed, Bogaards (2019) sees Northern Ireland as the only case in the world of a divided society embracing power-sharing which uses both consociational and centripetalist theories of governance.

For the purposes of this research into why the electorate of Northern Ireland continues to vote by constitutional preference, one may therefore use a theoretical framework of the state using a mixture of both consociationalism and integrationalism in its complex institutional power-sharing, evidenced in contemporary political discourse with proponents of both theories.

4.2 Theories of electoral participation and preference

4.2.1 Electoral participation

In order for the Northern Irish electorate's voting preferences to be analysed, the electorate obviously must vote. A commonly used theory of individual political participation is the micro-theory of likelihood of a citizen to participate in elections, used by political scientists such as Norris (2002), as illustrated in figure 4:

$$likelihood\ of\ participation = \frac{motivation * ability}{difficulty\ of\ participation}$$

Figure 4: Wegner, 2018

In this model, motivation refers to a voter's strong preference for something (be it a candidate, party, social ideal, or policy issue), ability refers to the voter's capacity to make sense of political information and procedures (knowledge of the political system and institutions), and difficulty refers to the costs of participation (the effort of voter registration, time needed to go and vote, or in some cases, state repression of the electorate). Deficit in any area may be sufficient to undermine an individual's likelihood of participation in elections. For example, a citizen with little motivation to vote (e.g., 2/10), a medium ability to understand politics (e.g., 5/10), but very little difficulty in casting a vote (e.g., 1/10) is therefore very likely to participate

in an election (10/10). Likewise, a citizen very motivated by a certain issue (e.g., 10/10), but who has little ability in understanding the political process (e.g., 1/10), and who experiences much difficulty in their ability to vote (e.g., 10/10), is very unlikely to participate (1/10).

It is important to note that in Northern Ireland, a state with universal franchise for all residents with Irish and/or British citizenship over the age of 18, voting is non-mandatory. As such, one-third of the population registered on the electoral register do not regularly vote (Todd, 2023). This poses a serious problem in Northern Ireland, especially when considering community voting, as turnout in the most recent local election of May 2023 being as high as 71% in traditionally 'Catholic' areas, and as low as 42% in traditionally 'Protestant' areas (EONI, 2023). As a result, the link between election participation and the importance of constitutional preference is a pertinent relationship to analyse further.

4.1.2 Electoral preference

Unlike in the rest of the United Kingdom, where Robinson (1998) sees a standard set of patterns and trends in psephology in postwar Britain, the unique setup of the Northern Irish institutions means that the standard theories of voting preference may not paint an accurate picture of the situation. Garry (2016) presents two theories of voting behaviours which explain the preferences which a voter allocates on their ballot: *performance- and issue-based voting.*

Performance-based voting theory is the most "straightforward model of citizens holding governments to account as it assumes a two-party system, with one governing party and one opposition party, clear lines of responsibility, and reward/punishment based voting behaviour. Coalition governments in a multiparty system, however, undermine this simple dichotomic theory, and beg the question as to which particular governing party should be punished if life has gotten worse, and which opposition party should be rewarded. The voter is left with the daunting challenge as to identifying which political party should be held to account or 'punished' in the election.

In Northern Ireland, consequently, proponents of the performance-based voting theory voice criticism of the power-sharing arrangements as being undemocratic as they do not allow the voters to hold the government to account due to the mandatory, inclusive coalition- there is little to no room for meaningful opposition, and no clear mechanism for an alternative government.

With this knowledge in mind, voters in Northern Ireland employ what is termed issue-based voting theory, a "far more onerous demand on voters" whereby citizens attribute responsibility across a range of issue areas to the appropriate level of government and to specific governing parties. In such a way, the voter must ask him/herself in relation to a particular issue domain (the economy, health, etc.): has life gotten better or worse? This issue is then attributed to the political party of the Executive minister in charge, and the voter may then choose to either support the minister's party, or else vote for another party within that voter's bloc. To exemplify this, a unionist voter whose main concern was the health service in the 2022 Assembly election will look to the performance of the Minister of Health- Robin Swann of the UUP. If he/she believed that he performed his task well, the UUP as a party will be rewarded with a vote, if not, the voter will instead vote for another unionist party.

An important finding of Garry (2016) in relation to the issue-based voting theory at play in Northern Ireland is that it still operates in an intra-bloc context, with little potential for citizens

to vote for ‘rival community’ parties, even if the party is perceived to have performed well in a particular issue domain.

5. METHODOLOGY

Previous chapters hitherto have addressed research into Northern Irish issue prioritisation and voting preferences and behaviours by conducting a review of the existing literature and the theoretical backgrounds of the outlined topics. This chapter outlines the methodology: the strategy of research, and the ethical considerations of such a process. Research methodology is said to be a "science of studying how research is to be carried out" (Panneerselvam, 2014); therefore, it presents a clear outline of how the research is collected. Data collection in this research is done via semi-structured interviews.

5.1 Inductive and deductive methods

This research involved in this dissertation uses both inductive and deductive research approaches, thus allowing conclusions to be determined insofar as the research question of the dissertation. An inductive method was first used through the compilation of relevant contextual background to Northern Ireland, a literature review in the form of a state of the art into voting behaviours, and a theoretical framework of theories alluding to the same. Once this information was gathered, from which established the basis of the dissertation's hypothesis, a deductive method was thereafter involved which tested the validity of the hypothesis. This deductive approach was completed through interviews with both political representatives and academics in the field of Northern Irish politics. The answers outlined in the interview deduced as to whether the hypothesis, formed through inducing the literature review and relevant theories, should be accepted.

5.2 Qualitative data

In order to best gauge the situation of Stormont politics at this present time at an in-depth level, qualitative data in the form of interviews with political actors is the most suitable method of assessing the reasons why the electorate vote as they do. Qualitative data describes methods which "deal with non-numerical data rather than numbers" (Hammond and Wellington, 2012). Within a qualitative study, the principles of interpretive social science are more prevalent, and they provide subjective aspects; exploring the meaning and complexities of people's experiences and opinions, speaking the language of "case and contexts' (Neuman, 2014). One advantage of conducting qualitative research is that it recognises the important of the subjective human creation of meaning, without rejecting outright some notion of objectivity (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Nevertheless, this data must be used with caution, as due to the time-consuming nature of the process, it is frequently possible to only conduct interviews with a small number of subjects/ as a result, there is often an overdependence on a select number of persons' understanding of a topic, thus potentially leading to bias or prejudice.

5.3 Semi-structured interviews

This research used semi-structured interviews as the principal source of qualitative data collection. This interview method is thought of as the most appropriate method as a way to "find out what is in and on someone else's mind" (Patton, 2014). This therefore allows for more detailed data collection while avoiding the collection of irrelevant data. The semi-structured nature, as opposed to a rigid structure, also allows for new information to be gathered, which provides greater detail, especially for opinions and information that had not been considered beforehand. Both political representatives and academics were interviewed in order to gain a broad scope of insights, from the on-the-ground experiences of political representatives who

are working day-to-day within the Stormont institutions, to the more analytical and objective views of academics who deal with the subject matter in their professional research.

5.4 Interviewees

The following are the four individuals with whom this research has conducted interviewed for the purpose of gaining further insight into the research question, with a view of analysing the information collected to assess the validity of the hypothesis:

Interviewee	Role(s)
Prof Jonathan Tonge	• Academic and teaching Professor at the Department of Politics, University of Liverpool, UK. • Regular contributor as an expert on Northern Irish politics on both radio and television.
Ms Liz Kimmins MLA	• Sinn Féin Member of the Legislative Assembly for Newry and Armagh constituency since 2020. • Sinn Féin councillor for the Newry district electoral area in Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, 2014-2020.
Ms Helena Young	• Representative of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland in the Newry area, and constituency office manager of Patrick Brown MLA. • Chair of the Alliance Party Executive 2020-2021. • Alliance Party candidate for the Newry district electoral area in the Northern Ireland local elections 2019 and 2023.
Prof Jennifer Todd	• Academic and Professor Emeritus at the School of Politics and International Relations, University College Dublin, Ireland. • Research Director at the Institute of British-Irish Studies, UCD • Associate Fellow at the Centre of Constitutional Change, University of Edinburgh, UK.

In the cases of Mses Kimmins and Young, the interviews were conducted in person, whereas for Profs Tonge and Todd, they were conducted via online videoconferencing. All interviews were conducted in the English language. A general guide towards the questioning of the participants in these semi-structured interviews may be found in appendix 1. Similarly, all interview questions and responses may be found in the interview transcripts, located in Appendix 2.

5.5 Ethical considerations

Qualitative research using interviews must take into account the effects on its participants, therefore, research has an obligation to guarantee confidentiality if the interviewee wishes to remain anonymous (Cohen et al., 2017). To mitigate any concerns therein, the interviewer must

ask the participant whether they wish for their confidentiality to be upheld. Furthermore, the interviewees were informed prior to the interview that any information given during the course of the interview which they did not wish to be disclosed in the transcript would be deleted as appropriate. The data collected via the interviews is to be used only for the purposes of this research.

Insofar as the interviews for this research are concerned, all interviewees were happy for their identities to be disclosed within the dissertation. During the course of the interviews, some participants disclosed certain details or anecdotes in order to illustrate their points, which they subsequently asked to be removed from the tape. As such, these details have been deleted from the transcript as requested.

5.6 Limitations

As with all studies in political science, this research may contain potential limitations. The first identifiable limitation insofar as the qualitative data is concerned is that the research had difficulties in contacting a broader range of political party representatives from the full political spectrum in Northern Ireland. As such, the political representatives interviewed correspond to the nationalist designation (Liz Kimmins- Sinn Féin), and the non-designated "other" (Helena Young- Alliance). Consequently, this research was unsuccessful in conducting an interview with a representative with a designated unionist party in the Assembly (be it the DUP, UUP, or TUV). To remedy this limitation, alternative interviews were held with Profs Tonge and Todd, both eminent academics of Northern Irish politics, and who have both written widely on unionism in Northern Ireland: Tonge's handbook on the DUP- *The Democratic Unionist Party- From Protest to Power*, and Todd's extensive research on unionist identity in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, further research into the topics explored in the dissertation would undoubtedly benefit from the analysis and opinions of a unionist political representative, in order to gauge his/her thoughts on the voting behaviours of the Northern Irish electorate.

A second potential limitation concerns the scope and exact questioning of the interviewees. While similar questions could be asked to Mses Kimmins and Young, these questions had to vary slightly for Profs Tonge and Todd, as they evidently do not represent political parties or have experience of holding public office. Furthermore, in the case of Prof Todd, I had a very limited window in which to conduct the interview, meaning not all the questions I had intended to ask could be answered. For future research, a more uniform set of questions would prove beneficial in providing a more standardised set of results.

What must also be considered, insofar as Mses Kimmins and Young are concerned at least, is that they are members of political parties currently involved in the Northern Irish institutions. As such, although they spoke in their personal capacities, one must keep in mind their political affiliations and natural biases for or against certain interpretations of the facts of the contemporary situation. Consequently, their views must be regarded as such.

6. ANALYSIS

The following analysis comes from questions asked to the interviewees about different aspects of Northern Irish politics which result in the electorate continuing to vote by constitutional preference. The four interviewees are Professor Jonathan Tonge, a lecturer and writer of Northern Irish politics at the University of Liverpool, Liz Kimmins, an incumbent Sinn Féin MLA for the Newry and Armagh Assembly constituency, Helena Young, former Chair of the Alliance Party and Alliance representative in the Newry area, and Professor Emeritus Jennifer Todd, research director at the Institute of British-Irish Studies at University College Dublin. Three broad subjects discussed during the interviews which shed light on the reasons behind the voting behaviour of the Northern Ireland electorate are the consociational structure of the Stormont institutions, party-political engagement, and the role of the Northern Ireland media vis-à-vis the constitutional question.

6.1 Consociationalism

Analysis of questions pertaining to consociation in Northern Ireland, and its implications for voter preferences, may be divided into the role of the community designation in cementing an 'orange and green' divide among Northern Irish voters, the emergence of a 'one bloc, one party' system in Northern Ireland in the years since the introduction of power-sharing in 1998, the lack of a left-right divide within the state, as some had anticipated post-devolution, and finally the apparent reinforcement of the political party's positions on Northern Ireland's constitutional position within its party literature and manifestos.

6.1.1 Community designation

The first line of questioning that can be raised in regard to if the consociational setup of government has led to the electorate continuing to vote by constitutional preference concerns a need for a change in the community designation. Would the scrapping of parties being institutionally boxed into one community or another, the so-called 'ugly scaffolding' of the Good Friday Agreement lead to a situation where voters begin to vote for parties not historically aligned to their own community? Tonge believes, in his opinion, that community designation should be discontinued:

> I would change the system from now in that it's the first thing than an MLA does- they're elected to the Assembly and the first thing they have to do is register whether they're a unionist, nationalist, or the rather reductionist 'other'. That shouldn't be the first thing that an MLA is doing. It does put people into silos.

While accepting that this would not be a panacea, and that problems would persist within government even without community designation: "You could have a whole plethora of reforms to Stormont, but I don't think any reform will make it a smooth-running government", Tonge views a potential change in the community designation as an improvement, as it would at least go some way in stopping the *silo politics* of voters automatically identifying themselves primarily and exclusively within one community or another, which is a consequence of parties immediately aligning themselves by community identity. However, when asked if the political parties themselves see a necessity for some form of change in the structure of the Good Friday Agreement around community designation, Tonge answered no, given that Sinn Féin would not want to change a system under which they have done well and become the largest party in the state, something that was "unthinkable in 1998". Likewise, the Tonge believes that the DUP

enjoy having the aforementioned *petition of concern* veto, a mechanism made possible by the community designation, therefore it would not be to the advantage of other of the large parties to alter the mandatory community alignment.

Where Tonge does see the impetus for change vis-à-vis reform to community designation is with the Alliance Party, who despite coming third in the most recent Assembly election "receive no prizes for the bronze medal", as power through the consociational system will inherently always be in the hands of community designated parties. Young, as an Alliance representative, agrees that a change is needed to this ugly scaffolding, because it means that parties are thereby depicted as catering for its own community rather than for all the population, a situation to which Alliance as a non-aligned party objects:

> Our slogan is 'We work with everyone, and for everyone'. I spoke at our party conference in March and in my speech, I said that I now don't consider Alliance as a cross-community party, I consider Alliance as an all-community party.

For Alliance, wishing that it be seen as an "all-community party", consociationalism has limited its chances at electoral success, and the possibility of the electorate moving away from constitutional-based voting, as parties are primarily identified and associated with the communities from which they originated, thereby lessening voters from across the community divide's engagement with these parties, even if a voter may agree with many of the party's non-constitutionally related policies.

When asked about the need for changing the community designation, Kimmins stated that Sinn Féin does not have a position on it as it stands, and that whilst one must recognise that demographics and attitudes are changing, she believes that one must "err caution about changing too much of it too quickly" as the Good Friday Agreement was instrumental in protecting minorities and ensuring that everyone receives fair and equal representation within the political structures:

> It's about striking that balance. I'm not saying that we're against reform, absolutely not. I think the current situation has highlighted that things maybe should be looked at […] but if you completely change it, then you risk just losing a lot.

Kimmins further asserts that 25 years on from the Agreement, a lot of people do not have experience of what politics and society in Northern Ireland was like pre-1998, and therefore change seems "very black and white". However, it is her position that mechanisms such as community designation as part of a consociational structure were put in place in order to protect the rights and representation of all communities in the state, and to begin to amend the Good Friday Agreement could mean beginning to unravel some of the "transformational change" implemented in the years since, ergo she is "fearful around what could be lost".

Todd also agrees that there is a reluctance of the main parties to change the community designation or other facets of consociationalism in Northern Ireland, however, insofar as voter choice is concerned, she points out that the electorate, as a result of consociation, often find themselves voting primarily within their own bloc as they are fearful of parties of other designations:

> One guy told me: "I hold my nose when I'm going to vote, but I'm voting DUP because I think Sinn Féin would be bad for the country".

In such a way, orange and green voting is reinforced as voters are not always voting in direct support of the parties they choose, instead they may be 'holding their nose' and voting for the party they best believe serves the interests of their community, in opposition to parties of the other designation.

6.1.2 The emerging 'one bloc, one party' system

Another area of interest in regard to the repercussions of consociationalism on community identification and constitutional preference is the emergence of a 'one bloc, one party' system, a situation which has arisen since the introduction of power-sharing whereby each community designation (unionist, nationalist, or non-aligned) is now predominantly represented by a singular party of each bloc (DUP, Sinn Féin, and Alliance, respectively). This contrasts to a situation at the time of the Good Friday Agreement, when party support and seat distribution was spread more evenly. To illustrate the apparent emergence of this system, the interviewees were asked their opinions on the previously mentioned image of Jeffrey Donaldson and Michelle O'Neill representing the 'Rangers and Celtic' of Northern Irish politics, by Laverty (2023).

Tonge very much agrees with this portrayal, pointing to the very quick displacement of the SDLP by Sinn Féin, whose future, in his opinion, is "terminal". Likewise, for the UUP, Tonge sees "no way back" from the loss of the unionist vote, and for the 'other' vote, he points to Alliance "sweeping out" the Green Party at the last Assembly election. In such a way, there is only room for one large party in each bloc, with no room for relatively moderate parties on either side. Even so, Tonge does not see this as a "triumph of the extremes", rather that the Stormont institutions have moderated Sinn Féin and the DUP, and thus the voters have rewarded these parties for their moderation as "ethnic tribune parties"; parties best seen as representing the views of the community as a whole.

Regarding where the votes formerly attributed to the SDLP and UUP are going, Tonge sees that in addition to Sinn Féin and the DUP being rewarded as ethnic tribunes, Alliance is also making gains as the party of moderates. As Alliance nowadays, especially its younger members, are not hostile to the idea of a united Ireland, Tonge opines that this has lured a lot of younger moderate nationalists from the SDLP to Alliance. Likewise, for young unionists, Alliance is "where the future and dynamism is at": "The UUP has been so beset by electoral defeats than some people have jumped ship". Despite the UUP's attempts at advocating social liberalism, Tonge thinks that the UUP looks dated and stale to many young unionists, and that the social liberal body within the UUP membership remains relatively small, with most liberal unionists voting instead for Alliance who, at a minimum, are not advocating for a united Ireland. Furthermore, Tonge considers that Alliance have grown as a third bloc for a growing number of people who identify themselves as "constitutional agnostics":

> They [Alliance] are representative of a big bloc of people now in the middle who are constitutional agnostics […] I don't think the political structures in the North reflect the constitutional agnosticism of a sizeable swatch of the population whose votes are up for grabs come border poll day.

In this way, Tonge views Northern Irish consociationalism, especially its community designation, as pigeonholing the population into two distinct communities of voters, when in fact there is a growing third bloc of those indifferent towards the constitutional position of the

state. Todd also agrees that there is a growing bloc of voters indifferent towards identifying as a member of one community or another, yet they continue to vote for designated voters, even if their view on the constitutional position may be as totally aligned:

> About one-quarter of people in the North now are undecided about their constitutional preference. So that means they're swayable, it means that their vote can't just be taken as a vote for a united Ireland or a vote for the Union, even though they're voting for these parties. But it means that they're willing to be convinced.

Young agrees that, considering the surge of votes for Alliance in the previous election increasing their MLAs by 11, there is a growing group of people not overly interested in the constitutional issue, with the majority of people she sees at the doors instead "fed up" with the way that things are, and are hence swaying towards the centre ground: "Now, a lot of people are wanting to bring their families up not identifying as one side or the other."

Young also agrees with the view that Alliance is taking up the space for both moderately minded unionists and nationalists, previously occupied by the SDLP and the UUP. Also, she anecdotally spoke of voters she had talked to who had previously voted for Sinn Féin now intending to vote Alliance- although she admitted that whether they did on election day is a different matter. Rather interestingly, Kimmins disagrees with the depiction of her party dominating the nationalist bloc vote, as Lavery (2023) portrays, although she did understand why the media and the public may see the party's unquestionable growth in this way. Instead, Kimmins describes Sinn Féin's party policies as not specific to any one community, rather ensuring that the best opportunities and outcomes are provided to all:

> I think there's people who are from a unionist background who want the same things as I'm sure we want. That's what underpins our policies.

Believing the DUP to be more "hardline" on certain topics such as reproductive rights, marriage equality, and integrated education, Kimmins therefore sees Sinn Féin as being able to provide a party platform for all voters, nationalist or unionist, who Kimmins believes have more liberal views on these issues "that people don't have anything to fear from". Furthermore, she speaks of how the party has had to develop its understanding of the unionist perspective through the years, in order to become more cognizant of what people in other communities want, and to become more able to protect these identities within Sinn Féin's ultimate goal of a reunified Ireland. Rather than seeing Sinn Féin and the DUP as the Celtic and Rangers of Northern Irish politics, Kimmins therefore illustrates Sinn Féin as wanting to cater for the views of all in the state, which she believes are essentially much the same.

6.1.3 Left and right as green and orange

As a consequence of the institutional normalisation of politics in Stormont 25 years ago, many spectators expected, or at least hoped, to see the emergence of a left-right divide come into Northern Irish politics; that instead of voting for nationalist or unionist parties, the electorate would begin to vote according to their socioeconomic preference. The lack of this left-right divide, 25 years on from the Good Friday Agreement, show that political identities and choices are still firmly connected to one's constitutional preference. Agreeing with this, Kimmins considers that political discourse in Northern Ireland is so used to differentiating on terms of nationalism and unionism, but that a left-right divide can indeed be found within the same

identity blocs already present, with nationalist parties being more left-leaning and unionist parties more right-leaning:

> When you look at the politics of the parties who fall into those categories [nationalist or unionist], you are probably looking at a left and right divide […] I think that you could easily switch the terms.

This belief that nationalist and unionist parties could otherwise be correspondingly identified as left and right parties leaves a problem for nationalists who may be more right-leaning in their social or economic preferences, and vice vera for unionists who may be more left-leaning. The dearth of right-wing nationalist and left-wing unionist parties must therefore be examined. Aontú can be identified as a party in this category; an Irish nationalist/republican party formed in 2019 by Peadar Tóibín, a former Sinn Féin member of the Dáil (Irish Parliament), which is associated with social conservatism such as opposition to abortion rights and gender-affirming transition, whilst also advocating for a united Ireland (Leahy, 2019). When asked if Sinn Féin sees Aontú as a realistic threat, Kimmins rules this out, pointing to recent election results where Aontú has not made much of an impact upon the nationalist vote. Believing their key focuses to be on the issue of reproductive rights and trans rights, Kimmins believes that the party would struggle to gain electoral success based on these policies alone, given that there is more support for these policies than against them within both the nationalist and unionist communities. Tonge also believes that there is not much room for a conversative nationalist party either, affirming that parties must have a broad agenda and that Aontú's focus on reproductive rights has hindered their electoral success among nationalists:

> People are not going to make abortion their number one issue, which Aontú is associated with more than anything else, even more so than Irish unity. Otherwise, some party would simply stand on the label "Catholic" and probably would do well.

Consequently, the lack of support or electoral success of left-wing unionist or right-wing nationalist parties further reinforces the notion of constitutional-based voting, as there are ostensibly conservatively minded nationalists who continue to vote for the socially liberal and economically socialist nationalist parties, and vice versa for those in the unionist community.

Tonge affirms that most people accepted, as a result of the consociationalist model, that community designation would make it difficult for the emergence of other forms of identity to be forthcoming. In such a way, due to the ethnonationalist nature of parties and the exclusivity of the religious community background in which the parties canvas, a standard left-right divide is unlikely to emerge. Tonge has found through his studies that most people in Northern Ireland do not understand left-right in economic terms, rather they think of it in terms of the constitutional question:

> We asked unionists to place Sinn Féin on a 0-10 scale representing left to right, they placed Sinn Féin at 0, as far-left Marxists, which Sinn Féin aren't these days, if they ever were. Most nationalists and republicans put the DUP at 10, and the DUP are many things, but they are not a far-right fascist party.

This seeming conflation of economic left-right with the constitutional question, with the far-left seen instead as overt nationalists and the far-right seen as overt unionists, results in a situation whereby voters continue to vote by their community identity, and by extension

constitutional preference, as the parties of Northern Ireland are unable to be differentiated by the standard model of left-right politics.

This conflation is a possible reason why Alliance identifies as a centrist party, whereas due to its liberal ideology, it would be considered a centre-left party in the context of a standard European understanding. Tonge thinks that there are younger members of Alliance who are not keen on the label of centrist, as they view themselves as progressively centre-left. Tonge further opined that Alliance have instrumentally aligned themselves with Sinn Féin on social issues in recent years, which given the decline in unionist identifiers senses sense "if you're going to posit yourself for transfers". Young also believes Alliance to lean more the left, even with its centrist label, and also stated that she sees little in difference vis-à-vis policies between Alliance and nationalist parties, except for the main denominator of people's perceptions of the constitutional question:

> I'll be really honest with you, I know when I look at Sinn Féin and the SDLP and Alliance, there is nothing very much that separates us, there really isn't.

Hence, the reluctance of the Alliance Party to label itself as a left-leaning party, which by standard socioeconomic parameters it is, further points to a misperception in the electorate's understanding of left-right politics, as for Alliance to move from the centre would be interpreted as the party diverging from its 'other' designation within Stormont politics, towards the nationalist designation. A left-right divide, as was hoped for in some quarters at the time of the Good Friday Agreement, therefore shows little sign of emergence, due to the consociational structures of government, in the words of Tonge, "freezing ethnic divisions" by obliging parties to categorise themselves as nationalist, unionist, or 'other', which consequently conflates the public's understanding of socioeconomic left and right with nationalist and unionist.

6.1.4 Reinforcement of the constitutional issue

Given that the constitutional issue itself is quite a low priority (if not a low determinant) of the Northern Irish electorate, the question must be asked as to why parties reinforce their respective constitutional positions so heavily on election literature and other forms of party marketing. It would come as no surprise to anyone that the Democratic Unionist Party is pro-Union, the clue is in its name, likewise, it is no secret that the basis of Sinn Féin is Irish reunification. Nevertheless, a rudimentary search on all the parties' websites speaks of issues explicitly or implicitly linked to the constitutional question: the DUP speaking of strengthening Northern Ireland's place in the Union, Sinn Féin of a "Republic for all"; the UUP speaking of a "Union of people", and the SDLP of a "prosperous, new Ireland". Why therefore is a party's constitutional position so heavily reinforced in its manifesto when the electorate's priorities lay elsewhere? For Tonge, it seems perfectly logical that, while also concentrating on day-to-day issues, that these issues must not be at the expense of what the parties' core business is: be it a united Ireland or the retention of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom. For Sinn Féin, Tonge believes that the party would not gain any votes by diluting its pledge to Irish unity, as indeed it has already been through its moderation phase, away from the era when Sinn Féin called for "Brits out". Now, Sinn Féin's language around the constitutional question is more measured, and they have been rewarded as such:

> Once upon a time, Sinn Féin equalled Brits out, that's all in the rearview mirror. All Sinn Féin is calling for now is a date for a border poll […] and that strikes people as reasonable and fair; it doesn't put off any voters.

Likewise, Tonge opines that the DUP still see a lot of their voting base as fearful of a united Ireland, and therefore it is logical for the party to emphasise that theirs is the party with which the Union is safe. As for Sinn Féin's reinforcement of its focus on a united Ireland, Kimmins confers that, as the party believes that the public will be voting on the constitutional question in the very near future, the party must continue to speak about it as people want to know and understand what it is that they are voting on.

Conceding that, for some, it may seem that Sinn Féin overemphasise the constitutional question, Kimmins makes the point that a united Ireland would make sense in improving the services and issues which people do prioritise, such as healthcare or the economy:

> Whilst it seems that's our focus and we just want a united Ireland because we want a united Ireland, it's about actually improving people's outcomes, it's about improving life for people because of all those things, a joint approach rather than working separately.

The position may therefore be taken that parties do not reinforce their constitutional stance simply for the sake of it, but as they believe that all of the other issues which the public may find more pressing in the more immediate term can be improved with reference to Northern Ireland's constitutional position, be it with closer cooperation with the rest of the United Kingdom, or as a reunified Ireland. Nevertheless, to a voter 'from the other side' interested in the policies of a party, the projected reinforcement of the party's constitutional preference will undoubtedly cast doubt on the voter regarding how comfortable he/she feels voting for said party.

6.2 Party-political engagement

Engagement of political parties with people not seen as traditionally identifying with their original bloc may be seen as a way for voters to expand their party choice, and indeed as a way for the parties to expand their voting base. Analysis can be made into both the purported 'no-go' areas which may handicap a party's opportunities to canvas in certain areas beyond the community divide, and the Northern Irish parties' engagement with people of newer forms of identification, such as immigrants or those of ethnic minority backgrounds.

6.2.1 'No-go' areas?

The next subject of focus concentrates on party-political engagement when canvassing during elections, be it knocking on doors, distributing election literature, or erecting posters on roadsides. Of particular interest is the level, or lack thereof, of engagement of parties with those of different identity backgrounds, or in areas traditionally considered to be in the 'other side' across the community divide. If community designated parties fail to engage with voters of other backgrounds, there is a risk that voters will continue to vote along their community lines, and by extension constitutional preference, merely due to lack of knowledge of the other parties' political platforms or ideas vis-à-vis non-constitutional issues, even if the individual voter shares the parties' views.

Firstly, when asked if their respective parties had decision-making processes behind where election workers knock on doors or erect posters during election campaigns, both Kimmins and Young affirm that strategies are consciously planned ahead over target areas. Kimmins highlights that there are places in Northern Ireland where a balance must be struck, and it may be better not to knock doors in certain areas still deemed contentious and not welcoming of Sinn Féin representatives. Therefore, Kimmins thinks that these decisions are based on local knowledge, and therefore one must consider the importance of having local activists to gauge party support in different areas "to get a sense of people's views and what they're thinking". Young also emphasises the importance of on-the-ground activism from local associations in order to anticipate where Alliance support may be strong, and therefore the party may focus on these areas during election periods.

If a party sees an area as too deeply entrenched in one community affiliation, they may simply regard it as unfeasible for electoral success, and hence not invest as many resources into campaigning there. For Kimmins, she opines that, although some areas are difficult to gain success in, Sinn Féin would not see any area as unattainable; that everyone has the right to right who is on their ballot, and indeed that she has been to vote counts where she has seen voters from traditionally unionist electoral wards transferring a lower preference vote to Sinn Féin. In terms of how many candidates to run in each five-seat constituency, Kimmins states that there is no "exact science", sometimes the party must take a risk; sometimes it pays off and other times it does not. However, the party does consider what resources it has in an area in terms of people and anecdotal support in order to see how realistic it is to deliver results during election canvassing. Similarly, Young concedes that it is unlikely for the party to make gains in certain areas:

> For instance, Slieve Gullion [a heavily nationalist electoral district], we're not going to get anyone in there, so we don't waste our resources going there. We still send out literature, but we don't have bodies out knocking doors there.

Consequently, Alliance decides that some areas are so entrenched in ethnonationalist affiliation, that to use often-scarce resources in these areas would simply be a waste. Nevertheless, she believes that it is still better to have party representation in these areas come election time, therefore an Alliance candidate is always placed in each constituency (in the case of Slieve Gullion in the most recent local election, an 18-year old party member), in order to have a name on the ballot paper, even when the candidate knows to do any local campaigning would be futile.

In addition to resource management, intimidation of candidates in certain locations is another reason as to why party-political engagement across the community divide may be low; in April 2023, Alliance councillor Michael Long was physically assaulted and branded "Republican scum" while campaigning in the predominantly unionist East Belfast (Campbell, 2023). When asked about political intimidation and the existence of 'no-go areas', Kimmins admits that she and other Sinn Féin representatives have had "hairy encounters with people on the doors" which may be frightening, but insists that most members of the public are receptive, and that most arguments on the door are a result of people conveying their opinions too aggressively, rather than deliberate intimidation. Similarly, Young recounts experiences of canvassing in neighbourhoods with strong political affiliation to other parties, and the reputation that came with it:

> People were saying to me about areas that I was going into to canvas, "That's a really Sinn Féin area", and I said, "Why? They don't own it" […] people would wonder are they rude to me.

Despite acknowledging that areas exist which may be deemed as 'no-go', Young states that unpleasant encounters are few, and that most people are, at a minimum, are receptive towards her, as they don't particularly see Alliance as representing a threat: "I don't think they blame the Alliance Party for anything".

Apropos whether there are constituencies where electoral success is deemed unattainable to certain parties, Tonge affirms that there are very much still 'Catholic and 'Protestant' areas where parties are not going to waste their resources campaigning:

> If you're DUP, you're not going to go into South Armagh to try and get a vote any more than a Shinner [Sinn Féin representative] is going to go to Sandy Row- it isn't going to happen in the real world.

Tonge depicts this phenomenon as an example of *silo politics* in Northern Ireland, of which there has been "virtually no thawing […] since the Good Friday Agreement". An interesting consequence of the PR-STV system which Tonge alludes to, however, is that due to the quota system, even very predominantly unionist/nationalist constituencies will have at least one MLA from another designation. Tonge furnishes this consequence with the example of the Newry and Armagh constituency, which has four nationalist MLAs and one unionist (DUP MLA- Willaim Irwin), who consistently comes in second place at elections due to the unionist minority population voting heavily in his favour.

Ergo, for political representatives and academics alike, there is an acknowledgement of 'green and orange' electoral areas, for which political engagement for parties of opposing designations is rendered futile, as the chances of connecting with this electorate to the extent of winning votes is highly unlikely. Although the fear of intimidation is not to the level it once was and parties are keen to engage further in neighbourhoods not historically seen as their strongholds, the presence of silo politics is as clear today as 25 years ago, resulting in a definite correlation between a voter's constitutional preference and their political party of first preference choice.

6.2.2 Engagement with 'new' voters

Political parties' engagement with Northern Ireland's 'new' voters: immigrants and members of ethnic minority groups, may well be seen as a way of parties attracting votes from outside their 'Catholic and Protestant' bases and thus as a way of enticing votes due to party policies other than their stance on Northern Ireland's constitutional position. From the censuses of 2011 to 2021, there has been an increase from 4.5% to 6.5% of the population having been born outside of Ireland or Britain, which, though comparatively low by European standards, still represents a record high for Northern Ireland (Harte, 2022). Tonge views these voters as key for the parties to attract, as this "ever-growing larger influx" of people may well determine the outcome of elections, as the populations of those from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds increasing reach an equilibrium. Yet, Tonge believes that the parties have not penetrated this sector of society, firstly as the voting population of immigrants and ethnic minority people is disproportionately low; a large portion have not registered electorally, and secondly, as the majority of these voters would not categorise themselves as unionists or nationalists, they are

far less likely to vote in any case, as the 'other', non-aligned population historically is less inclined to vote. Due to this, parties have not "fully switched on their radar in terms of this new set of potential voters".

Todd acknowledges that immigrants and other newer "transversal ways of identification" such as voters whose primary identification is as a woman or as a member of the LGBTQ community represent a sector of society which has gotten bigger in recent history, yet agrees with Tonge that parties have not really homed in on these new ways of identification, as the parties still largely remain primarily concerned with their ideological positions:

> Those are the people, when you talk to them, say "Oh look, I'm just fed up with the ideology, I don't want the ideology, I want something that comes organically from experience".

Young agrees with the view of Tonge that immigrants, though growing in population, still represent a disproportionately low percentage of the electorate, as a lot of this population do not vote. Using her own area of Newry, which has large Polish and Lithuanian communities, as an example, Young explains that while canvassing, a lot of these people told her that they do not vote, even if they possessed a polling card. Though when she explained to them who Alliance were, many seemed keen to vote for Alliance as a centrist party not involved in the 'orange and green' politics. Young also thinks that this group of people are one who parties looking votes outside of their community should tap into, as rather than being entrenched in a nationalist or unionist camp, they will generally vote for the parties who engage with them the most; a more pragmatic way of voting rather than who "mum or dad voted for", as what often happens.

Kimmins believes similarly that the growth in immigrants proves a potential turning point for Northern Irish society, as a more diverse society "makes it harder to say that there's just two communities here". Mentioning that Sinn Féin often have people of immigrant backgrounds in its office in regard particularly to immigration issues, she maintained that the party does perform some outreach with the new communities, however this does prove harder due to language barriers. Furthermore, Kimmins acknowledged that there are quite a few immigrants with no interest in politics at all, and they may come to Sinn Féin for help as they are simply the first party they find, given the large size of the party in Newry.

In regard to 'new voters', be it immigrants or indeed those of other, newer forms of identification, the research has shown that the political parties have not switched on their interest to these groups as one would expect, with attraction being geared more so towards floating voters within their own community. This lack of engagement, and oftentimes franchise, among 'new' voters causes voting to remain along constitutional lines, as often only the two traditional groups of voter identification (PUL and CNR) are engaged.

6.3 The media

The next issue discussed during the interviews was the role of the media in possibly sensationalising or trivialising the Northern Irish constitutional question, condensing a serious and complex topic into a 'green versus orange' topic of tribal debate. When asked if the media has a role in stoking up these tensions, Young fully agreed, and immediately pointed to the aforementioned *Nolan Show* as an example of a media news outlet sensationalising the constitutional question into a two-sided debate. Young points to the regular contributions on

the show from Jamie Bryson, a well-known anti-Agreement loyalist activist, and Jim Allister, the leader of the hardline-unionist Traditional Unionist Voice Party, as an example of how the show is often used to "stoke up tension" in society and "stir the sectarian pot". Young acknowledges however that the show is the most listened-to radio programme in Northern Ireland, as people to compelled to listen, and indeed praises the calm and measured behaviour of Alliance contributors to the show, who refuse to be pulled into any of the "nonsense". Young concludes her view of the often-hostile media by claiming that it does set the people against each other, yet concedes that that is how the media is selling their newspapers and increasing their audience figures.

Tonge agrees with the view of the media, in particular programmes such as *The Nolan Show,* as promoting a level of antagonism vis-à-vis identity issues in Northern Ireland. He contrasted *The Nolan Show* on BBC Radio Ulster to the *Stephen Nolan* programme*,* which Nolan presents on BBC Radio 5, UK-wide on the weekends, claiming that this show, which deals with international news affairs with in-depth analysis, has a very different tone. Opining that Nolan turns issues into a "bearpit", Tonge considers that this "bearpit that already exists"; that a certain level of antagonism already exists within Northern Irish political and societal discourse, and what Nolan is doing is simply facilitating a "scratching at the wounds" on the radio in order to hold up a mirror to discussions and debates already happening on the street. In such a way, if programmes like *The Nolan Show* ceased to exist, Tonge affirms that "you still got Twitter"- that the "tit-for-tat" debating of 'orange and green' issues is a facet of discourse which will always exist in Northern Ireland, as no one will ever agree about what the conflict is about, and that the wounds of the Troubles will never be healed for as long as the contested state of Northern Ireland is in existence.

For a number of years, Sinn Féin has boycotted *The Nolan Show*, alleging bias and unfair reporting, starting from its coverage of a republican funeral held during the Covid lockdown (Hargan, 2023). When asked about the reasons behind Sinn Féin's continuing boycott of the programme, Kimmins admits she could not remember the reasons, but explains that she, personally, does not see the show as balanced or providing fair representation, claiming that it reinforces the 'green and orange' divide instead of representing "what is actually going on in real life". Believing that the programme continues to get high ratings, despite its controversy, as "big, sensationalist headlines" are inevitably going to attract listeners, Kimmins nevertheless denies that the ongoing boycott has caused Sinn Féin any damage, as the party has only increased its voting percentages since the boycott began.

In terms of the media and the constitutional question more generally, Kimmins stated that there is a lot more conversation about the future of Northern Ireland and the possibility of a border poll (a hypothetical future referendum on Irish reunification):

> Subconscious or not, I think people are starting to realise from all backgrounds that this is what people are thinking about. I think the fact that it is now being talked about more and more in mainstream media, where it was never talked about before, is quite telling.

Kimmins therefore alludes to an increase in mainstream media discourse about a united Ireland and its consequences, a situation that she believes had never been there before. This view is shared by Todd, who speaks of a "renewed discussion of a united Ireland" within the Northern Irish media, yet she views this not merely as "old nationalism coming out again", but as a pragmatic and strategic response to the difficulties imposed on Northern Ireland by the

implementation of Brexit, as one of several discussions currently being had within the media as a solution to these difficulties, which Todd sees as "seriously undercutting the Good Friday compromise".

Though Todd does view the Nolan Sow as a definite example of sensationalism of the constitutional question, however she sees the media, especially the BBC, as otherwise being historically more cautious and conservative in its reporting, reinforcing the aforementioned views of Porter (2010) of reporting through the Troubles as *terrorism as cause.* Instead of stirring up problems, as critics often claim, Todd believes that the media instead often deny the existence of problems, erring caution towards the reporting of identity issues, as they don't wish to be seen as "unhelpful" insofar as promoting peace is concerned.,

Consequently, in regard to the Northern Irish media's influence on the preferences of the electorate, it can be inferred that many still see the media as 'stirring the sectarian pot', especially phone-in political programmes such as *The Nolan Show*. Whether this has a deliberate effect on the prioritisation of 'green and orange' issues is debatable: Tonge sees the divisive side of the media as simply facilitating a space for these debates to be had, which are going to happen anyway, whereas Young and Kimmins see it as reinforcing divisions by stoking up tension in a bid to increase audience figures. Concerning the purported increase in discourse vis-à-vis a united Ireland, Kimmins views this as "quite telling": a forecast of a rise in interest for Irish reunification, whereas Todd views this as a pragmatic response to the problems posed by Brexit, as one possible solution to solving the current impasse.

6.4 Conclusionary remarks

When presented with the research question, Tonge replies that there is an "obvious paradox" as to why people continue to vote on constitutional lines, if what they really care about is other concerns such as healthcare or the economy. One reason for research such as the Institute of Irish Studies (2022) poll showing the low priority of the constitution question, Tonge opines, is that there is an increasing level of politeness within respondents to opinion polls in Northern Ireland, which may not tell the whole story:

> People are becoming more polite in surveys […] They say that their biggest single thing is the NHS or education or whatever, when actually what does drive a lot of people still is the constitutional question.

Tonge furnishes this explanation with the fact that in both the most recent Assembly and local elections, 80% of votes were cast to unionist or nationalist parties, which evidently shows high community allegiance. Furthermore, Tonge maintains that elections in Northern Ireland remain "contests of true believers", in other words, a member of the public is far, far more likely to vote if he/she already self-identifies as a nationalist or unionist than as 'neither'. During his research, Tonge found that when asked how interested they are in politics, most nationalist and unionists responded fairly or very interested, yet most 'neithers' said they were not very or not at all interested in politics; the 'neithers' are more "switched off" from politics and therefore do not vote. In such a way, the electorate continues to vote by constitutional preference as the consociational system at play reinforces the 'unionist versus nationalist' effect, with Alliance furthermore dismissed as 'others'.

As Northern Ireland is the state with the strongest link between religious-community background and voting in Europe, Tonge believes that the electorate is "slightly lying to itself"

in citing issues such as healthcare, the economy, and the cost-of-living crisis as the most important issues, as if this were the case, such a strong link between community background and voting intention would exist: "Why would so many Protestants think that the DUP was the best party on the NHS? Why would so many Catholics think that Sinn Féin is the best party on the NHS?" In such a way, the "ultimate story is that voting in the North is still conditioned by community background". In conclusion, Tonge thinks that voters have always and will always vote on sectarian lines, which has been consolidated by consociationalism because the voters are electing candidates to institutions which only recognise the binary divide, with those not on either side treated dismissively as "bit players":

> Unionism and nationalism will always dominate Northern Ireland because it's a contested state. Politically, constitutionally, you can't wish away the fact that one set of people want it to exist, and another set of people don't.

While Tonge does see consociationalism as managing this division, a noble aim in itself, it remains a bleak aim as the constitutional question will remain the most important voting determinant, as it is naïve to "believe that a utopian sense of Northern Irishness" may be created under the consociational system.

Todd disagrees with Tonge's synopsis slightly, in that she sees that for the electorate, "the most important thing for them isn't the institutional design, it's rather healthcare or other bread-and-butter issues". Nevertheless, she depicts these bread-and-butter issues as having a constitutional dimension to them, as the electorate ultimately often believe that these everyday issues can be ameliorated by either retaining or changing Northern Ireland's constitutional position. Consequently, Todd views the "on-again, off-again" nature of Stormont as set to continue, as there can not be an agreed path of policy design or implementation in such a contested state: "I have never though that there's a stable resolution within a Norther Ireland context".

Todd also sees the consociational system as holding back the creation of a Northern Irish identity, or the possibility of people voting beyond constitutional lines, because the institutions were not created or intended for a situation whereby the electorate see beyond their own community self-identification for political representation:

> If you had a very large Alliance ['other' designation] vote, there would have to be a change; the main blocs would be stultified, they would not be able to move.

Kimmins, while acknowledging that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland may be a low priority for people "in the here and now", believes that the constitutional question shall remain the key determinant of the public's voting choices, as Sinn Féin's policies have always highlighted how the electorate's main priorities in the short term, such as healthcare, can be improved within an all-Ireland context:

> If you look at it in the short, medium, and long term- in the short term, yes, people want access to their GPs, they want their healthcare treatment free at the point of contact. But we also have to show people how we could deliver that, so I think people do look at that.

Consequently, Kimmins states that "you can walk and chew gum at the same time"- that Sinn Féin must be able to deliver effective outcomes at a power-sharing level at Stormont yet

recognise and support a united Ireland as the party's main objective, as working solely within a contested Northern Irish devolved state "holds us back".

Alliance, as the only large 'other' party finds itself in a unique position in that it doesn't explicitly take a position on Northern Ireland's constitutional status, and Young agrees that the party comes in for a hard time for those aligned to different blocs; accused of being part of a "pan-nationalist front" by unionist critics, and of "sitting on the fence" by nationalist critics.

While accepting that the main structures of the Good Friday Agreement "should probably stay", Young maintains that reform of the institutions must be reviewed and reformed, so that no one party can ever again pull down the government- a mechanism which is made possible by the necessity of a mandatory power-sharing coalition. Furthermore, Young sees Northern Ireland no longer as simply an 'orange and green state':

> Nothing can ever stay the same. The makeup of the population is changing, and again, we've got so many people from different countries here who have made this place their home. So, it's not all about us; it's not all about the orange and green.

Due to this demographic and societal change within Northern Ireland, Young opines that the rules of Stormont must be reviewed and amended going into the future, in order to reduce the 'ethnic bloc-voting' evident as a result of consociationalism, and to ensure that the Northern Irish voting public vote more in according to their 'bread-and-butter' priorities, rather than simply by their constitutional preference.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Following an analysis of the points raised by the participants in the interviews regarding the research question of why the Northern Irish electorate continue to vote by constitutional preference, it can be concluded that the hypothesis of this research stands- that the consociational setup of government, and a lack of party-political engagement beyond the community divide have both meant that voting in Northern Ireland remains firmly sectarian, in such a way that the electorate continue to cast their vote by constitutional preference, be it within the PUL or CNR bloc, regardless of more 'bread-and-butter' issues that they may ostensibly prioritise as more important when surveyed.

In regard firstly to the consociational setup of government, the analysis shows that the necessity of MLAs to pigeonhole themselves as unionist, nationalist, or 'other' before any other functions of the Assembly are carried out automatically casts Northern Ireland's politicians as being either 'green or orange', with the cross-community dimensions of Stormont meaning that the 'other' designation, namely the Alliance party, are reduced to bit players in the game, despite the party comprising the third-largest number of seats in the Assembly. Whether Stormont's politicians themselves want a change to this evidently partitionist system is dubious- whereas Alliance who receive 'no prizes for bronze medal' are the obvious losers in a system in which elections are the contests of true believers (be they unionist or nationalist), and thus wish to see the Stormont institutions amended to facilitate representation of the incipient 'third way', other parties such as the DUP and Sinn Féin would not be so keen to change a system which supposedly protects minority tights, though also a system through which they have electorally performed well, becoming the 'ethnic tribune parties' of their communities. The consociational system has therefore led to a 'one bloc, one party' phenomenon; in contrast to years previously where community support for its various parties was spread evenly, today, the DUP and Sinn Féin dominate the vote within their respective blocs, with Alliance leading the way for a growing third bloc. In such a way, these previous 'extreme' parties have been electorally rewarded for the moderation which consociationalism has helped them achieve, and thus community identification has been further consolidated towards each respective party- if you are a nationalist, you are more than likely a Sinn Féin voter, if you are a unionist, you are more than likely a DUP voter, if neither, you are more than likely an Alliance voter. Consociation has also meant that a potential emergence of a standard left-right divide, evident in most European democracies, is as far away as ever, with voters regularly conflating the ideas of socioeconomic left and right as nationalist and unionist due to the solidifying of the different blocs within community designation. Despite the electorate's priorities evidently laying elsewhere, the respective reinforcement of parties' constitutional positions within their election literature or on their websites further encourages intracommunity voting, as constitutional position is put front-and-centre above all other 'bread-and-butter' concerns.

Likewise, the analysis depicts that party-political engagement, or lack thereof, across community divides and with those who possess alternate, transversal forms of primary identity also acts as a conduit to a system whereby the electorate continue to vote by constitutional preference. While the likelihood of political violence or candidate intimidation as a result of canvassing in neighbourhoods of the 'other side' is not as extreme as during the Troubles, there is still a definite understanding and acceptance from the political parties of 'green and orange' areas, within which the party is unlikely to gain votes, thus reducing election campaigning

within these areas to futility. Furthermore, the analysis shows that political parties have not yet deciphered the 'ever-growing larger influx' of the population whose primary identification transcends the traditional ethnonationalist or religious cleavages evident in Northern Ireland, such as immigrants, those of ethnic minority background, or those who identity primarily in regard to their gender or sexuality rather than their religious or ethnic community background. While addressing and engaging with these 'new' voters would compel parties to attract votes from beyond their respective blocs, the analysis shows that this has not yet been the case, with most of the population identifying as neither nationalist nor unionist choosing not to vote at all.

Finally, there is universal consensus deriving from the analysis that the Northern Irish media, with community-aligned newspapers and populist phone-in programmes such as *The Nolan Show,* plays a role in sensationalising the Northern Irish question, trivialising the complex topic into a 'green versus orange' debate. Though the media is responsible for facilitating this 'tribal bearpit' by scratching at preexisting wounds, the divisive nature of social media discourse means that these intracommunity debates which routinely take place on the street are going to be amplified anyway, as 'green versus orange' topics of debate are often how people are 'fired up' in Northern Ireland, and thus how newspapers increase their sales and television programmes and radio shows increase their listenership.

In conclusion, while the electorate's concerns surrounding matters such as healthcare or the economy may well be the most important issues facing the Northern Irish voters at elections, it is the belief of this study, on analysis of the qualitative research carried out, that the Northern Irish electorate is lying to itself in denying the importance which they place on their preference for the constitutional future of Northern Ireland, due to the "ugly scaffolding" consociational setup of government, and a lack of party-political engagement across the community divide. The percentage of Catholics voting for unionist parties and Protestants for nationalist parties is practically zero, so a clear conditioning of voting preference by community background is evident. Consequently, rather than asking what the most important issue is facing the electorate in how they intend to cast their vote, asking the question of what the most important determinant of how the electorate intend to cast their vote is would paint an altogether clearer picture- that political socialisation within the PUL or CNR community will be what will ultimately shape their vote.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1- Interview guide

Introduction	• Introduce yourself please. • What made you want to get into politics? • Why [political party]?
Consociationalism	• Need for a change in the "ugly scaffolding" of the community designation? • Is [political party] taking steps to attract voters from the [other] community? • Are Sinn Féin and the DUP now the "Celtic and Rangers" of NI politics? • Why does [party] place such an emphasis on [a United Ireland/NI's place in the Union] in election literature if [party's] support for such is an obvious fact?
Political engagement across the community divide	• Is there a decision-making process behind where [political party] displays election posters and knocks on doors? • Are certain areas deemed as unattainable for your party's electoral success? • How is it decided how many candidates are put up for election from the party in each constituency? • Have you ever felt intimidated or threatened while campaigning in certain areas? • What is your opinion on the potential for a standard left-right divide to emerge in NI politics?
Media	• Does the media play a role in sensationalising the constitutional question? • Do you feel that listeners to certain radio shows do so in order to get annoyed? / Scratch at those existing wounds?
New voters	• Is [party] making active attempts to attract voters who are not originally from NI? (Not coming from an ethnoreligious-community background). • Once an immigrant voter decides on their party, are they then entrenched in a nationalist/unionist/other camp? • Have you seen a difference in the newer, younger generation in terms of their attitudes towards the constitutional question?
Party-specific questions	• [Differs according to the party/academic interviewed.]
Closure	• Repeat hypothesis- would you be in agreement? • Is there anything else you would like to share? /Anything else I should have asked?

Appendix 2- Interview Transcripts

Interview 1: Professor Jonathan Tonge, Department of Politics, University of Liverpool.

Eoghan McArdle (EMcA)

Professor Tonge, thanks a lot for taking some time out to talk to me about this. I know that you must be busy, but I really appreciate the time.

Prof Jonathan Tonge (JT)

No problem at all, always happy to help.

EMcA

To begin, would you mind introducing yourself, especially to an audience that maybe mightn't be as familiar to your work?

JT

Yeah, so I am Jon Tonge, I'm a professor in the Politics Department here at the University of Liverpool, and the main areas of my research would be politics in Northern Ireland, on the island of Ireland more generally as well, but particularly within Stormont and the other devolved institutions in Northern Ireland. Now, I do want to clarify that here in the university, we do also have the Institute of Irish Studies, which I think a lot of people believe I am in. I do not work for the Institute of Irish Studies, simply the Politics Department. I certainly wouldn't distance myself from them at all, our areas of research often overlap, and I work closely with all the guys there, but I myself am not employed there, so to speak.

EMcA

Brilliant, thank you. So, I might start by just giving you little bit of background into my research and then hopefully you'll be able to answer a few questions for me if that's all right. Yeah. So, my research starts off by looking at the opinion poll from April 2022 that the Institute of Irish Studies in your university, the University of Liverpool, published about the upcoming Stormont elections. What I am interested in is the priorities of the voters. So, 29% said healthcare and the state of the NHS in Northern Ireland was their main priority, 10% Covid recovery and then 3% the economy. And then, 0.7% said that the constitutional preference was their main priority in the elections. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority continue to vote for parties of their own community, and 70% of people in the polls said that the politics remains sectarian. The research question I'm looking at is: "Why does the Northern Ireland electorate continue to vote by their constitutional preference?". And then the hypothesis I've been working on is that the electorate continue to vote this way due to the consociational setup of government and also a lack of political engagement across the community divide, or the "other side" if I may.

JT

An obvious paradox, isn't it? It's a really interesting question that you pose. Why are people still voting on constitutional lines; for the unionist or nationalist parties, if what they really care about is the NHS? I think there's a combination of things with that. One is that people are becoming more polite in surveys, particularly university book surveys, perhaps, and they say

that their biggest single thing is the NHS or education or whatever, when actually what does drive a lot of people still is the constitutional question. In both the Assembly election of 2022 and the local elections this year in the North, 80% of the votes cast were for unionist or nationalist parties. So, I think there's sort of politeness of answers. Secondly, it also depends how many times you list the constitutional question in those surveys. If you put the constitutional question, that might not mean a lot to people. But, if you list them separately, put Northern Ireland's place in the UK, and separately a united Ireland; you'll get a higher percentage one or the other. Just putting the constitutional question isn't probably the best way of teasing out the exact percentage. For the surveys I do post-election, we tend to put what were the most important issues for the election and we list both of those constitutional propositions, rather than just saying the constitutional question. I think the other big point to make is that elections in the North remain contest of true believers. You're far, far more likely, I think about two and a half or three times more likely, to vote if you're already self-identifying as a unionist or nationalist. You're far more likely to vote than if you say I'm neither unionist nor nationalist. According to the Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys, the biggest single category of elector now are those saying they are "neithers", but that's clearly not reflected in how the votes are cast and how the institutions are filled. And that's partly because "neithers" don't tend to vote, they tend to be younger, they tend to be switched off from the political system. Their level of interest when we ask the question, "How interested would you say you are in politics?": most unionists and nationalists said either fairly or very interested in politics. Most "neithers" said they were not very or not at all interested in politics, so "neithers" are more switched off. Now, I don't know whether that's the consequence of the consociational system or not. We haven't got longitudinal data going back long enough to test that as to what the "neithers" were thinking pre-1998, but I think there's no doubt that it reinforces the effect of the "neithers", because it is a system that, really, the way that's all set up, it is sort of, it's a unionist versus nationalist system. Alliance is sort of dismissed as the others, even though they're the third largest party now in the North.

EMcA

I have been speaking to politicians from different parties and they have given different views on the need for a change to this community designation, in an attempt to avoid the orange or green voting. Would you say that you would see on the whole that the political parties do see the need for some form of change in the structure of the Good Friday Agreement around this?

JT

I'm not sure the main designated parties see the need for a change. I mean, Sinn Fein probably wouldn't want to change the system under which they've done well and have become the largest party; something was unthinkable in 1998 for most people. The DUP still likes to have a veto, which of course they're playing at the moment, so I don't think there's a great emphasis for reform from either Sinn Fein or the DUP. Obviously, with Alliance coming third and getting no prizes for the bronze medal- there, that's where the impetus lies for change. In terms of what I would do, I would scrap the community designations, except perhaps for certain key votes. In other words, nationalist and unionist parties could bring it in, say, two or three times per parliamentary assembly term if they so wish. I wouldn't. I would change the system from now in that it's the first thing that an MLA does- they're elected to the Assembly and the first thing they have to do is register whether they're unionist, nationalist, or the rather reductionist, other.

That shouldn't be the first thing that an MLA is doing. It does put people into silos and it's not as if it's a secret anyway, I mean, the clues are in the names of the Unionist Party or the Democratic Unionist Party. Is it really necessary to these communal designations? I'd simply have weighted majority voting at a high threshold: 70% to pass a measure. But it's not a panacea, if you look at the other consociational systems in Europe, where some of them operate on a weighted majority voting system, you still get political paralysis where you've got strong identity politics. So, I would get rid of the permanent communal designation, yes, but I don't pretend it's a panacea. You can have a whole plethora of reforms to Stormont, but I don't think any reform will make it a smooth functioning government, but it can be improved.

EMcA

I'm sure you saw a few weeks ago in the Belfast Telegraph a photoshopped image of Michelle O'Neill in a Celtic jersey and Jeffrey Donaldson in a Rangers jersey- portraying that, like in in Glasgow where you're either supporting Celtic or you're supporting Rangers, in Northern Ireland, you're either Sinn Féin or the DUP- there's nothing in between. Has Northern Irish politics really come to this, that the system of five parties that we had in 1998 has been decimated?

JT

Yes, very much so. I mean, you have a politics in which Sinn Féin has very quickly displaced the SDLP and there's absolutely no sign that reversing, and the future of the SDLP, I think, is terminal. It's only, ironically, Westminster elections that are keeping the SDLP going now. The same on the unionist side, I don't think any way back for the UUP. I think there's only room for one large party within each bloc, whether it be the centrist bloc- so Alliance swept out the Greens last year, DUP on the unionist side, and Sinn Fein on the nationalist side. I don't think it's the triumph of the extremes, I agree with Paul Mitchell and his body of work on this; he talks about ethnic tribune politics where basically, his argument is that, although it sounds ridiculous in the current climate, that the DUP have been rewarded for their moderation. And certainly, on the nationalist side, Sinn Fein, ever since they started moderating their reject that have been rewarded for it, they've camped on the SDLP's political territory. I think the institutions have moderated the political parties in that respect, but that means that as those parties become less extreme, there's no room for two relatively moderate parties on either side on each side of the bloc.

EMcA

And Alliance has taken all the centrist, moderate vote?

JT

Yeah, Alliance has. It's taken some votes from the from the SDLP because younger members of Alliance are not hostile to a united Ireland in the way that older members of Alliance would have been, remember that Alliance was actually formed as a pro-union party, although it never liked the label unionist, but it's constitution said that it was in favour of NI's place in the UK. But Alliance changed its constitution just after the Good Friday Agreement and Alliance is neutral now. The people who back Alliance tend to be younger these days. A united Ireland within the EU is quite an attractive prospectus for them, so the nature of Alliance has changed. Of course, they're still going to want to be described as centrist and they certainly would reject

the label unionist or nationalist, and they are representative of a big bloc of people now in the middle who are constitutional agnostics. I think that that's quite important and I don't think the political structures in the North reflect the constitutional agnosticism of a sizeable swath of the population whose votes are up for grabs come border poll day.

EMcA

And for the 'small u' unionists who might take a more liberal stance on same-sex marriage, on a woman's reproductive rights, would you say that they would see a more natural home in Alliance party, even as explicit unionists, than in the Ulster Unionists?

JT

For these voters, Alliance is where the future is at. The UUP has been so beset by electoral defeats that some people have jumped ship. I mean, if you were a young person growing up in Northern Ireland state, and you were mildly pro-union, would you think, "I'll support the Ulster Unionist Party?" They look dated, and so those people would support Alliance and think well, Alliance is not advocating a united Ireland so they might feel comfortable there. Alliance seems to be where the dynamism is. If you look at the UUP, it's had he's had some pretty socially liberal leaders in recent years: Mike Nesbitt and Doug Beatty are obviously socially liberal, but it's not helped the party. I think it's a relatively small body of social liberals within the UUP. Social liberals will tend to vote Alliance. If you're either religiously or socially more conservative and a hardline unionist, you'll vote DUP or even TUV, perhaps. So, I think the electoral marketplace for the UUP is problematic and they've tried all sorts of different things: "Vote Mike, get Colum", they tried to pact with the SDLP, they've tried social liberalism. The only thing that they haven't tried is hardline unionism. Although when Tom Elliott was leader, you could argue they were trying to revert to type. So, I'm not sure what the UUP can do, really.

EMcA

To move on a bit, if you were just to go on to the Sinn Fein's website or read their election literature, there's a lot of talk about Irish Unity or a United Ireland, and then the same on the DUP's literature, there's a lot of talk about strengthening Northern Ireland's place in the Union, etcetera, etcetera. Obviously, it's no surprise to anybody that Sinn Fein supports a United Ireland, and the DUP wants to remain in the United Kingdom, so why do you think that they emphasise this point so much? Would it not be better to emphasise their views on the NHS, on the economy?

JT

Well, with the scale of the NHS crisis in the North, this means it's perhaps unsurprising that this may well be the voters' top priority. And Brexit, as well. Nevertheless, Sinn Fein would not gain any votes by diluting the pledge to Irish unity, so Sinn Fein are not going to go down that road. It's already been through its moderation phase: once upon a time, Sinn Fein equalled Brits out. That's all long in the rearview mirror. All Sinn Fein is calling for now is a date for a border poll, they don't want a border poll tomorrow- chances are they they'd lose. What they want is a date, and that strikes people as reasonable and fair; it doesn't put off any voters, so Sinn Fein are not going to change that. As for the DUP, a lot of their voters are still fearful of a united Ireland, so why would the DUP not emphasise that they are the party with which the

union is safe. So, it's perfectly logical to me that, while also concentrating on day-to-day issues, these issues must not be at the expense of what the parties' core business is.

EMcA

That's very interesting. Would you say that perhaps the electorate are lying to themselves whenever they're casting their vote? I don't think anybody is lying awake at night thinking about a united Ireland. They're thinking about, you know, the cost of living or waiting lists. Are the electorate lying to themselves in thinking that NHS is their number one priority when actually, a unionist would never vote for a nationalist party even if they believed they had the best healthcare policy, and vice versa?

JT

Yes, I do think the electorate slightly lies to itself. The electorate is not just voting on the NHS, or other issues, because otherwise, why would so many Protestants think that the DUP was the best party on the NHS? Why would so many Catholics think that Sinn Fein is the best party on the NHS? It wouldn't make sense. If this were the case, you wouldn't have any strong link between religious affiliation or community background and how people are voting. So, it shows that clearly, people say the NHS is the most important policy, but there are other determinants. There are obvious social and religious, at least in background, determinants of how people vote. Remember, the North has got the strongest link between religious-community background and voting anywhere in Europe. So, yes, the ultimate story is that voting in the North is still conditioned by your community background. I mean, the percentage of Catholics who identify as unionists is practically zero, and the percentage of Protestants identifying as nationalists is close to zero, so clearly there is a conditioning there. The electorate can kid itself anyway, even in a more normal polity, I'm old enough to remember when Margaret Thatcher was consistently winning landslides in the 1980s. Regularly, in the top three election issues: unemployment. My God! The British electorate were going and voting for a Prime Minister who was solely responsible for record high levels of unemployment. So, I think that stating these supposed priorities is partly altruistic, but also, I think that the way in which the question is framed in surveys is important. Never mind what's the most important issue; what's the most important determinant of how you vote? And if people were honest, they would say: "Well, actually, it's my community identification".

EMcA

Just from my personal experience as a young person in Northern Ireland, I don't see any of my generation as particularly more religious than any other country in western Europe, nonetheless, we're all still siloed as Catholics or Protestants…

JT

I remember tweeting facetiously after the 2021 NI census results, "Wow, so many Protestants and Catholics. The churches must be packed on Sundays with all of these Christians!"

EMcA

That's for sure. Why then, for faithful Catholics who are going to mass every Sunday, why don't they look at the DUP and think that that is the perfect party for them? They all share the same views on social issues surely?

JT

Well, they would on issues like a woman's reproductive rights, if you are a proper Catholic who disagrees with this, then the DUP, in terms of its social conservatism, would be the party for you. Similarly, if you're a Catholic who did not believe in same-sex marriage, again the DUP. There was a period, believe it or not, within the DUP, where people like Peter Robinson were arguing that Catholics should vote for them because they're more in tune with them than Sinn Fein was. Nevertheless, Catholics could never bring themselves to vote for the DUP because of that party's history as a fundamentalist Free Presbyterian vehicle; the anti-Catholicism, even if not in anti-individual Catholic, rhetoric of the DUP in the past. When I did a membership survey, I think there were about four Catholic members in the whole of the DUP.

EMcA

And yet and all, the vote for Aontú, the socially conservative nationalist party, has never really taken off the ground.

JT

No, I mean people are not going to make abortion their number one issue, which Aontú is associated with more than anything else, even more so than Irish unity. Otherwise, some party would simply stand on the label "Catholic" and probably would do well, you've got to have a broader agenda. Even within Sinn Féin, the issue of abortion did cause a lot of difficulty within the party because you still have that Catholic, rural, socially conservative wing, who were opposed to change, but that wing seems to have dwindled.

EMcA

To move on now to talk more so about political engagement, I've asked politicians about their decision-making processes about where to knock doors, where to display posters, et cetera. To give you a sense of where I am, I'm originally from South Armagh, so a very, very predominantly nationalist/ republican/Catholic area. A representative from Alliance told me that, apart from obviously the free postage that they send out to every address, that there is minimal campaigning here for Westminster or for the Councils, simply because they do see the results as a foregone conclusion; there's no point wasting their resources here when they could maybe focus on battleground areas in Belfast or Lisburn for example. So, would you say that for the Sinn Féin or the DUP, there are still, quote unquote, "Catholic" or "Protestant" areas, where electoral success is just unattainable, and they don't want to waste the resources?

JT

Yes, very much so. I mean, West Belfast isn't going to be electing a unionist anytime soon. You've highlighted South Armagh, where you're from, that's just the way it is. I mean, that's not just a consequence of consociational PR-STV though, because most Assembly constituencies do have a mixture of elected representatives. I know West Belfast would be different with five Shinners and one PBP, but that's very much the exception. Newry and Armagh almost the same, but you only need to go down the road a little bit- in Armagh City, you'll see all the Orange regalia. People might actually forget what it's actually like there.

EMcA

I find it very interesting that in my Assembly constituency, Newry and Armagh, the DUP consistently wins the second seat in Assembly elections, and it's so interesting to me because, except for maybe Armagh City or its outskirts, you will not see any DUP posters, you will not get any knocks on the door. Still consistently, second highest placing.

JT

Of course, they're not going to go and campaign in South Armagh, but they'll get one seat thanks to Armagh City, they'll get a quota, so they'll get one candidate elected to the Assembly. So, unionists can say, "Well, at least we've got representation for this constituency within the Assembly". In Liverpool, where I live, the Conservatives have not won a seat in this council since the 1990s, yet even in Liverpool, one-in-five people will vote Conservative, yet there's no representation for them. So PR-STV does work in terms of proportionality, except if you look at Jim Allister and the TUV because they're so transfer-toxic. There's no doubt that parties are not going to waste resources-if you're DUP, you're not going to go into South Armagh to try and get a vote any more than a Shinner is going to go to Sandy Row- it isn't going to happen in the real world. So it is silo politics, and there's been virtually no thawing in that respect since the Good Friday Agreement. There's been intra-changes in terms of Sinn Féin and the SDLP, and DUP and UUP, but in terms of party resources, it's a no brainer- just campaign in your own area.

EMcA

25 years on from the Good Friday Agreement, do you think that back in 1998, there was ever any politician, any academic who really did see a left-right divide coming into Northern Ireland 25 years afterwards?

JT

I think that there were academics who hoped for that, but I think most people accepted, given what we already knew about consociationalism, that whilst they don't quite freeze ethnic division, or that they don't preclude the emergence of other identities, such as gay and lesbian identities, it is harder for other identities to be forthcoming. I think in terms of left-right, the the ethnonationalist nature of parties, and the exclusivity of the religious community background in which they fish means the left-right isn't really going to take off. Most people in Northern Ireland in surveys don't even understand left-right in terms of the way that we might understand it in economic terms, they'll think left-right in terms of the constitutional question. So, when we asked unionists to place Sinn Féin on a 0-10 scale representing left to right, they placed Sinn Féin at zero, as far-left Marxists, which Sinn Féin aren't these days, if they ever were. And most nationalist and republicans put the DUP at 10, and the DUP are many things, but they are not a far-right fascist party.

EMcA

So many in Northern Ireland view left-right in constitutional terms rather than economic terms?

JT

Exactly. They don't think of it in terms of social class left-right terms in the way that people in the rest of Europe would think of it. There's at minimum a conflation of left-right in economic terms with the constitutional question.

EMcA

Do you think that this is why the Alliance Party would still call themselves centrists rather than maybe centre-left, as they would be viewed as in any other European understanding?

JT

Yeah, I think so. yeah. There are a few younger members of Alliance now who are not as keen on the label centrist, because they do see themselves as centre-left, and they see themselves as progressive, and they argue that they've been at the forefront on campaigns of social liberalism, such as abortion rights and same-sex marriage. Whereas once upon a time they were quite proud of being the militant centre, now, there were some within Alliance who see it more as part of a progressive coalition. We have seen Alliance, instrumentally at least, align themselves with Sinn Fein on social issues in recent years, which again, given the demographics, the decline in unionist identifiers in the North makes sense for Alliance if you're going to posit yourself for transfers, that's the largest proportion of the population. Never forget that unionism is in decline: in terms of demographics, in terms of self-identifiers as unionists, and in terms of voters; whatever metric you use, unionism is in decline.

EMcA

To move on to speak briefly about the media, would you agree that the media has a role in sensationalising the constitutional question? I'm asking this I suppose in the context of the Nolan Show, you've seen that Sinn Fein, for years now, has been boycotting it and the SDLP from earlier on this year. Other radio or TV shows may have a bit less antagonism, yet the Nolan Show is still the most listened to radio show in the North.

JT

Exactly, you've hit the nail on the head with the last sentence. A lot of shows are about chasing ratings, and providing they're not being too unedifying, that's commonplace. Yes, Nolan does sensationalise it in the sense that he turns things into a bearpit, but that bearpit already exists. What Nolan does is facilitate it. I speak regularly on both his shows on Radio Ulster and on BBC 5 Live. If you listen to his weekend show on 5 Live, it's a very different tone. But I mean, those antagonisms exist already within society, and Nolan is only holding up a mirror to them.

EMcA

Are people just looking for a fight then?

JT

Exactly, sure if there was no Nolan, you still got Twitter. Go on Twitter after the morning of the Wolfe Tones concert for example, you know exactly what it's going to be like, you know what's coming. So even if Nolan decided he was only going to work for 5 Live on a Saturday and Sunday evening in the future, you'll still find this tit-for-tattery that is always there.

EMcA

Exactly.

JT

What does really annoy me about that show is the phrase: “We need to agree on the past”. We can't even agree on the present. Listen, both sides are entitled to their historical narratives and to respect their dead, so you need to leave it at that because they’re never going to agree about what the conflict was about, never. So, Nolan’s programme does encourage scratching at the wounds which have not healed, and will not heal for so long as Northern Ireland is in existence. It's a contested state, that’s the nature of things. But you know, times are changing.

EMcA

I’m looking to pivot towards the theme of new voters now. So, the percentage of people living in Northern Ireland who are born outside of either Great Britain or the island of Ireland is 6.5%, according to the latest census; still quite low by European standards, but it's the highest ever level for Northern Ireland. Obviously, these people, if they choose to vote, they're not bound by these religious affiliation backgrounds that voters from here come from. Do you think that the parties do see the worth in trying to attract these new voters over as political neutrals?

JT

I think one of the most startling things at the census was the number of people who were born outside Britain and Ireland. It's so different from when I first started going over there in the 1990s, you just didn't see anyone who was born outside of the place. So, I think in demographic terms too, it is really interesting, it shows the progress that's been made. Thirdly though, in terms of chasing the votes, no, I don't think the parties have really got into this yet, and I think it's two reasons for that. One is that a large portion of those have not registered electorally, it’s disproportionately low. Secondly, a lot of them would self-identify as “others” and are therefore less likely to vote as well. If you’re trying to win a border poll, it makes sense to get these people on side, because there is an ever-growing larger influx of people that could determine the outcome of it, if the result was tight. But at the moment, I don't think the parties have fully switched their radar on in terms of this new set of potential voters.

EMcA

Given the projected immediacy of a border pole, in that it is being talked about a lot more now than ever in the past, can you see a future where the SDLP might merge into Sinn Féin, or the Ulster Unionists might merge into the DUP as a way of embedding further the two camps, so to speak?

JT

I can, but I think it will be a slow process, and you've got the members of those parties to get past. The DUP wouldn't mind merging with the UUP. But when we did the membership survey with the UUP, only about one in six, one in seven members were in favour of a merger with the DUP. So, the vast bulk were against. Who in the UUP is going to vote to wind up their own party? And in the SDLP, there's still that historical antipathy towards Sinn Fein, given Sinn Fein’s history. So, I think voters will become increasingly bewildered as to why you've got these minor parties within nationalism and unionism, but you've still got that membership issue because the members are committed people.

EMcA

If you were to look at healthcare, it's obviously such a massive issue now in the North. The Alliance Party seemed to be the only party that is faithful towards the Bengoa Report which asks for less, and more specialised hospitals, and they've stayed away from the populist notions of "Save our hospitals" but they don't seem to have suffered in the polls, nobody is accusing Alliance of wanting to shut down the hospitals. Do you think that other parties are favouring seat retention rather than practising the Realpolitik of looking at the evidence and thinking we do have far too many hospitals, we don't have adequate or efficient healthcare provision?

JT

The cynic in me thinks that if you were to ask an ordinary voter in Northern Ireland about the Bengoa Report, loads of them wouldn't be able to tell you what its contents are. Even fewer would have read the Alliance Party manifesto, so they're probably unaware that Alliance's support for the Bengoa Report would mean hospital closures, albeit with the creation of specialist ones. I just don't think people realise, when they hear that we need to implement Bangoa, they don't really understand the ramifications.

EMcA

Might other parties fear that if they did take a stance towards the recommendations of the Bengoa Report that they might be accused of wanting to simply shut down hospitals?

JT

Yes, I think they would. This is part of the problem that a report that is trying to streamline and improve services ultimately could be taken out of context. If you want to shut down Belfast-Mater for example, but you're also proposing a brilliant new Stroke Unit in Belfast-Royal Victoria, all the fuss will be about the closure of the Mater- it's an impossible sell. You know, political change is hard enough in non-consociational systems, but it's mighty bloody hard here because trying to sell change to an electorate when you can't even agree with fellow politicians is really difficult.

EMcA

To wrap things up now, I already told you my hypothesis there that the electorate continue to vote by constitutional preference due to consociationalism and then a lack of political engagement from the other side. Would you agree with this? Do you think there are other reasons?

JT

Absolutely, I think that voters have always voted on sectarian lines in Northern Ireland, consociationalism has slighted added to it because voters are voting to institutions that really only recognise the binary divide. People who are not on either side of the divide are treated, rather dismissively, as others, almost as if they're bit players in the national game, that they are marginal. Unionism and nationalism will always dominate Northern Ireland because it's a contested entity. Politically, constitutionally, you can't wish away the fact that one set of people want it to exist, and another set of people don't. Consociationalism manages that division, but it's never going to get rid of that division, it can't. All consociational systems can do is manage

division and that's not a bad aim in some ways, but it's also a bleak aim, because you're never going to create a utopian sense of Northern Irishness. That's just naïveté.

EMcA

Do you not think the Northern Irish identity has grown in recent years?

JT

A little bit, but not that much. At best about a quarter of the population, which means three-quarters of population don't their primary identity as Northern Irish. Although, if you ask it in a more subtle way, quite a few will say that Northern Irishness is part of them. But if you give people the brute choice of British, Irish, or Northern Irish- Northern Irish will always come third. Even 25 years after the attempted building of institutions within the Northern state.

EMcA

Just before we end the interview, do you think there's anything else that I should have asked you, but perhaps didn't, or else is there anything else relevant to my research that I've overlooked?

JT

No, not at all. We've certainly given it all a good going over. The very best of luck with your thesis.

EMcA

Thank you very much, and thanks so much for taking the time out to talk to me, as well.

Interview 2: Liz Kimmins, Sinn Féin Member of the Northern Irish Legislative Assembly for the constituency of Newry and Armagh

Eoghan McArdle (EMcA)

If you would like to start off by introducing yourself, please?

Liz Kimmins (LZ)

Yes, my name is Liz Kimmins. I'm a Sinn Féin MLA for Newry and Armagh.

EMcA

And how long have you been in the job?

LK

So, I was first elected as a Sinn Fein councillor for Newry in 2014, and I was there until January 2020 when I was co-opted as an MLA, where I replaced Megan Fearon, who was one of our previous MLAs for this area. She had stepped down and then I was elected to the Assembly in May 2022.

EMcA

OK. And what made you want to get into politics in the first place back in 2014?

LK

Well. I mean my background is as a social worker, so that's what I'm qualified in doing and I always had a real interest in that kind of work, of helping people and working with people. I came from a working-class community in Barcroft, here in Newry and I would have been heavily involved in my own community growing up. It just kind of naturally evolved and I would have volunteered and things like that. And then I always had a natural interest in republicanism as a young person. And then as I got older, I went to university in Liverpool for a couple of years. When I came back, uhm, I joined Sinn Fein and would have been an activist, I suppose, and just the opportunity arose. To be a politician wasn't something I ever saw for myself, I was asked by the party would I be interested in standing and, supposing in the first instance you're thinking "No, I don't know if I would be able to do it. Why you want me to do it?" But when I thought about it and I talked to other people in the party and I thought, well, if I could make a change, if I can do some good for my community and I was always about that, then that's kind of how I got involved. So, it's never been something I ever aspired to or ever thought I would ever be involved in, but it just kind of naturally happened.

EMcA

So, by the way you explain it, it was maybe a bigger decision to become a councillor than to become an MLA?

LK

Yeah. Well, I mean it, it was my first step in to elected politics, which is something I never would have even thought I would have been able. I just loved getting involved the voluntary aspect of the activism and getting involved campaigns and all that there, but I just didn't think it was for it was me and I was really honoured to be asked and to think that people thought I was capable of doing that. And so it was a big decision then, I obviously did it for six years. I I was working as well still in my social work job, but then when I was asked to stand as an MLA, I had just had my first wee boy, he was just turning one. And I was thinking, gosh, can I do this? But I had good support and I thought well, let's see how it goes. At that time, the Assembly was down, so that was January 2020. But, I think the day after I was went co-opted this and we got a deal and we went back in, so then it was Covid. So it's been a real learning curve, you know, but I really enjoy it and I think obviously at the minute we're in a really, really difficult situation with no Executive, no Assembly. And I think this is probably the worst we've ever seen, in terms of public services and how people of suffering, cost of living, health service, all of that and we really need to be in there and we're working off yet another decimated budget. That's the only way I can put it, which has been obviously the trajectory for the last 12 years under a Tory government, but, it is what it is and we just need to back and to be able to deliver and try and deal with some of this stuff that people are facing.

EMcA

So you said you were involved, first of all in campaigning for Sinn Féin and Republicanism and stuff like this, did you come from a "Sinn Fein" family so to speak?

LK

Well, I suppose they come from an area which would have been predominantly Republican and, you know, I didn't grow up with my eyes closed, so you can see what's happening around

you, but in terms of my own family, yes, it would have been Republican, but not overtly. If you know what I mean.

EMcA

Not politically as such?

LK

I wouldn't have been able to tell who my mummy or daddy voted for, but I was very conscious from a very young age of the treatment of my community, as such, and I always would have heard of things that happened where I grew up. From when my daddy grew up, his home house was in our street, so you would have heard things over the years. And I would have taken a natural interest in history just for myself. It was just something I really got interested in from a very young age. I remember reading with the Hunger Strikes and wanting to know why that happened, so I kind of would have went and looked into and I remember Daddy always would have said to me, it can be romanticised, our generation doesn't really know what it was like to live through those really, really hard times and none of us want to go back to that. I also would have a wee bit of experience pre-1998, of rioting and things like that. I can always remember the Drumcree stuff even though I was very young but it's things like that that you remember, so I suppose, understanding how that came about, I got a wee bit of understanding around the Civil Rights movement and then, I suppose, how the Troubles started- all of that. How Catholics were treated and all of that, you know, I think even for young people now to think of that Catholics couldn't get the vote, couldn't get housing and all that stuff. It's like another world, you know, it's hard to believe that that actually did happen, and it was allowed to happen. So, I think that's the kind of things that would have triggered my interest in it, and then I suppose it comes from my family that people deserve equal rights and that nobody has the right to have supremacy over someone else. That makes sense to me. And then as I got older, just had a real interest in it. And obviously coming from a working-class community, a low-income family, I kind of just wanted to help people. And I think that's a lot of the values that Republicans hold.

EMcA

OK. So, moving onto the first questions then, more specifically. So Mark Durkan, who was the deputy First Minister once upon a time, he said that consociationalism was the ugly scaffolding of the Good Friday Agreement. So it's needed to get things to work, but the need for community designation means that the people are often inclined to vote for, quote-unquote, orange or green, depending on the community that they're raised in. Maybe you agree this, maybe you don't, but does Sinn Féin or yourself maybe see a need for a change in the community designation or are you happy enough?

LK

Well, I think I think there's a lot of talk at the minute because of the political situation here that we're seeing, around reform, and it's something that we do have to look at, I think. I don't think we have a position on it as it stands. I suppose it was introduced, and I think this is an important thing for people to remember, and I actually was talking to young people recently around just how important the Good Friday Agreement is. There were things put into the Good Friday Agreement to protect minorities. OK, so for a long time, Catholics/Nationalists were the

minority and we, you know, have alluded to some of the history of it. It makes sure that everybody gets an equal chance, and that is because those are the two main communities that live in the six counties. in the north you know. So whilst we also have to recognise that it is changing, and that the demographic is changing here, I just think I would err a bit of caution about changing too much of it too quickly because there's so many elements of the Good Friday Agreement, in particular, I think if we start to make one change then that opens it up for whole lots of things and a lot of it was hard won. So, it's about striking that balance. I'm not saying we're against reform, absolutely not. And I think the current situation has highlighted that, that things maybe should be looked at, and to ensure that there can't be a blockage and all of that because at the end of the day, people on the ground that are suffering. But I think, if you want fair and equal representation across the board, that that's why those things were put in place 25 years ago, if that makes sense. So, it's not an easy one to answer. I don't think there's a clear answer to it. I think you could say, yeah, completely change it and then you risk just losing, losing a lot of that. So, it's just it's something we have to talk about, and I know that the discussion is growing. And for a lot of younger people, particularly who don't, maybe haven't had an experience of what was like before the Good Friday Agreement and how that all came about, it's very it seems very black and white, that you just change it and that's it. But I think it's something we need to really have a good discussion around.

EMcA

OK. And then what do you think Sinn Fein are doing then to persuade voters from the, I've used the term PUL community, who might agree with your stance as you were saying before, on the economy, maybe on social issues, but they kind of like feel, “Well, I'm a unionist. I could never vote for a nationalist party”. Is Sinn Féin taking active steps kind of to address this?

LK

Absolutely. I mean, I actually really struggle with the notion that people say it's a green and orange cause. I think that our party and, I know that from being in the office and for the people that I deal with on a regular basis, on constituency issues, there's absolutely no one that has turned away from this office. When you come through the door, I don't ask you what church you go to, et cetera, et cetera. I want to know your issues and how I can help you. I think particularly in the current context with Michelle O'Neill, as the First Minister designate, she wants to be a First Minister for all and she's doing that in her actions and you know, we've had to make some very difficult decisions in the recent times, which wouldn't sit well, naturally, with Republicans. But if you're saying you want to deliver for everybody, then you have to show that, and that's what we do. And I think it's important because now and as younger generations come through, some of the things that maybe were important 20-odd years ago, in terms of religion and background, all that aren't people's priorities now, and everybody wants the same things. We want a good education system, we want a good healthcare system, etcetera, etcetera. You want people to be able to get jobs. I have two wee kids now, I don't want them in 18 years’ time having to move away for work. You know what I mean? So I think it's bringing it back to that. I think that's kind of what our work is to do and when we're saying when we talk about a united Ireland, obviously that's our still are going to be our core objective. It always has been and always will be, because that's what we're, you know, that's what Republicans are, and what we what our focus is, but it's about trying to make people see that our current situation isn't working. I think Brexit has exposed that, you know, financially, all of those things. This

six-county state is not working for people. Especially under a Tory government, when we're seeing our public services are just completely underfunded. And while people say we can blame the politicians here, you can only work with what you have. And whilst costs are going up and funding is being continually cut, it's becoming more and more difficult to deliver. When we look at the South, I mean, they're in a really healthy situation financially. They're actually giving money to put to the North at the minute for Magee Campus in Derry, things like that, so I'm not saying it's completely a panacea either, there's a lot of things that have to be worked through, but if we're trying to make people understand that, you know, it is something will benefit everybody. We want to protect people's identities too. So, it's about having that conversation, but having it with everyone. I suppose the biggest one recently was Michelle attending the King's coronation and that wasn't a tokenistic gesture, that was to show that we mean it, because that wasn't an easy thing to do for Republican. But the vast majority of people understand that that that's what needs to happen, because we have to make sure that everybody feels that they're being represented. If she's going to be the First Minister, she's going to be the First Minister for everybody.

EMcA

So I don't know if you saw it a few weeks ago, but there was a photoshopped image in the Belfast Telegraph of Michelle O'Neill wearing a Celtic jersey and Jeffrey Donaldson wearing a Rangers jersey. It was denoting from this that Sinn Féin and the DUP are to the six counties, what Celtic and Rangers are to Glasgow, the two big parties, there's kind of no competition. That Sinn Féin have galvanised the nationalist vote to such an extent and the same with the DUP with the unionist vote. Whereas maybe 25 years ago the vote was a bit more evenly spread throughout all five parties. So how far would you agree with this portrayal?

LK

Well, I don't. I think that I can see why people think that. But I think that, as I mean going back to even our policies, the policies of our party aren't just for people who are Nationalists. OK, like you know, I think there's people who are from a unionist background who want the same things as I'm sure that we want. That's what underpins our policies; that people are getting an equal chance and that they're getting the best opportunities and the best outcomes. So that isn't specific to one community as such. The DUP I suppose are more, and this is my view on it, more hardline on certain things and everything is kind of, you know, based on things like religion and stuff like that and it informs their decision making. So, for example, we talked about some of the kind of the key discussions that are happening. You know we talk about reproductive rights, marriage equality, integrated education. You know, things that people don't have anything to fear from. It's about making sure that everybody can make a decision for themselves and things like that, and the DUP still vote against all of those things. So, I would say there are people in the nationalist community that would vote with that, but I don't think that's specific just to Sinn Féin or people from the nationalist community, it is something for everyone and so that's kind of where I'm coming from. We also think that a lot of the ways how we've moved on is about being more cognizant of what people in those communities want and their identity and protecting them as well. So, I can see where it's coming from, but I think particularly our electoral success in recent years is because of the policies that that we have developed and are what we want for people. And that’s for everyone.

EMcA

So, you were saying there about how you're trying to cater for all kinds of people. Everybody has the same objectives and I suppose, people do lay awake at night thinking about buying their child's school uniform, about waiting lists in the hospitals. But if you go on to like Sinn Fein's website or their election brochures, there's a lot of talk about the United Ireland. The same with the DUP, talking about strengthening the Union. So, why do you think such an emphasis is then placed on this constitutional question? If it's not the stuff that is keeping people up at night?

LK

Well, I mean, I think we also have a lot of information around what we're doing and what we want, what we would want to do in terms of government and how we would try and deliver on those issues as well. For example, in the last election Conor Murphy was Finance Minister. He had set the budget, which would have been for three the next three years. We had always had worked off annual budgets, whereas a multi-year budget would have allowed better planning, better investments, £1 billion for the health service. Which when, because the DUP, pulled out of the Executive then we couldn't deliver. We've now completely lost, more or less those three years. You're starting from scratch, which could have made a huge difference. In terms of our focus around a united Ireland, I don't think is any secret to anybody that that's what, that's what the basis of our party is.

EMcA

So if it's no secret, then why is it being reinforced?

LK

Well, people want to know. I believe that we're going to be voting on the constitutional question in the very near future. So you want people to understand what they're going for and what this about or just start thinking about it. So if people want to know why we are so focused on it, then they need to be able to understand where we're coming from. And certainly from our perspective, a united Ireland makes sense in all respects of everything you've highlighted there around health, education, economics. I mean, we're seeing here Daisy Hill, for example, and this in the crisis that Daisy Hill's in. But Daisy Hill serves a bigger area than just South Armagh, Newry, and South Down. It also covers Louth. And if we worked on an all-Island basis in terms of healthcare, we already had the cross-border scheme of your where of it the cross-border Directive where people on waiting lists here could be funded to go South and get treatment which would help. So if we were working on that basis across all those major public issues you know. You could make huge change and I think so, whilst it seems like that's our focus and we just want a united Ireland because we want a united Ireland, it's about actually improving people's outcomes, it's about improving life for people because of all those things, a joint approach rather than working separately. Like we have two education systems. We have two healthcare systems. And I don't think any of them work particularly well, but if you, you know, I think Covid was a good example because we started to work on and a lot of things during Covid you had to take an all island approach because we had no choice because we had too, and I think that showed for a lot of people what potential there is. Brexit's another one. People now realise the potential of being in the EU and being part of it all.

EMcA

So you could kind of say that in terms of all of these issues that they are integrated in terms of United Ireland because it would, well, it's not going to make everything better, but it would, that's kind of the basis.

LK

Well, we have an opportunity to be able to improve all those on all those things and by working together. At the minute, it's just crazy. We can see even coming through here, people are leaving the North to work on the South because it's better money, it's better conditions. We're always looking over at the Britain for more money for, you know, support like that. There's healthcare workers in England who got their pay raise last week and healthcare workers here haven't got it. And a lot of nurses are leaving here to go to the South because they're getting better money. Whereas if we were operating as an island, there could be huge change, but there's a lot of things to work through. But it's not just switching on a light overnight, we have a lot of things to discuss, but we need to be having that conversation now, because people are starting to think that way.

EMcA

OK. Thanks for that. For the next part, it's about political engagement with the other side quote-unquote. So, my first question, is there a decision-making process behind where your campaigners or your electoral workers display posters or knock on doors?

LK

Well, I mean, I think in I'm doing this now probably coming up in 10 years. And I can say, there probably was a time where you would say there's areas you just wouldn't have went into, more because they wouldn't have wanted you there. But I do think that's changing and we tend to knock every door now. I'm talking from a Newry and Armagh perspective, there's maybe different parts of the north where that's still more difficult. But I can definitely see like, even in the recent Council elections, we've got councillors elected in councils, we have never that have never had a Sinn Féin councillor, you know, so you can see that's changing. It's still a developing picture, but I do think that is starting to change, and look, there's always a balance to be struck. There may be areas that it will still be contentious and you don't want to cause tension either. So if you do make decisions based on local knowledge and that's why it's so important to have activists and why we do have such a big membership, but it is changing.

EMcA

You've kind of already answered that for me, but there is maybe, in certain areas, a conscious decision made that it's maybe best not to display posters in the area.

LK

Yeah, I think so. I don't really know of any in my own area. So I'm kind of speaking generally, but I think that rather than you don't want to antagonise people either.

EMcA

So would you see these certain areas as unattainable? As if “we're not going to get a seat in this area, so let’s not try”?

LK

Well, I wouldn't say it's unattainable because we do have, like all parties, free posts and things like election literature that will go out there to all addresses. So everybody has an opportunity to look at our stuff and think about it and may give you a preference and as I said at the start, I mean that is definitely changing, but there's maybe areas that I don't know it could be difficult, but I'm speaking, I suppose, as someone who hasn't experienced that. There probably are certain areas in the north that maybe at this point it wouldn't be good, more so that you don't wanna upset people; they might not want you to come in. That makes sense, but the view we take is that everybody has the right to vote for whoever they wish. So say for example there is an area that maybe we wouldn't generally be welcome, but there may be a few houses in the area that there are people who would vote Sinn Féin or who would want to hear from us. I mean, they may they still have a right to know who is on their ballot and why they might want to vote for them. And you'd be surprised. I've been at lots of counts and people who maybe are voting down the ballot for unionist parties may give you a transfer somewhere along the line. And that's because maybe something they have seen or something they've read or they've spoken to someone they've contacted your office and they felt well, they deserve a transfer.

EMcA

Therefore, is there a process behind deciding how many candidates to put forward? Is it based on history? Opinion polls?

LK

I think every election, it changes. I can't be giving away all of our secrets, But I mean, we're activists as well, like we're not just knocking people's doors at election time. You know, we have a regular newsletter and obviously you can't always get every door, but we do try to knock on doors numerous times, so you do get a sense of people's views and what we're thinking. So, I mean there's a lot of a lot of work goes into deciding how many candidates to put up, and sometimes you take risks, and sometimes they're worth it. Other times they can be disappointing, but if you don't try, you don't know. In the most recent election, we put up the most candidates we've ever put up and we won significant numbers of seats in some areas. We maybe lost a sitting councillor but got a new councillor elected. So we didn't lose seats we but we maybe didn't get the extra one. So there's a lot of work and a lot of research goes into it, but it can differ from election to election. When you're looking, and obviously the politics of the moment always have an impact on it as well. So what maybe happens in an election this year, in two or three years down the line, things can change dramatically, we've seen that happen quickly in the last 10 years, and that can really focus people's minds as well. So no, there's no exact science there.

EMcA

There are constituencies with no Sinn Fein MLAs, so would you say maybe it's safer, then, for Sinn Fein to put up one strong candidate in these areas, that it would be unattainable to maybe put up 3 candidates?

LK

Oh yeah, there’s a lot of work and a lot of effort go into elections. So it's about trying to think about what resources you have in terms of people and you want to go and talk to people on the

doors. And I think our vote has been growing in those areas, as I said, like in some other Councils, where we have won seats now and hopefully that will be able to build on that you know so yeah like I mean I don't think any party is going to put up 3 candidates in an area where they've never got someone elected before. You work with what you've got in terms of resource and how realistic it is to deliver, because the canvas and the engagement with people is the most important part of it because people want to talk to you. They want to hear what you have to say. They want to ask you questions. They want to raise their issues. And if it's an area where you don't have an elected representative, we do have people that cover those areas if issues come up, just on a voluntary basis and all our offices will have people coming from those areas. Even though there might not be a Sinn Fein elected representative there, they may go to a different office close to their constituency. So we'll always we'll always help and do things like that. But, yeah, I think I think it's only right that you would try and get one before you would run three, yeah.

EMcA

So, moving on then, so candidates from all parties from all the different communities have talked about intimidation whenever they're electioneering or campaigning. And then in April, there was an Alliance councillor who was physically assaulted campaigning in East Belfast. So have you, as a politician, ever felt intimidated or threatened in certain areas of the constituency?

LK

No, I mean not personally. I mean look, you get people who can be quite aggressive with issues and then maybe their approach isn't great, but not to the point where I've felt threatened.

EMcA

And would you always feel secure putting up a poster, knowing that that poster will be there tomorrow if you came back and checked?

LK

Look, people take down posters all the time. That's just nature. Sometimes it's just young ones taking them down for a bit of craic. So it's not that I would feel intimidated. I couldn't put my hands up and say I've ever felt intimidated. Yes, we've had some hairy encounters with people on the doors. But then again, I suppose we have a different demographic in this constituency where the tension maybe isn't as high, but I do know that in other parts of the North that, that that can be an issue and it can be frightening for people.

EMcA

Then finally for this part, what would your opinion be on the potential for like a kind of standard left-right divide in the North that we kind of have in the rest of Europe- one left party, one right party. Many people maybe expected this following the Good Friday Agreement that this would come, and it still hasn't, it's still that you're either going to vote for the Nationalist party or the Unionist party.

LK

Well, I think if you do look at it, it's maybe just how they're termed, because we are used to differentiating on terms of nationalism or unionism. But when you look at the politics of the

parties fall into those categories you probably are looking at left and right and then you have a middle ground as well. I think that you could easily switch those terms, because I mean like even some of the DUP policies are more right-wing than the British parties, if you know what I mean, so, I think that it there it is there and but it's just how people see it and if you really drill down into people's priorities, and the policies of parties and their goals and their aims and objectives and all of that, uh, you would probably say that there is a left-right divide there.

EMcA

I'm moving on now just to talk about the media and new voters- either younger people or the diaspora coming into the North. So first of all, I want to talk about the media. So I would just like if you could walk me through why Sinn Fein hasn't appeared in the Nolan Show for a number of years now. The SDLP, from March, have also boycotted the show. Could you maybe walk me through, as far as you're aware, the reasons behind Sinn Fein's boycott?

LK

I actually can’t. I can't remember, to be honest with you.

EMcA

OK.

LK

Well, I mean, I don't want to get personal because, you obviously have personal opinions which aren't naturally the party’s view if that makes sense. I mean some of the coverage and some of the topics and the balance on the show, I wouldn't necessarily think is fair representation. I don't particularly listen to it, to be honest, I think a lot of it can very much reinforce that orange and green divide. That's my own view, which I don't think is representative of what's actually going on in real life, so that's probably about as much as I'd say on it because, I just think there's other things. I would listen to a lot of Good Morning Ulster and stuff like that where I think there's good debate and good discussion. People talk about the issues and I just it's slightly different and that's not just me saying we hear that; we hear that all the time.

EMcA

Would you say that because, if you look at the listening figures, that the Nolan show is consistently higher than maybe these other more balanced shows, do you think that people listen because they, in a sense, want to get annoyed?

LK

I don't know. I don't know what people's motivation would be. If there's big sensational headlines, it's gonna attract people, so that's maybe what it is. I don't know, that's a guess really. But I actually just read something that there's a review or something happening now, isn’t there?

EMcA

Yes, there is.

LK

I suppose that's kind of tells you some of it, but look, we'll see what happens. I don't really know. I mean, I don't think. From our perspective, I don't think it's been any harm. It hasn't caused us any damages that we don't go on the Nolan Show.

EMcA

So, would you say that the media more generally would have a role to play in sensationalising the constitutional question; that it's still being reinforced even though you wouldn't see it on the ground, it's still being reinforced by the media?

LK

It's a difficult one because you can have your own personal take on it, but I think in terms of the constitutional question and the media coverage of it, I think you're hearing a lot more conversation on it, which is interesting, very interesting. I don't know how many times I put on the TV or the radio and that is what people are talking about it. Whether it's subconscious or not, I think people are starting to realise from all backgrounds, that this is what a lot of people are thinking about. I think the fact that that's now being talked about more and more in mainstream media, where it was never talked about before is quite telling.

EMcA

So do you think then that the international media as well as there's still this kind of portrayal of the North in a conflictual sense?

LK

Yeah, I think so. I think I think there's there still is a lot of talk alluding to the past, which I'm not saying is not needed. We understand that that does have to happen for us all to be able to move on. And there's still a lot of hurt and a lot of pain from all sides. And I think that's why things like legacy really do have to be dealt with. It’s not about putting it in a box and pretending it didn't happen. But think we have to be more forward-looking as well. What can we do here? What potential? What is not working? How do we improve that? What are our options for young people come through? I think that's. And you don't see enough of that. But I do think that conversation is just creeping in, very, very naturally. And I think Brexit was a big catalyst for. That’s because, particularly here for the North, the fact that we voted to remain- that was ignored because it was taken as part of that wider UK vote. Whereas our circumstances are very, very different here because of our constitutional status and when that started affecting people's business and people's livelihoods. And travelling, you mentioned you were on the Erasmus programme, those things which were hugely beneficial for people on this island created opportunities that were never here pre-1998 in some ways as well. And Peace money- we're just the last tranche of peace money, Peace Plus funding, which has transformed communities here, has just been launched. So I think when people realised what was going to be lost and that that they actually wanted to remain but because of people in a different jurisdiction, we have to go with that, despite the consequences for here. And I think that is starting to people, people, how they're trading and everything is changing and they're seeing what, what potential is there.

EMcA

So, I'm sure for maybe the people who vote for the DUP as well, that they would be coming into their offices as well, saying the exact same things to them. Can you imagine, I don't want to put ask you to put yourself into their place, how they would be able to defend their decision to support Brexit?

LK

I don't like they can defend it.

EMcA

OK.

LK

I mean, I haven't seen one benefit.

EMcA

They wouldn't change their mind if there was another vote tomorrow though.

LK

No, I don't think they would, and I actually don't know what they say to people. I'm yet to see a benefit of Brexit for people on the ground for people who are most vulnerable in our society. I think that there's been very, very few, if there's any, benefits to it. It's been a bit of a mess. I think the Protocol has actually helped to soften the blow and we're probably in a better position because we got those arrangements in place and you're going to have trade and all of that, but there are still some things there that are problematic and I don't think we'll be able to resolve them, and that is down to Brexit. Even where we're at now politically, even though they blame the Protocol, the Protocol didn't have to, wouldn't have had to happen if we didn't Brexit.

EMcA

Then moving on to the next question, from the census in 2011 through 2021, the percentage of those living in the North who were born outside of either Ireland or Britain has gone from 4.5% to 6.5%. So, it's still quite low for European standards, but it's the highest level ever in Northern Ireland. So, these people obviously are bringing different social viewpoints, religions, cultures and they don't come over entrenched in families which vote one way or the other. So, what would you say Sinn Fein is doing to try and attract these voters?

LK

Well, a lot of those people are coming into our office all the time and you know, we would have a lot of people coming through here with immigration issues and things like that.

EMcA

And do you think they're making a conscious decision to come to your office? Is it because you're on Monaghan Street, you're handy to reach? They would walk past the DUP office to get to a Sinn Féin office?

LK

Well, I don't know. I don't know. But I mean we get a huge volume of people coming here from all different backgrounds. I mean, I think our society here is becoming so diverse. I lived in England for a few years at university and it was so diverse, and I can see now it's good because it makes it harder as well to say that there's just two communities here because it's not the case.

EMcA

Absolutely.

LK

There's all bar none. As I said I'm from Barcroft, so what have been predominantly nationalist Republican- now we families from Poland and Nigeria, you know, and nobody bats an eyelid. I think that yes, it's always going to be harder cause there's gonna be language barriers. We do try and do some outreach with the different communities.

EMcA

Would you have contacts then with interpreters or translators?

LK

Yeah. Well, we have people in here with interpreters and translators as well, who have come for help and I'm dealing with a family at the minute who have no English at all to do with housing and health issues, and they live in a rural area. And then there's some people who just have no interest in politics at all and will go to just the nearest person they'll find. And then you have others, I remember during the election, a man approached me and said I vote Sinn Fein and he I think he was Polish or something, and he knew who we were. He could tell me bits and pieces about what we've been doing and stuff.

EMcA

So that actually links on quite nicely then to the next topic. So, there was a poll from Pivotal, basically about young people and their opinions on things: whether they want to stay here, whether they want to go away, what's their political opinions. So most young people feel more comfortable with mixing in their communities, but most said that they continue to live in segregated areas and are educated away from people of different backgrounds. So still a lot of segregated education and they would like to see an increase in integrated education and housing and then a majority also want to see day-to-day politics move away from the green versus orange debates. How have you seen a change then, if any, on young people's views and wanting to secure a united Ireland as opposed to the older generations, would you say younger people are more enthusiastic about it?

LK

Yeah, I think young people just bring such a breath of fresh air to a lot of this stuff because they haven't got the same experiences. They see things from the perspective of 'we want to be able to get a job, we want to be able to access good healthcare, we want a good education'. I went to Catholic, all girls' grammar school. I loved school, don't get me wrong. But when I went to England for university, I don't ever remember anybody asking me what type of school I went to. That didn't feature and I think that's why ideally what where we would like to be. I just mean that I don't think that defines people. I think we all want the same things. So, I think that young

people probably see that potential in a united Ireland, and I think it's as well because of access to social media and the Internet and all of that. Young people are far better informed than maybe I would have been at that age, because you didn't have the same access to the information and to be able to make decisions. I just love listening to those young people who just see things for what they are, and they want to better their own lives and their friends' lives and I just think that they can bring so much to the table that way and it's not about harking back to what happened in the past and how we got here.

EMcA

Would you perhaps say that the older generation are maybe a wee bit more "small C" conservative in terms of their pushing towards a united Ireland?

LK

Well, yeah, I think so. And people can get set in their ways too. And I suppose there's a lot of things that have to happen to make it work. We've one shot at this. So we want to do it right and that's why, you know, you see things like Ireland's Future, and Think 32, all those who are a broad spectrum of people from all backgrounds, but all who believe in a united Ireland. At the last Ireland's Future event in the 3Arena last October, you had people on the stage such as James Nesbitt, Reverend Karen Sethuraman…different people like that who are from a traditionally Protestant background. But they see the potential in the united Ireland, so, for me, I think that the conversation has just snowballed massively. People see what we could achieve if we all work together, but that doesn't have to exclude anybody. And I think that's the attitude a lot of young people have is: "Why wouldn't we work towards this when we can?"

EMcA

The second part of this topic is about integrated education, so in this poll, the majority of younger people were looking more towards that. And then the educational divide costs £600,000 a day to maintain. So, what would your position be on the segregated education system?

LK

Well, we obviously voted in favour of that integrated education bill, so we're supportive of integrated education. Our party policy is that every school is good school and it's about making sure that they have the proper investment and the proper facilities to give to all the kids a good opportunity when it comes to education.

EMcA

So I'm going to move on now to some specific questions towards Sinn Fein. You had mentioned it earlier on with Michelle O'Neill going to the King's coronation. It's been seen in the past, even going back to Martin McGuinness shaking hands with the Queen, holding out the hand of friendship to the Unionist community. You would say it's not tokenistic, I'm sure.

LK

No, absolutely not.

EMcA

Why do you think it's important that this is done?

LK

We talk about united Ireland and a united Ireland for all. It's very clear that if we are going to achieve that, we would be so contradictory if we were saying we want a united Ireland that's purely for nationalists and republicans because that's not what it's about. It's about creating a home for everybody, an environment that everybody feels comfortable in. When you look at what Northern Ireland was set out to be- the orange state and all of that- that's gone and it's gone forever, thankfully because a Protestant person and a Catholic person are the same. To me, nobody has that supreme right over somebody else and everybody should have that same opportunity. So if we were working towards the united Ireland that would be more beneficial for one community than another, then we are just as bad. That's that same mentality, which isn't what we're about. When you go back even to look at the wording of the Proclamation, it's about treating everybody equally, regardless of your religion, your background. That's why it's so important.

EMcA

Would you say that this softens the blow for a person from Unionist community sees the likes of John Finucane at the republican commemoration in Mullaghbawn a few weeks ago?

Speaker 2

Well, I mean, I don't think it softens the blow. I mean obviously there's a lot of discussion about it which I don't understand because it's running for13/14 years; nobody ever showed an interest in it before I think. And I go back to what I said earlier around legacy. And John actually said it that day, nobody has anything to celebrate from what has happened in the past in terms of conflict.

EMcA

Would children's entertainment not be seen as celebration?

LK

The point I'm making is that everybody has tight to commemorate their dead. But I think the fact that we've moved on the way we have and we're living in peace, it was about respectfully remembering people at the end of the day, regardless of people's views. And that's the people's right across the board. The dead are people's sons, daughters, fathers. They have a right to remember them.

EMcA

And in terms of this commemoration, though, how would you fit that in terms of the children's entertainment that took place on the day?

LK

The commemoration wasn't military or anything like that. It was remembering those people, but also recognising how far we've come. So, I mean, it's not as if they were there and they

were talking about conflict and how it was great, etcetera, etcetera. We are proud of those people who sacrificed their lives, but it's about how you do that. John's speech was very much about looking to the future, but recognising that was in a different era and that unfortunately a lot of people felt they had no other choice at that time. They knew that there was nobody protecting them, and people were being killed on the street. But we're 50 years on from a lot of that. And we're now in a different era and we're doing things democratically, but I think we still have a right to remember that those people put themselves on the line as well and they sacrificed their lives, their families lost loved ones as well as other families.

EMcA

Personally, would you feel as comfortable about a commemoration on the Shankill Road for loyalists who died, and then afterwards there was a family fun day?

Speaker 2

They have the right to remember their dead too.

EMcA

You would feel as comfortable?

LK

It's not for me to say who they commemorate. And I think it's how it's done. If you look at the event itself. You remember the people that died, there was a minute's silence, John spoke about recognise what has happened in the past but then looked at what's coming ahead, what we want to achieve. Our children are living in in peaceful society now and they're getting opportunities that they didn't get in those days.

EMcA

So it's changed from 15/20 years ago, when there might have been a display of guns, balaclavas?

LK

Yeah, I mean, that has all changed and I think it's just a natural evolution, I suppose, of where things are with society. But I think that it's wrong to say that people don't have the right to remember their dead because there is still a lot of hurting, still a lot of pain. People have sacrificed a lot on all sides, and I think we have to remember that.

EMcA

Is there a directive, so to speak, from the Sinn Fein upper echelons in terms of things that went on in the past? Three-gun salutes at funerals, stuff like this. Has there been a directive to disassociate the party from this. Or has it just naturally evolved that way?

LK

In terms of our party and how decisions are taken, everything is voted on for the membership anyway. But I think naturally over time, there's just been change. And I mean you have different generations coming through, I suppose you move with what's happening.

EMcA

And then in 10 or 15 years down the line, if there was a new leadership in place, hypothetically, and they said we're just going to not associate ourselves with these commemorations anymore, could you see that happening?

LK

But that would be that would be off to the membership.

EMcA

OK, yeah.

LK

So that would be something that would be up to our Ard Fheis.

EMcA

If you look at, for example, Michelle O'Neill going to the coronation, 20 or 30 years ago, that would have been out of the question.

LK

Yeah. That's one thing I suppose about Sinn Fein- the vast majority of decisions, particularly big decisions are taken and discussed right down at a grassroots level. So, there's no hierarchy as such. Though, there's obviously different structures in place of course.

EMcA

It's very tight though, isn't it?

LK

Yeah, but we've a huge membership. So don't get me wrong, you go to rooms, and we have debates, and we have discussions about things.

EMcA

You mentioned there the necessity of reaching out to other communities. Would you say that certain people from the nationalist gene pool have moved away from Sinn Fein, that there's been this moving away of Sinn Fein from its core Republican values?

LK

No, I don't think so.

EMcA

Well, more generally then, maybe over the past while since the Good Friday Agreement?

LK

Well, no, I disagree, because our vote has increased. We've obviously the highest number of elected representatives that we've ever had.

EMcA

You haven't seemed to lose any support?

LK

No. Well, not in the most recent elections, you know, we're actually the biggest nationalist party now in the Assembly. We're the biggest party on the island now as it stands. So I don't think so. Yes, there probably were people who moved away from Sinn Fein due to things over the years, but I think people are seeing a bigger picture. And in terms of things around the King's coronation and other things and reaching out to our Unionist neighbours, it's more about showing people that we respect what is important to them- that we want to represent them as well. Michelle obviously doesn't agree with the monarchy, but when you're a leader and when you're in that position, you have to realise that you're representing people who do.

EMcA

Sinn Fein's slogan at the moment is "Working for all" and then Michelle O'Neill specifically is "First Minister for all". If you're look at Alliance's slogan, it's "Making politics work". You're looking at something similar. Would you say this is something like an 'Alliancification of Sinn Fein'? Would you say that you may be hoping to get, from somebody who's going to give Alliance their first preference, a second or third preference? Trying to focus on this type of voter over somebody who'd be more naturally inclined to vote for the DUP for example.

LK

I don't know. I think it goes back to that point of what people's priorities are and showing that we want to work for everybody, not just for one element of society. I don't think we're looking at the likes of Alliance or anyone else to tailor what our approach is or how our front-facing image is. it's more about what do we want to achieve, and trying to help people to see that as well. We have been able to show in small amounts, even in the last couple of years when the Assembly was up, of how we can do that and how we actually mean that. But I don't think it's an 'Alliancification', because we still hold our core values and that's always going to be important to us. But that doesn't mean that you completely shut off from everything else, because that is what we're what Republican values are about.

EMcA

In terms of the centre ground that Alliance claimed to have- both members from the Nationalists and the Unionist community- would you see this as genuine? Or would you see Alliance as a Unionist party, the same way that somebody from the DUP might see Alliance possibly as a Nationalist party? They come in for a hard time from both angles.

LK

Yeah, they do definitely. I suppose traditionally they would have been seen as a Unionist party, maybe with a small U. Some of their policies wouldn't be in line with what we would be looking at in terms of economic policies and things like that. But they do have representatives from various backgrounds. So, I think it's genuine in the sense that they cover a broad spectrum of people. There's a lot of the people voting for them will also be termed "Other" in terms of the constitutional question, so there's a lot of people within that who will probably make the difference one way or another if we get a referendum. So, there's probably things about

Alliance- their policies- that we do agree with and others that we don't. And that's probably where there can be an overlap. But that work from all sides.

EMcA

I'll just try and wrap it up now. A poll published a few months ago for the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement showed that 75% of those interviewed wanted to see the power-sharing rules of Stormont reviewed, at the very least. What would your view be on the notion that the Good Friday Agreement needs to be amended before a new Executive can be formed?

LK

I sort of alluded to it earlier, I would err caution around amending the Good Friday Agreement. The transformational change has been huge and, obviously because of the situation at the minute with the Executive, there's a lot of focus around the power-sharing arrangements, but I suppose I would just be fearful around what could be lost if we started to unravel some of that. I don't think people maybe fully appreciate just what it has meant for here. I'm not saying we don't talk about it, we do we the discussion has to be had but, I think there's so much that we have gained from the Good Friday Agreement, and we are we want to make sure that that is protected. It's a difficult one but from our view we've said it repeatedly we want to protect it, it's important. It does protect people's rights. There's so much of it that hasn't even been delivered, and we have to make sure that that's seen through. With power-sharing, I suppose, people are frustrated by it because of how it can be abused as such, but it is a lot of the stuff was put in there to protect minorities and people who weren't being properly treated prior to that.

EMcA

My last question is, all voters have different priorities and opinions, so of course, not every Sinn Fein voter would agree with you on absolutely every single point in your manifesto. As we said before, the constitutional possession is quite a low priority for voters. So could you ever see a situation whereby Unionists, who are British, they disagree with your policy on United Ireland, could you ever see a situation where they would give you first preference because of your opinion on something not related to the constitutional question, reproductive rights for example?

LK

Yeah, yeah. I think if it is a low priority for people…

EMcA

Well, first of all, do you think it's a low priority for people?

LK

Well, I think it's a low priority in the here and now. It's not something that's going to happen next week. But for a lot of people who are voting for us, they vote for us because of our policies on health, education, etcetera. So, I think if you look at it in the short, medium, and long term- in the short term, yes, people want access to their GPs, they want their healthcare treatment free at the point of contact. But we also have to show people how we could deliver that, so I think people do look at that.

EMcA

And what would you say then to a Unionist who completely agrees with Sinn Fein's actions on the economy? This unionist is thinking "I really want to give Sinn Fein my first preference because I'm really impressed with their performance in government. But I'm British. I would never ever vote for united Ireland". What would you say to that voter?

LK

Well, I mean, we'd obviously still try and encourage them to vote for us and you would be saying well this is what we can do in the six counties but think what we could do if we had an all-Ireland joined-up government structure. If they're discussing that with you, that's you're going to talk about. You're going to say, "Well, this is why we are supportive of a united Ireland. That's why it's our main objective". But, you can walk and chew gum at the same time. There are things that you're never going to win somebody over in that short period, but if they give us their vote and we get in and we're in government here and in the government in the South, you can start to see that joined up approach and you can see how things might help people. We want to encourage as many people as possible to start thinking about it, talking about it. So even the fact that you're having that discussion with somebody, to me, is a positive. Someone who is definitely saying they would never vote for a reunited Ireland, but they're considering giving Sinn Fein a vote, who are a party of united Irelanders, tells me that there's something changing there. I worked in an area in my last job which would have been predominantly unionist and a lot of my colleagues were unionist people, and in the last two elections, they have told me they have given Sinn Féin a preference. And I wasn't a candidate in the constituency, it wasn't a personal thing. But these people would never ever have thought they would ever do it before, but they openly told me that. I also think people maybe are looking at the British Government's treatment of people here, in terms of what they do for us and what they don't do for us and how that holds us back.

EMcA

Would you see Aontú as a realistic threat?

LK

No, no. I think the like the elections have shown that.

EMcA

Right, yeah.

LK

Look, everybody has the right to stand and I'm not. I'm not trying to be not trying to be condescending or anything, I just mean that their key focus is obviously around reproductive rights and they are that kind of more right wing…

EMcA

Would you say in terms of their desire for united Ireland, Peadar Tóibín was obviously a Sinn Fein TD previously, would you say that they have the same desire for a united Ireland as they seem to obviously have against reproductive rights?

LK

Well, I don't know enough about their policies on a united Ireland, they haven't made it clear really. I'm not going looking for it either, but I think yeah, they're so focused on the issue of reproductive rights. Given the support that there is now for abortion rights, marriage equality, trans rights- there's more support for it than there are people against it. I think the vast majority of people out there have no issue with it. I think that Aontú would struggle to gain electoral success based on those policies alone.

EMcA

And in the run up to a unity referendum, would you be happy standing shoulder to shoulder with an Aontú representative? Can you imagine Mary-Lou and Peadar being united behind the one cause?

LK

Yeah. Well, I think, I mean, if you go back to the Brexit vote, all parties who were anti-Brexit united; we all may have had different policies and different perspectives, but people unite for a common goal for the right reasons. In terms of united Ireland, I think that is something that we always we're going to have to consider because it's not going to be just Sinn Fein heading up a united Ireland. We need everybody onboard. What a united Ireland looks like may be different to all of us in terms of some of the legislation, but yeah, I don't think there's anything wrong with people coming together for a common cause.

EMcA

Well, I think that's everything on my part.

LK

I hope I didn't talk too much!

EMcA

Absolutely not. But is there anything else you think that I should have asked?

LK

No, I think I think we've covered quite a lot and for me, I've actually found it very interesting. It challenges me a bit too that there's no harm. So I appreciate your time too, and if there's anything else we can do, don't be afraid to give us reach out.

EMcA

Yes, I will do. Absolutely. Thank you very much.

Interview 3: Helena Young, former Chair of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland.

Eoghan McArdle (EMcA)

Many thanks for taking some time out of your day to speak to me, Helena, it's much appreciated. Would you mind starting off my giving a short introduction to yourself, please?

Helena Young (HY)

You're very welcome, Eoghan. So, my name is Helena Young, and I am the representative for the Alliance Party in the Newry area, and I was actually the Chair of the Party Executive for the year 2020-21. I've also been a candidate for local elections here in the Newry electoral area for Newry, Mourne, and Down Council in both 2019 and 2023. tly, I didn't get elected either time. I was only 41 votes short at the last count in 2019, a bit more at the last election there in May, but actually my first preference votes did increase by 109 votes to 830, so obviously I was very happy with that. But on a day-to-day basis, I am very involved in the Alliance Party nonetheless, I sit on the Party Executive and I would see myself as the party representative here in Newry, a town which historically has not exactly been an Alliance stronghold, but nevertheless I do help people out with whatever issues they are facing, be it with universal welfare payments, school placements, et cetera, as best as I can.

EMcA

What made you want to get into politics in the first place?

HY

Well, growing up I was never into politics at all, I never even voted once until about ten years ago! I'm nearly 60 now, but I got married at 21, as you did back in those days, so I then had four boys to rear so I was always busy between them and work, so I never really had any time for politics. Then, in later years, I got involved in local community groups around Newry, and community activism, and to be honest, I got very frustrated with the lack of funding available for local services, and the lack of political interest in community services too, so that fired me up a bit. Then about six or seven years ago now, I gained an interest in the Alliance Party, just from watching the news and listening to the radio, I saw them as a party that I might be interested in, which was a bit strange as Newry would never have been a town that would have voted Alliance. So, I headed on to the Party Conference that year, and got myself involved as an Alliance rep in Newry, and fast forward to 2020 and I was chosen as the Chair of the Party for that year.

EMcA

And why the Alliance Party?

HY

I suppose what attracted me to them those years ago when I initially joined was that Naomi Long had just been elected as the leader of Alliance, and I thought that she was very fresh, she was a woman, and that she had a lot of ideas for the future of how to run this place. Before, I had seen the Alliance Party as a unionist party, and to be honest, a bit boring really, quite middle-class, and certainly not representative of myself as a working-class girl from Newry. But Naomi did change that for me, so I took a deep breath and got myself involved in the party, and I've been doing that ever since and really enjoying it. Even though I came from a republican background, my daddy was in prison when I was in primary school for IRA activity, I never

really got involved in republicanism myself, or any politics for that matter. Also, after my first husband died, I got remarried to a man from a Protestant background from Carrickfergus, so then that changed my perspective as well, you know, realising that the future of this place here cannot just cater for one community. Now, as well as my own activism, I am the office manager for Patrick Brown, the Alliance MLA for South Down over in Warrenpoint, so that keeps me busy as well with all of his case work and dealing with the local issues there.

EMcA

Thank you for your introduction. To move onto the questions about consociationalism: Mark Durkan, he described consociationalism as the ugly scaffolding of Good Friday Agreement, so community designation means that people are often more inclined to vote for Orange and Green, so would you, as a member of the Alliance Party, see a need for changing this community designation?

HY

Yeah, because obviously the Alliance Party, I hate using both sides, but it represents, you know, nationalist, unionist, and other- and neither. So, definitely yes.

EMcA

And what would you say to someone, for example, who agrees with your party on your social policy, your economics, your views in healthcare, but they see themselves as staunchly unionist or stanchly nationalist; are the Alliance Party working to try and attract these people?

HY

I think the Alliance Party tries to engage with everyone, and I think really that their track record proves what they are doing protectively. Maybe not in Newry because obviously we're still very young, in Newry there's basically just me, but the party itself is thriving up in Belfast and in Mid Ulster and Ballymena. We have more representation there now. And our party works with everybody. Our slogan is that we work with everyone, and for everyone. I spoke at our party conference in March and in my speech, I said that I now don't consider Alliance as a cross-community party. I consider Alliance as an all-community party. And a couple of the newspapers actually picked up on that in particular. I do think we're very interested in engaging with all sides and a lot of that engagement, even with the other political parties, can be done behind closed doors. That may not actually be in the public domain. I know that, as a member of party executive, you know that I would be aware that there is a lot of engagement going on with parties behind closed doors, and I think the Alliance leadership particularly spend a lot of time trying to pull the sides together and find common ground.

EMcA

So obviously you do see a need for a change in the community destination: nationalist unionist, and other. Could you see a danger there in terms of representation, looking at the past where it's unionist dominated. Can you see an issue if there were not these protections in place?

HY

I'll be honest, I just think with the history of where we were that it's going to take a very long time until, organically, that sorts itself out, I really do. I think that even now post Good Friday

Agreement, we're in a much, much better place. But it's always there, always in the background, sometimes to the forefront.

EMcA

I don't know whether you saw it a few weeks ago in the Belfast Telegraph- a photoshopped image of Jeffrey Donaldson and Michelle O'Neill, Jeffrey in a Rangers jersey and Michelle in a Celtic jersey, so it's showing Sinn Fein and the DUP as the two massive parties; in Northern Ireland, you are either supporting one or supporting the other, there is nothing in between. How far would you agree with this portrayal?

HY

Well, when you look at the election results in recent years, Alliance had a surge in 2019 and they continued that with the Assembly elections last year, increasing our MLAs by 11. And even in these Council elections, I think we've got 40-something more councillors across the board and we've got councillors in places we never had before. I think we're moving in the right direction, when you look at where we were even ten years ago. Now, a lot of people are wanting to bring their families up not identifying as one side or the other. And I'd be really honest, the majority of people that I know, especially young people such as my own sons, they're not interested in politics- they're interested in how much the mortgage went up a couple of months ago, and making sure that the kids get into school and being able to pay their bills. So, I think as we're moving forward, a lot of people are of that mindset. And I know that when I was on the doors, the majority of people were saying that they were fed up. They were just fed up with the way the things were and that they were swaying towards the middle ground. Unfortunately, their votes didn't prove that. But anyway, that's another story for another day. But I really do think that that centre ground is growing.

EMcA

You can see from the election results now that Sinn Féin are dominating the nationalist vote, whereas 20 years ago they would have been more neck-and-neck with SDLP, and idem with DUP overtaking the Ulster Unionists in terms of the unionist vote. Would you say that Alliance is therefore taking up the space for both moderately-minded unionists and nationalists away from the SDLP and UUP?

HY

Yes, probably. Though we have had quite a few Sinn Fein people who have voted Sinn Fein previously told me that they would be voting Alliance now- whether they did do that on the day or not, that is a completely different matter. I know that this most previous council election was sort of an exception. It was a council election, but people seemed to been voting the way they would in an Assembly election. So, I think that this particular election is maybe not the comparison that you would make, you would need to be looking in four year's time at the next council elections to see a change. Lord knows where we'll be by then anyway. But there's a Westminster next year and then an Assembly election in 2027.

EMcA

I'm going to move on now to just talk about political engagement. I know you were saying that the Alliance Party representation in Newry is rather small, but is there a decision-making process behind where election workers knock doors or where posters are displayed during election campaigns??

HY

Yes, we have a campaign strategy and Alliance are always election ready. There is always a really well thought out and executed plan, more so in particular for target areas. Obviously, we know, for instance, Slieve Gullion, we're not going to get anyone in there, so we don't waste our resources going there. We still send out all the literature, but we don't have bodies out knocking doors there.

EMcA

And would you think if you did have bodies up, people knocking at doors, that you might just get people on your side?

HY

I think particularly because we're such a small association here that we have to focus our efforts on where we think we can make the difference. But the other thing is that Alliance as well, outside of elections, the majority of associations will be out on the doors doing surveys, so the engagement goes on all year round. It's not just at election time, and particularly where they have the numbers, like in Belfast, those guys are out a couple of times a month.

EMcA

So, the party tries to anticipate throughout the term of the Assembly where the support may be the strongest, and then afterwards make the decision to focus your electioneering on those particular areas?

HY

That’s it, yeah. But that on-the-ground work is up to each association between elections; what level of community engagement they have. And obviously that will be determined by what numbers of members the association has. But in terms of when it comes to election time, we will have a soft election campaign for a couple of months going in and then we have the six weeks where it's all hands on deck. Now because I'm the only one really here in Newry, obviously because I can’t get round all the doors, I would do quite a bit on social media and, through different groups I'm involved with here in Newry. At the same time, people were saying to me about areas that I was going into to canvas, “That's a really Sinn Fein area” and I said “Why? They don't own it”. Even out in the Belfast Road where it would have been very unionist, I'd go out by myself and knock doors out there and people would wonder are they rude to me, and I have to say no.

EMcA

And have you had any unpleasant encounters at doors?

HY

I have to say that I have canvassed in probably about five elections now, and there's only ever been once that somebody was not pleasant. The worst thing they can do is just say, “No thanks, I'm not interested” and I say thank you and leave. But one house I went through, the son came to the door, he was young, and I said to him that I was there canvassing, I asked him, “Have you voted before?” And he said no. I asked, “Do you think you're going to vote this time”, he says, “I don't know”. And I asked, “Look, would you maybe consider voting for Alliance because we're a cross-community party and we're all about inclusivity and diversity”. I knew that he wasn’t particularly interested, but he was being pleasant and receptive. So, he went back inside, and I hadn’t even closed the gate when his mother came out, screwed up the election literature, and threw it behind me. I just thought, thank God she didn't answer the door! But that was the one and only time because people are quite receptive because I don't think that they blame the Alliance Party for anything and we're not a threat, we are sort of middle of the road.

EMcA

What would you say the decision-making process is behind how many candidates you put up for election? Do you look at the history of where you have received lots of votes previously?

HY

So, we have a guy who is our campaigns and developments manager, and we have a team of people who will are constantly looking at the makeup of the electoral areas for council, Assembly, and Westminster. There'll be Westminster election coming up now, so obviously we know that we are not going to get all the seats possible. We've already got Stephen Farry in, and what we have done is identified potentially another two or three places where we think we might have a fighting chance. So then everyone will concentrate their efforts on those areas, because there's no point if my name here in Newry and Armagh goes on a on a paper, not a chance in hell. We mightn’t have the massive machine that Sinn Féin do, but we do still have a machine, so they are completely on top of everything, they will have everything sorted out like a year in advance. So, we have a plan, yes.

EMcA

I know for my council electoral area this year, Alliance did have one candidate up for election. Was he aware that it was going to be a very hard bet to get him elected?

HY

100%, because Caolán only came in to join the party last year and then I reached out to stand for election. He’s a clever boy, and we didn't have a candidate to stand in Slieve Gullion, so he offered to be the candidate. But he knew that he wouldn't have to do any canvassing. But he is somebody that could be developed. This is what we'll do now. He's very interested in politics, so what we'll do is we'll work with him and develop him potentially for the next council election.

EMcA

Are there people put up in areas just to have an Alliance representative name on the ballot sheet?

HY

All parties do that when they don't have anybody prolific in the area; rather than leave it that there's no party representation. And even Caolán, he did get a few hundred votes. Sure look at our new councillor in Antrim, Lewis Boyle, 18, doing his A-Levels, we do have amazing young people coming through that are not just faces on a poster or names on a ballot paper. They're really high calibre, really clever people. It's brilliant to see it.

EMcA

Following on from the Good Friday Agreement, a lot of people expected to see a left-right divide to come in, as in the rest of Europe. 25 years later, that doesn't seem to have arisen in Northern Ireland. Would you believe that there is room for that to come on down the line in the future?

HY

Well, I would say that Alliance would be leaning more towards the left. I know, personally, I do. And I'll be really honest with you, I know when I look at Sinn Fein and the SDLP and Alliance, there's nothing very much that separates us, really there isn't.

EMcA

In terms of policies you mean?

HY

Policies, yeah. There's not a whole lot that separates us, I think. I think it's a constitutional question that is the main denominator there, in terms of people's perceptions.

EMcA

Would you still see the Alliance Party as a party for small 'u' unionists who are a bit more towards the left, not agreeing with the DUP's stance on abortion, same-sex marriage…?

HY

Yeah, I definitely would. And I still think that we are, realistically, small 'u' unionists. Particularly in Belfast, but that's changing. Slowly, but surely, changing.

EMcA

And would you be comfortable saying that to somebody else within the party who would disagree with that belief?

HY

You know, I met a journalist for an interview a couple of years ago, and he was writing about the consequences of Brexit, and he said that he had been around the Alliance Party a long time, and that I was the least likely Alliance Party person I have ever met, as if I had broken a mould or something. Because I'm really sort of embedded within the communities and community groups- ordinary, everyday people who are facing struggles that I faced myself all through my life. So, maybe I'm just maybe that bit more approachable. So yeah, we need different people from all kinds of walks of life and backgrounds.

EMcA

So, I'm going to move on now to talk more about the media and new voters. So would you say that the media, so would you say that the media has a role in sensationalising the constitutional question, in making it that it's more of an orange vs. green issue rather than anything else?

HY

Yes, definitely. Especially shows like Nolan. But look at who he has on the show consistently and constantly: Jamie Bryson and Jim Allister. It's as if he's doing it to stoke up tension.

EMcA

At the same time, it is the most listened to radio show in the country. Do you think maybe that people are attracted to this drama?

HY

I think that people might say that he's stirring the sectarian pot or whatever, but they listen. And they're compelled to listen. I always feel whenever our Alliance people come on, I'm always very proud of how calm and measured there are, they won't be pulled into any of that nonsense. They'll step back from it, but definitely sometimes the show is just ridiculous. But sure, that's how they're selling their papers, that's how they're increasing their audience figures. But it is setting the people against each other.

EMcA

To speak now about new voters, in the censuses from 2011 to 2021, there's an increase from 4.5% to 6.5% of people who were born outside of Ireland or Britain, still quite low by European standards but a record high for Northern Ireland. So obviously these people are not coming from a unionist or nationalist background- what would you say that the Alliance Party is doing to entice these voters over to your party? Would you say you might have an easier time enticing somebody who's not from either tradition?

HY

I can speak personally on this when knocking doors of people who were from Poland or Lithuania and have actually been here for a while. And a lot of them will say "Oh, no, no, I don't vote. I don't vote". But there were quite a number, when I spoke to them and showed them my card and explained what the party were, that we're in the middle. And I did have a few people who said that they actually had a polling card but that they weren't going to vote, but now that they were. Hopefully they voted for me! But when I go and somebody says that they're not going to vote, I'll say, you know, you need to use your vote. I don't even care if you don't vote for me, but please use your vote, because if you look at the proportion of people who don't vote, if even half of them voted, I think it would just sort of change everything, wouldn't it? But people are just so disengaged and disenfranchised and full of apathy, just fed up with the whole thing.

EMcA

Would you say that once such an immigrant voter does vote, and they vote for Sinn Fein or the DUP, would you see them then as being entrenched in the nationalist or unionist camp?

HY

No, I don't think so. This might just be a sweeping generalisation, but I think that they will vote for the people who engage with them the most. There's no question that here in specifically in Newry that Sinn Fein have the monopoly on the boots on the street. But I do think that people who have made this place their home, they will vote for whoever they engage with.

EMcA

They may be more pragmatic?

HY

Yes, rather than thinking about who mum and dad vote for. Sadly a lot of people actually still do that. We have perfectly intelligent young people, can they not have their mind? But once you stand and engage with them on the door, they'll say, "I wasn't going to vote. But you know what? I am going to vote now, I'll give you a vote", so yeah.

EMcA

So to move on now for more specific questions for the Alliance Party. Would you find that your party does come in for a hard time from both designations? The unionists would accuse you of being a nationalist party, then nationalists may accuse you of being a unionist party.

HY

100%, and this is becoming more apparent over the last year, we're accused of being part of the "pan-nationalist front", or of sitting on the fence. I can't even remember all the bloody things that they call us. To be honest, I actually think that we are aligned more with Sinn Fein now than we are with the DUP.

EMcA

Due to your policies?

HY

It's the simplest things, because for example in Belfast City Council, we support motions, or because we second motions. It's even down to that very simple thing. I think it's because, as well, in particular since Stormont folded, that we are so critical of the DUP as well.

EMcA

In the context of Northern Ireland's history, how would Alliance approach the issue of dealing with the legacy of the Troubles? I'm talking about the Troubles Legacy Bill, stuff like this. I've also thinking about your party's MLA Sorcha Eastwood in particular, taking a very hard stance against John Finucane speaking the recent Republican commemoration, stuff like this. At the same time, you do have Alliance councillors and MLAs at RUC commemorations. Is there a united view within your party on the past?

HY

I don't think anyone else really came out as strongly as Sorcha did. I'm not sure whether I can really speak on behalf of the party because I know that they obviously support victims and are

very proactive in getting justice for victims. My own personal opinion is that everybody should be able to respectfully honour the people who were lost. But when does that stop, I wonder, how long does that go on?

EMcA

Well, what the Conservative Party are trying to do is to make it all stop here.

HY

The only issue I had with that Mullaghbawn commemoration, what didn't sit comfortably with me, was the fact that it was a children's fun day. I think if they had just gone to their monument and honoured those guys who died and then didn't link it with a family fun day, that would have sat more comfortably with me. I had no zero issue with them doing their parade and doing their service and their speeches and stuff, no issue whatsoever. But the fun day? No. The same with the Raymond McCreesh Park- that should never be allowed to be called that, a children's park.

Speaker 2

So, there are different views within the Alliance Party about these sorts of things, and that's in every party, I guess.

HY

That's it.

EMcA

But before you speak to somebody within in the media, talking on the radio or giving an interview to a newspaper, would you have to consult other people at the party?

HY

If it's something that doesn't involve policy, if it's something local: work away. But anything other than that, you have to go through the Press team so it can be just reviewed or if anything needs to be edited or added. Anyone on the radio or television will be briefed before they go on. You're told what to do and what to say, and just do as you're told; that's what happens with all parties, nobody makes a decision until they ring somebody.

EMcA

So we mentioned it earlier on, "Save Daisy Hill" et cetera, Alliance obviously support the Bengoa Report for less, more specialised hospitals, that it is a more complex issue which needs pragmatism. Alliance haven't really suffered at the polls as a result of that. That's interesting, no?

HY

Well, I think here in Newry, for me, we did slightly.

EMcA

Okay.

HY

So obviously every party signed up to Bengoa, and the way that I see it now is that Alliance have been the only party courageous enough to stand by what they've signed up to. Everyone else has taken the whole populist line. Now obviously that is our hospital, and we love that hospital and we don't want to lose our services, but the reality is that the health service is in that much of a mess, so something's got to give. We can't expect to have every service in every hospital. So, I completely understand that the has to be reform. But the week before the election, Naomi was on The View and she said that she would be willing to travel extra miles to get the medical service she needed in a timely manner. So, people immediately turned that to Helena Young wants to shut down Daisy Hill. And the other parties went to the doors and said, well, Alliance don't want to save Daisy Hill. Even though I've been out on the marches, and I am part of the Daisy Hill Future Group. Sometimes it's very difficult to be able to stand up and speak your opinion.

EMcA

So, what were you marching for, then?

HY

Well, I was showing my support for our community that we want to see as many services saved as possible. Obviously, we're going to lose some of them. Now the interesting thing is Emergency Surgery had been gone out of Daisy Hill for over a year and there had been no adverse incidents. And then, the next thing was it was all blown up and everybody was out on the streets. So, it had been gone for a year, and no one even knew.

EMcA

And when participating in these marches, do you keep some of those opinions to yourself?

HY

No, I would say that I fight for Daisy Hill. That's our hospital. I would say, listen, we have to be realistic here. You know, obviously we can't have everything, and you might have to go to Dungannon or Craigavon for certain services: that's OK. I think that people have to be pragmatic and realistic and think well, are you going to complain that you're going to the Royle to get stents in to save you from having a heart attack? It's the emotion connected with Daisy Hill that is the crux of the matter.

EMcA

In terms of "Save our Hospitals" et cetera, you would see other parties as favouring seat retention? Looking at Daisy Hill as an emotive issue, fearing losing their seat if they even suggest the slightest reform?

HY

I would say that every party will have played that game because, as I said before, every party signed up to Bengoa in 2016, every party. But it's so emotive an issue, so they say nothing, and you know, and in fairness, whether you agree or disagree with Alliance, they're there and they're talking about the changes that are needed. It's not popular, but it's the reality, unfortunately.

EMcA

If you were elected as an MLA, regardless of your own personal belief, you'd have to be designated as “Other” as Alliance are non-designated. Does that sit comfortably with you?

HY

Well, I do call myself an Irish nationalist, but I respect everybody's opinion. Just because I consider myself to be an Irish nationalist, that doesn't mean to say that I can't work for my unionist neighbour.

EMcA

You would see change needed, then, to scrap the nationalist/unionist/other designation?

HY

Yes, absolutely. I do consider myself an Irish nationalist, but I don't go round wearing that as a badge on my chest. Primarily, I am just a community activist.

EMcA

Would your representatives be free to take an opinion in terms of the constitutional position if and when there is a border poll?

HY

Yeah, but there's been no formal discussions yet.

EMcA

Are your politicians free to declare right now their position on the constitutional question?

HY

I don't think any of them have done. I don't know whether they're not allowed to, but I just think that they're more focused at the minute in trying to get here sorted out.

EMcA

In the future, if there is a border poll as many predict, will your party be taking a side as a party, or more so a conscience vote?

HY

Again, that's not something that has really been discussed. The leadership have said when we get to that stage, then we’ve got to set out our stall. But I think obviously before that ever has to happen, the internal conversations have to take place. So at the minute, that hasn't happened.

EMcA

And that will be decided as a party?

HY

As a party, yes, so it won't be the leadership. The party leadership don’t make a decision on anything that is policy led really, that goes to party council.

EMcA

Would you, personally, be voting for a united Ireland if there were a vote held tomorrow?

HY

I would be undecided, because in my heart it's what I want to see, because for me, even to look at Ireland on a map, to see a line drawn on the island, aesthetically, it doesn't look very good. And if I'm anywhere, I tell people I'm Irish, not Northern Irish, I'm Irish. But I would need to see the detail. For me, a border poll cannot logically take place until we know exactly how it would look, and then I would make a decision. But I think a lot of people might jump because they go with their hearts and not with their heads.

EMcA

I suppose maybe they might think that this is a once in a lifetime vote.

HY

Exactly, that's it. And remember: do the South want us? I worked in Navan for a number of years, I made a lot of friends down there and they had never been over the border. I said, "Do you think we all drive around in tanks and flat jackets?", but they were petrified, and they knew very little. Nobody knew anything about here, zero interest. Even a lot of politicians from the South and in England, they know nothing and have zero interest; nothing about the dynamic here, how it all works, the intricacies of it all.

EMcA

I want to ask you now about the former Alliance representative for Armagh, Jackie Coade, who left your party and subsequently joined the SDLP. I won't go into the reasons behind it, but why do you think that Jackie saw the SDLP as her new political home?

HY

I don't think she does see it as her new political home, honestly.

EMcA

Why do you think then that she didn't simply remain politically independent, as many others have done? Why do you think she then jumped ship to the SDLP?

HY

Well, it did rather surprise me when she joined the SDLP because had always said to me, "would never, ever join Sinn Fein or vote for Sinn Fein, I would never join the SDLP, they're too far right for me". Now, it didn't surprise me that she joined the party in the respect that she wanted to continue to do whatever what she was doing, and that was the place where she thought maybe she would fit best.

EMcA

She felt as though she couldn't continue on her work as being independent?

HY

She maybe could have., but she chose not to. Maybe she thought that there was a better support system for her within another party. And obviously in the election, then, I think she's got 196 votes or something in Craigavon.

EMcA

Jackie has then gone on the record to say that she doesn't view herself as a nationalist, despite being a member of the SDLP. Would you say that other parties more generally would be able to open themselves up more to people who are not of that same community designation?

HY

I don't know. For the SDLP, probably, I suppose because they're maybe not as far entrenched in nationalism as Sinn Féin are, so that could be a really good move on their part. I'm not sure what Jackie has been doing from the election because it's been like radio silence. People are also saying that Sinn Fein are becoming more "Alliancefied", so I think we're at this stage now because obviously Sinn Fein are giving this more political route and working for everyone. So, I think that we're all sort of organically merging, coming towards each other. Which is a good thing.

EMcA

Would you see yourselves as more willing to cooperate with Sinn Féin, more aligned to their policies, rather than the DUP?

HY

Well, if the DUP are saying no, no, no to everything, and Alliance and the other parties are really willing to work together, it's only obvious that we will work together.

EMcA

And if the DUP say, "Okay, we will work together, but we're still going to say no to same-sex marriage, to women's reproductive rights. These are our lines", would you still be willing to cooperate?

HY

At the end of the day, these are their lines that you just have to accept, because we're all not the same. I think that the DUP just need to get back into Stormont and get things moving.

EMcA

A poll published at the time of the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement showed that 75% of those interviewed would want to see the rules of Stormont reviewed, in terms of power sharing. What would your opinion be on the notion that the Good Friday Agreement needs to be amended into the future?

HY

I think it has to be. Nothing can ever stay the same. The makeup of the population is changing, and again, we've got so many people from different countries here who have made this place their home. So, it's not all about us; it's not all about the orange and green.

EMcA

Would you say that maybe there is a danger of losing the things that were so hard-fought, if you look at the civil rights abuses from 50 years right stuff like this. Some might say that things like these are so precious that if we did start to amend the Agreement, that we are heading into dangerous waters?

HY

I don't know. I think that the main structure of it should probably stay, but I definitely think that there's other things that can be looked at and maybe reviewed. I think there needs to be reform of the institutions, so that no one party can ever pull down the government. But when you look at our track record, it's so abysmal that, for all the years that Stormont has been running, the percentage of the time that we have actually been working together. Is it ever going to run smoothly? I don't know.

EMcA

What would your opinion be on maybe the census in the future asking for one's view on the constitutional status?

HY

I don't think it would do any harm to ask that question.

EMcA

I suppose in the past, this was gauged with religion, but obviously you can see the limitations of this.

HY

What harm would that new question do? At the end of the day, it's just gauging an opinion, it's not a border poll, it's just gauging an opinion.

EMcA

Just to recap on my hypothesis that the electorate in Northern Ireland continued to vote by their constitutional preference due to the consociational setup of government and the lack of engagement from the other sides, would you agree with this?

HY

When remember that Alliance went from having 8 MLAs to having 17, so a massive increase, and in the Council elections, I think we're the only party to grow their councillors by the biggest percentage as well. So I do think that as time is moving on, there definitely is a shift. It may not be happening in Newry, yet! But it's happening everywhere else.

EMcA

And if there were more political engagements, would people stop thinking about Newry as a "nationalist" town as things change and new generations emerge?

HY

Yeah, I really do think it will. I think that we're making a bit of headway, but very slowly. Still, when you look at Newry now, the only unionist part is out to the Belfast Road or Bessbrook. I think historically, Bessbrook would have been 70-30 in favour of unionists, now it's almost the other way around, so there's still a lot of work to do.

EMcA

Okay, well that's all my questions covered. Thank you very much for your time, Helena.

HY

My pleasure, Eoghan, we certainly got a lot of ground covered and I hope that I've helped as much as I can.

Interview 4: Professor Emeritus Jennifer Todd, Research Director, Institute of British-Irish Studies, University College Dublin.

Eoghan McArdle (EMcA)

Hello, Professor Todd, thank you for taking the time to speak to me.

Prof Jennifer Todd (JT)

Not at all, Eoghan.

EMcA

Would you mind if we begin with you briefly introducing yourself?

JT

Sure, okay, so my name is Jennifer Todd. I am a Professor Emeritus from University College Dublin. I taught in the school of Politics there until 2018, and I remain the Research Director at the Institute of British-Irish Studies in UCD, and I'm also an associate Fellow at the Centre of Constitutional Change at the University of Edinburgh. My work would mainly focus on the areas of conflict, identity, and ethnic and identity shifts within conflictual societies, so a lot of my work has focused on Northern Ireland.

EMcA

Okay, thank you very much, so I'll try not to keep you too long, I hope, but thanks a lot for taking the time. If it's alright with you, I think I'd like to just start by just telling you what I'm about, what my research is, and then we can go from that, if that's alright with you.

JT

That's fine, yeah.

EMcA

So, I started off my looking at a poll from the University of Liverpool in April 2022, which talks about the priorities of voters before the latest Assembly election. And in it, 29% of people said that healthcare was their main priority, then 10% Covid recovery, then 3% the economy. Only 0.7% of people said that the constitutional preference of Northern Ireland was their main priority. However, you and I both know that the majority of people do continue to vote for

parties of their own community. And 70% of people agreed that politics remains sectarian. From that, then, comes my research question of: “Why does the electorate continue to vote by their constitutional preference?”. Then, my hypothesis would be that it's due to the consociational setup of the government, and a lack of political engagement from across the community divide or, as some people would say, from the other side, in inverted commas. Firstly, I would just like to discuss the fact that this survey does show that the constitutional question is quite a low priority, but from talking to other people, they have said that while it may be a low priority, it's still probably the major determinant however, when it comes to preference.

JT

Yes, you could also have a look at the Irish Times ARINS poll, from the end of 2022, beginning of 2023. It shows that, even in terms of people's preference for a united Ireland or against it, the most important thing for them isn't the institutional design, it's rather healthcare or other bread-and-butter issues. So that that would qualify thereout the Liverpool survey.

EMcA

Okay, so the constitutional question therefore isn't quite the bread-and-butter stuff that people are thinking about?

JT

Well, it’s not that they're not interested in the constitutional issue, but what they're interested in, if they are thinking about the constitutional issue, is the bread-and-butter aspects of it. That was really clear in this Irish Times ARINS poll.

EMcA

I’m sure you’ve once heard that Mark Durkan called consociationalism the ugly scaffolding of the Good Friday Agreement, meaning that from it, people are inclined to vote orange or green. My question is, I've heard opinions from politicians both for and against a change of this community designation. Do you see a desire on the whole for a change?

JT

No, I don't think so, not the community designation. There's certainly a desire to change the petition of concern which allows the DUP to block politics for the long term. You also have to think, when you're thinking about this, that over one-third of people in Northern Ireland don't vote. So it's not as if all of the people who prioritise bread-and-butter issues are suddenly voting for green and orange candidates. A: one-third of them aren’t bothering to vote at all, B: some of them vote for Sinn Féin, or even the DUP, because they think that they'd be better in getting healthcare or economic things sorted out than the Alliance party, which, as you know has still got a bit of a label as middle class. So, there's a lot of things going on here and I think it's wrong to see people simply voting out of orange or green sympathies or fooling themselves. I've done a lot of qualitative interviews with people, and when you talk to them individually, they explain why they vote or why they don't vote. I mean, some of them vote DUP because they don't want Sinn Féin to get in; one guy told me: “I hold my nose when I'm going in to vote, but I'm voting DUP because I think Sinn Fein would be bad for the country”. Is that voting orange and queen? It's not altogether clear to me that the motivation is orange and green; and other vote because

they think it's important to have to push the main parties in a more progressive direction, so not to vote for a tiny party, like People Before Profit, but voting to push maybe Sinn Féin, or on the unionist side, the UUP, in a more progressive dimension.

EMcA

Would you say that there is just room for one party in each bloc of nationalist, unionist, and "other"? That DUP, Sinn Féin, and Alliance have filled these three blocks?

JT

I'm not sure, I'm not sure. I'm also stuck by Neil O'Doherty's quite recent article, where he points out that the party system has changed in ways that you don't immediately notice, because there's a lot of an anti-DUP alliance. So very often, everybody allies against the DUP.

EMcA

Alliance with a small 'a'?

JT

Yes, yes, an alliance comprising of, you know, Sinn Féin, Alliance with a capital 'A', SDLP, et cetera.

EMcA

I'm not sure if you've seen the photo yourself, but it was a recent photoshopped image in the Belfast Telegraph of Jeffrey Donaldson in a Rangers jersey and Michelle O'Neill in a Celtic jersey, would you say that now politics in Northern Ireland has come to the situation of two, big parties?

JT

Again, that question was what made me think of Neil O'Doherty's argument, that instead of two symmetrical big parties, there's the DUP and an anti DUP coalition, very often in voting.

EMcA

By that, you would see Alliance perhaps being tilted more towards Sinn Fein in terms of policy, although they claim of the radical centre, over time they've shifted more so towards the progressive aspects of Sinn Féin, if not the nationalist aspect?

JT

Well, on O'Doherty's analysis on voting practises in the Assembly, it does show a lot of anti-DUP voting, and an anti-DUP coalition. Not only that, and obviously Alliance dislikes lots of the things that Sinn Féin stands for and so on, but I think it's not quite as symmetrical as people tend to point out today.

EMcA

Okay, so you still deduce that a lot of unionists would vote for Alliance, as liberal unionists, simply because they see it as they're not advocating for a united Ireland and they're more liberal in terms of the social questions than the UUP, a lot more so in the case of the DUP?

JT

Yeah, I think that does happen, but there's always also been people that voted Alliance who want a united Ireland. And see, people that vote Alliance, people that vote for minor parties, and people that that actually vote for probably the UUP and SDLP, about one-quarter of people in North now, are undecided about their constitutional preference. So that means they're swayable, it means that their vote can't just be taken as a vote for the united Ireland or a vote for the union, even though they're voting for those parties. But it means that they're willing to be convinced.

EMcA

Would you say that the parties are making active attempts to try and persuade these voters over who aren't embedded in the orange or green as deeply?

JT

Do I see any evidence that Sinn Fein or DUP is actually trying to attract people from the other side? I think there's a lot of evidence that going to attract the floating voter on their own side. Quite a lot of floating voters, you know, maybe 20%, maybe even more, people that aren't quite sure how they vote in a referendum and more than that before Brexit, then you get a bit of a different picture of what's going on, because those people aren't just plain orange or plain green.

EMcA

Yeah, they have their own different priorities than they vote different ways depending on the issues.

JT

Could be young people, could be women, could be LGBTQI+, could be all these sorts of alternative transversal ways of identification, which has certainly gotten bigger in the recent history.

EMcA

So these new types of identifying oneself: younger people, women, LGBTQ people; have the parties not really honed in on these new identities?

JT

No, not really. Those are the people, when you talk to them, they say, “Oh look, I'm just fed up with the ideology, I don't want the ideology, I want something that comes organically from experience”. Now, the parties on the nationalist side, they're thinking a bit more about how to engage these people than they are on the unionist side, I think. The unionist side, I think are mainly thinking in terms of economics and health service, but you know, the National Health Service is certainly not in a good place in the North at the moment.

EMcA

To move on now to talk a little bit about political engagement across the community divide. Politicians I've spoken to have told me that they obviously have decision-making processes etcetera about where to knock doors. An interviewee from Alliance did tell me where I live in

South Armagh, they simply see it as a foregone conclusion that they're probably not going to make many gains, so they focus on Belfast, they focus on Lisburn. Would you still see an acceptance of the parties that there still is, quote-unquote, Protestant or Catholic areas?

JT

Oh yeah, definitely.

EMcA

I suppose what's interesting for me is that, if I was a potential Alliance or unionist voter in my area, they are never going to know that because they'll simply cast me aside as a nationalist voter. Would you agree with this argument?

JT

Well, wasn't it Peter Robinson in 2012 who made a couple of big speeches saying that, you know, we have to attract Catholics to vote for us. That's where the future is. And that was just before the flag protests, so that argument definitely failed! But, he was saying those things and he was absolutely right to say those things, because if they don't, the numbers of hardcore unionists are lessening, so if they want to keep the union, they're going to have to attract people who are interested in the union for economic and other reasons, not just because they were born Protestants and coming from a hardline unionist perspective.

EMcA

Last time research was held, I think there was maybe four Catholic members of the DUP, but surely if you look at social issues, abortion, same-sex marriage; the DUP still hasn't really cracked the Catholic voter. Could that ever happen, do you think?

JT

Claire Mitchell did interviews with the DUP at one stage so oh, and even some DUP evangelical members were thinking, "Oh gosh, a united Ireland wouldn't be so bad, because, you know, they've all given up on the Catholic religion and they might join our evangelical wing". I mean, we're not seeing it at the moment anyway, we're not seeing the DUP taking up this Catholic space at the moment, and I think, in the longer term, that's a problem for them. The numbers are shrinking, and they're shrinking beyond even the Protestant community. They're shrinking to just a part of the Protestant community.

EMcA

With the other part of the Protestant community, I suppose, then heading towards Alliance?

JT

Or not voting at all. I mean, don't forget that one-third of the population don't vote.

EMcA

Moving on then, I have a question about the media. Would you say that the media does have a role in sensationalising the constitutional question? So, whenever I spoke to a lot of politicians, they all seemed to mention Steven Nolan as a type of example of this sensationalism.

JT

Oh yeah, definitely. A definite example of somebody who just sensationalise and so on. Otherwise, the media is cautious more than anything else. Traditionally, outlets like the BBC and so on were just incredibly conservative and cautious. Now, that doesn't mean that they actually were in the middle of the road, but it would be false to say that they were stirring up problems- they were denying problems as opposed to stirring them up. But that was some time ago, but I still think that when you talk to civil servants and at least some media people in in the North, there's still this conservative caution, people want to be helpful and don't want to be told they're not helpful. To speak about this new media interest in the border poll or the united Ireland question, you can't overstate the impact of Brexit, this has reignited so many issues. Pragmatically and strategically, people in the North voted to stay in the EU, and now they're out of it. What the Good Friday Agreement was, in part, was a way of opening up borders and making Northern Ireland a kind of post-sovereigntist region between Great Britian and Ireland, borders didn't matter much anymore. Now, at that stage, the majority of people from a Catholic background would have preferred that to a united Ireland, but what Brexit did was really make all of that problematic. So, I think the renewed discussion of a united Ireland isn't just old nationalism coming out again, but it's also a pragmatic and strategic response to the difficulties posed by Brexit, which has seriously uncut the Good Friday compromise, I think.

EMcA

Do you see much future for the institutions of Stormont?

JT

I was actually talking to a politician from the North not so long ago, he didn't think that Stormont was going to be revived in the autumn, as is being discussed. He didn't actually think the DUP would work on it. It's been on-again-off-again, it may well be on-again-off-again before it's done. I have never thought that there's a stable resolution within a Northern Ireland context, and I think particularly after Brexit, it makes it all the more difficult. Where would there then be a stable resolution? Well, that's difficult too.

EMcA

Do you think that this tit-for-tat entrenchment into different groups is just inherent to Northern Ireland?

JT

No, I don't, but what I'm trying to say is there's a rationale to what the nationalists are saying that isn't that actually a civic rationale, not a nationalist rationale. And it's not just "green" politics, it's a response to the fact that a very hard-won compromise has just been blown up with Brexit.

EMcA

It's more a response to the loss of the institutions, and to the democratic deficit in place?

JT

And not just that, the actual compromise that Good Friday Agreement was has been undermined. So, now I don't think it's just orange and green, actually. I think there's much more rationale there. There's much more intuitive sense, of what could be a fairer way forward. And also, intuitively, a very different perspective from unionists and nationalists, and in particular, there's also a geographical aspect of that now because unionists, as you know, are concentrated in the east. And we found real difference in the interviews west of the Bann and east of the Bann. Even when you are talking to middle-grounders and liberals, everybody knew, west of the Bann, that you had to be able to get on with your neighbours. East of the Bann, nationalism just vanished from most people's view because there were very few nationalists about, or just something "out there". So, trying to get any sort of way forward, one of the things that makes it difficult is a different experience west and east of the Bann.

EMcA

I'll try to get things wrapped up soon, I know that we don't have much time. But if I just can recap on my hypothesis there that the electorate continue to vote by constitutional preference due to the consociational set up of the government and the lack of political engagement. My question is, would you agree with this hypothesis?

JT

Well, I think consociation isn't the main reason why they're voting like this. I mean, consociationalism has only been functioning for part of the time since 1998, so I don't think it's just consociation. I don't think changing that is going to change many things. It's still interesting hypothesis but I don't fully agree.

EMcA

These divides were there before, and they'll continue on? It's more complex?

JT

Yeah. I mean consociation, on one level, is kind of like a safety net or safety valve, such that nobody wants just to be bulldozed over by a majority. And consociation makes sure that neither side is just bulldozed over by a majority. Now, is it the best way to ensure that? That another question, but I'm not so sure that it forces people into voting preferences.

EMcA

Would you agree that it does put people into a situation whereby, even if 60% of people, for arguments sake, did vote for the Alliance Party, the Alliance Party would still find itself in a very tricky situation where it couldn't get much done.

JT

If 60% voted for the Alliance party, they could easily get things passed by a weighted majority. But, if you had a very large Alliance vote, there would have to be a change; the main blocs would be stultified, they would not be able to move.

EMcA

Okay, well that's all the questions answered on my part. Thank you so much for all of your time, we did get a lot covered even in the short time we had. So, thanks again.

JT

Okay, thank you. Good luck for the rest of your thesis.