



The Constitution Unit



Nations and Regions: The Dynamics of Devolution

Quarterly Monitoring Programme

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Northern Ireland report 20

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- **European election confirms political polarisation**
- **September deadline set for new accommodation**
- **Public more sanguine about community relations**

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1. Summary Robin Wilson

The European election marked a further political watershed during the quarter: the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin placed clear orange and green water respectively between themselves and their more moderate rivals, the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. Any prospect of a restoration of devolution now hinged on an agreement between the two parties with the most directly counterposed ethno-nationalist goals.

But the prime minister, Tony Blair, indicated that patience was running out. Aware of public anger in Northern Ireland about the continued payment—albeit at half rations—of the region’s under-employed 108 assembly members, he indicated that renewed talks in September would be the last effort to put the architecture established on Good Friday 1998 back together again.

Yet his government—or, indeed, its counterpart in Dublin—appeared to have few ideas of its own as to how this might happen. A remarkably perfunctory private document was produced on the review of the Belfast agreement, amounting to little more than headings and certainly raising more questions than answers.

The public remained remarkably sanguine about all this. Evidence of widespread disengagement from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey was reinforced by indications that public perceptions of ‘community relations’ in the region were improving, and that only small numbers of Catholics or Protestants now feared discrimination from the ‘other side’. This was against a backdrop of a falling incidence of paramilitary violence, as recorded in the chief constable’s annual report.

Whether the Treasury was so sanguine was another matter. There were growing signs during the quarter of a tightening of the financial screw on Northern Ireland. There were also continuing concern about the weakness of accountability arrangements, including over public expenditure, under renewed direct rule. But the current hiatus did give the government the opportunity to do what a devolved administration might well have balked at, when it decided to introduce water charges to the region.

Elsewhere, ministers continued to get on with the mundane business of government. A range of ‘low’ political decisions were made, albeit in the face of diverse pressures from civic actors in the region seeking to influence the current powers that be at Stormont.

2. The ‘peace process’ Rick Wilford

2.1 Introduction

The pivot for this quarter’s report was the outcome of the European Parliament election on June 10th 2004 (see the media and the political parties and elections sections). The results confirmed the electoral ascendancy of the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin: the DUP took almost two thirds (65.8 per cent) of the ‘unionist’ vote (*ie* when one adds the tally for the Ulster Unionist Party), and SF secured 62.3 per cent of the ‘nationalist’ bloc (when one includes the Social Democratic and Labour Party).

In the wake of the election and a round of discussions with the parties, the two governments, having produced an almost cursory summary¹ of the progress to date of the review of the Belfast agreement (see May 2004 report), set a new September deadline for talks to try to achieve the restoration of devolution. Yet the current stasis is even more grounded than hitherto—the DUP wedded, as it is, to a ‘new agreement’, and SF seeking ‘implementation in full’ of its interpretation of the 1998 model.

2.2 Inconclusive review

The review paper was little more than a series of headings that referred only to ‘the key issues emerging from discussion of Strand One’—the aspect of the agreement dealing with institutions internal to Northern Ireland—and it gave no indication of the governments’ preferences on any of them. The topics included: mechanisms for the accountability, selection of, and confidence in ministers; election of the first and deputy first ministers; cross-community voting thresholds in the assembly; alternatives to the communal designation of assembly members (MLAs); and accountability of ministers on north-south matters.

While brief, the paper did demonstrate that the parties, minus the UUP which boycotted the review process from early March, had at least grappled with some of the procedural details dismissed by the UUP leader, David Trimble, as mere ‘nuts and bolts’. Indeed, there was more than a hint that the agenda included substantive issues.

For instance, the parties and the governments addressed—though did not agree on—alternatives to application of the d’Hondt proportionality rule as a means of executive formation, including a voluntary coalition and the election of ministers (*via* PR-STV) by the assembly. Relatedly, the paper indicated that any future executive might be subject to a cross-community vote of confidence at its formation which, if it failed, would mean the institutions would revert to an assembly-driven model, presumably akin to the DUP’s corporate-body alternative (see February 2004 report).

In addition, the paper hinted that any future first and deputy first ministers could be elected separately by the ‘unionist’ and ‘nationalist’ blocs—the outcomes of the second assembly election in November 2003 would mean a unionist (DUP) first minister and a nationalist (SF) deputy first minister—and that a review of the scope of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister’s functions could be undertaken.

The latter would be welcome. It is a sprawling office, with more than two-dozen functions and a staff running into the hundreds (see August 2002 report)—one result of a somewhat untidy reconfiguration of the six former departments that administered Northern Ireland under direct rule before the transfer of powers in December 1999. During the quarter, Sir Reg Empey of the UUP—who acted as first minister during the resignation of Mr Trimble between July and November 2001—said he had found the office ‘far too spread out over a range of issues’ and called for it to be ‘streamlined’.²

The idea of separate—rather than, as at present, joint—election of any future incumbents at the OFMDFM would work to the DUP’s advantage, since it would free its MLAs from any accusation that their nominee for FM appeared on the same slate as the SF nominee for DFM. While absolved of any such perceived ‘taint’, the co-equal status of the two ministers would require some *modus operandi*: else the executive machinery could, indeed would, grind exceedingly slow. Of course, such a situation could only arise if there was to be a definitive resolution of the current stalemate—that is, if the DUP and SF could arrive at an agreement.

2.3 Conclusive talks?

While Northern Ireland has grown accustomed to deadlines—though honoured more in their breach than in their observance—that set for the September talks does, at the time of writing, appear solid. After the Euro-election, the two governments engaged in separate and joint meetings with party leaders in London, Dublin and Belfast. In their wake, on June 25th the prime minister, Tony Blair, and the taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, set out at Lancaster House in London the business for what Mr Blair described as ‘intensive negotiations in the early part of September’. He said there would be ‘four issues which we *will be resolving* at that time: an end to paramilitary activity of any kind whatsoever, the decommissioning, the institutions, and policing’ (emphasis added).³

Though this was a wearily familiar agenda, what was novel about the prime minister’s remarks was the apparent finality of the looming negotiations. He continued: ‘I think there is a recognition that it is time to come to the point of decision and make up our minds one way or another so that at the end of this negotiation we either have, and let us hope we do, a concluded agreement that allows everyone to move forward together, or alternatively, we are going to have to search for a different way forward.’

Mr Ahern underscored that September was the intended endgame:⁴ ‘We will use the summer period to prepare ourselves and be ready to come to this final move ... We have fairly well exhausted discussion. The question is whether we can come to a final understanding on these issues. We are not there now, but we have to be in September; otherwise we will have to think again.’⁵

The prospect that Northern Ireland may be moved to what might be called ‘another place’ come the early autumn may help concentrate minds as, perhaps, will the prospect that MLAs—currently on half salaries—will cease to be paid in the event of failure. As the prime minister put it, ‘most people in Northern Ireland realise that you cannot carry on with an assembly when people are being paid salaries and the thing is not actually doing anything’ (see assembly section).

There were straws in the wind that indicated some prospect—however remote—of advance in the next few months. The annual report by the chief constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland⁶ showed that in 2003-04 the number of shootings and bombings had fallen for the second successive year, with most incidents perpetrated by ‘loyalists’. In addition, rumours abounded that John de Chastelain, head of the decommissioning commission, had been in Northern Ireland in late June and early July, which suggested that lines of communication might have been reopened with the IRA following the *débâcle* of October 2003 (see November 2003 report)—though it might be too sanguine to assume that this heralded another imminent act of putting weapons ‘beyond use’. The most obvious positive sign was the knowledge that all major parties willed the end of the restoration of devolution.

But the two key players, SF and the DUP, remained poles apart. The former seeks the full implementation of the 1998 model, as it defines it, whereas the latter aspires to a new agreement, a so-called ‘fair deal’, required to be acceptable to ‘unionists as well as nationalists’. The DUP does countenance power-sharing according to the Good Friday template, including republicans, if the latter engage in full, final and transparent decommissioning—albeit with major institutional and procedural reforms affecting all three ‘strands’ of the agreement (see May 2004 report). This, of course, is the condition for re-devolution adopted by the UUP and would have eventuated had the understandings between the UUP and SF been realised in October 2003 and the former retained its position as the leading unionist party at the November election.

If the DUP could succeed where the UUP has failed—that is, in terms of the October understanding—there is no doubt that Mr Trimble would row in behind it.⁷ Where he parts company with the DUP is in relation to its corporate-assembly model, which some regard as the party’s default position: this would include SF even without the required ‘acts of completion’, though with the key distinction that there would be no executive in which power would be shared. The DUP’s third option, a voluntary coalition, fails the test of inclusiveness since it is expressly designed to exclude SF and is not feasible given the steadfast endorsement of the 1998 agreement by the SDLP, whose (cross-community) support would be necessary for it to be realised.

The only alternative to the DUP's models that has thus far been canvassed is that from the SDLP—and this was only proffered as an interim arrangement. To inject regional accountability into the current direct-rule *régime*, it proposed to restore the original institutions but, instead of ministers, the party urged the two governments to nominate 10 administrators to lead the departments, drawn from the trade unions, business and the voluntary sector, two of whom would also head the OFMDFM. The nominees would be approved by a cross-community vote in the reconvened assembly as elected in November 2003 and represent Northern Ireland's interests in the institutions of strands two and three (the north-south and 'east-west' aspects of the post-agreement architecture).

This proposal had the virtue of enabling a regional administration to function in tandem with the review process and of lending the opportunity for more systematic scrutiny of legislation and policy than is available under direct rule. It found no support among the other parties, however, and fell off the agenda.

As for the UUP, during Northern Ireland questions at Westminster after the Lancaster House talks, the party leader, Mr Trimble, gave some sense of the future in his bones at least. Addressing the secretary of state, he urged Mr Murphy to confirm that September 'really is a deadline [which] if not met will lead to firm action by the Government, that it will move on, close down the Assembly and put in place alternative arrangements?' Mr Murphy was clear in his reply that 'we must decide [the issues] then'.⁸ Of course, what such 'alternative arrangements' might be was less clear.

Data from the most recent Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (rehearsed in the May 2004 report), were published more widely in mid-June, reportedly to 'some alarm in London and Dublin and among the parties who want the reactivation of devolution'.⁹ These indicated that most people could live with direct rule for the foreseeable future, even if with little enthusiasm (for more see public attitudes section).

The Northern Ireland secretary was determined to indicate that direct rule was 'not an option'. Linking Northern Ireland to the evolving UK constitutional architecture as a whole, Mr Murphy told the *Irish News* in July: 'Anything about direct rule is not an option. You can't have Scottish and Welsh devolution expanding, talking about English devolution and we have just had elections in London. It's just not on. There has to be a devolved settlement in Northern Ireland.'¹⁰ Ironically, so long associated with 'unionist misrule', while Protestants are now lukewarm on devolution the prolonged absence of an assembly at Stormont would not be acceptable to the SDLP nor SF—and certainly not to the latter's support within the wider republican movement.

The prospect of indefinite direct rule would unsettle republicans and compromise the portrayal of the agreement by the SF leadership as but a transitional phase to unification by (according to Mr Adams) 2016. That said, there appears to be no

appetite within the IRA for a return to the ‘long war’, a judgment voiced by the chief constable, Hugh Orde, in July: ‘I am absolutely sure in my mind that they have no intent to go back to the “armed struggle”. There is no intent at all’.¹¹

Mr Orde has also been vocal in his call for a truth commission for Northern Ireland—not an off-the-shelf model drawn from South Africa, Guatemala or Peru for instance, but one customised for the circumstances of the region that is ‘lawyer-free’.¹² The Northern Ireland secretary, Mr Murphy, did, indeed, visit South Africa during the quarter as part of a round of consultations on how to deal with the past in order to ‘build a better future’.¹³ Meantime, the chair of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission said it was ‘quite crucial that what you have in Northern Ireland is tailor-made for your particular situation’.¹⁴ Provisions for assisting victims and their relatives were and remain part of the remit bequeathed by the agreement, but this is a very delicate issue and will require real sensitivity on the part of the responsible minister in the NIO, Angela Smith—not least in ensuring that future policy does not establish some ‘hierarchy of victimhood’.

Returning to the wider picture, it is difficult to conjure up the likelihood of a resolution in September: the idea that Northern Ireland, Prometheus-like, will be unbound in a matter of months, though beguiling, is highly improbable. And yet ... If we cast the DUP as Zeus and SF as Prometheus—a far-fetched analogy, to be sure—there may be some glimmer of hope. To quote the shackled Prometheus: ‘I know the heart of Zeus is hard, that he hath tied Justice to his side; But he shall be full gentle thus assuaged; And, the implacable wrath wherewith he raged Smoothed quite away, nor he nor I Be loth to seal a bond of peace and amity.’

There is no doubt that the heart of the DUP is hard in terms of its readiness to strike a deal with SF—at least judging from the major speech by the party leader, Rev Ian Paisley, on July 12th. Speaking at Rasharkin, in typical Old Testament mode, he was resolute: ‘A change has come about, and today the traditional unionists have been revived, and have partaken of a new zeal to defeat our ancient enemies, and crush the vipers who poisoned our society ... The spirit of Trimbleism must be buried in a tomb from which there is no resurrection ... I give you my pledge that there shall be no compromise, no sell-out and no surrender.’¹⁵

While the bulk of the speech continued in a similar vein, there was a slight moderation in its conclusion. Recalling his remarks at the Lancaster House talks, Mr Paisley reiterated his party’s commitment to the restoration of self-government (emphasis added): ‘Our priority remains the return of devolution on a basis that involves *all* parties working together on a level playing field which is exclusively peaceful and democratic. There can be no tolerance of terrorism and no inclusion of unrepentant terrorists. It is only on that basis that we can move forward. It is, without apology, “no guns – no government”.’¹⁶

Readers will be forgiven for thinking this latter extract has a familiar ring: if one was to wind the clock back to 1998 or the ensuing four years, it was a form of words that

often tripped from Mr Trimble's lips. The UUP leader's credibility has, though, been damaged, perhaps irretrievably: many in his own party think his day has passed—he having, as recent elections and polls demonstrate, lost the confidence of unionist voters. And yet, Mr Trimble must have succumbed to a wry smile when he read Mr Paisley's concluding words, and it would have become even broader when he read the speech of his former UUP *bête-noire* Jeffrey Donaldson to the Belfast County Grand Lodge, the same day.

In his address, Mr Donaldson referred to the DUP's agenda at the Lancaster House talks. He declared:

At the recent talks ... we persuaded our Government and the Irish Government that the issues that must be given top priority include a definitive and conclusive end to all paramilitary activity; the decommissioning through the IICD of all paramilitary weapons, to an early timescale and on a convincing basis; a clear commitment on all sides to the stability of the political institutions and to any changes to their operation agreed within the Review; support for policing from all sides of the community, and on an agreed framework for the devolution of policing.¹⁷

This is, to all intents and purposes, the position held by the UUP leader in the run-up to October 2003. Indeed, Mr Donaldson's invocation that 'this time the IRA must jump first' also owes a debt to Mr Trimble—which is perhaps why Mr Donaldson's speech received only polite applause, compared with the rapturous reception accorded Mr Paisley's remarks.

There is perhaps, if not a division of opinion, at least a difference in tone among some of the public remarks of the DUP leadership—between, say, those, including Peter Robinson, regarded by some as pragmatists, and the diehard Free Presbyterian wing led by Mr Paisley. London and Dublin, and the SF leadership for that matter, will devoutly wish that it is the former who gain the ascendancy, thereby making the prospects of a new political bargain somewhat more likely, though by no means certain. There may be some credibility to this analysis, but any such mooted pragmatism—save for that embedded within the DUP's corporate assembly model—is unlikely to prevail by September. Mr Robinson, it should be said, was at pains to deny any claims of DUP disunity as the quarter closed.¹⁸

If the scheduled talks do fail, then it seems Northern Ireland will be moved to 'another place', not just undiluted and unilateral direct rule, but a form of administration that could create more space and opportunity for bilateralism by London and Dublin.

¹ private communication, June 2004

² *Belfast Telegraph*, August 2nd 2004

³ Downing Street press release, June 25th 2004

⁴ In the summer of 2001, just after the Weston Park talks between the governments and the parties, the BBC ran a major political documentary on Northern Ireland called 'Endgame'. It was re-transmitted by the republic's public broadcaster, RTE, with the nuanced addition of a question-mark to the title.

⁵ Downing Street press release, June 25th 2004

⁶ available at www.psni.police.uk/chief_constables_annual_report_2003-2004.pdf

⁷ In an article in the *News Letter* of June 3rd 2004, Mr Trimble was explicit. While dismissing the DUP's proposal for a corporate assembly on the ground that it would 'inevitably lead to the full executive model whether or not the IRA completed decommissioning', he welcomed 'those in the DUP who appear anxious to achieve a return to inclusive devolution', continuing, 'if the IRA leadership makes the decisive break with its militaristic and fascist past we will be ready to respond positively'.

⁸ HC Debs, 30 June 2004, cols 270-271.

⁹ *Irish Times*, June 14th 2004

¹⁰ *Irish News*, July 24th 2004

¹¹ *Observer*, July 4th 2004

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Northern Ireland Office press release, May 27th 2004

¹⁴ *Irish News*, May 28th 2004

¹⁵ DUP press release, July 14th 2004

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ DUP press release, 14 July 2004

¹⁸ *Newsline 6.30*, BBC Northern Ireland, August 10th 2004

3. 'Devolved' government Rick Wilford and Robin Wilson

3.1 Grandstanding at Westminster

The SDLP's proposal for reform of direct rule (see 'peace process' section) did chime with the disquiet at Westminster (see May 2004 report) at the blunt and marginalised procedures for dealing with Northern Ireland business. But the SDLP has blocked one salve designed to soften these procedures, *viz* the attempts by the unionist parties in the Commons to allow the Northern Ireland Grand Committee to meet at Stormont.

Such an arrangement, afforded to the Welsh and Scottish equivalents in their respective nations, would at least have the merit of bringing Westminster to the region and thereby enable the population to witness the actions of the parties in seeking to influence policy and legislation. It would also demonstrate that SF takes no part in the committee's proceedings, given its boycott of Parliament.

This matter appears likely to rumble on. During business questions in the Commons in early July, Roy Beggs (UUP, East Antrim) asked the leader of the house, Peter Hain, whether it was necessary to table a motion to enable the committee to meet in Northern Ireland. Mr Hain's reply was suggestive. Observing that the Welsh Grand Committee had met several times in Wales, he noted that this was possible because an order in council had been passed to that effect—and he suggested that Mr Beggs should raise the matter with the Northern Ireland secretary.¹

The Grand Committee—still confined to the Palace of Westminster—met three times during the quarter, the last to debate the draft budget order 2004.² The debate covered the main estimates for 2004-05, amounting to some £11.3 billion in resources and £9.9 billion cash, yet it lasted a mere two and a half hours. Only one DUP MP, Gregory Campbell, attended and only Eddie McGrady of the SDLP, whereas four of the UUP's five members participated, including the party leader, Mr Trimble.

The previous month, the Commons Work and Pensions Committee had expressed concern about the political uncertainty in Northern Ireland in its report *Child Poverty in the UK*,³ a scourge which the government aims to reduce by half by 2010. The committee pointed to recent research⁴ suggesting child poverty was more severe in Northern Ireland. Yet, visiting Belfast, the committee found: 'At times it was difficult to determine who had actual responsibility for the various policies concerning child poverty and whether that would change once the Assembly is re-instated.'

3.2 Civic pressures at home

While the populace in Northern Ireland may not be clamouring for the restoration of devolution (see May 2004 report), civic associations with a policy interest continue to find direct rule a frustrating experience. The general secretary of the Royal College of

Midwives, Dame Karlene Davies, told its annual conference, held in Cardiff in May, that the parties in Northern Ireland had ‘proved incapable of working together to overcome the impasse blocking devolution’, and this was making it ‘extremely difficult to agree substantive improvements to the health service’.

Dame Karlene instanced community midwifery units, for which she said the former SF health minister, Bairbre de Brún, had secured cross-party support. The Northern Ireland RCM board secretary, Breedagh Hughes, said Ms de Brún’s direct-rule successor, Angela Smith, appeared to be ‘reluctant to make these crucial decisions, decisions that affect the well-being of mothers and babies in Northern Ireland’.⁵ Two months later, Ms Smith said she had heard strong views ‘both for and against’ such units—with presumably some hospital-based consultants on the other side of the argument—but now agreed they could be established, albeit ‘in a very small number of locations’.⁶

Meanwhile, an attempt emerged during the quarter to roll back the decision made by Ms de Brún’s party colleague, Martin McGuinness, to end academic selection at 11. A range of small-c conservative figures, prominent Catholics alongside unionist politicians, and calling themselves the Confederation of Grammar Schools’ Former Pupils’ Association, sent the direct-rule minister, Barry Gardiner, an open letter via the *Belfast Telegraph* accusing him of rejecting ‘the will of the people’ in his acceptance of the Costello report (see February 2004 report) on post-primary education. This stemmed from the ill-judged, populist consultation engaged in by Mr McGuinness, who appeared naively to believe that a questionnaire survey sent to all households would deliver majority support for his anti-selection stance—two-thirds of those who responded disagreed (see November 2002 report).

The group’s spokesperson claimed Costello would mean ‘forcing’ comprehensive education on Northern Ireland and he declared: ‘Our grammar schools have done an outstanding job, not just in academic terms, but in providing a pathway for all children to achieve their potential.’⁷ Six days later, Mr Gardiner replied in the *Belfast Telegraph*, standing firm behind the decision by his predecessor, Jane Kennedy, to implement the report.⁸ Mr Gardiner had no need to concede to the grammar lobby because ever since the core curriculum was introduced across the UK, selection at 11 on the basis of ‘academic’ aptitude has made no sense whatsoever.

He did, however, face a continued rearguard action at Westminster, where 54 MPs, including unionist and Conservative figures, signed an early-day motion criticising his proposals. The DUP MP for Lagan Valley, Jeffrey Donaldson, said that if he were ‘a democrat’ he would endorse the view of ‘the majority of people who responded to the public survey’, while the UUP MP for South Antrim, David Burnside, accused the minister of being ‘dictatorial’.⁹

Interestingly, Mr Gardiner’s colleague John Spellar himself adopted a populist stance in resisting opposition in Northern Ireland to the extension of anti-social behaviour orders to the region. The children’s commissioner and the Northern Ireland Human

Rights Commission claimed the minister had not adequately consulted, including children and young people. Mr Spellar accused the commissioner and the commission of being out of step with ‘democratically elected’ bodies in Northern Ireland in local government.¹⁰

The children’s commissioner applied for judicial review of the ASBOs decision.¹¹ Mr Spellar’s action was vulnerable to the charge that it was reckless with regard to section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, which implemented the agreement, where public bodies, including the NIO, have to have due regard to the potential adverse impact of any policy on nine axes of potential inequality, including age. ASBOs would arguably have such an adverse impact on the rights of young people to due process, and Mr Spellar appeared to adopt a similarly cavalier approach when announcing a government initiative targeted at two poor areas of south Belfast.

The problem with the minister’s initiative in this case was that he said it was in response to representations by ‘representatives of Protestant working class communities’ that government was not having ‘sufficient impact in their areas’.¹² Section 75 also has religion as one of the nine axes and whether ‘Protestant’ as against ‘working class’ representatives who make such subjective claims should be able to have them met by government is a very moot point.

Some NGOs in Northern Ireland invested huge expectations after the agreement in the capacity of ‘section 75’ to act as a legal lever of social equality in the region. Mr Spellar’s behaviour—and he was backed on ASBOs by the former first minister, Mr Trimble—suggests that attention to the broader political balance of forces is in order in understanding how key social-policy decisions are made.

During the quarter, the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, the region’s voluntary-sector umbrella body, sought to change that balance in terms of the decidedly modest proposals for an ‘anti-poverty strategy’ unveiled by the government in April (see May 2004 report). The organisation decided not to accept the document as a basis for consultation, and began seeking to mobilise the voluntary sector behind alternative proposals of its own to tackle social inequality, unveiled in its house magazine, *Scope*.¹³

Mr Spellar was challenged during the quarter on equality by an SDLP MLA, Patricia Lewsley, who might be described (paraphrasing Howard Dean) as on the social-democratic and labour wing of the Social Democratic and Labour Party. He was announcing a consultation on a Single Equality Bill for Northern Ireland, which would rationalise the various pieces of legislation dealing with equality of opportunity by religion, gender, race and disability.¹⁴

The first Programme for Government of the devolved executive had in fact promised to begin such a consultation in April 2001, with a view to introducing legislation in 2002.¹⁵ The consultation paper was duly issued by the OFMDFM with a deadline of August 2001 to respond. Three years on, Mr Spellar issued his further paper, with a

deadline of November, but he said: 'No particular timetable is envisaged.' Responses to the consultation would be assessed throughout 2005, with the *possibility* of a bill in the subsequent parliamentary term.

While there are genuinely difficult technical issues involved, this did not convey the impression of a man in a hurry. Ms Lewsley, a former member of the committee of the centre of the assembly, which monitored the OFMDFM, complained: 'This Bill was designed in all its essentials by the power-sharing Executive only to become yet another victim of the suspension of the Assembly.'¹⁶

Pressure also continued during the quarter (see May 2004 report) for an independent environmental authority for Northern Ireland—the only jurisdiction in Britain and Ireland to lack one. A report from the Waste Management Advisory Board, presented at Stormont, said the Department of Environment had met only 14 out of the 90 targets set out in its waste-management strategy in the past three years. The board includes representation from business, local government, environmental organisations and academics.¹⁷

¹ HC Debs, July 1st 2004, cols 444-45

² The committee met on May 20th, June 17th and July 8th to debate, respectively, a draft special educational needs order, community-relations policy and the draft budget order.

³ HC 85-1, p12

⁴ Hillyard, Paddy *et al* (2003), *Bare Necessities: Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland—key findings*, Belfast: Democratic Dialogue

⁵ *News Letter*, May 22nd 2004

⁶ Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety press release, July 29th 2004

⁷ *Belfast Telegraph*, May 18th 2004

⁸ *Belfast Telegraph*, May 24th 2004

⁹ *Belfast Telegraph*, August 9th 2004

¹⁰ *News Letter*, June 10th 2004

¹¹ *Irish News*, June 11th 2004

¹² Department of Social Development press release, June 21st 2004

¹³ 'Government poverty plans sink', *Scope*, July/August 2004

¹⁴ OFMDFM press release, June 22nd 2004

¹⁵ Northern Ireland Executive (2001), *Programme for Government: Making a Difference, 2001-2004*, Belfast: OFMDFM, p17

¹⁶ *Irish Times*, June 23rd 2004

¹⁷ *News Letter*, June 30th 2004

4. The assembly **Rick Wilford and Robin Wilson**

The rumbling discontent (see February and May 2004 reports) about the continued payment of assembly members, albeit at a reduced rate, continued this quarter. In a written answer on June 15th, replying to the UUP MP for North Down, Lady Hermon, the Northern Ireland secretary, Mr Murphy, indicated that the total cost of maintaining the assembly since its suspension in October 2002 (until March 31st 2004) had been £36.6 million. Almost half of this (£15.4 million) related to costs attributable to MLAs and the parties, he said.¹

The statement led to editorial comment in the *Belfast Telegraph* the following day. Under the heading ‘Assembly costs must be reviewed’, the paper (notably less chipper than the prime minister about how soon the body might be taken out of mothballs) said: ‘There is little doubt in anyone’s mind that Northern Ireland is grossly over-governed and if restoring devolution is to be regarded as a long-term proposition—postponed, perhaps, beyond the next Westminster election—none of the present structures should be regarded as sacrosanct.’²

¹ HC Written Answers, June 15th 2004, column 887W

² *Belfast Telegraph*, June 16th 2004

5. The media Greg McLaughlin

5.1 Introduction

The media section this quarter looks at the regional response to the results of the European election. It also features an analysis of images of sectarian violence on July 12th, in the context of efforts by Orange Order leaders to promote the celebrations as a major European festival. Other items include developments in the media market, a row over the contents of a publicly-funded Belfast arts and culture magazine, and the death of the prominent Irish journalist Mary Holland, who built her reputation reporting on the conflict in Northern Ireland, principally for the *Irish Times*.

5.2 The European elections

The results of the European election came as no surprise to media analysts and pundits. The DUP and SF enhanced their positions as the leading voices of ‘unionism’ and ‘nationalism’ respectively: ‘Triumph for DUP’ (*News Letter*) and ‘DUP and Sinn Fein cement positions as “Big Two” parties’ (*Irish News*).¹

The mainly Catholic *Irish News* concluded that day (‘The reward of the ballot box’) that the clear lesson for SF was that ‘the further the party distances itself from the IRA, the more its support at the ballot box increases’. The challenge was to stand down the IRA decisively and reap further electoral rewards, north and south of the border. With a 12.5 per cent increase in its European vote, and unprecedented successes in both European and local elections in the republic, the party had yet to peak.

The predominantly Protestant *News Letter*, inevitably, took a very different view. With the DUP in first place and the UUP securing a seat, it was, the paper contended, a ‘win, win’ for unionism—‘a development that undoubtedly would be warmly welcomed by the pro-union population’. The success of SF, however, was perceived as marking a hardening of attitudes among Catholics, described as voting in large numbers for ‘a party so clearly aligned with a terrorist organisation’.

The *News Letter* and *Irish News* also differed in their prognosis for the SDLP and the UUP. The failure of the SDLP to get its man, Martin Morgan, elected, seemed to vindicate the view of the commentariat that the party was in deep crisis, with no clear vision or message to recapture the high ground as the representative of ‘constitutional nationalism’. The UUP, for its part, was still weakened by internal divisions and a crisis of leadership. The *Irish News* noted that both parties would have to act quickly to reverse their alarming decline at the polls, especially in first-preference votes. The *News Letter*, however, declared the SDLP to be in irreversible decline yet held out the hope that the UUP, the ‘grand old party’, would work hard to regain its position as the leading voice of ‘unionism’.

Writing in the *Observer* ('Eyes wide shut'),² Henry McDonald offered a different, more hopeful view *vis-à-vis* the SDLP. Its future, he wrote, lay in a merger with the Labour Party in the republic, giving it not only a much needed all-Ireland dimension to compete with SF, but also a wider appeal to voters in the north, hungry for a viable, socialist alternative to 'ya-boo sectarian headcount politics'.

The received media wisdom has appeared to be that, buoyed by their decisive mandates, the DUP and SF would do a deal to restore some form of devolved government. But Brian Feeney, long a dissenting voice among the pundits, argued in the *Sunday Tribune* ('Polarised North vote sees peace move further away')³ that this had no basis in logic. The media had said the same thing in the run up to the assembly election. Nothing had happened then, so they had then revised their prediction: the two parties were waiting until after the European election to do the deal. Yet the DUP wanted nothing short of the dissolution of the agreement, while SF wanted restoration of the devolved institution plus further policing reforms. These were irreconcilable positions, Mr Feeney argued, and electoral triumphalism would only encourage entrenchment, not compromise.

5.3 The 'Twelfth'

According to the UUP peer Lord Laird of Artigarvan, writing in the *News Letter*, 'Ulster-Scots floats, bouncy castles, swings and roundabouts for kids, do sit readily beside the traditional image of the sash, flute, drum and bowler hat.' The peer, who has a background in PR, argued that the Orange Order should promote the Twelfth as a major European 'folk festival' ("Market the Twelfth properly to unlock tourist potential").⁴ This juxtaposition of 'cultural tradition' and 'family day out' has long been a feature of media coverage of the day's events in the region—even when it sat uneasily with stories of confrontation with Catholic communities over the routes of contentious marches.

Most commentators would agree that the picture has improved since the worst years of the annual 'Drumcree' crisis (over a Battle of the Somme commemoration parade in Co Armagh) but there are still flashpoints, especially in Belfast's so-called 'interface' areas, where violence can erupt. Even so, a sample of some of the headlines from coverage⁵ of this year's 'Twelfth' would appear to mock Lord Laird's vision of the day: 'Violence after parade', 'Shots fired at [loyalist] "street party"', 'Catalogue of violence includes a stabbing', 'Recriminations over parade riot' (*Irish News*); and 'Violence flares on bonfire night', 'Petrol bomb attack on marchers' train', "'Unprotected" buses attacked', 'Fury over targeting of town Orange men' (*News Letter*).

This year, the worst violence centred on a contentious 'Twelfth' parade which proposed to return home from 'the field' past the mainly Catholic Ardoyne area of north Belfast. The Parades Commission had initially rerouted the parade but it

subsequently modified its ruling to allow the band, but not its supporters, to march through in silence and under police escort. This pleased neither side and tension mounted in the run-up to the event; a heavy police and army presence that afternoon raised it further. Media reports throughout the day focused on the potential for violent confrontation and so, inevitably it seemed, it happened.

Although the parade itself passed through without incident, the decision by the police to depart from the commission ruling and allow the parade's supporters through was the last straw for the Catholic residents. The violence that erupted made for familiar media images of clashes between 'nationalists' and the 'security forces'. The *News Letter* next day⁶ devoted a full front page to a photo of a man attacking a group of soldiers with one of their own riot batons. Under the headline, 'What a shame', Joanne Lowry reported: 'The colourful scenes of yesterday's Twelfth demonstrations descended into violence last night as Orangemen returned home'. A follow-up, front-page report the following day revealed that some of the rioters had managed to isolate army Land Rovers and loot their contents, mostly riot gear ('Mob robs paras').⁷

No doubt, Lord Laird would see such coverage as unrepresentative of how the 'Twelfth' is celebrated across Northern Ireland, well away from the negative media spotlight. But there are signs that, for locals and tourists alike, there is a long way to go before it becomes a folk festival for all to enjoy. BBC Radio Ulster's *Talk Back* phone-in programme featured a sustained debate about the problems and hazards of 'Eleventh night' bonfires, which revealed intriguing class divisions within the Protestant community (professional Protestants tending to be very hostile to the environmental despoliation associated with the plebeian bonfire celebrations). As for tourist perceptions, the *Irish News* spoke to a French couple who had been directed to the field in Belfast by the landlord of their B&B. They complained about the lack of organisation, the consumption of alcohol and the litter, failed to see why Belfast had to close down for the day, and said the tourist information they had did not explain what the 'Twelfth' was all about ('Moves into the field of culture are messy').⁸

On the political front, the Parades Commission came under heavy criticism over its handling of the parade. The *News Letter* editorialised that unionist politicians were 'becoming increasingly alarmed', claiming ('Question mark over parades Commission'): 'The word bizarre is a regular description of its decisions.' The *Irish News* reported 'Nationalists' feeling of "betrayal" over march', but its editorial did not see the commission as the problem. Rather, it claimed that only constructive, intercommunal dialogue would settle the parades issue and eventually remove the need for the commission altogether; this could only happen with the goodwill and full participation of all parties to local disputes ('Talks could end impasse').⁹

5.4 New media developments

While the *Derry Journal* group launched a new Sunday newspaper in March, the *Sunday Journal*, the Andersonstown News group's efforts to start up a daily,

'national' newspaper have so far proved problematic. The group proposes to publish the first edition in November but there is a question mark over its viability in a small and very competitive regional market. In order to realise its ambition to rival the *Irish News*, it will have to equal or outstrip that paper's circulation of over 50,000 copies per day.

The group's established paper, the *Andersonstown News*, sells only 16,800 copies, most of those to readers in west and north Belfast.¹⁰ This puts into proper context the overblown controversy over its proposed title, *Ireland Today*. It emerged that Rupert Murdoch's News International had registered the title as a trademark, and obtained an injunction prohibiting the Andersonstown News group from using it. There was much angry rhetoric from the group about censorship and intimidation but Colm Murphy of the University of Ulster, a former journalist with the *Sunday Times*, explained that it was a simple matter of checking the title against the register of trademarks at Companies House in London.

Then again, perhaps the whole controversy served as good publicity for a venture that badly needs real investment and public profile. The group is experiencing problems attracting adequate investment and will need to be assured of 60-70 per cent of agency advertising revenue to break even—a tough proposition when competing with the *Belfast Telegraph*, whose share of newspaper advertising (associated with its cross-communal reach) puts even the *Irish News* and *News Letter* under pressure.

The relevance of all this to this report lies in the political dimension. The Andersonstown News group's managing director is Máirtín O Muilleoir, a former SF councillor for west Belfast. An event in Belfast in May to promote the project was attended by leading SF figures, including the party's former publicity director Danny Morrison, who said he was unhappy at 'the Irish News' monopoly of the nationalist newspaper market in Northern Ireland'.¹¹

In June, the UUP MP Lady Hermon elicited in a parliamentary answer that the British government had given the group over half a million pounds in grants since 1999. She claimed it was 'absolutely outrageous' that 'an avowedly republican newspaper' should receive public support.¹²

5.5 Belfast's Satanic verses

The politics of outrage returned to Belfast City Council chambers in July over the contents of a local arts and culture magazine, the *Vacuum*. Published by the Factotum company, the *Vacuum* is free and is distributed mainly in the greater Belfast area (10,000 copies per monthly issue).

A recent edition looking at religion in cultural and artistic life gave particular offence to unionist councillors on the arts and leisure committee, which funds the magazine (to the tune of £5,000 per year). An article on Satanism and an account by an artist of

the social humiliation of urinating in church as a child were seen as pushing the bounds of taste and decency. The *News Letter* headlined the story ‘Satan shock for council—ratepayers’ cash used to “promote devil-worship”’.¹³

A UUP councillor, Jim Rodgers, called for funding to be revoked at the next meeting of the committee, raising accusations of censorship in turn. In various interviews, including on *Talkback*, Mr Rodgers argued that the council had a right to hold to public account organisations which it funded.

In reply, Daniel Jewesbury, magazine editor, told *Talkback* that the articles in question in no way promoted Satanism or gave grievous offence to Christianity, and claimed Mr Rodgers and his council had grossly over-reacted. A majority of the committee voted to continue funding the magazine at its subsequent meeting in August.

5.6 Mary Holland, 1935-2004

The veteran *Irish Times* journalist Mary Holland died on June 7th, an occasion marked by respectful obituaries in Irish and British newspapers. Ms Holland had a comprehensive grasp of the northern conflict from her years as reporter, correspondent and columnist, and for the most part escaped being stereotyped as a ‘pro-nationalist’, even ‘Provo’ journalist by assessing and commenting on the conflict in all its complexity.

The *Daily Telegraph* described her as ‘essentially a passionate liberal’, keenly attuned to the ‘excesses of nationalism’ (a judgment she would probably question). The paper quoted her thus: ‘Most journalists who reported on the conflict came to understand that they were working within serious, if unspoken, constraints—political disapproval, fear of offending public opinion, the denial of access to certain sources. To deny these realities, to insist on making waves, meant running the risk of being branded as “unreliable” or “a Provo lover”—but what this meant was that the public was not given the information to enable it to understand what was happening.’¹⁴

The *Observer*’s Ireland editor, Henry McDonald, described her not only as ‘a lifelong advocate for peace in Ireland’ but also ‘a voice-for-the-voiceless’. He wrote that ‘she provided a road map of understanding, analysis and above all else, humanitarian concern for the people directly affected by the Troubles’.¹⁵

¹ June 15th 2004

² June 20th 2004

³ June 13th 2004

⁴ July 10th 2004

⁵ July 13th and 14th 2004

⁶ July 13th 2004

⁷ July 14th 2004

⁸ July 13th 2004

⁹ July 13th 2004

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- ¹⁰ Audit Bureau of Circulation figures
¹¹ *Belfast Telegraph*, May 27th 2004
¹² *Irish News*, July 22nd 2004
¹³ July 2nd 2004
¹⁴ June 24th 2004
¹⁵ June 13th 2004

6. Public attitudes and identity

Lizanne Dowds

6.1 Introduction

This report highlights additional results from the 2003 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey, which fill out the picture on public opinion at the end of 2003 and the beginning of 2004.

The previous report (May 2004) examined attitudes to the Belfast agreement and concluded that Protestants largely remain alienated from it. Most Protestants and a substantial number of Catholics think bits of it should be renegotiated; increasing numbers in both communities feel the assembly achieved very little; and while very few would be pleased to see it permanently disappear an awful lot just don't care much any more.

6.2 Community relations

Attitudes towards community relations are, however, increasingly upbeat. Figure 1 shows the proportion of people who believe that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better than they were five years ago. The slight increase noted *vis-à-vis* the 2002 survey (see August 2003 report) has been followed by a further upward turn. While this 'feelgood' measure has not reached the level of the aftermath of the agreement, it has risen for two years running from the low realised around the time of the Holy Cross school dispute (see November 2001 report), and mirrors the decline in paramilitary violence since that time (see 'peace process' section).

Figure 1: % believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than 5 years ago (by religion)

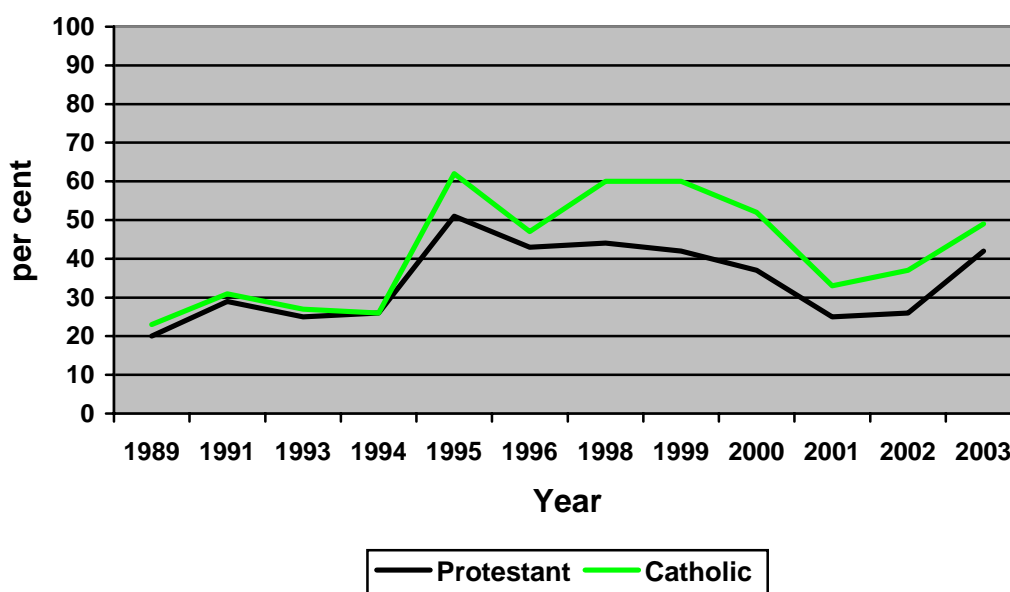
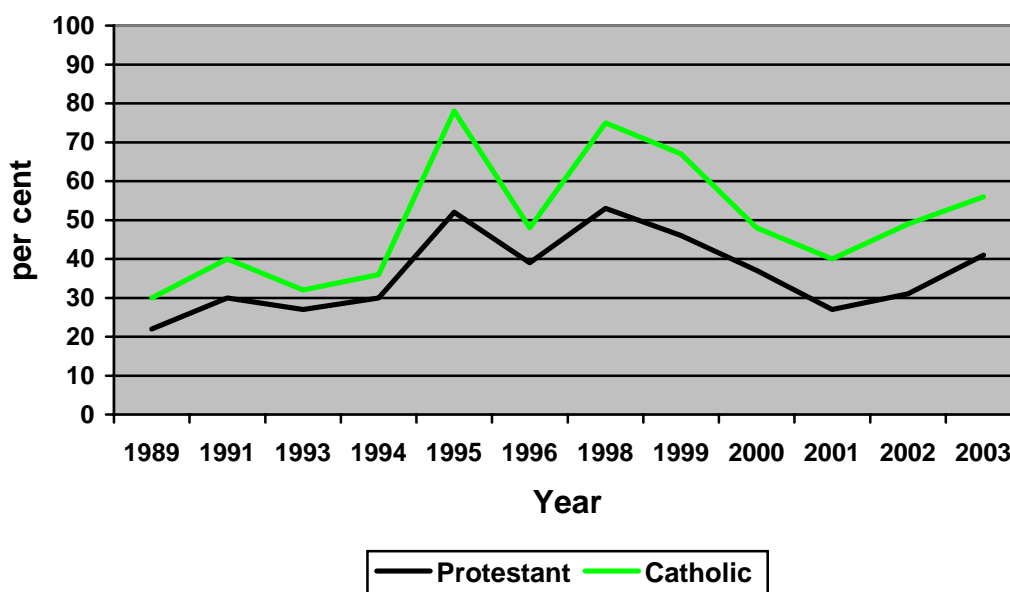


Figure 2 shows, moreover, that optimism is also rising. It charts the proportion of respondents who believe that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in five years time. It could be argued that the trend in both these charts is still downward from 1998, but realistically this looks like two time-trends—the first marking the downward slide since 1998 and the second showing signs of recovery from 2001 to 2003.

Figure 2: % believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in 5 years time (by religion)



6.3 Equality

Other questions in the Life and Times Survey have monitored over time perceptions of equality of opportunity. Here the results from 2003 are compared with attitudes in 2001, when most of these questions were first asked. Table 1 shows the range of different groups that respondents consider to be unfairly treated, compared with other groups.

Table 1: *Equality laws have been drawn up in Northern Ireland to make sure that everyone is treated equally. In your view, are any of the groups on this card generally treated unfairly when compared with other groups?*

	Catholic		Protestant		All	
	2001	2003	2001	2003	2001	2003
Catholics	15	7	3	2	8	4
Protestants	2	1	19	8	11	5
Gays/lesbians/bisexuals	22	30	13	14	18	21
Disabled	22	23	23	30	23	27

Elderly	19	25	24	33	21	30
Travellers	31	34	14	15	22	23
Other ethnic minorities	11	27	9	16	10	22
Women	4	4	3	3	4	4
Men	1	1	1	-	1	1

Overall, the numbers thinking Catholics or Protestants are treated unfairly are small: in 2003, only 4 per cent of the public thought Catholics were treated unfairly and only 5 per cent the same of Protestants. Also fewer Catholics in 2003 than in 2001 considered Catholics were treated unfairly (15 per cent thought so in 2001 but only 7 per cent in 2003). Similarly, while 19 per cent of Protestants in 2001 felt Protestants were treated unfairly, only 8 per cent were prepared to say this in 2003. All in all, the religious aspect of equality (along with gender) pales into insignificance in the public mind beside some of the other areas of concern.

6.4 Conclusion

Time-series analyses of public attitudes towards community relations in Northern Ireland often show that these go hand in hand with perceptions of the ‘political’ situation. But at the end of 2003 and the start of 2004, when the latest Life and Times Survey was carried out, this was not the case. While the survey showed a public somewhat jaded about the political situation and while voting in the 2003 assembly elections would seem to indicate a return to particularly sectarian positions, this was not reflected in downbeat or pessimistic views about community relations.

Protestants may well remain alienated from the agreement itself (and the sense that nationalists have benefited more from it runs very deep within the Protestant community), but this does not translate into a gloom that relations in general are deteriorating. Moreover, the alienation from the agreement and disengagement from the assembly is not (at present) perceived as part of a wider societal discrimination against the Protestant community.

7. Intergovernmental relations

Elizabeth Meehan and Robin Wilson

During the quarter, the British-Irish Council published an 84-page report on its work between 1999 and 2003.¹ It reported on all the meetings and the follow-up. This embraced five summit meetings, seven ministerial meetings (four on the environment, two on drugs and one on transport); and some 75 meetings of officials, study visits, seminars and conferences. Most of the substance of these meetings has been summarised in previous quarterly reports and is not repeated here.

What is however worth remarking upon is the changed political context since the BIC held its inaugural meeting, as did the North-South Ministerial Council, shortly after devolution was effected in December 1999. The introduction to the report points out how the BIC was established as a result of the Belfast agreement, yet four years on: ‘In the absence of members from the Northern Ireland Executive, the interests of Northern Ireland are temporarily represented by the British Government.’

Members of the council welcomed the report. In the words of the taoiseach, Mr Ahern, there was ‘no doubt that all British-Irish Council members have benefited from this common transfer of knowledge and expertise’. And he said: ‘This sharing of information reinforces the strong economic, social and cultural links which already exist between us.’²

There had, indeed, been considerable discussion before the Belfast agreement—from which the BIC emerged as a ‘unionist’ counterpart to the NSMC—about the (dispassionate) case for a ‘council of the isles’, with an eye to the Nordic Council experience and in the light of much reduced tensions between Dublin and London. The taoiseach’s comments suggest that the BIC may indeed be acquiring a life of its own, irrespective of the vagaries of devolution in Northern Ireland.

The BIC met in sectoral format to address social and financial exclusion on July 15th and 16th 2004. The NIO finance minister, Mr Pearson, attended in lieu of a devolved administration. He rehearsed the government’s plans for an anti-poverty strategy, which have been sharply criticised at home (see devolved government section).³

¹ *British-Irish Council Report 1999-2003*, London: Secretariat of the British-Irish Council on behalf of the Members, available at www.british-irishcouncil.org

² *Irish Times*, July 7th 2004

³ OFMDFM press release, July 16th 2004

8.1 EU strategy

This quarter was marked by the election to the European Parliament (see political parties and elections section), but with campaigns in which directly European issues played only in minor key. Meantime, to very little public political reaction, the NIO minister Ian Pearson opened a consultation on a European strategy for Northern Ireland. The associated paper, *inter alia*, canvasses opinion as to whether, in addition to the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels (established in May 2001), there should be ‘a civil society umbrella organisation’ there as well, modelled on Scotland Europa.¹

The consultation was due to end on September 28th 2004. That it was taking place over the summer did not augur well for a big response. The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action was meantime complaining that it had been asked to comment on 24 official proposals between mid-July and mid-September (as well as seven section 75 ‘equality schemes’).²

Shortly before Mr Pearson’s announcement, the Northern Ireland secretary, Mr Murphy, expressing his support for the European constitution, urged BBC Radio Ulster listeners to pay attention to the benefits EU membership had brought. He itemised funding, trade links, and the bringing together of the London and Dublin governments in ‘a very special way that has considerably helped the peace process’.³

8.2 Special programmes body

The troubled Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) now has a new chief executive, Pat Colgan, to replace the acting chief executive who had filled the gap on the suspension of the previous incumbent, John McKinney. In announcing his appointment, the republic’s finance minister, Charlie McCreevy—subsequently appointed a European Commissioner—and his Northern Ireland counterpart, Mr Pearson, drew attention to Mr Colgan’s wide experience of European issues, public administration and funding, as well as fluency in several languages.⁴

Mr Colgan has been head of the INTERACT secretariat in the Austrian Institute for Spatial Planning and Development. INTERRACT is an EU programme to provide assistance to cross-border co-operation schemes funded by INTERREG. He has been involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of EU-funded and other programmes in member states and acted as an adviser in the ministries of new member and accession states. His background bodes well for the SEUPB.

¹ *Taking Our Place in Europe: Northern Ireland’s European Strategy 2004-2008*, Belfast: OFMDFM, available at www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/europe.pdf

² McGill, Paul, ‘Government poverty plans stink’, *Scope*, July/August 2004

³ Press archives of the NIO, June 21st 2004

⁴ Executive news release, July 9th 2004

9. Relations with local government Robin Wilson

In the wake of his announcement in May on the review of public administration (see May 2004 report), the responsible NIO minister, Ian Pearson, continued to sustain momentum with a series of meetings in June and July with representatives of the five main political parties in the region.

In mid-July Mr Pearson issued a further statement clarifying his intentions. Having indicated in May that he wanted to see the number of councils reduced from 26 to fewer than ten, he said these 'larger more powerful councils could have responsibilities for an increased range of functions such as regeneration, environmental services, some planning functions and possibly local roads'. He said he also saw such councils 'having an important role in ensuring co-ordinated service delivery', including 'a major role in community planning'. This would dovetail with the—of course, virtual—assembly playing a strategic, policy and standard-setting and monitoring role *vis-à-vis* public services.

He suggested this would mean 'around five to eight' councils, suggesting a reorganisation of the existing district structure along county lines (six) plus Belfast and Derry or forming new authorities by a process of amalgamations. He said he would also be looking for 'significant reductions in the number of public bodies, in particular, the administrative structures around health and education'. Key here will be the fate of the area boards for health and social services and for education and libraries, which are neither co-terminous with each other (there are four of the former and five of the latter) nor with council boundaries.

Mr Pearson said the parties had raised with him the need for 'checks and balances' to ensure the more powerful authorities he envisaged would operate in a fair and equitable way—though he did not spell these out how he intended to deal with this challenge (see May 2004 report).

He said, however, that he was 'very encouraged' by their support—a common affinity to locality in Northern Ireland is easier to secure than civic loyalty to institutions at the contested regional level—and by that of 'other key stakeholders'. So far the potential revolt by councilors facing a cull in their numbers has not materialised. And the minister promised 'firm proposals' in the autumn after further talks with the parties.¹

¹ Review of Public Administration pres release, July 19th 2004

10. Finance Robin Wilson

A further tightening of the financial screw on Northern Ireland (see May 2004 report) was apparent this quarter.

It began with the demand by the Department of Finance and Personnel that reductions of some £178 million be found by departments over the coming three years in line with the budget goal set by the chancellor, Gordon Brown, of 2.5 per cent year-on-year 'efficiency' gains.¹ The author of the review for government of potential savings, Sir Peter Gershon, visited the region a couple of months or so before his report was published in July.

Another recent visitor has been the chief secretary to the Treasury, Paul Boateng, who floated the notion of regionalised pay arrangement during his trip. The direct-rule administration has been locked in a protracted and bitter dispute with the main civil-service union, the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, having taken a tougher line on pay than its devolved predecessor.

Northern Ireland's financial case was not helped by continued evidence this quarter of the chronic incapacity to turn budgets into expenditure, revealed by the finance minister in July. There had been a £220 million underspend in the 2003-04 financial year, Mr Pearson reported. In fact, the table accompanying the departmental press release indicated that to this should be added £100 million, described as 'planned overcommitment'. And there had been a further £53 million underspent from the EU Peace II programme.²

The Liberal Democrat peer Lord Smith of Clifton, former vice-chancellor of the University of Ulster and now a serial critic of the management of public expenditure in Northern Ireland, attacked the government in the Lords a fortnight later. He declared, in characteristically forthright style: 'The Northern Ireland economy is more collectivised than Stalin's Russia, more corporatist than Mussolini's Italy and more quangoised than Britain (under former Prime Ministers Harold Wilson and Edward Heath).'

Lord Smith was backed by his party colleague Lord Shutt of Greenland, who is also long familiar with Northern Ireland through his involvement with the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, a major charitable funder in the region. He argued that direct rule meant that the budget for Northern Ireland could not be properly scrutinised.³

Meantime, the chancellor, Gordon Brown, had published his comprehensive spending review, which Mr Pearson highlighted would mean an extra 3 per cent per year in real terms over the coming three years.⁴ He did not choose to highlight the evidence here of the continuing impact of the 'Barnett squeeze'—but the former first minister, Mr Trimble, did. He told the Commons that spending for the UK as a whole would rise

by 4.2 per cent on average, with Wales seeing a 4 per cent increase and Scotland 3½ per cent. Mr Trimble complained that this was not ‘a fair deal for Northern Ireland’.⁵

In turn, however, he declined to mention that the region’s increased allocation in relative terms is lower because its absolute level of expenditure is higher—of which the Treasury is well aware. As the chief secretary said in public earlier in the year, ‘We need to remember that Northern Ireland has the highest public expenditure of any region in the UK.’⁶

Also in July, the NIO explained the apparently bizarre budgetary provision in 2004-05 of £500,000 for the Civic Forum—on which only £176,000 was spent in 2003-04, given the forum had been suspended alongside the devolved institutions in October 2002. An NIO spokeswoman explained that the money spent in the past year had included new accommodation ‘in anticipation of early restoration’, and the half million for this year would be reallocated if suspension remained.⁷ The apparent anomaly had given unionists—this time including the UUP alongside the always antagonistic DUP—the opportunity to vent their spleen against a body they have seen (as Lord Laird of Artigarvan put it) as a ‘waste of money’.⁸

On the revenue-raising side, Mr Pearson launched a policy paper on reform of the rates system. Mrs Thatcher never applied the ‘poll tax’ to the region—the then NIO minister Richard Needham having pointed out the potential consequences of trying to do so in Northern Ireland. The devolved finance minister Seán Farren initiated a review of rating policy in May 2002 (see August 2002 report), clearly with an eye to replacing the system with a more equitable arrangement based on the capital value of the property.

This approach his direct-rule successor followed—the only real alternative would have been the Liberal Democrats’ local income tax model—with the promise of the necessary corrective reliefs for what is still a rough-and-ready system for those on low incomes. The minister said he would consult until November, with a view to introducing the new system, after a revaluation exercise, in April 2007.⁹

Rather more fuss followed the similarly long-awaited announcement that water charges would be introduced. Hitherto—as ‘mainland’ ministers have constantly reminded their Northern Ireland audience—ratepayers in the region have paid hundreds of pounds less per year than their constituents have stumped up in council tax and water charges. As with the argument over Barnett, however, this has been something of a dialogue of the deaf, with Northern Ireland politicians retreating into oppositionalism on the issue.

The regional-development minister, Mr Spellar, announced in August that a company with a government-majority shareholding would be established in 18 months to take over the water service, to be self-financing through charges in five years. Households would be billed from April 2006, he said. Reaction was predictable: the DUP said it

would ‘hugely increase the tax burden’, while SF said it would lead a campaign against the plan.¹⁰

A more acceptable arrangement—and, arguably more dynamic—would have been the independent public-interest company advocated by the former permanent secretary of the old Department of Environment (formerly responsible for water), modelled on Glas Cymru in Wales.¹¹ The danger with the proposed ‘go-co’ is that it will not escape the dead hand of government on the one hand, and on the other any private equity stake would introduce a shareholder-value focus, unlike the stakeholder connections which tie Glas Cymru to the Welsh National Assembly and pursuit of the public good.

On the day of the announcement, the *Belfast Telegraph* revealed a leaked memo indicating that more than 700 jobs were expected to be lost in the coming four years, associated with the changeover. This prompted a threat of further industrial action from the civil-service union.¹²

¹ *Belfast Telegraph*, May 21st 2004

² DFP press release, July 6th 2004

³ *Belfast Telegraph*, July 20th 2004

⁴ DFP press release, July 14th 2004

⁵ *News Letter*, July 14th 2004

⁶ DFP press release, February 9th 2004

⁷ *Irish News*, July 24th 2005

⁸ *Irish News*, July 22nd 2005

⁹ DFP press release, July 21st 2004

¹⁰ *Irish News*, August 11th 2004

¹¹ See Wilson, Robin (2002), *Private Partners and the Public Good*, Belfast: Institute of Governance, Queen’s University

¹² *Belfast Telegraph*, August 10th 2004

11. Political parties and elections Duncan Morrow and Robin Wilson

11.1 Introduction

Northern Ireland's strange ritual of endless elections followed by political stasis took a further twist this quarter. While the European election had no formal relevance for the future of devolution, the growing dominance of the DUP and SF which the results portrayed certainly does. The strategy of 'saving Dave' (as disdainfully represented by republicans, the securing of the position of the UUP leader and former first minister, Mr Trimble)—a strategy which defined much London-Dublin intergovernmental activity for the last five years—appears to have come to a definitive end. Meanwhile, any remaining fantasy that the SDLP could or would substitute for SF in an alternative coalition with unionism has disappeared.

Instead, the future of devolution lies in directly negotiating an unprecedented deal between the followers of Ian Paisley and the fellow-travellers of the IRA. Whether or not it can be officially admitted, Northern Ireland politics have returned to a phase of constitutional negotiation, less profound perhaps than the talks leading up to the Belfast agreement but equally uncertain in their outcome. Only time will tell whether the 'optimists' (those who believe that the absence of any serious prospect of either party being outbid from its ultra-nationalist flank means that a workable arrangement is at last feasible) or the 'pessimists' (those who believe that the ethnic exclusivism of both parties makes a deal unlikely or even undesirable) will be proved right.

11.2 European disunion

The European elections provide something of a distraction in the becalmed political landscape that is Northern Ireland. For the first time since the inception of these elections in 1979, neither Mr Paisley nor the former SDLP leader, John Hume, stood, and both their parties indicated a downgrading of the contest by choosing relatively unknown candidates.

From the outset it was clear identifiably European issues would play a minor role. As in most elections in the region, this was to be a single-issue referendum on the Northern Ireland constitutional question. Both the DUP and SF were keen to underline their political pre-eminence within their respective religious 'communities', while the UUP and SDLP were focussed on the more limited goal of retaining their seats. Outside the four large parties, three candidates sought support: the former head of the Ulster Farmers' Union John Gilliland stood as an independent, with the backing of the Alliance Party and smaller groups; a prominent activist and journalist, Eamonn McCann, flew the flag of the Socialist Environmental Alliance; and Lindsay Whitcroft was the relatively unknown face of the Green Party.

The campaign, such as it was, was fought against an apathetic backdrop. The DUP was determined to retain its record of topping the poll in European contests. Its candidate, Jim Allister, deliberately focused Protestant voters on the threat of SF receiving the greatest first-preference share, in a campaign which emphasised traditional anti-republican themes.¹ The confidence of the DUP campaign was in marked contrast to the weakness of the UUP, even though the party's candidate, Jim Nicholson, was the only sitting MEP. The absence of any distinct message or defining theme left the UUP struggling.²

SF luxuriated in its role as the only party fighting seats on both sides of the Irish border, with a serious prospect of success in both jurisdictions. Like anti-system parties across Europe, its very anti-system orientation attracted huge media attention. Within the Northern Ireland constituency, designated by SF as 'the six counties', the party campaigned for the first time as the clearly dominant Catholic political force. The former Stormont health minister, Bairbre de Brún, ran a confident if relatively low-key campaign, while most party effort went into more marginal contests in Dublin and the west of Ireland.³

The party with the most to lose at these elections was the SDLP. At the last European election in 1999, the veteran Mr Hume, fresh from winning the Nobel Peace Prize, had come within 0.3 per cent of Mr Paisley at the top of the poll, in his party's best-ever election result. This time, major figures in the party declined the opportunity to stand, perhaps fearing the ignominy of defeat. The SDLP's position was not helped by the major split which developed with Fianna Fáil over the referendum on citizenship being held in the republic on the same day as the European election⁴. In the event, the young mayor of Belfast, Martin Morgan, ran an energetic if somewhat forlorn campaign in the face of a widespread presumption that the SDLP could not hope to outpoint SF. Nationalist hopes of taking a third seat rested on a much higher level of electoral participation by Catholics than Protestants.⁵

Among the other candidates, Mr Gilliland was given the best chance. The decision by Alliance not to stand a candidate of its own reflected its poor prospect and the disastrous experience of 1999, when the party leader's vote had been squeezed between the UUP and SDLP to 2 per cent of the poll. This time, an independent candidate with strong rural credentials offered the prospect of harvesting votes from the same source.⁶

The results largely reflected expectations. Turnout fell to 52 per cent, still healthy compared with other parts of the UK, but part of a continuing decline in enthusiasm especially around Belfast. As with the assembly election (see May 2004 report), the fall in turnout, of more than 5 points on 1999, obscured a larger drop associated with the introduction of tighter registration requirements in 2002: 124,000 fewer voters took part this time, just as 122,000 fewer had voted in the assembly election than in 1998. 'Apathy wins as electorate stays at home' was how the *Belfast Telegraph* framed the story.⁷

The clear message of the first-count results was the success of the DUP and SF:⁸

Candidate	1st preferences	Vote share	Change on 1999
Jim Allister (DUP)	175,761	32.0	+3.6%
Bairbre de Brún (SF)	144,541	26.3	+9%
Jim Nicholson (UUP)	91,164	16.6	-1.0%
Martin Morgan (SDLP)	87,559	15.9	-12.1%
John Gilliland (Ind)	36,270	6.6	NA
Eamonn McCann (SEA)	9,172	1.6	NA
Lindsay Whitcroft (Green)	4,810	0.9	NA

With three single-transferable-vote seats available, the quota was 25 per cent, ensuring the election of Mr Allister and Ms de Brún after the first count. Following the reallocation of their surpluses and the elimination of the three non-sectarian candidates, Mr Nicholson retained the third seat and the SDLP was left without any European representation.

For SF, there was the additional satisfaction of winning a European seat in the Dublin constituency and of major advances in simultaneous local-government elections in the republic, especially in the border counties and the capital. Some commentators believe SF is within striking distance of a share of government in the south by 2006 or 2010⁹—though for as long as the party remains linked to the IRA it is not a legitimate coalition partner, given the express constitutional requirement that the only army in the state be raised by the Oireachtas (the Dáil and Seanad).¹⁰

The four-party system of the agreement era appears to have been superseded by a two-party polarity, with the traditionally more moderate groupings relegated to minority status. The triumph of mutually antagonistic anti-system parties presents both the parties and devolution with hugely difficult choices. Under previous circumstances, such a result would have led to serious unrest. In fact, the governments were able to treat the result as a predictable, if undesirable, fact of life, and announced their intent to redouble their efforts to restore devolution against the backdrop of apathy and inactivity. But the potential for long-term difficulties and impasse is unmistakable.

As an aside, at Northern Ireland questions on May 26th, the NIO minister John Spellar confirmed the government's intention to allow the current order exempting the regional parties from declaring foreign and anonymous donations, conceded when Mo Mowlam was Northern Ireland secretary, to expire in February 2005, thereby enabling the same accountability and transparency to apply as is currently the case in respect of parties in Britain.¹¹ This was given a warm welcome on all sides of the Commons—not least from unionists, who perceive that this will exert a differential and significant impact upon the absent SF. Mr Spellar also confirmed that the government was exploring new measures under electoral funding regulations to prevent parties linked to paramilitary organisations deriving monies from criminal

activities, as were clearly set out in the first report from the Independent Monitoring Commission (see May 2004 report).¹²

During the exchanges, the South Down SDLP MP, Eddie McGrady issued a forthright attack. He said: 'Since the IMC report the British and Irish governments have failed to tackle seriously the links between paramilitary organisations and political parties in Northern Ireland. If a report of this nature was to arise in any other country in Europe, serious consequences would follow that would shake the democratic system to its core. The governments' failure to deal with this problem has made democracy in Northern Ireland a laughing stock and only served to prove that the two governments are playing a game of appeasement with those who keep the guns in politics.'¹³

11.3 Talking about talking

The overwhelming feature of the last ten years in Northern Ireland has been talking about talking. In the absence of the political capacity to agree, the process of negotiating has itself become the substance of political life. The last quarter proved no exception, with the DUP proclaiming that it would only talk to SF if the IRA decommissioned its weapons¹⁴ while the SF president, Mr Adams, demanded that the governments in London and Dublin 'break the deadlock'.¹⁵ The governments themselves maintained their doctrine of making a further push to restore the agreement, holding exploratory talks in London in late June (see 'peace process' section) aimed at clearing the way to new, substantive negotiations in September.

With the frontlines between 'unionism' and 'nationalism' now frozen like the Western Front in 1916, change, if it comes, can only be swift and unexpected. As it stands the auguries for agreement in September are mixed. On the one hand, the prospect of an agreed permanent coalition between the DUP and SF remains eternally unlikely, while, on the other, both communalist parties continued with the 'will they? won't they?' signalling which has (ironically) successfully detached Northern Ireland politics from both the rest of the United Kingdom and the rest of Ireland, if not yet devolved it. The DUP will still not talk directly to SF, though the SF chair, Mitchel McLaughlin, insisted there would be no deal in September unless it did.¹⁶

The appearance by the former UUP rebel and now DUP figure Jeffrey Donaldson at the West Belfast Festival in August 2004, where he reiterated the centrality for unionists of disposing of IRA weapons if the impasse were to be broken,¹⁷ was followed by a suggestion from the SF leader, Mr Adams (who attended the event), that the IRA that might 'remove that as an excuse' in the context of 'an ongoing process of sustainable change'.¹⁸ This may or may not provide the opportunity for a breakthrough, but most observers will hold the champagne until the deal is finally signed and sealed.¹⁹

Significantly, the Dublin-based *Sunday Business Post*, which has an *entrée* to the republican movement, clarified Mr Adams' Delphic comments the following

weekend. The paper reported from ‘republican sources’ that what was on offer was the possibility that the IRA would ‘dump arms’. This is how the IRA acknowledged (in 1962) the end of the 50s campaign, but it is distinct from the decommissioning of weapons or disbandment of the organisation (both loyalist and republican paramilitary organisations were of course reactivated in the maelstrom of 1969). And this would only eventuate, the paper said, if London and Dublin gave ‘cast-iron guarantees’ that the agreement would be ‘forced through against the wishes of intransigent unionists’—the antithesis of the power-sharing ethos at the agreement’s heart.²⁰

Responding in turn to Mr Adams’ overture, the DUP deputy leader, Mr Robinson, made plain that his party was in no hurry to reach agreement—whatever the prime minister insisted. Mr Robinson said it had taken two years to negotiate the agreement, and suggested it might take a year or more to achieve the DUP’s alternative.²¹ In June, during a visit to the John F Kennedy School of Governance for a ‘Leaders of Tomorrow’ seminar, he was said to have insisted that successful talks would have to be followed by an IMC report (showing IRA inactivity), the completion of decommissioning and legislation to reflect the changes in the agreement his party sought, before his party would be ‘going into government’.²² And in July, responding to comments by the prime minister at his presidential-style monthly press conference, the East Belfast MP said: ‘We will not move one inch towards a deal which is unsatisfactory for unionists just because someone is pushing, shoving and pressurising for that deal.’²³

Opinion data show that supporters of his party are much more content than those of any other to see direct rule continue. Mr Adams meanwhile declared, rather less opaquely in this regard, that the ‘fundamental changes’ sought by the DUP to the agreement were ‘totally unacceptable’.²⁴

One of the benefits of stalemate is that the prospect of a successful military alternative to negotiation appears equally distant. Nonetheless, the possibility of localised outbreaks of violence around particular issues remains alive. In late May, a feud broke out between ‘loyalist’ gangs in east Belfast.²⁵ On the Catholic side, a leading member of the fringe Irish National Liberation Army was gunned down outside a primary school.²⁶ In June and July, Orange Order parades again provided opportunities for conflict.

The Parades Commission upset loyalists with an initial ban on an Orange march along part of the mainly Catholic Springfield Road in west Belfast,²⁷ a decision which was later reversed for a deal which failed to satisfy nationalists.²⁸ Although the previously difficult ‘Drumcree’ demonstration in Portadown passed off peacefully this year,²⁹ tensions in Belfast boiled over with a major riot between republicans and the police at Ardoyne on the Twelfth of July (see media section).³⁰ While the Parades Commission came under renewed attack from all sides,³¹ and annoyed the UK government when its decisions threatened the attempts by the latter to corral regional politicians towards talks, there is little real prospect that it will be removed in the absence of any consensus on a replacement. The most serious damage was probably to the stability of

the Policing Board—one of the most prominent success stories of the ‘peace process’—with members (who do not include SF) breaking down along sectarian lines in public comments as to the conduct of the police during the parades incidents.

What is remarkable, in global perspective, is the length of time such a pantomime can be sustained without major risk to the systems of everyday life. The British government, at least, shows signs of impatience with some of this. In an attempt to increase pressure on the parties, the prime minister, Mr. Blair warned that failure to make a breakthrough in September would mean the end of attempts to broker negotiation in the medium term. He appeared to imply that the government would look to a mix of direct rule and joint, London-Dublin sovereignty to fill the gap.³²

11.4 Justice done?

With the policing of parades again in the headlines, justice issues remain the most serious threat to the stability of any political agreement. Even during the relative quiet of this quarter, a number of issues which have had serious implications in the past returned to the political limelight. In Colombia, the three Irish republicans accused of helping the rebel FARC movement were acquitted (while being convicted on the lesser charge of carrying false passports), although the decision was immediately appealed. Directed by the court to remain in Colombia pending the outcome, the trio refused to leave prison for fear of their lives.³³ While republicans were clearly delighted with the outcome, the DUP underlined the broad unionist view that the acquittal was largely attributable to legal technicality, no matter what the verdict. Nonetheless, this issue at least has probably lost most of its potency for now.

The same can not be said for the inquiries resulting from past events in Ireland. In the republic, the government came under further pressure to open a full public inquiry into the Dublin and Monaghan bombings in 1974, when 30 people were killed in a single day.³⁴ While executed by the Ulster Volunteer Force, there has been persistent suspicion of the involvement of aspects of the security apparatus in the north at the time.

The issue of inquiries continues, and will continue, to cause major problems for the British government too. The Northern Ireland secretary, Mr Murphy, outlined the formats of three inquiries into cases of alleged collusion or negligence, on which the Canadian judge Peter Cory had reported in April (see May 2004 report), although none was held to be fully satisfactory by all parties.³⁵ But the decision not to hold an inquiry into the fourth case, the killing by the Ulster Defence Association of the Belfast solicitor Pat Finucane in 1989, continues to fuel the greatest protest from republicans, leading Mr Finucane’s widow to claim Mr Blair was himself colluding in state-sanctioned murder.³⁶

At the same time, the adjudication by the Police Ombudsman, Nuala O’Loan, on the police raid on SF’s offices in Stormont (which led directly to the collapse of

devolution in 2002) stoked unionist presumptions about the party's democratic *bona fides*. Ms O'Loan criticised the heavy-handed nature of the raid but not the operation itself.³⁷

The announcement of another suspected break-in at the intelligence centre at Castlereagh near Belfast was only further grist to that mill. The previous episode, in March 2002, had seen intelligence material passed apparently to the IRA, leading to the rehousing of a large number of prison officers at huge public expense. This time, the suggestion was that loyalists might have been the beneficiaries: 28 soldiers from the locally-recruited Royal Irish Regiment were suspended from duty at the centre.³⁸

11.5 Conclusion

There were, of course, small changes to the familiar faces of local life during this quarter. The funeral of Joe Cahill, a veteran IRA man who had strongly and very publicly backed the Adams 'peace strategy', brought out a huge crowd in west Belfast³⁹ but did not appear to signal any major sea change in republicanism. In Belfast, Tom Ekin from the Alliance Party was elected as mayor but most controversy was reserved for the election of Joe O'Donnell of SF as deputy. Nonetheless, the logic of power-sharing and the rotation of ceremonial posts continues to advance across district councils.⁴⁰

But anyone awaiting decisive change was disappointed. The drift to political polarisation without any appetite for violence continues to define and confine the parameters. In the context, it was hard not to agree with the incoming moderator of the Irish Presbyterian Church, Dr Ken Newell, that the over-riding feeling was one of despair at the inability or unwillingness of politics to deliver any decisive conclusion to Northern Ireland's tensions.⁴¹

¹ *Irish Times*, May 27th 2004

² *Irish Times*, May 31st 2004

³ *Belfast Telegraph*, June 2nd 2004

⁴ *Irish Times*, June 10th 2004

⁵ *Irish Times*, June 6th 2004

⁶ *Irish Times*, May 28th 2004

⁷ June 15th 2004

⁸ *Irish News*, June 15th 2004

⁹ *Irish Times*, June 15th 2004

¹⁰ article 15(6) of Bunreacht na hEireann, the republic's constitution

¹¹ HC Debs, May 26th 2004, col 1550

¹² *ibid*, col 1551

¹³ *Irish News*, May 27th 2004

¹⁴ *Irish News*, May 10th 2004

¹⁵ *Belfast Telegraph*, June 21st 2004

¹⁶ *Irish News*, June 26th 2004

¹⁷ *Irish News*, August 5th 2004

¹⁸ *Irish Times*, August 7th 2004

¹⁹ *Irish News*, August 9th 2004

²⁰ *Sunday Business Post*, August 8th 2004

²¹ BBC Northern Ireland news, August 10th 2004

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- ²² *Irish News*, June 28th 2004
²³ *News Letter*, July 23rd 2004
²⁴ *Irish Times*, August 10th 2004
²⁵ *Belfast Telegraph*, May 31st 2004
²⁶ *Irish Times*, June 5th 2004
²⁷ *Belfast Telegraph*, June 21st 2004
²⁸ *Sunday World*, June 27th 2004
²⁹ *Belfast Newsletter*, July 5th 2004
³⁰ *Irish News*, July 13th 2004
³¹ *Belfast Telegraph*, June 21th & 28th 2004
³² *Irish Times*, June 30th 2004
³³ *Irish Times*, June 18th 2004
³⁴ *Irish Times*, May 20th 2004
³⁵ *Irish News*, July 9th 2004
³⁶ *Sunday Tribune*, August 8th 2004
³⁷ *Belfast Telegraph*, August 1st 2004
³⁸ *Irish Times*, July 22nd 2004
³⁹ *Irish News*, July 28th 2004
⁴⁰ *Belfast Telegraph*, June 2nd 2004
⁴¹ *Irish Times*, June 8th 2004

12. Public policies

Rick Wilford and Robin Wilson

The team of direct-rule ministers continued their activism during the quarter in relation to 'low' politics. Apart from participating fully in the Comprehensive Spending Review (see finance section), the NIO minister Ian Pearson unveiled plans for the regeneration of the north-west of the region¹ and a detailed assessment of proposals to the same end for west Belfast and the greater Shankill area,² each of which is to benefit from the Integrated Development Fund announced by Mr Pearson in March 2003. He also continued to progress the review of public administration (see section on relations with local government).

The health minister, Angela Smith, launched a consultation on the strategic framework for primary care services for the next 20 years, *Caring for People Beyond Tomorrow*,³ and announced eight pilot projects to test the strategic thinking and reshaping of community nursing services.⁴ She was also the bearer of good (direct-rule) news when, in early June, she announced that hospital inpatient and day-case waiting lists had fallen to their lowest levels for four years, to below 50,000—this had been a thorn in the flesh of her devolved predecessor, Bairbre de Brún, under whom waiting lists rose inexorably.⁵

Her colleague, Barry Gardiner, also announced other good news when, in mid-July, he disclosed that unemployment had fallen to the lowest level on record.⁶ This was rather more deceptive, however, as the 37,000 unemployed (seasonally adjusted) were dwarfed by the 503,000 estimated to be economically inactive, an increase of 50,000 on a year earlier. Almost three out of every ten adults of working age in Northern Ireland do not participate in the labour market, the highest rate for any UK region.

John Spellar, responsible for regional development, opened an industry conference on public-private partnerships in early June, taking the opportunity to publicise a £263 million PPP investment programme for water and waste-water treatment facilities. He observed that more than £3 billion of capital investment would be required over the next two decades to upgrade the infrastructure. PPPs are not popular among the parties in Northern Ireland—any more than water charges (see finance section). Mr Spellar also launched a three-month consultation on sustainable development in the countryside, as part of the implementation of the regional development strategy that gained assembly approval in September 2001.⁷

The enterprise, trade and investment minister, again Mr Gardiner, set out policy proposals to update policy on credit unions and provident and industrial societies and, more controversially, picked up the educational mantle of his immediate predecessor, Jane Kennedy, in reconfirming that academic selection at the age of 11 is to be scrapped. He responded vigorously to a campaign for the retention of some form of academic selection (see devolved government section)⁸ and he gave the go-ahead for associated plans, developed by the Council on the Curriculum, Examinations and

Assessment, for a more broadly-based secondary curriculum.⁹ Mr Gardiner further announced a review of pre-school education and launched a consultation exercise to that end.¹⁰

Following the all-island energy forum held in March, Mr Gardiner held a meeting with his counterpart from the republic, Dermot Ahern, to discuss north-south energy and telecommunications provision. He was bullish about a strategic framework to achieve an all-Ireland energy market, an initiative set in train by his colleague Mr Pearson, who had held the enterprise, trade and investment brief before the recent reshuffle.¹¹ A month later, Mr Gardiner announced a new framework, the key goals of which are reducing energy costs, building competitive energy markets, enhancing renewables and securing a reliable energy supply.¹²

Last but not least, the head of the civil service, Nigel Hamilton, launched a consultation on an OFMDFM strategy for the social inclusion of elderly people, *Ageing in an Inclusive Society*. The document was the product of a working group under the 'promoting social inclusion' strand of the 'New Targeting Social Need' initiative. The much-criticised 'New TSN' is being replaced by an 'anti-poverty strategy' (see devolved government section) but its most successful aspect has been the PSI groups, partly because they have been focused and thematic, and partly because they have involved NGOs active in the field as well as departments.

Mr Hamilton said he had been 'really impressed' by the input from the voluntary sector (Age Concern, Help the Aged, the Rural Community Network and NICVA were all represented) and *Ageing in an Inclusive Society* covers much useful ground. Working group sources indicate, however, that there were disagreements over the fundamental issue of pension levels.

¹ NIO press release, April 29th 2004

² NIO press release, May 6th 2004

³ Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety press release, June 7th 2004

⁴ DHSSPS press release, June 18th 2004

⁵ DHSSPS press release, June 3rd 2004

⁶ Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment press release, July 17th 2004

⁷ Department for Regional Development press release, June 24th 2004

⁸ Department of Environment press release, May 24th 2004

⁹ *Belfast Telegraph*, June 23rd 2004

¹⁰ DoE press release, June 28th 2004

¹¹ DETI press release, May 19th 2004.

¹² DETI press release, June 30th 2004