



The **Constitution** Unit



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- Paisley big winner in election battle
- Trimble resigns UUP leadership
- Sinn Féin weathers McCartney storm
- SDLP lives to fight another day
- Public disengagement evident in lower turnout
- IRA statement on future still awaited

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1. Summary Robin Wilson

Elections have dominated the scene in Northern Ireland in recent months, though mercifully the citizenry may be spared any more until 2009. The Westminster poll was matched by elections to the region's 26 district councils—the last to the latter before they are to be culled as a result of the review of public administration.

The big winner at the ballot box was Rev Ian Paisley, the old Protestant-fundamentalist warhorse, who saw off yet another unionist figure who had tacked to moderation. The Ulster Unionist leader, David Trimble, resigned following a humiliating election defeat he could not see coming.

It was a remarkable testimony to how little Northern Ireland's much-vaunted 'peace process' has shifted the region's underlying tectonic plates. As was the consolidation—though not significant further advance—as the main Catholic party of Sinn Féin, political wing of the IRA. This despite being internationally excoriated, notably by the US Congress and the European Parliament, over the brutal slaying by republicans of Robert McCartney in a Belfast bar.

Indeed, as these elections confirmed, the two trends are towards polarisation between the ethno-nationalist forces on both sides—the DUP and SF—and growing disengagement on the part of the less ideologically committed (who, being captured by attitudes surveys, ensure the latter present a more nuanced picture). The turnout was markedly down, even before the effects of a reduced register are taken into account.

With devolution a distantly receding experience, the not-very-distant calls by the new Northern Ireland secretary, Peter Hain, for a British withdrawal from Ireland have done little to endear him to his emboldened DUP interlocutors. Meanwhile, on the republican side, SF's electoral success was interpreted by its leader, Mr Adams, as endorsement of his call to the IRA to adopt 'political and democratic'—which may not be the same as peaceful and legal—methods. But the recurrent Northern Ireland political game of 'Waiting for Provo' continued, as the expected response from the IRA did not emerge during the survey period.

In any event, the DUP notably toughened its stance, demanding *inter alia* the disbandment of the IRA as a precondition of renewed power-sharing, which neither London nor Dublin would endorse. The UUP under its new leader, Sir Reg Empey, tacked back to a harder line, while the SDLP continued to sustain its self-denying ordinance against a cross-sectarian coalition built around the centre. Renewed devolution remains a distant prospect.

2. The ‘peace process’ Rick Wilford

2.1 Paisley prevails

As elsewhere in the UK, the pivot on which political events turned in this period was the general election and, in Northern Ireland’s case, the concurrent local-government elections (see also parties-and-elections section below). As expected, each saw the further electoral advance of the Democratic Unionist Party and, to a lesser extent, Sinn Féin. It represented an emphatic victory for the veteran DUP leader, Rev Ian Paisley, over his Ulster Unionist rival and sometime first minister, David Trimble.

The results confirmed the electoral ascendancy of the DUP among unionists, established in 2003. It took 66 per cent of the combined DUP-UUP vote at the Westminster election—matching its equivalent vote share at the 2004 European Parliamentary election—and 62 per cent in the district-council elections. The DUP returned nine MPs to Westminster, a net gain of four from 2001, and increased its number of councillors by 52 to a total of 182—almost a third of the total. The DUP’s overall vote share was 34 per cent at the parliamentary election and almost 30 per cent of first preferences at the local elections.

These results represented the DUP’s best-ever performances at local and general elections; correspondingly, they were the UUP’s worst. From 10 MPs in 1997 and an overall vote share of 32.7 per cent (almost 71 per cent of the combined UUP-DUP vote), Mr Trimble’s party saw its share of the total vote almost halved, to 17.7 per cent—a spectacular decline. Its 34 per cent share of the UUP-DUP vote equates with the one third of the unionist electorate that remains supportive of the Belfast agreement, as demonstrated by more recent Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys (see public-attitudes section).

As table 1 demonstrates, there has been a demonstrable upward trend in the DUP’s electoral fortunes since 1997. Discounting its performance at the general election that year, when it contested just nine seats, its share of first-preference votes at the simultaneous district-council election, 15.8 per cent, had almost doubled by 2005 to 29.6 per cent.

Table 1: votes (N) and vote shares (%) of the major parties, 1997-2005

Election	DUP		UUP		SDLP		SF	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1997 Westminster	107348	13.6	258349	32.7	190814	24.1	126921	16.1
1997 local	99651	15.8	175036	27.9	130387	22.6	106934	16.9
1998 assembly	145917	18.0	172225	21.3	177963	21.9	142858	17.6
2001 Westminster	181999	22.5	216839	26.8	169865	20.9	175392	21.7
2001 local	169477	21.4	181336	22.9	153424	19.4	163269	20.6
2003 assembly	177944	25.7	156931	22.7	117547	16.9	162758	23.5
2005 Westminster	241856	33.7	127314	17.7	125626	17.5	174530	24.3
2005 local	208278	29.6	126317	18.0	121991	17.4	163205	23.2

The scale of the DUP's advance was not matched by the performance of SF. It did gain one seat from the Social Democratic and Labour Party—held by the former deputy first minister, Séamus Mallon, who retired this time. Thus, as the electoral dust settled, the DUP emerged with nine seats, SF five, the SDLP three and the UUP one.

In terms of overall vote share, SF consolidated its lead over the SDLP established in 2001. Its share of the combined SF-SDLP vote at the parliamentary and local elections—58 per cent—was the same as that achieved at the 2003 assembly election: this result suggests that its vote share among nationalists may have stabilised, as also appears to be the case in the republic.

That SF held on to its share of the nationalist vote is however noteworthy: against the backdrop of the Northern Bank robbery and the murder of Robert McCartney (see March 2005 report), it mobilised its core electorate with ease. Its most obvious electoral casualty was the loss of its Belfast City Council seat in the Pottinger ward, which includes the Short Strand—home of the late Mr McCartney, his partner and their two children and his five indomitable sisters.

2.2 Adams' animadversions

The election campaign itself was fairly lacklustre, enlivened initially by a speech from the SF president, Gerry Adams, during which he encouraged the IRA to 'take courageous initiatives which will achieve your aims by purely political and democratic activity'.¹ On the following day, the IRA issued a statement in which it said it would give Mr Adams' appeal 'due consideration' and promised to 'respond in due course'.² While that response was still awaited at time of writing, the speech itself was given short shrift by other political leaders in Northern Ireland.

Predictably, the most trenchant reaction came from Mr Paisley: 'It is an insult to democrats ... and no one will be taken in. I don't think there is any hope for Sinn Féin and the IRA. There must be a complete and total abandonment of IRA / Sinn Féin and that's not going to happen. The DUP won't be back at any negotiating table. He [Mr

Adams] has put himself outside the arena. It's all over. There is no place in any democracy for terrorists and no place for IRA/Sinn Féin.'³

Following his first post-election meeting with the prime minister, Tony Blair, Mr Paisley was even more forthright. Referring to an earlier statement by the SF president, the DUP leader remarked: 'Mr Adams said today that the IRA would never be disbanded so, if that is his view, then that is it.' He also insisted that he would not serve as first minister with an SF deputy first minister: 'I don't see it because I don't trust them and the people don't trust them.'⁴

The range of responses to Mr Adams' speech ranged from outright cynicism to measured scepticism: what each cleaved to, however, was the determination that action, not words, was required. The speech did, however, fuel speculation that a positive reply from the IRA army council—which includes Mr Adams and Martin McGuinness—could occur towards the end of the election campaign, thereby putting the other parties, and Dublin and London, under pressure to revive talks and pave the way to re-devolution.

In the event there was no such response, positive or otherwise. Within three weeks of the election having taken place, what did appear was the fifth report of the Independent Monitoring Commission.⁵

2.3 Facts on the ground

The IMC report, while covering the range of activities engaged in by loyalist and republican paramilitaries, excited most interest *via* its references to the IRA. In the judgement of the four commissioners, the organisation continued 'to seek to maintain its medium term effectiveness' by recruiting and training new members, including in the use of firearms and explosives, continued to gather intelligence and stock its arsenal, remained heavily engaged in organised crime, and had been responsible for five shootings and six assaults since the end of August 2004.

The report restated the commissioners' view that the IRA had been responsible for the Northern Bank robbery, three other major robberies and an arson attack, and that a number of its members had been involved in the murder of Mr McCartney and the stabbing of Brendan Devine⁶ during the same incident. The commissioners concluded that the IRA remained 'a highly active organisation', which was 'determined to maintain its effectiveness, both in terms of organised crime, control in republican areas, and the potential for terrorism'. They had 'no present evidence that it intends to resume a campaign of violence ... but its capacity remains should that become the intention'.

That particular conclusion was foreshadowed a month earlier by the chief constable, Hugh Orde. He said that the IRA was still recruiting and targeting police and soldiers, stopping short 'of actually going out to kill them'.⁷ But in his judgement, while the

IRA retained the capability to return to ‘the armed struggle’, there was no indication it would do so.

Mr Orde’s remarks, and the IMC report, were dismissed by the SF leadership in characteristic terms. Alex Maskey, for instance, described the IMC as ‘the tool of British securocrats ... created and used to discriminate against Sinn Féin and our electorate’. Its reports had ‘little or no credibility’ and were ‘neither impartial, fair nor balanced’.⁸

The IMC report dimmed an already gloomy post-election context—indeed, the prospect of an early resumption of talks designed to restart the political process was doomed once the results were declared. The largely new ministerial team⁹ in the Northern Ireland Office, headed by Peter Hain (the fifth secretary of state since 1997), faced a prolonged and difficult task in restoring political momentum.

Even if the IRA were to abandon violence¹⁰ and criminality, to allow the decommissioning of its arsenal—accompanied by a visual record—and to disband, the DUP insists that this would have to be tested for an as yet undetermined period. So no one can anticipate an early return to devolution. Moreover, any such restoration would almost certainly be preceded by another assembly election, likely to compound the dominance of the DUP and SF in their respective and exclusive electoral blocs.

The terms of any prospective deal between SF and the DUP would seem to be prefigured by the abortive bargain essayed in December 2004 (see the April 2005 monitoring report). But even if that deal had been thwarted only by the refusal of the IRA to allow a pre-nuptial photograph of weapons being put ‘beyond use’—which turned out to have been only one of the unresolved issues—then subsequent developments, punctuated by the DUP’s electoral success, have at least reinforced, if not altered, those terms. The onus is now clearly on the republican movement to make the first in a series of decisive moves, sufficient to persuade Mr Paisley *et al* that he could commend a power-sharing arrangement with SF.

To even contemplate such a possibility is quite remarkable in itself. And the DUP and the UUP, together with the Alliance Party, have not been content to wait on the IRA. Each has restated the alternative of a voluntary coalition, ie a power-sharing executive minus SF. But this option, while endorsed more or less *sotto voce* by two of its MPs (Alasdair McDonnell and Eddie McGrady), is not the official policy of the SDLP.¹¹

In effect, there is a tacit recognition that direct rule is the only foreseeable future for Northern Ireland.¹² Moreover, as previous reports have indicated, one should not discount the preference for direct rule of many who voted for the DUP. This is not to imply that direct rule is inherently popular—rather, that it is acceptable to many Protestants in particular as a default position, and certainly preferable in the current context to a mandatory coalition that includes ‘SF/IRA’.

Moreover, there is a particular difficulty for the new Northern Ireland secretary, Peter Hain, in seeking to jolly the parties into a new power-sharing arrangement. Among unionists, Mr Hain has ‘form’. His earlier calls for a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland—as the University of Ulster political scientist Paul Dixon detailed to his embarrassment¹³—have already undermined, perhaps terminally, his credentials as a ‘neutral broker’.

The secretary of state’s response to criticism on these grounds is that his prior ideological stances on Northern Ireland predated the agreement. And now that everyone is in principle signed up to a power-sharing, devolved administration, his task is to realise that goal and ‘do myself and my ministerial team out of a job’.¹⁴ Even if a new deal could be struck, Mr Hain would not become entirely redundant, of course, given the secretary of state’s continuing responsibility for both ‘reserved’ and ‘excepted’ matters, although the number of junior ministers in the NIO (currently four) could be reduced if any ‘settlement’ proved durable and robust.

2.5 Exit Trimble

One man who, post-election, did find himself jobless in one key regard was David Trimble. Up until the afternoon of the general election count, Mr Trimble was apparently in denial, believing that the UUP would not just survive but prosper.¹⁵ Even when the scale of the defeat became clear, he still believed he could hang on to the leadership of the party, even if *via* a triumvirate.¹⁶

He was wrong on both counts. Within 48 hours of the final results being declared, Mr Trimble resigned his leadership of the party which, until its new leader, Sir Reg Empey, was elected on June 24th 2005 (see parties-and-elections section), was administered by Sir Reg, the party president, Lord Rogan, and Lady Sylvia Hermon, its one surviving MP.

There is no space here to assess Mr Trimble’s legacy, warts and all, but his successor is confronted with a demoralised and divided party. Some, including David Burnside who lost his seat to the DUP, believe that the party should formally align with Mr Paisley’s. By contrast, Lady Hermon called for the party to move in a ‘more liberal direction’—believing, rightly, that the majority of unionists would not be attracted to a ‘DUP-lite’ banner.

While London and Dublin will be keen to try to restart talks, with a view to the restoration of devolution in the autumn, neither Sir Reg nor Mr Paisley is in any hurry to re-enter government. Indeed, the DUP’s demand for a ‘decontamination’ period to test the *bona fides* of the republican movement is shared by the new UUP leader.

In an interview shortly after his election victory, Sir Reg said that unionists should wait until at least March 2006 before contemplating power-sharing with SF—that is, some eight months after the IRA statement on its future which many expect in

August. What few expect is that the statement will include a commitment to voluntarily disband the IRA, one of the DUP's key demands.

2.6 Don't mention the D word

Disbandment is not in the political lexicon of the two governments. Instead, the taoiseach, Mr Ahern, insists that the IRA must end all paramilitary and criminal activity¹⁷ and transform itself into a 'commemorative organisation'.¹⁸ This would enable it to 'disband away from criminality or paramilitarism: I can't see why anybody would force an organisation to do more than that'. Equally, Mr Hain has refused to insist publicly on the disbandment of the IRA.

This raises a fine point, however, and not just a lawyerly one, as the Conservatives' spokesperson on Northern Ireland, David Lidington, observed:¹⁹

If the British government believes the IRA statement and its subsequent actions are sufficient evidence that the IRA has gone out of business, then it will presumably ask whether this is also a sufficient basis for de-proscribing PIRA as an illegal organisation under the Terrorism Act, because the logic of the government's position would be that PIRA had ceased to be a terrorist organisation. But if PIRA has not done enough to merit de-proscription, then surely it cannot have done enough to merit SF's inclusion in government.

If not disbandment, then another 'D' word has begun to circulate—divorce. That is, a formal separation between the IRA and SF, akin to a decree *nisi* rather than absolute, perhaps. But the credibility of such an estrangement would be difficult if not impossible to establish, at least in the shorter-run.

In the interim, Mr Paisley appeared to have raised the bar even further by suggesting that the time would be right for SF's inclusion in a future power-sharing executive when the taoiseach was in a position to say that a government in Dublin 'could share power with the IRA'. Only then, the DUP leader insisted, could the plain people of the north 'think of having them back in the government of Northern Ireland'.²⁰

Until the IRA's statement appears,²¹ there are just straws in the wind to clutch at as a means of discerning the attitude of 'mainstream' republicans. One such was the unanticipated apology by the IRA for the 1973 murder of a 14-year-old Derry schoolgirl, Kathleen Feeney, which it had previously attributed to the British army—indeed, the IRA shot dead a soldier shortly thereafter in apparent retaliation, to legitimise its claim.

Another possible indication of the IRA's developing mindset was the re-arrest and imprisonment of Sean Kelly, convicted of the Shankill Road bombing in 1993, in which 10 people died, and released on licence in the wake of the Belfast agreement.

Mr Hain authorised his return to jail after security information indicated that he had become re-involved with ‘terrorism’. Any engagement was, it seems, with ‘dissident’ republicans rather than the IRA, and (as yet) unsubstantiated allegations quickly surfaced that the IRA leadership had been complicit in Mr Kelly’s arrest, by passing on information about his alleged activities.²²

Those outside the tight loop of political contacts are reduced to reading the runes of such acts. These include the process of ‘demilitarisation’, or at least the scaling back of the police presence. At the end of June, the chief constable recommended to the Policing Board the closure of 17 stations in Fermanagh and Tyrone, eight of which had already been scaled down.²³ This proposal caused ire among local unionist politicians, set to oppose the closures.

Meanwhile, the annual ‘marching season’ got under way. The first major Orange parade, the ‘Tour of the North’, ended in a serious clash between marchers and Catholic residents in north Belfast, leaving 18 police officers and 11 others injured and leading to a number of arrests. This seemed an ominous indicator of further trouble, but in late June an agreement was brokered in Derry enabling Orangemen from outside the city to march on the overwhelmingly Catholic west bank of the Foyle for the first time in 13 years. The deal, struck by civic, religious and business intermediaries, was a more positive harbinger.

¹ The text of the speech, delivered on April 6th 2005, is available at [Hwww.sinnfein.ie](http://www.sinnfein.ie)H.

² BBC News Online, April 7th 2005

³ *ibid*

⁴ BBC News Online, May 19th 2005

⁵ *Fifth Report of the Independent Monitoring Commission*, HC 46, May 24th 2005

([Hwww.independentmonitoringcommission.org/documents/uploads/IMC_Report.pdf](http://www.independentmonitoringcommission.org/documents/uploads/IMC_Report.pdf)H)

⁶ Mr Devine was later sentenced to seven years imprisonment for his part in a robbery of a security van in February 2004.

⁷ BBC News Online, April 28th 2005. A week earlier, the taoiseach told the Dáil that the IRA was still recruiting and training new members but that some members had ‘moved on to criminality’; according to the republic’s justice minister, Michael McDowell, up to 1,500 people are actively involved in the IRA and there is ‘sporadic evidence’ that some are turning to crime to fund their new lifestyles (BBC News Online, June 24th 2005).

⁸ SF press release, May 24th 2005

⁹ See devolved-government section. The former Northern Ireland secretary, Paul Murphy, left the cabinet to take up the chair of Parliament’s intelligence and security committee—there was some speculation he had been sacked (*Guardian*, May 7th 2005). Two of the former junior ministers, Barry Gardiner and Ian Pearson, were moved to junior jobs elsewhere, while John Spellar was retired to the backbenches.

¹⁰ Mr Adams made his keynote speech at 3.00 on the day after Mr Blair announced the election date, ensuring wide coverage on the evening bulletins. It led the BBC news at 6.00, which headlined it as an appeal to the IRA to abandon violence, which was not what the carefully crafted text—on which Mr Adams took no questions—actually said.

¹¹ In the Commons, in answer to a question from Mr McGrady, Mr Blair indicated he had not discounted the idea of a voluntary coalition: ‘The fact is that there are only two ways forward. One is inclusive of Sinn Féin, and for that to happen, there has to be a complete end to all forms of paramilitary or criminal activity ... Alternatively, there is a way forward without Sinn Féin, which would depend on my hon Friend’s party. Those are the only two ways forward.’ (HC Debs, May 25th 2005, col 701)

¹² The new secretary of state has dismissed the idea of an interim assembly, favoured by the DUP and the UUP, wherein NIO ministers would be scrutinised by MLAs. The idea is akin to the first stage of James Prior’s rolling devolution scheme unveiled in the early 80s (*News Letter*, May 25th 2005).

¹³ *Belfast Telegraph*, June 18th 2005

¹⁴ BBC News Online, June 24th 2005

¹⁵ private information

¹⁶ The same private source insists that the three-handed leadership set in place after the election was Mr Trimble's idea—except that it did not include him.

¹⁷ This is itself an advance on the intergovernmental Joint Declaration of May 2003, which only enjoined republicans to end paramilitary activity, while implicitly allowing that criminality could continue. That position became unsustainable in the wake of the Northern Bank robbery, and claims by leading republicans that even such a heinous murder as the 'disappearing' of the mother-of-ten Jean McConville by the IRA in 1972 should not be deemed a crime.

¹⁸ *Irish Times*, June 17th 2005

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ BBC News Online, June 17th 2005

²¹ Speaking in the Dáil on June 28th 2005, the taoiseach indicated that the statement could appear in August.

²² Relatedly, the remains of Gareth O'Connor, who went missing in May 2003, were recovered from a car in Newry Canal in June 2005. Mr O'Connor had been charged with membership of the dissident Real IRA and was reported missing after he failed to report to Dundalk police station in the republic as part of his bail conditions. Following the recovery of his remains, allegations resurfaced about the involvement of the IRA in Mr O'Connor's murder; no organisation has admitted responsibility for the killing, but the family is adamant that the Provisionals were to blame.

²³ BBC News Online, June 29th 2005

3. ‘Devolved’ government Robin Wilson and Duncan Morrow

3.1 New NIO team

The new Northern Ireland secretary, Mr Hain, appointed after the election retained his position as Welsh secretary. This led some, including Nigel Dodds (DUP), to regard his dual mandate as a ‘downgrading’ of the Northern Ireland job. Plaid Cymru’s spokesperson on the constitution, Helen Jones, meanwhile said it was ‘unfair in principle and practice’ to both the people in Wales and Northern Ireland.¹

The new ministerial team included figures with personal ambitions within politics, such as David Hanson (responsible for political development, criminal justice, social development and culture) and Shaun Woodward (health and regional development). Angela Smith returned to the NIO with a changed portfolio (education, employment & learning and enterprise) and the team was completed by the experienced ‘old Labour’ campaigner Lord (Jeff) Rooker (finance, agriculture, environment and OFMDFM), who also doubles as deputy Labour leader in the Lords.²

3.2 Community relations

The former Downing Street adviser Geoff Mulgan, who now runs the Young Foundation in London, concluded on his exit from Number 10 that governments tended to over-estimate what they could do in the short term and under-estimate what they could achieve in the long run.³

It is arguably a lesson the prime minister could digest in terms of Northern Ireland. Mr Blair has, repeatedly talked up the next—though always, supposedly, ‘final’—round of negotiations between the communalist parties on constitutional arrangements. His government has invested far less, meanwhile in creating the long-term conditions for Northern Ireland to become a society at ease with itself, including its range of Irish, British and European contexts. Integrated education, for instance, has strong public support because of its obvious potential, yet this has hardly been recognised in government.

So a significant step was taken in March when, amidst the flurry of pre-‘purdah’ announcements in advance of the May elections, government published the policy framework on ‘community relations’ arising from the consultation on *A Shared Future*, launched in January 2003 after the devolved institutions were suspended. The document, also entitled *A Shared Future*, signalled that for the first time since the partition of Ireland the incumbent administration at Stormont had committed itself to addressing the deep communal divisions in the north.⁴

This task would in effect require government to present a perspective to which any citizen could reasonably subscribe—whether their passport was British, Irish or neither—on where as a society Northern Ireland was going. The new framework attempts to do so. Its overall aim is:

The establishment over time of a normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere, and where all people are treated impartially. A society where there is equity, respect for diversity and a recognition of our interdependence.

To realise this aim, 13 objectives are set out. These promise to attack sectarianism and racism, to reduce conflict at interfaces and to ‘facilitate’ sharing in housing, education and work. There are commitments to promote civic-mindedness via citizenship education, and to protect minorities and mixed marriages from intimidation, including ensuring perpetrators are brought to justice.

There are pledges that public services will be ‘delivered impartially and guided by economy, efficiency and effectiveness’—in a more straitened public-expenditure climate demands for duplicate services stemming from sectarian prejudices may not be so readily accommodated—and to ‘shape policies, practices and institutions’ to foster trust.

The school curriculum and museums are to ‘encourage understanding of the complexity of our history’, while cultural projects which ‘highlight the complexity and overlapping nature of identities’ will be supported, as will organisations working for reconciliation, including island-wide. There is to be backing for the ‘voice’ of victims of violence, encouragement of communication and tolerance, and promotion of dialogue between people from different faiths and backgrounds—including ‘recent arrivals to these shores’.

The most obvious limitation in these proposals is that integrated education and mixed housing, despite their popularity, are to remain marginal rather than mainstream. ‘Facilitating’ integrated education is no more than the Department of Education has been legally obliged to do for 16 years—and still only one in 20 kids are in integrated schools. Even integrated teacher-training, proposed in a review for government fully a quarter of a century ago, remains unmentionable.

Nor is there any commitment to ensure that social housing is equally accessible to all, by the removal of the kerbstone-painting, paramilitary murals and flags which act as sectarian chill factors. There is, however, to be action to dampen the display of flags and emblems—which, ironically, symbolically demarcates Northern Ireland from both the rest of the UK and the rest of Ireland—and indeed a protocol proposed in the document has already been jointly agreed by the police and relevant agencies.

Otherwise, departments have offered little in the way of new activities, which are mostly deferred to the ‘triennial action plans’ through which *A Shared Future* is to be

implemented. There is to be no dedicated budget—remarkably, given the huge public costs of intercommunal tension. And while the Community Relations Council survives more or less intact—indeed, with an enlarged role—harnessing action across government is to be up to an interdepartmental ‘Good Relations Panel’ which will lack either practitioner or expert engagement.

3.3 Other matters

After a protracted recruitment process going back to last autumn, the NIO finally announced new appointments to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. The commission had been allowed to atrophy to the extent that its chief commissioner’s term had expired with no replacement and, indeed, only two commissioners remained. This provoked an angry valedictory from the former chief commissioner, Brice Dickson (see March 2005 report). In June the government announced an additional seven commissioners, plus a new chief commissioner, Monica McWilliams, to bring the commission to full complement.

The old commission had been subject to criticism from both the nationalist and unionist camps. Paradoxically, the government response was further to politicise the commission, with DUP, SDLP, Alliance and Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition figures among the appointees.⁵ Prof McWilliams, the former assembly member and NIWC leader, was immediately attacked by the DUP leader, Mr Paisley, who claimed her appointment was an ‘insult’.⁶

Also during the period, government published its response to the Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector (see November 2004 report). The document, *Investing Together*,⁷ accepts the case made by the task force for longer-term support for the voluntary sector, suggesting 7-10 year, outcome-focused funding packages. But while the task force called for a £25 million per year ‘community investment fund’, *Investing Together* holds out in this regard only the prospect of £1 million in 2005-2006 and £2 million per year for each of the next two years.

¹ BBC News Online, May 24th 2005

² *News Letter*, May 13th 2005

³ *Prospect*, May 2005

⁴ available, with the preceding consultation document and other associated work, including important research by Dominic Bryan and Gordon Gillespie on flags and emblems, at [Hwww.asharedfutureni.gov.uk](http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk)H. The author of this section was responsible for some of the drafting.

⁵ *Irish Times*, June 16th 2005

⁶ *Irish Times*, June 17th 2005

⁷ available at [Hwww.dsdni.gov.uk](http://www.dsdni.gov.uk)H

4. The assembly **Rick Wilford**

One symptom of the fact that re-devolution is ‘on the long finger’ is that post-election the DUP has turned its attention to the task of trying to improve the parliamentary means of rendering direct-rule ministers accountable. Early in the new parliament, Gregory Campbell (Londonderry East) put down an early day motion in the Commons to that end—a signal that, as far as the DUP is concerned, Northern Ireland is in for a long haul.¹

Since the final collapse of the first assembly in mid-October 2002, as successive reports have indicated, the NIO has interpreted direct rule in a proactive way, forging ahead with controversial policies. These have included the looming introduction of water charges, a new capital-value based rating system, confrontations with the education and library boards over budget ‘overspends’, the extension of student top-up fees to Northern Ireland and the planned abandonment of the transfer test (the region’s version of the old ‘11+’).

This agenda is four-square with the government’s wider ‘modernise and reform’ project and it has pursued it in a largely unhindered way, albeit there have been sporadic protests over water. At the same time, the regional parties have been enabled to practise what they tend to do best: oppose. It is a licence for them to exercise (some) power without any actual responsibility.

Parliamentary discontent with the means to hold NIO ministers to account for ‘transferred’ matters is not new, of course. But it does extend across all parties and has deepened now that the secretary of state has two sets of responsibilities. But Mr Hain is no stranger to occupying two cabinet roles simultaneously—nor, for that matter, in following in his predecessor’s footsteps.²

Moreover, since 1998, the prime minister and his US-style chief-of-staff ‘point-man’, Jonathan Powell, have adopted a hands-on approach to Northern Ireland, at times circumventing the NIO, such that the political drive for resolving the successive logjams has come from Downing Street rather than Stormont Castle—and been even more removed from public or parliamentary scrutiny. Yet, given Mr Blair’s assumption of the EU presidency and his chairing of the G8, Mr Hain may well be to the fore in the next six months or so.

The Northern Ireland secretary made clear, however, that he was not prepared to indulge unionist demands for an interim assembly to scrutinise the operation of direct rule. Echoing the previous government position when unionists had made this pitch at past points of stalemate, Mr Hain said there was no appetite for the idea among the other parties.³

¹ ‘That this House acknowledges the results of the General Election, particularly in Northern Ireland, where nine Democratic Unionist honourable members were returned compared with one Ulster Unionist honourable member; accepts that this is the clearest possible expression of the will of the

Unionist community in Northern Ireland; urges the Government to recognise this fact; and, in the obvious absence of the Provisional IRA winding up its organisation, demands that the Direct Rule system of Government be made much more open, accountable and responsive to the needs of the people in the Province.’ (EDM 78, May 17th 2005)

² Peter Hain replaced Paul Murphy as Welsh Secretary when the latter took up the Northern Ireland post in October 2002.

³ *News Letter*, May 25th 2005

5. The media Greg McLaughlin

5.1 Introduction

The media report for this period looks at reaction to the results of the Westminster election (particularly the defeat of the UUP leader), a TV reconstruction of the murder of Robert McCartney and developments in the media market-place.

5.2 Westminster election

The results of the Westminster election in Northern Ireland's 18 constituencies provided a feast for the headline-writers and the pundits. The big stories in the newspapers on the morning after the count were the demise of the UUP and its leader, Mr Trimble ('End of the road', *Belfast Telegraph*; 'Trimble meltdown', *Irish Independent*), the triumph of the DUP ('Big party', *News Letter*; 'A political masterclass', *Daily Ireland*), and Alasdair McDonnell's coup for the SDLP in South Belfast ('Dogged SDLP refuses to roll over', *Irish Times*).¹

The unionist newspapers cast a rather cold eye on Mr Trimble's defeat. The liberal-leaning *Belfast Telegraph* declared 'The fall of unionism' and 'Unionists torn apart'. The more conservative *News Letter* said that 'serious questions do need to be asked about the future role of ... Trimble and his principal officers'. Writing in the paper to a pre-election deadline, the *News Letter* columnist Alex Kane reckoned that 'it would help the party enormously if Mr Trimble, the entire officer team and his advisers were to fall on their swords, clearing the way for new people and new approaches' ('Trimble or the party—only one can survive').

The Dublin and nationalist papers were rather more generous to Mr Trimble in his darkest hour. The *Irish Times* acknowledged his contribution ('Trimble price for his fidelity to the Belfast Agreement'), while the *Irish News* remarked that SF and the SDLP might now 'wonder whether they would have been better to reach a long lasting accommodation with Mr Trimble rather than face the prospect of continuing stalemate with Mr Paisley'. It is interesting that this should come from the *Irish News*: many of its writers and columnists, as well as the SDLP and SF themselves, had consistently argued that Mr Trimble failed to 'sell' the agreement to the Protestant community, because of internal party division and pressure from the DUP to pull down the institutions.

The pundits were divided about the likely implications. Writing in the *Irish Independent*, Henry Patterson of the University of Ulster talked of a new political alignment, in which the SDLP confounded the doomsayers by doing much better against SF than expected. But he saw no prospect of the parties restoring the institutions any time soon—there would have to be another assembly election before that could happen. *Daily Ireland* echoed the SF line when it said that 'the same task

awaits the parties and the two governments: bringing the DUP to a power-sharing executive with nationalism’.

Most of the papers were surprisingly unfazed by the continued success of SF at the expense of its rival, the SDLP—apart from the *Irish Independent*, which attacked nationalists who voted for the party in spite of the Northern Bank robbery and the murder of Robert McCartney. ‘What this says about so many voters in nationalist areas in the North is depressing,’ said its leader (‘Triumph and betrayal’). ‘Their moral judgement has been so clouded by years of Sinn Fein spin that they vote in large numbers for a party tied directly to widespread thuggery and criminality.’ Similar charges have been aimed at DUP voters in recent times—evidence perhaps of a deep seated liberal unease about the dramatic realignment of politics in Northern Ireland, with working-class voters in particular embracing these two parties.

The *Belfast Telegraph* considered the possibility that far from the Northern Ireland electorate moving to the extremes, the DUP and SF had ‘moved onto the centre ground’, making themselves sound more appealing and moderate and picking up the votes (‘Still only one way forward—positive signs despite the polarised landscape’). The independent northern Seanad member Maurice Hayes wrote in similar vein in the *Irish Independent*, even going so far as to claim that SF had adopted most of the policies the SDLP had promoted since the failure of the 1974 power-sharing experiment (‘Trimble’s fall marks end of old guard’).

The election results provided much-needed colour and drama after a lacklustre campaign in which, once again, the big social and economic debates facing Northern Ireland were sidelined. The poor quality of media coverage, especially television, hardly helped.

On the eve of the election, BBC Northern Ireland and UTV managed to schedule special debates at the same time. The BBC’s effort was bland and predictable, featuring the usual suspects from the ‘big four’ parties. UTV opened its programme from Derry at 10pm, took a commercial break five minutes later, broke again for ITV news at 10.30, picking up again sometime near 11pm for another 20 minutes. TV coverage of the results was somewhat better, but was blunted by the agonisingly slow counts in almost all the counting centres.

5.3 McCartney murder

A recent episode of the RTE current-affairs programme *Primetime Investigates* (‘Home Truths’) looked in detail at the circumstances surrounding the murder of Robert McCartney in Belfast on January 30th.² As is usual with this series, it employed a reconstruction where the facts alone appeared less than televisual.

Its dramatic account of the murder had all the production values of a television drama or a movie. The use of actors, lighting, music, sound effects and very explicit scenes

of violence made for a powerful and disturbing reconstruction. In fact, it bore an uncanny resemblance to violent bar-room scenes in two fictional films (*Nothing Personal*, Thaddeus O’Sullivan, 1995; and *Resurrection Man*, Marc Evans, 1998) based on the activities of the Shankill Butchers, a loyalist gang operating in Belfast in the early 70s.

Is this, however, what current affairs should be about? Such reconstructions surely move away from a public-service commitment to impartial reporting because they lead the viewer to a particular and subjective version of events, based on information from anonymous and unaccountable sources.

5.4 Media market

The last media report (March 2005) looked at some developments in the Northern Ireland media market. Every now and then, something hits the headlines that has media journalists and ‘experts’ proclaiming it as further evidence of a new era of media pluralism in Northern Ireland. Not so.

Take broadcasting. UTV and a consortium that includes the UUP Lord Kilclooney’s Alpha media group and the *Irish News* recently won licences for new radio stations in Belfast and Ballymena respectively. Some may celebrate their advent but these will be commercial stations for advertisers, not serious proponents of public-service broadcasting.

In the press arena, last year, the European venture-capitalist firm 3i bought the *News Letter* and the Derry Journal group from Trinity-Mirror. There is speculation that the firm is now looking to resell these titles, a move that might see the break up of the journal group and an associated loss of jobs.

A wider development with Northern Ireland implications was the sale in June 2005 of Scottish Radio Holdings to the big UK media publisher Emap, for £391 million. The acquisition includes radio stations (Downtown Radio outside Belfast) and newspaper titles (the *Londonderry Sentinel* and the *Portadown Times*) in the region. Emap immediately sold on the newspapers to Johnston press, one of the biggest regional newspaper groups in the UK.

What all this means long-term for media democracy and the regional economy is uncertain. Some of the new titles of 2005 have already run into trouble. The *Daily View*, an experiment in non-political, youth-orientated journalism, folded on May 6th—ironically, the day after the election—after only 25 issues. It was owned by Local Press, in turn owned by 3i, indicating its ruthless nose for the profit margin.

Daily Ireland continues to struggle to push its circulation over the 10,000 mark and to generate significant advertising revenue. In an unusual step for a political newspaper (it has a republican editorial perspective), *Daily Ireland* has even taken to carrying the

logo of the Audit Bureau of Circulations on its masthead, to establish some credibility with potential advertisers. But it is in a catch-22 situation. Without significant circulation, *Daily Ireland* will not attract the big advertisers and without that crucial source of revenue it will find it hard to survive on a relatively small readership. It has already made staff redundant and may not see out the year.

All this is market capitalism in action: newspapers these days must first and foremost sell readers to advertisers, before they can sell news and comment to readers. Furthermore, in a small and very competitive regional market, such as Northern Ireland, it is tough enough for the long established Belfast dailies to survive, never mind new entrants. They not only have to compete with each other but also with the better-resourced regional editions of the London tabloids—particularly the *Mirror* (57,000) and the *Sun* (78,000), whose circulations outstrip all but the *Belfast Telegraph* (87,000).³

¹ May 7th 2005—the leisurely election count in Northern Ireland did not begin until the morning of May 6th

² May 26th 2005

³ figures for fully-paid copies only

6. Public attitudes and identity Lizanne Dowds

6.1 The agreement

Given that the devolved institutions have now been in suspension for nearly three years, it seems appropriate to take stock of public opinion on devolution and reflect on the ‘winners and losers’ over the seven years since the Belfast agreement. The results reported here are taken from various surveys over that period and are deliberately not broken down by religion. As a region, what did the Northern Ireland public really think about the great devolution experiment?

In 1998, the agreement itself was endorsed by a full 71 per cent of the public. But by 2003, only 56 per cent of people in Northern Ireland said they would do so again if the vote were to be rerun—a majority still, but a serious leaching away of support. And behind this overall result there are a variety of opinions, as Table 1 shows. Only one in ten respondents to the 2003 post-election survey felt that the agreement should be abandoned and there were still around 70 per cent who felt that the agreement was ‘basically right’, although there was clear support for some sort of renegotiation.

Table 1 Opinions on the agreement (post-election survey 2003)

	%
The agreement is basically right and just needs to be implemented in full	29
The agreement is basically right but the specifics need to be renegotiated	41
The agreement is basically wrong and should be renegotiated	14
The agreement is basically wrong and should be abandoned	11
Don't know	6

Alongside this variety of judgements on the success of the agreement overall, there were also winners and losers within the different parts of the agreement. The three aspects that received the most support in 1998 continued to draw a high level of support in 2003: weapons decommissioning, the setting up of an assembly and the guarantee that Northern Ireland would remain part of the UK for as long as a majority of people wished it to be so. Slightly more supported the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons in 2003 than did so in 1998. And, despite the frequent suspensions of the assembly itself and public opinion about the agreement in general, support for the setting up of a Northern Ireland Assembly was still remarkably high in 2003.

Table 2 Opinions on different aspects of the agreement (1998 and 2003)

	1998	2003
% support		
Decommissioning of paramilitary weapons	89	95
The setting up of a Northern Ireland Assembly	83	79
The guarantee that Northern Ireland will remain part of the UK for as long as a majority of people in Northern Ireland wish it to be so	86	84
The requirement that the executive is power-sharing	72	84
The creation of North-South bodies	64	66
The removal of the Republic of Ireland's constitutional claim to Northern Ireland	63	53

But there were changes in support for other aspects of the agreement. Power-sharing is one of the 'winners' over the last seven years or so, rising from 72 per cent endorsement in 1998 to 84 per cent in 2003. Interestingly, the removal of the republic's constitutional claim showed a distinct drop in support—from a fairly robust 63 per cent in 1998 to a less than enthusiastic 53 per cent in 2003. While interest has focused on disillusionment within the Protestant community of late, it is easy to overlook perceived losses within the Catholic community, which are masked by high general support for the agreement.

Of course one of the clearest trends that opinion surveys have highlighted over the years is the perception that 'nationalists' have benefited more than 'unionists' from the agreement. Table 3 shows the slow but relentless increase in public support for this view between 1998 and 2003.

Table 3 Views on whether unionists or nationalists have benefited more

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
% saying nationalists have benefited 'more' or 'a lot more' than unionists from the agreement	34	38	41	42	45	48

Policing and decommissioning were two of the key issues behind many people's disillusionment with the agreement, and both have played a significant part in the ups and downs within the political arena of the last seven years. Interestingly, by 2003, opinion on policing reforms was divided, but balanced (Table 4). About the same proportion of people thought that police reform had 'gone too far' as thought it had 'not gone far enough'. And in fact, the most popular view was that police reform was 'about right'. It may remain one of the most bitterly contentious of issues—and successive analyses have shown its importance in the leaching away of Protestant support for the agreement—but in governance terms this may well be seen as 'a

result'. (And, indeed, the Policing Board set up to preside over the reformed Police Service of Northern Ireland is arguably the only institution created by the agreement which has been left unshaken.)

Table 4 Do you think that the reform of the police in Northern Ireland has gone too far, has not gone far enough, or is it about right?

	2003
	%
Gone too far	29
Not gone far enough	27
About right	33
Other	2
Don't know	10

Not so with decommissioning. Regardless of how the issue has been played out politically over the last seven years, the vast majority of people feel that more is necessary, as successive surveys over the last seven years have consistently indicated. Table 5 shows results from 2003, where 83 per cent of people felt the decommissioning of weapons by republican paramilitaries had 'not gone far enough'. Given the lack of attention paid to loyalist decommissioning, it is also interesting to note that an even larger 91 per cent felt decommissioning by loyalist paramilitaries had 'not gone far enough'.

Table 5 Do you think that decommissioning of weapons by republican/loyalist paramilitaries has gone too far, has not gone far enough, or is it about right?

	2003	
	Republican paramilitaries	Loyalist paramilitaries
	%	%
Gone too far	3	1
Not gone far enough	83	91
About right	11	4
Other	0	1
Don't know	3	3

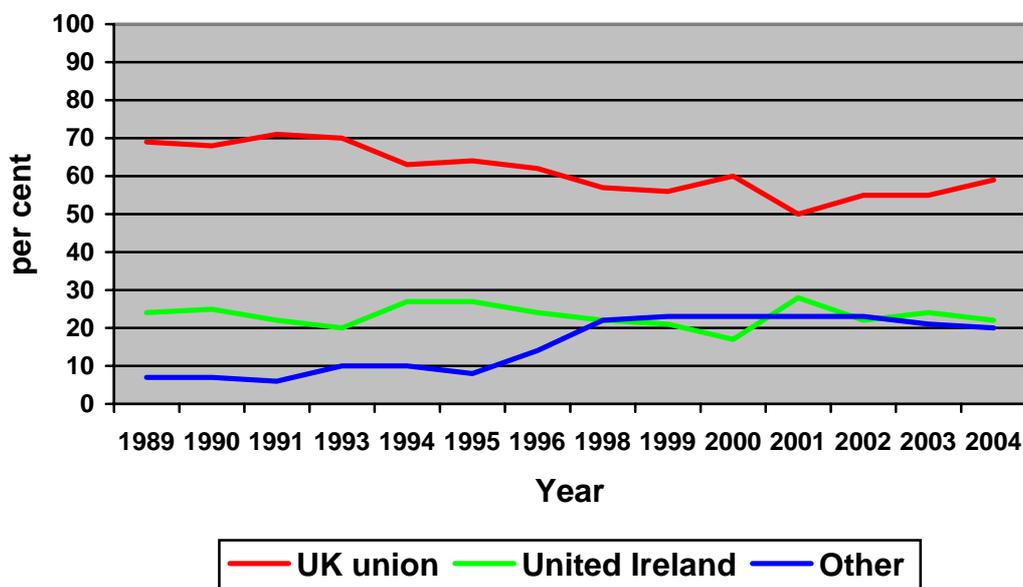
In terms of devolution then, this brief overview brings mixed results. Support for a Northern Ireland Assembly is still high and the notion of power-sharing has been soundly endorsed. The agreement itself is not 'dead in the water', but only a narrow majority would support it in its present form if a vote were held again; there is a fairly widespread consensus that it requires renegotiation. History may well judge that the tricky issue of police reform was probably handled 'about right', but this remains a divisive issue.

6.2 Constitution and community relations

In terms of the backdrop against which devolution may or may not be restored, public opinion on other key issues is important. What are the long-term trends on constitutional preferences? Are these favourable for devolution? And what is the climate in terms of community relations? Can the assembly realistically be restored against a background of fear and suspicion on the streets?

Figure 1 shows that there is no upward or downward trend in terms of support for a united Ireland over the period 1989 to 2004. Opinions fluctuate year on year, and while support reached an all-time high around the time of the Holy Cross dispute in 2001, it has never risen above 30 per cent. In contrast, support for the retention of the union with Britain remains high, but the overall trend is slowly downwards—certainly between 1989 and 1998. About 70 per cent of the public would have opted for retention of the union in 1989, but the equivalent figure for 2004 is about 10 percentage points lower. Again, the Holy Cross dispute marked an all-time low in support for the union with Britain (at 50 per cent). Since then support has been climbing, but the overall trend over the 15 years still appears downwards.

Figure 1: % saying that the best long-term policy for Northern Ireland is for it to remain part of the United Kingdom

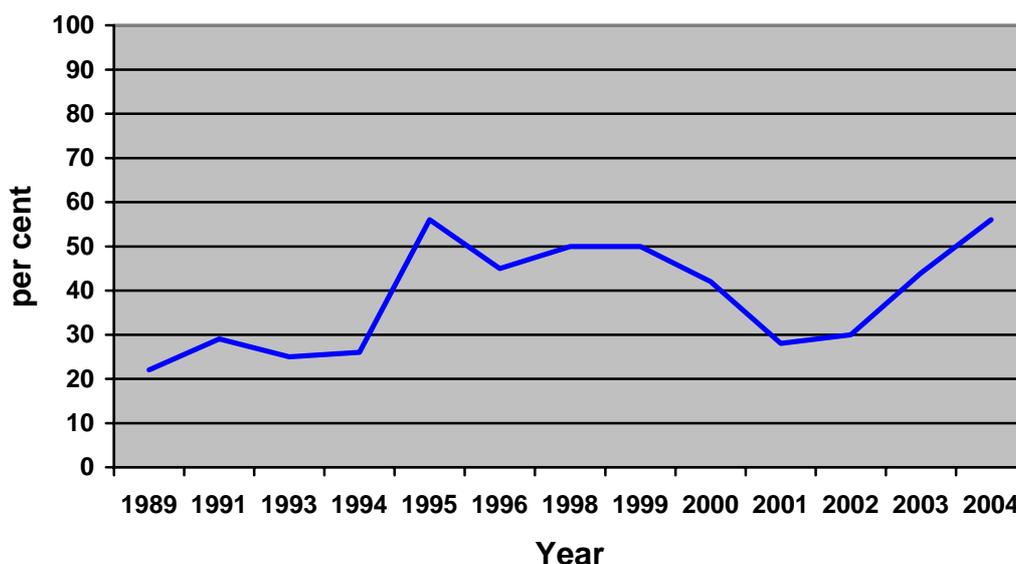


What is important for the architects of devolution and for the background against which the assembly may be restored is the fact that support for the 'other' option rose between 1989 and 1998 and has remained very stable ever since. The 'other' option on surveys (in this case the Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys) is *not* necessarily a vote for devolution, but includes all answers by survey respondents which represent a rejection of the stark united Ireland / union with Britain responses.

People who do not choose the mainstream options include those who simply say that they ‘don’t know’. It includes those who opt for ‘independence’ or ‘joint authority’. It also includes responses like ‘I don’t care as long as there is peace’ and ‘just something else’. What these long-term trends in constitutional preferences do indicate is that, whatever weather systems have blown in over the years, the climate was right for devolution in 1998 and was not adverse by the end of 2004.

In terms of the public sense of the state of community relations, the long-term trends are much less stable—fluctuating a great deal more in response to events. A regular NILTS question asks respondents whether they believe relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than 5 years ago. As Figure 2 shows, optimism increased between 1989 and the 1998 agreement, with a particularly optimistic surge following the 1994 ceasefires. Hopes for better community relations *fell* in the years following the agreement, with a particularly low point around the time of the Holy Cross dispute. Since then, there has been a steady resurgence of optimism, until by 2004 it had reached the levels attained around the time following the ceasefires, post-1994.

Figure 2: % believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than 5 years ago



Again for the devolutionists, the scene looked fairly positive by the end of 2004. Despite the picture of polarisation that recent elections present, there is a discernible sense among the public over the last three years or so that community relations are getting better.

These results provide only the most superficial overview of public opinion during Northern Ireland’s curious on-off devolution from 1998 to 2004. And by only reporting the ‘majority view’ and not presenting views of Protestants and Catholics separately, this ignores significant and bitter divisions in attitudes at particular times during the last seven years. But perhaps one of the most useful contributions of

opinion surveys is to provide levelling statistics in which the silent (and often uninterested) voices are captured alongside the passionate ones.

7. Intergovernmental relations Wilson

Elizabeth Meehan and Robin

7.1 North-south

During this survey period, senior figures from the north-south implementation bodies established under the Belfast agreement came together for the first time with other officials, politicians and academics to reflect on their experience at a conference in University College Dublin. The conference, held in late May, showcased work emerging from a research project organised by UCD, Queen's University Belfast and Democratic Dialogue, funded by the republic's Higher Education Authority under the 'Peace 2' EU programme.

The conference, attended by the authors, was addressed by the taoiseach, Mr Ahern. He said that 'one of the quiet successes' of the Belfast agreement had been the great improvement in north-south co-operation—the 'thaw' that had taken place 'after so many years of neglect and lost opportunity'. He said the north-south bodies had made 'significant progress', despite the 'ongoing political stalemate' which had prevented them being able to 'reach their full potential'. He recognised the 'sensitivities' around this issue but stressed—in an implicit reassurance to unionists that this was not some 'slippery slope' to Irish unification—that his government had 'only one agenda, and that is the agreement itself'.

Mr Ahern said it was in the interests of both parts of Ireland to co-operate where this brought 'practical and mutual benefits' and he stressed the economic potential of the programmes of infrastructural investment envisaged by the Strategic Investment Board in the north and under the National Development Plan in the south. This could amount to €100 million of business over the coming years, he said, representing 'a real opportunity to work together for common benefit'.

At the conference Lord Laird of the UUP made his familiar complaint about the weak arrangements for accountability of the north-south bodies. During the period, the NIO junior minister Lord Rooker unveiled a draft code of practice to render more accessible information on their functions.¹ This issue was at the centre of the DUP's proposals for a revised—or in its terms, 'new'—agreement to replace the 1998 model. Should devolution return, the code, out for consultation, would enable MLAs and others to gain a surer grasp of the working of the six implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland.

7.2 'East-west'

Two meetings of the British-Irish Council were held during the period. The first was a meeting in environmental sector format, hosted in Dublin on April 7th 2005.² The meeting was chaired by the UK government representative, Elliott Morley, minister

for the environment and agri-environment. Dublin was represented by Dick Roche, minister for the environment, heritage and local government. There was no political representation from Northern Ireland, but one of the two officials accompanying the British minister was from a Northern Ireland department—Judena Goldring, director of sustainable development in the Department of the Environment.

The Welsh delegation made the first presentation of the work of the integrated coastal zone management working group. This covered recent developments, including the EU recommendation on the theme, and identified potential areas for a common approach to national strategies. The meeting also considered an Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic and North Seas. This had recently been extended to cover waters between Ireland and the Isle of Man, thereby now covering the whole of the BIC area. Also covered were waste disposal and climate change.

The meeting was informed about a bilateral Agreement between the United Kingdom and Ireland on Early Notification of a nuclear accident or incident. And it received an updated version of a paper on Sellafield, submitted by the republic and the Isle of Man. Discussion of this contested issue was deferred but the meeting agreed to keep the matter on the agenda for future meetings and, indeed, it was placed under the main items for discussion at the next, to be held in Northern Ireland. The continued deferring of the topic was agreed before the latest news on overlooked leakages at Sellafield³ entered the public domain—Dublin wants to see the Cumbrian nuclear-reprocessing plant closed.

The second meeting was the seventh BIC summit, held in the Isle of Man on May 20th.⁴ From the republic, the taoiseach, Mr Ahern, attended, accompanied by Mary Harney, the tánaiste and minister for health and children. On the UK side were the deputy prime minister, John Prescott; the minister of state for health, Lord Warner; and two Northern Ireland ministers: Peter Hain, secretary of state, and Shaun Woodward, parliamentary under-secretary of state. The meeting heard about: developments and difficulties in telemedicine; progress on the misuse of drugs; tourism; the knowledge economy (access to ICT by those with disabilities); indigenous, minority and lesser-used languages; and social inclusion (credit unions, disability and employment).

Northern Ireland, the lead administration on transport, reported that it had been focusing on road safety and transport links among BIC members. (It might be noted that Northern Ireland does not intend to upgrade the northern end of the Belfast-Dublin route to motorway standard, but to stop at a full dual carriageway.) A means of sharing best practice in the use of public-private partnerships was being sought.

The summit heard about the environmental meeting, noted above, and again agreed that Sellafield should remain on the agenda, to be discussed at a meeting provisionally fixed for January 2006. It remains to be seen whether the latest revelation will add any sense of urgency.

¹ OFMDFM press release, June 20th 2005

² British-Irish Council *communiqué*, April 7th 2005

³ *Irish Times*, May 28th 2005

⁴ British-Irish Council *communiqué*, May 20th 2005

8. Relations with the EU Rick Wilford and Elizabeth Meehan

In June the finance minister, Lord Rooker, announced a two-year extension to the 'Peace 2' programme. This further €144 million would the total of such funding to more than €1 billion over the past decade.¹

Targeted towards peace-building and fostering reconciliation, the government indicated that the latter would be emphasised this time, 'given the political uncertainty and suspension of devolution'.² Among the beneficiaries will be victims of the violence, women and Protestant working-class communities—where there is some resentment that Catholic counterparts have differentially benefited in the past, though this is itself a sentiment revealing that reconciliation remains some way off—as well as ethnic minorities.

There is otherwise little to report this time. There were events at which Northern Ireland could learn about the European constitutional treaty. A seminar addressing what it would mean in general, and for Northern Ireland in particular, was held at Queen's University Belfast on May 19th. The Waterfront Hall was the venue for another the next day. The latter, organised by the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform and its sister organisations that form the basis of UK representation on the European Women's Lobby, focused on gender issues.

But, shortly thereafter, the referenda in France and the Netherlands put paid to the proposed referendum in the UK. The republic's government formally took the view that the imminent referendum there should go ahead, but political realities indicated otherwise.

¹ Department of Finance and Personnel press release, June 3rd 2005

² *ibid*

9. Relations with local government Rick Wilford and Robin Wilson

The review of public administration, whose significance looms ever larger as the suspension of Stormont becomes ever more prolonged, is coming near to fruition. Among the pre-purdah publications was a further consultation document from the review team.¹

The proposals built on one of the five options identified in an earlier document of October 2003 (see November 2003 report), that based on strong local government, which attracted widespread support. On that basis, government had made clear (see August 2004 report) that it favoured some 5-8 local authorities replacing the current 26 district councils. This however excited a reaction from existing council members (see November 2004 report), who warned that 'local identity' was under threat.

The upshot this survey period was that the new document said that there might be seven new councils, or there might be 11 or there might even be 15. Remarkably, it devoted just three paragraphs to the crucial issue of 'safeguards and standards',² despite the fact that such enhanced local authorities would face major challenges in sharing power internally and agreeing external municipal symbolism (given the tendency of unionist-dominated councils to insist on flying the Union flag). The consultation on this and other issues raised in the review document—notably a rationalisation of the health and education boards—continues until September.

The new junior NIO minister Lord Rooker, who counts the review among his responsibilities, undertook shortly after his arrival to push ahead on this agenda: 'The need for reform is pressing ... I hope that final decisions can be taken by the end of this year ... to allow work to implement proposed changes to begin as soon as possible.'³

¹ *The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland: Further Consultation*, available from [Hwww.rpani.gov.uk](http://www.rpani.gov.uk)

² *ibid*, p47

³ OFMDFM press release, May 24th 2005

10. Finance Robin Wilson

The tensions arising from growing fiscal stringency continued to manifest themselves during this survey period.

The five education and library boards continued to be the front line in the confrontation. This provoked some elected representatives to resign over the ‘cuts’ they were being forced otherwise to accept,¹ while the then minister, Barry Gardiner, blamed the boards for supposedly mismanaging their funds.² Mr Gardiner claimed vindication when a report commissioned from the former comptroller and auditor general Bill Jack criticised the chief executives of two boards whose budgets had been overspent.³

Mr Gardiner’s then NIO colleague, the finance minister, Ian Pearson, piled on the pressure the following day, returning to the issue of water charges. ‘I realise that no-one wants to pay increased taxes, but if we are serious about improving our schools, health service and transport infrastructure, then water charges are essential to the funding we need,’ he said.⁴

¹ *News Letter*, March 23rd, 24th and 25th 2005

² Department of Education press release, March 25th 2005

³ DE press release, April 4th 2005

⁴ Department of Finance and Personnel press release, April 5th 2005

11. Political parties and elections Duncan Morrow

11.1 Introduction

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. After 11 years of post-ceasefire wrangling and 'peace process', the combined local and Westminster elections in May produced a definitive return to inter-community stand-off and competition. While the policies of the DUP and SF may have changed dramatically from their equivalents in 1994, they have largely done so by eating into the relatively hard-line vote of their respective ethnic competitors.

SF appears to be stranded in the contradiction of its dual strategy—unable, or unwilling, to deliver the end to private armies which has become the *sine qua non* of cross-community devolution—while the DUP may have moderated its language, but remains wedded to an approach which would not have sat ill with the UUP under its immobilist former leader James Molyneaux. Whatever the case, Northern Ireland may have seen the last in its planned series of elections for up to four years, unless there is an unexpected assembly poll to give cover to the DUP before entering devolution. At this point the odds must be against a successful, sustainable deal.

11.2 Pre-electoral skirmishes

The period leading up to St Patrick's Day was dominated by the hostile reception accorded to the SF leadership in the United States. The combined impact of the Northern Bank robbery in December 2004 and the killing of Robert McCartney in January 2005 was brought home to the party, as it endured a week of frozen smiles and public attacks from the once-warm Washington élite. In spite of the attempts by the party president, Mr Adams, at its annual ard fheis (conference) to call for the killers to be brought to justice,¹ the leadership—and, along with it, the leadership of the other political parties—was excluded from the White House St Patrick's Day jamboree that has become central to the regional political calendar.²

When the IRA proposed breaking the impasse by offering to shoot the supposed perpetrators, while still refusing to co-operate with the Police Service of Northern Ireland,³ the movement's difficulties were evident. And when even Edward Kennedy—doyen of Irish-America and the main source of congressional pressure behind US involvement in Northern Ireland—refused to meet Mr Adams on this trip⁴ and called on the IRA to disband,⁵ the extent of its isolation was apparent. To cap matters, Congress passed a special resolution condemning IRA violence and expressing support for the sisters of Robert McCartney and their campaign for justice⁶—an initiative replicated in May in the European Parliament.⁷

London and Dublin nevertheless continued to talk up the medium-run prospects for talks.⁸ The former moved to establish a public inquiry into the loyalist murder in 1999

of the solicitor Rosemary Nelson, in line with the recommendations of the 2003 report by the Canadian judge Peter Cory.⁹ At the same time, the question as to how much of Northern Ireland's troubled past is really over was raised by the Policing Board's agreement to the introduction of new plastic-bullet rounds.¹⁰ In any event, the DUP suggested that power-sharing with republicans could be off the unionist agenda for a generation,¹¹ while the UUP maintained that it would not be going back into negotiations with SF.

As election preparations began to hot up, the most historically significant event was surely the severing, by the Orange Order, of its formal link with the UUP. The Orange-Unionist monolith, which had collectively controlled government in Northern Ireland from 1920 until 1972, was finally broken—not by a modernising decision by the UUP but by a recognition within the order that many, if not most, of its members now supported the DUP.¹²

The complex shifting sands of Northern Ireland politics were however meanwhile confirmed by the lack of serious sectarian reaction to the death of Pope John Paul II. While the former UUP leader, David Trimble, wrote to the Catholic primate, Archbishop Sean Brady, to express his condolences, even Rev Ian Paisley, who built a career on his reputation for militant anti-Popery, sounded sympathetic on his death.¹³ And many Catholic jaws dropped shortly afterwards, when players from the Belfast football club Linfield—historically associated with some fanatically sectarian Protestant fans—took to the field in a north-south cup game wearing black armbands.

11.3 Election campaign

The election campaign, when it came, was surprisingly muted. SF and the DUP exuded quiet confidence, while the other parties clearly feared the worst. Meanwhile, many voters appeared to be preparing to stay at home—out of frustration, lack of interest or failure to register.

No doubt anxious to overcome the hostile publicity generated by the McCartney campaign among his core constituency, the SF leader, Mr Adams, sought to move the agenda on with his appeal to the IRA—in a widely-trailed speech the day after the prime minister announced the election date—to adopt 'political and democratic' methods.¹⁴ While there was a general welcome for the statement from nationalist leaders,¹⁵ there was considerable scepticism about the timing and content of the remarks.

The DUP was unsurprisingly dismissive of calls to the IRA from a man the party holds to be its *de facto* leader—accusing Mr Adams of talking to himself¹⁶—but even Washington awaited 'concrete actions'.¹⁷ When it became apparent that the IRA would not be responding within days,¹⁸ the issue failed to dominate the campaign in the way such pronouncements might have done in the past.

The DUP certainly saw political capital to be made in attacking republicans. The party deputy leader, Peter Robinson, said he could not foresee a time when SF would again be part of a power-sharing administration, though he did not rule it out in the long term.¹⁹ In standing down in favour of the DUP, Robert McCartney, leader of the United Kingdom Unionist Party and a former MP for North Down, declared himself satisfied that the party was opposed to any return to the d'Hondt mechanism—which automatically ensured a proportional distribution of ministerial posts among the parties in the last executive.²⁰ At the same time, the DUP was forced to deny charges of hypocrisy, when details were leaked of a meeting between a party delegation, led by Mr Paisley, and senior business people in Dublin.²¹

The SDLP continued to reject UUP overtures for a voluntary coalition excluding SF,²² although its retiring Newry and Armagh MP, Séamus Mallon, warned that the domination of politics by the DUP and SF risked political 'Balkanisation'.²³ But as the campaign evolved, it was clear that all the pressure was on the previously dominant UUP and SDLP. All the seats identified by pundits as liable to change hands were held by these parties: two days before the election, the *Belfast Telegraph* predicted that 16 out of 18 would fall to the DUP and SF.²⁴

11.4 Results

Table 1: general election 2005—results by constituency in Northern Ireland

Constituency	Elected	Change
East Antrim	Sammy Wilson (DUP)	DUP gain from UUP
East Belfast	Peter Robinson (DUP)	DUP hold
East Londonderry	Gregory Campbell (DUP)	DUP hold
Fermanagh / S Tyrone	Michelle Gildernew (SF)	SF hold
Foyle	Mark Durkan (SDLP)	SDLP hold
Lagan Valley	Jeffrey Donaldson (UUP)	DUP gain from UUP
Mid-Ulster	Martin McGuinness (SF)	SF hold
Newry and Armagh	Conor Murphy (SF)	SF gain from SDLP
North Antrim	Rev Ian Paisley (DUP)	DUP hold
North Belfast	Nigel Dodds (DUP)	DUP hold
North Down	Lady Sylvia Hermon (UUP)	UUP hold
South Antrim	Rev William McCrea (DUP)	DUP gain from UUP
South Belfast	Alasdair McDonnell (SDLP)	SDLP gain from UUP
South Down	Eddie McGrady (SDLP)	SDLP hold
Strangford	Iris Robinson (DUP)	DUP hold
Upper Bann	Alan Simpson (DUP)	DUP gain from UUP
West Belfast	Gerry Adams (SF)	SF hold
West Tyrone	Pat Doherty (SF)	SF hold

In contrast to the rest of the UK, in Northern Ireland recent public-policy attention *vis-à-vis* elections has focused on stopping fraud rather than encouraging voter turnout. As a result, these elections were held under the most restricted register, with all voters required to register individually, rather than as part of a household, and to bring photographic identification to the polling station. Even with the tightened register, and with two elections at stake, turnout of registered voters fell to 62 per cent, one of the lowest in recent years. Even in hotly contested seats such as Foyle, it barely climbed above 65 per cent—suggesting that, alongside political polarisation, there is a serious trend towards voter indifference or disengagement.

Before comparing the Westminster results with other electoral contests, two caveats are important. These are now the only elections in Northern Ireland under the first-past-the-post system, and this engenders peculiar pressures on party behaviour. Moreover, in previous Westminster polls the demands of the system have led the UUP and DUP in particular to make sectarian voting pacts, withdrawing reciprocally in an agreed number of constituencies to prevent the election of a nationalist. This time, the largest four parties contested all constituencies.

Unusually, the greatest pressure to withdraw came on the SDLP, in the West Tyrone constituency. In 2001, the party had suffered an unexpectedly heavy defeat at the hands of SF and had been further wounded in the assembly election of 2003, when anger over the downgrading of a hospital in Omagh led to the election of a local doctor, Kieran Deeny, at its expense. When Dr Deeny announced his intention to stand at the Westminster election, some party members saw an opportunity to avoid further embarrassment, while potentially allying themselves with a populist campaign likely to damage SF (as devolved health minister, Bairbre de Brún of SF had proposed the change). In the event, those opposing withdrawal prevailed, with the result that the SDLP vote in the constituency fell by more than two thirds (to 9 per cent), while more than 27 per cent supported the unsuccessful independent.

Three broad trends emerged. First, the election underlined the rise of the DUP to pre-eminence within the Protestant community and the decline of the UUP. In every constituency, there was a marked shift in this direction, although the swing varied from spectacular (in Lagan Valley, East Antrim and Strangford) to moderate (in East Belfast and North Down). Only in North Down did the UUP actually outpoll the DUP. Significantly, the DUP took the scalp of the former UUP leader, Mr Trimble, in Upper Bann, while his *bête noir*, Jeffrey Donaldson, now standing for the DUP, was returned in Lagan Valley with a majority of more than 14,000.

Secondly, and more surprisingly, the SDLP emerged from the elections redeemed by good performances in target constituencies. For the first time since 1998, the party appears to have halted the trend towards oblivion that had begun to seem inevitable. While SF was able to record a net gain of one (Newry and Mourne) and a huge majority for its leader, Mr Adams, in West Belfast, this election was the most disappointing performance for SF since 1992. The unexpectedly emphatic victory of the SDLP leader, Mark Durkan, in the Foyle constituency of his predecessor, John

Hume, not only consolidated his leadership but also struck a psychological blow against the notion of inexorable SDLP decline. Victory for Alasdair McDonnell in South Belfast, as a result of a deep split in the unionist vote, was the icing on the cake, allowing the SDLP to avoid the fate of Ulster Unionism and the predictions of the *Belfast Telegraph*.

Thirdly, and in spite of media attention on the success of the DUP, the only seat to change hands between nationalism and unionism was South Belfast. As a result, and for the first time, unionist parties now hold only 10 of the 18 Westminster seats. While polarisation has undoubtedly been one of the dynamics of Northern Ireland politics over the last five years, the requirement of inter-community consensus if government is to be returned has never been greater.

At the same time, the distribution of seats illustrates the changing demography of Northern Ireland, with nationalists in firm control of the south and west of the region and unionists in even firmer control in the north-east. Belfast remains evenly split, while all the seats secured by the SDLP and UUP—from Derry in the north-west to South Down in the south-east—run along the orange-green fault line. Notably, all four of these victors to some degree crossed it, with some Protestants endorsing each of the three SDLP winners and Lady Hermon prevailing with Alliance voters' support in North Down.

Mr Trimble's defeat in Upper Bann was seen as emblematic of the collapse of pro-agreement unionism. Yet the huge personal and tactical support which saw the liberal Lady Hermon home was denied to her anti-agreement UUP counterpart in South Antrim, David Burnside, who lost to Rev William McCrea of the DUP. Tactical voting also boosted Mr Durkan's performance in Foyle, although his unexpectedly large victory (46 per cent to 33 per cent for SF) indicated a bedrock of SDLP support in Mr Hume's heartland. In South Belfast tactical voting probably also prevented the expected victory of Jimmy Spratt of the DUP, with the first victory for a nationalist (albeit moderate) in the history of this increasingly mixed constituency.

Elections to Northern Ireland's 26 district councils were also held on May 5th. The conjunction of an FPTP election and a locally-focused poll by single transferable vote allowed more detailed insight than normal into Northern Ireland's electorate. Unsurprisingly, the results confirmed the general-election trends, with increased support for the DUP at the expense of the UUP and confirmation that SF had become the largest nationalist party.

Table 2: Northern Ireland district-council election results 2005, by council

	DUP	UUP	Alliance	Others	SDLP	SF
Antrim	6	5	2	0	3	3
Ards	12	8	3	0	1	0
Armagh	6	5	0	0	6	5
Ballymena	14	5	0	1	3	1
Ballymoney	8	2	0	1	2	3
Banbridge	7	5	1	0	3	1
Belfast	15	7	4	3	8	14
Carrickfergus	8	4	3	2	0	0
Castlereagh	13	4	4	0	2	0
Coleraine	9	8	0	1	3	1
Cookstown	3	3	0	0	5	5
Craigavon	9	6	0	1	4	6
Derry	5	1	0	0	14	10
Down	3	4	0	1	10	5
Dungannon	5	4	0	0	4	9
Fermanagh	4	5	0	0	5	9
Larne	5	4	2	2	2	0
Limavady	3	2	0	1	3	6
Lisburn	13	7	3	0	3	4
Magherafelt	4	2	0	0	2	8
Moyle	2	3	0	3	3	4
Newry	2	3	0	3	9	13
Newtownabbey	12	6	2	3	1	1
North Down	8	8	6	3	0	0
Omagh	3	3	0	2	3	10
Strabane	3	2	0	1	2	8
Total	182	115	30	28	101	126

The strongest trend towards the DUP came in the greater Belfast area. In Lisburn, traditional bastion of Mr Molyneux and centre of his old Lagan Valley constituency, the impact of Mr Donaldson's defection to the DUP was especially strong. Where previously the UUP had dominated, the DUP made eight gains, becoming by far the strongest party. Only slightly less impressive were results in Newtownabbey (Co Antrim) and Ards (Co Down), where the DUP took overall control. Even in North Down, the DUP made significant gains, although this was partly attributable to the disappearance from local government of the UKUP, whose future is certainly questionable.

Overall, the DUP gained seats in 21 of 26 councils. In contrast, the UUP lost seats in all but seven. Only in four council areas—Fermanagh, Down, Moyle and Newry & Mourne—does the UUP have more seats than its erstwhile junior rival.

Changes between nationalists were, in general less spectacular. The trend from 2001 was still towards a strengthening of SF, especially in Tyrone, Fermanagh and Mid-Ulster. At the same time, the SDLP successfully defended key strongholds like Down and Derry, and SF made disappointingly small progress in Newry and Mourne.

The Alliance Party, battered by changes in the last decade, performed robustly where it had prior strength. Regaining a seat lost to SF in the Belfast ward where Robert McCartney was murdered was particularly savoured. Elsewhere, the most noteworthy performance was the arrival of Green Party councillors on three councils in Co Down. Overall, Northern Ireland retains a ‘four and a half party’ system, with overall control a sporadic and highly localised phenomenon.

In many ways, the 2005 elections are best understood as an adjustment to changes which took place over previous periods, particularly 2003-4, rather than introducing new or unusual features. An analysis of party strengths, as represented in the results of the four elections in Northern Ireland since 2003 (table 3), confirms that the DUP now commands the allegiance of around 30 per cent of the electorate. SF can probably count on a consistent 24 per cent, while the UUP and SDLP have been reduced to 17-18 per cent each. On the Protestant side, this shift can be accounted for by the results of the assembly election (2003), plus the boost to DUP ranks brought by Jeffrey Donaldson, Arlene Foster *et al*—whose defection has underpinned a growth in its support among sections of the middle class.

Table 3: share of the vote 2001-2005, by party (%)

Party	Westminster 2005	Locals 2005	European 2004	Assembly 2003	Westminster 2001
DUP	33.7	29.6	32.0	25.6	22.5
UUP	17.7	18.0	16.6	22.7	26.8
Sinn Féin	24.3	23.2	26.3	23.5	21.7
SDLP	17.5	17.4	15.9	17.0	21.7
Alliance	3.6	5.0	n/a	3.7	3.6

For SF the elections pose some questions. While the broad upward trend since 2001 is confirmed, there is some evidence from the results that the remaining SDLP vote will be harder to win over. The party’s share of the vote in the (STV) local elections was almost identical with its share in the (STV) assembly election of 2003. Furthermore, the SDLP maintained, even slightly improved on, its performances in 2003-4. This is the first evidence that the historic SF surge since 1992 may have levelled off.

While there is no sign of any fall in core support, the dynamic element which the political process has provided for Mr Adams and the party leadership in the north may no longer be the engine it was. Furthermore, Mr Durkan’s victory in Foyle confirmed that he can be an election winner, and he has considerably strengthened his standing within his party.

11.5 Aftermath

The fallout from the general election was most immediate for the UUP. Within days, Mr Trimble had resigned the leadership, pointing the finger at the failure of the British government to force decommissioning on the IRA as the putative primary cause of his own failed attempt at agreement.²⁵ The party quickly began preparations for the election of a new leader in June.

Mr Burnside's defeat left him without a base to launch an effort, and speculation initially circled around Lady Hermon.²⁶ But after some reflection, and citing personal reasons,²⁷ she ruled herself out, leaving the field for the first time to figures elected only to the (suspended) assembly rather than Westminster.²⁸ The sense was unmistakable that, in its centenary year, a once-proud party had fallen into disarray, compounded by speculation that it might be forced to close its office in Washington (established in the 90s to attempt to counter the influence of SF there).²⁹

In spite of the publicity generated by Mr Adams' appeal to the IRA at the outset of the election campaign, there was little public evidence of movement. After the election, both governments and SF seemed at pains to give the impression that what was critical was the content of any further IRA statement, rather than the speed of its arrival. While Mr Adams claimed that SF's success boosted the chances of an IRA move,³⁰ initial and difficult post-electoral talks in Downing Street, separately engaging the DUP and SF, suggested that renewed devolution might take more than a single statement.³¹ All sides seemed agreed that progress without substantive movement by the IRA was impossible.³²

The arrest and charging of two people in connection with the murder of Robert McCartney ensured that that issue too would not disappear.³³ Such hydras will not easily be felled in one blow.³⁴ At the same time, the DUP and SF made unholy alliance over the results of the French and Dutch referenda on the EU constitution—in defence of the independence of different imagined national communities.³⁵

The election to the leadership of the UUP shaped up into a three-horse race, after the failure of a remarkable attempt by Lord Kilclooney to encourage non-party members—he suggested the Iraq-war officer Tim Collins, who declined to enlist for this particular cause—to seek to lead the party.³⁶ It came down to a contest between three MLAs representing different factions. David McNarry, a former adviser to Mr Trimble with strong roots in Orangeism, was first to declare.³⁷ He was followed by Sir Reg Empey, a former Stormont minister who had the support of half the assembly party, and Alan McFarland, standard-bearer of the party's liberal modernisers and enjoying the support of Lady Hermon.

The contest was won by the favourite, Sir Reg, who secured 48 per cent support in the first round and 52 per cent in a run-off with Mr McFarland. The big surprise was the strong support for the latter and the poor performance of Mr McNarry—suggesting

that the split between the UUP and DUP has not only weakened the UUP³⁸ but also turned it into a more clearly pro-power-sharing party.

11.6 Outlook

Sir Reg took over the UUP leadership on the same day as the Orange Order on the Shankill Road postponed its annual Whiterock parade in west Belfast, in protest against being rerouted through a former factory site and away from Catholic homes by the Parades Commission. The postponement headed off a potential breakdown in public order. Commenting on the difficulties, Sir Reg suggested that a definitive deal in Northern Ireland would now also have to encompass parades.³⁹

At the same time, the potential for inter-community violence has far from disappeared. An IRA statement had still not appeared at time of writing and the political parties in Northern Ireland appeared far more pessimistic than the government about a deal on devolution in the short term. *Plus ça change ...*

¹ *Irish Times*, March 7th 2005

² *Irish News*, March 8th 2005

³ *Belfast Telegraph*, March 9th 2005

⁴ *Irish Times*, March 14th 2005

⁵ *Irish News*, March 17th 2005

⁶ *Irish Times*, March 19th 2005

⁷ *Irish Times*, May 11th 2005

⁸ *Irish Times*, March 8th 2005

⁹ *Irish News* March 24th 2005

¹⁰ *Irish Times*, March 26th 2005

¹¹ *Irish Times*, March 24th 2005

¹² *News Letter*, March 14th 2005

¹³ *Irish News*, April 4th 2005

¹⁴ *Belfast Telegraph*, April 6th 2005

¹⁵ *Irish Times*, April 8th 2005

¹⁶ *The World Tonight*, BBC, April 6th 2005

¹⁷ *Irish Times*, April 8th 2004

¹⁸ *Irish Times*, April 12th 2005

¹⁹ *News Letter*, April 21st 2005

²⁰ *Irish Times*, April 12th 2005

²¹ *Irish Times*, April 23rd 2005

²² *Irish Times*, April 21st 2005

²³ *Irish News*, April 27th 2005

²⁴ *Belfast Telegraph*, May 3rd 2005

²⁵ *Belfast Telegraph*, May 7th 2005

²⁶ *Irish Times*, May 14th 2005

²⁷ Lady Sylvia's husband, the former chief constable Sir John Hermon, has Alzheimer's disease.

²⁸ *Belfast Telegraph*, May 18th 2005

²⁹ *Irish Times*, May 20th 2005

³⁰ *Irish News*, May 17th 2005

³¹ *Irish Times*, May 20th 2005

³² *Irish Times*, May 19th 2005

³³ *News Letter*, June 4th 2005

³⁴ *Irish News*, May 25th 2005

³⁵ *Irish Times*, May 31st 2005

³⁶ *Belfast Telegraph*, June 10th 2005

³⁷ *Irish Times*, June 7th 2005

³⁸ *Belfast Telegraph*, June 25th 2005

³⁹ *Inside Politics*, BBC Radio Ulster, June 25th 2005

12. Public policies

Rick Wilford and Robin Wilson

While expressing the ambition to ‘do myself and my ministerial team out of a job’, the new Northern Ireland secretary and his colleagues pressed ahead with the agenda on transferred matters. Indeed, in his first major speech in Northern Ireland, addressing the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in Belfast in June, Mr Hain said:¹

We strongly believe that elected local politicians are best placed for governance. However, in the absence of devolved government, we plan to get on with the job of governing with purpose and resolve.

David Hanson, wearing his Department for Social Development hat, announced a further £3 million investment from the Local Community Fund, to enable 48 of Northern Ireland’s most disadvantaged neighbourhoods to promote community development, community relations and environmental improvement.² This brought the total thus far invested in the LCF to almost £8.5 million since introduced in February 2003.

The announcement came a week before the Department of Finance and Personnel published a comprehensive study of deprivation in Northern Ireland.³ Led by Prof Michael Noble, the study identified areas around the Falls and Shankill Roads in Belfast as the most deprived and North Down, Castlereagh and the Jordanstown area of Newtownabbey as least—an unsurprising conclusion to those familiar with the region’s sectarian and social demography.

A month earlier, the 2003-04 Family Resources Survey was published.⁴ It identified Omagh and Strabane as having the highest proportion of households in receipt of social security benefits—15 per cent, compared with the Northern Ireland average of 8 per cent. Fully 13 per cent of all households in the region have no savings or bank accounts, compared with a UK average of 6 per cent, and overall benefit receipt is also higher (at 64 per cent of ‘benefit units’) than the UK average (59 per cent). By these measures Northern Ireland clearly remains a needy society.

In early June, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety published waiting-list statistics for March 2005.⁵ They showed a decrease (of 1,705 or 3.5 per cent) of inpatients on the waiting list, though an increase (of 2,508 or 1.5 per cent) of those waiting for a first outpatient appointment (a total of 167,138 individuals, about one in ten of the population).

Waiting lists spiralled out of control under devolution, but the inpatient queue has been steadily shortening under direct rule—one of the reasons why there is so little public clamour for a return of devolution, given health was identified by the Life and Times Survey as the public’s priority for the then new assembly around the time of its establishment. Having peaked at more than 60,000 just before the devolved

institutions collapsed in October 2002, the number waiting for inpatient treatment has come down to under 48,000—about the same as five years earlier.

This, however, was of scant satisfaction to the new health minister, Mr Woodward, from whose ‘outsider’ perspective the situation was clearly deemed intolerable. He announced two measures to tackle the problem. The first was a requirement, whose prior success in Wales he noted, that health trusts which would not provide treatment within 12 months (or, in some disciplines, less) stump up for the patient to be treated elsewhere, as an incentive against inaction. The second, borrowed from Manchester, was to cut out the consultant where outpatient diagnosis *via* primary-care centres could reveal that surgery was not required.⁶

More broadly, the chief medical officer published her most recent annual report,⁷ which indicated that mental health problems,⁸ smoking and obesity remain key causes of ill-health, with obesity in particular increasing at alarming rates. Two thirds of men and half of all women are overweight, while the proportion of children between 12 and 15 years who are overweight or obese has increased by one quarter over the last decade—a period that has witnessed the onset and outworking of the ‘peace process’ and, it seems, a ‘let them eat cake’, or perhaps soda farls, lifestyle.⁹

Mr Woodward was forced to address the smoking issue at an early stage of his incumbency as health minister. The success of the ban on smoking in public places in the republic has given rise to strong pressure for a similar initiative north of the border, with the BMA in the region to the fore in pressing the point, along with cancer charities. But he proved himself unwilling to grasp the nettle—or the weed—just yet, in a speech which promised further consideration of the matter over the coming months.¹⁰

Policy continuity between the devolved and direct-rule administrations was meanwhile evident in the announcement by the social-development minister of an advisory group to assist in tackling fuel poverty, following an initiative in 2001, the Warm Homes scheme. Initial funding of £3 million has increased fourfold to install better insulation and more efficient heating systems for those in public-sector housing. The number of households benefiting from the scheme has risen from 4,250 in 2001 to 8,250 in the current financial year.¹¹

Angela Smith, responsible for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, launched Northern Ireland’s first *Economic Bulletin* at the end of June. This showed that regional gross value added *per capita* had grown at a remarkable 6 per cent in 2002-03, above the UK average (5.4 per cent) and joint second highest of all UK regions. The publication also noted a doubling in the growth of exports of manufactured goods over the past decade, albeit from a low base. The report did, though, indicate that GVA *per capita* remained at only 81 per cent of the UK average, at less than £13,000, and that one third of all jobs in Northern Ireland were in the public sector, compared with one in five in the UK as a whole.¹²

In terms of the religious composition of the workforce, the *Labour Force Survey Update* (2003) showed that the labour force was 51.9 per cent Protestant and 48.1 per cent Catholic; this reflected an increase of Catholics and a corresponding fall of Protestants between 1990 and 2003. The economic activity rate among Protestants of working age (76.4 per cent) was higher than among Catholics (67.9 per cent): equally, among the economically inactive of working age, 55.7 per cent were Catholic and 44.3 per cent Protestant.

While unemployment rates have fallen over the period 1990-2003, there was still a religious differential, the survey highlighted. In 2003 the unemployment rate of Catholics was 7.2 per cent, compared with 4.8 per cent of Protestants—1.5 times as high. The absolute unemployment gap of 2.4 percentage points compared with a high of 10.7 points in 1991.¹³

Ministers also took forward a legacy from the 1998 agreement during the period. In early June, the European Commission approved the implementation of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund. Worth £12 million over five years, it will supply some 90 hours of Irish-language broadcasting per year to an estimated audience of 25,000 people and train 15 individuals *per annum* in broadcasting and production skills.¹⁴

If a consistent theme of these reports since direct rule has been to stress the evidence of ministerial activism, during the survey period government was challenged over its *inaction* in transposing an English development to Northern Ireland. Earlier attacks (see November 2004 report) over the failure to expand childcare in the region—leaving, indeed, existing organisations in jeopardy for want of long-term support—were followed by complaints, such as from the NGO Playboard, that government had no plans to follow the move towards ‘wrap-around’ out-of-school provision announced by the education secretary, Ruth Kelly.¹⁵ Ironically, Ms Kelly hails from Northern Ireland.

¹ *Belfast Telegraph*, June 21st 2005

² DSD press release, May 18th 2005

³ DFP press release, May 26th 2005. *NI Multiple Deprivation Measure 2005* is available on [Hwww.nisra.gov.uk](http://www.nisra.gov.uk)

⁴ DSD press release, April 14th 2005

⁵ DHSSPS press release, June 2nd 2005

⁶ DHSSPS press release, July 4th 2005

⁷ available at [Hwww.dhsspsni.gov.uk](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk)

⁸ One index of mental health problems has been a sharp rise in suicides among young men, notably in north and west Belfast, two areas of the city most blighted by the pathologies of the ‘troubles’ and continuing paramilitary activity. On June 30th, the health minister, Mr Woodward, announced plans for a task force to develop a suicide-prevention strategy. Over a three-month period earlier this year, there were at least 15 suicides in west Belfast, with seven occurring in one week in April.

⁹ At a press conference to launch new guidelines on the treatment of obesity, the consultant Tom Trinick said almost 20 per cent of adults in Northern Ireland were clinically obese (DHSSPS press release, June 7th 2005).

¹⁰ *Belfast Telegraph*, June 29th 2005

¹¹ DSD press release, June 2nd 2005

¹² DETI press release, June 30th 2005

¹³ Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister press release, June 23rd 2005

¹⁴ DCAL press release, June 8th 2005

¹⁵ *News Letter*, June 14th 2005