



PERSPECTIVES ON THE BELFAST/GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT:

EXAMINING DIVERSE VIEWS, 1998–2023

ALAN RENWICK AND CONOR J. KELLY

The Constitution Unit

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Any errors, omissions, or other weaknesses in this report remain entirely our own responsibility.

Executive Summary

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998 is the cornerstone of consensual politics in Northern Ireland, but today it faces serious challenges. Finding ways forward is difficult, not least because different people have different perspectives on the Agreement. Understanding those diverse views is essential. This report therefore sets out evidence on how the 1998 Agreement is seen.

Chapter 1 presents essential background on the Agreement: its content; the perspectives of key actors on it at the time; and its implementation since 1998. The record on implementation is positive but imperfect. Life in Northern Ireland has been transformed. But power-sharing frequently does not function, the Agreement's second and third strands have often been neglected, and there are ongoing debates on many other issues related to the Agreement. In recent years, the UK's decision to exit the European Union, and later the Protocol, have exacerbated tensions.

Chapter 2 analyses what party manifestos in Northern Ireland have said about the Agreement since 1998. Sharp differences between the parties over the Agreement in the early years after 1998 eased after the St Andrews Agreement in 2006/7. More recently, however, contentious debates have returned. Across the parties, there is consensus on the need for change, but details are often lacking on what change should look like. Agreement on some reforms might be possible, but others may prove harder.

Chapter 3 further examines elite perspectives on the Agreement through interviews with politicians, policy-makers, and other experts from across the UK and Ireland. These interviews again suggest that problems related to peace and security have subsided since 1998, though some communities have not benefited fully. There is wide frustration that the Assembly and Executive do not operate effectively and are prone to collapse. There were proposals for reform, but also a recurring fear that the Agreement as a whole could be undermined if issues covered by it were reopened. Interviewees stressed a need for the governments in London and Dublin to engage with Northern Ireland more substantially.

Chapter 4 examines public perspectives in Northern Ireland. It first summarises existing research, and then presents findings from an original set of focus groups. Most participants backed the principles of power-sharing and viewed the Agreement as a positive force, bringing peace and prosperity since 1998. But some unionists and loyalists opposed it, often relating their anger to the release of prisoners in the early years after 1998, or arguing that their community had not benefited. Participants did not have detailed thoughts on the political institutions of the Agreement, but there was much anger at the political dysfunction of recent years.

The report concludes with our own reflections. While the Agreement retains widespread elite and public support as the best basis for governing Northern Ireland and managing relationships across these islands, the work of ensuring that all communities in Northern Ireland benefit from it is crucial. The status quo of continued dysfunction at Stormont (and often beyond) must be addressed. Change is needed, but change requires trust, which is in very short supply. Leadership and a spirit of compromise, from politicians in Northern Ireland, from others in civic society, and from the governments in Dublin and London, will be necessary. As a starting point, listening to the diverse viewpoints voiced in this report will be essential.

Introduction

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998 brought relative political stability to Northern Ireland and was the culmination of decades of effort by the British and Irish governments and local political actors to address Northern Ireland's disputed status and governance. It was approved by large majorities in popular referendums in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It is a unique and carefully constructed document, and it is the cornerstone of consensual politics in Northern Ireland. It has underpinned periods of devolved government. Its greatest legacy is peace.

At the time of writing, however, many of the core institutions established through the Agreement are not functioning, and the future of the Agreement is in peril. Further, while the Agreement has had many successes, some aspects have not functioned as imagined in 1998, or indeed been implemented at all. Almost everyone wants the institutions to start functioning again. Many think that a more fundamental reset is also required. Two important reports by our colleague Alan Whysall have explored many of the challenges and options (Whysall 2022, 2023).

This is no straightforward matter, however, for different people have different perspectives on the Agreement. Among the various political actors and communities in Northern Ireland and beyond, there are varying and complex understandings of what the Agreement means (see McCrudden 2021), how it has been implemented, why aspects of its implementation have stalled, and how it should work in the future. Furthermore, there is often strikingly limited recognition among participants in this discussion of the range of perspectives that exist. As scholars based in London, we are acutely aware that few politicians in Great Britain today have invested much time in understanding Northern Ireland's politics deeply. The same can also be said to a large degree of Dublin. Within Northern Ireland, meanwhile, as is true in any polarised context, there is some tendency for all sides to 'other' those with different perspectives, rather than to seek to understand why others think as they do.

Our purpose in this report is therefore, simply, to set out evidence on how the 1998 Agreement is seen. We do so in four steps.

Chapter 1 sets out essential background: what the Agreement contains; how it was received in 1998; and what has happened in terms of implementation over the last 25 years. The chapter will be particularly valuable for readers who are less familiar with this history; readers who know the story well may wish to jump ahead.

Chapter 2 presents an analysis of what party manifestos in Northern Ireland have said about the Agreement since 1998, covering the five main parties. Even for seasoned observers, we hope it will be useful to see how – and how much – perspectives have changed over the past 25 years. In 1998, there were sharp contrasts between the parties, in whether they endorsed the Agreement and how they framed it. Today, there is broad acceptance of the Agreement as the basis for politics in Northern Ireland, but also a widespread sense that changes are needed. The chapter also sums up the parties' most recent official policy statements on these matters.

Chapter 3 examines elite perspectives on the Agreement further by outlining findings from interviews conducted over the past two years with politicians, policy-makers, and other experts on

the Agreement. These interviews allow us to go wider than the manifesto analysis, including voices beyond the five main parties within Northern Ireland, voices from London and Dublin, and other academic and legal experts. They also allow us to probe deeper into why different actors think as they do. Because the interviews are anonymous, they permit an honesty about some of the challenges that published statements sometimes miss.

Finally, Chapter 4 moves to perspectives of the wider public. It begins by summarising existing research findings, particularly from the annual Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey of public opinion in Northern Ireland, and from a deliberative exercise carried out by researchers in spring 2022. Then it presents findings from an original set of focus groups conducted in summer 2022. These focus group reveal how people from different backgrounds in Northern Ireland think about the Agreement, how the institutions work today, and how politics in Northern Ireland might change in the future. They show the depth of the challenges that remain in securing the better future that people from all backgrounds want.

We hope this material will prove a valuable resource for all those seeking to restore the institutions and rejuvenate the Agreement as a whole. We have approached the topic as politically neutral scholars, and we present the findings often without extensive commentary, giving space for others to draw conclusions.

At the same time, our report also has a core underlying message: that listening to the full range of perspectives voiced in these pages is vital. The lesson of the Agreement – of the negotiations leading up to 1998 and of the difficult decade thereafter during which the aspirations of the Agreement were gradually (and never fully) brought to fruition – is that progress can be made in Northern Ireland only if all communities feel they are recognised and respected. That condition is not currently met. All communities feel unfairly treated in some way or other. Recent years have left a legacy of deep distrust of London and to a lesser degree Dublin that is felt across society. No one feels heard by the other side.

After an exceptionally fractious period in recent years, it is time to focus on listening again. The governments in London and Dublin have a profound responsibility to engage, to build trust, and to seek to forge consensus on ways forward. Politicians and others in Northern Ireland must equally shoulder responsibility. Now is not the time for any of the key actors to wait for others to propose solutions. We hope that the material in these pages will assist the process of returning to a more constructive form of politics.

Chapter 1. The Agreement: Content and Implementation

This chapter begins by outlining the 1998 Agreement and its contents. Then it summarises how the Agreement was perceived at the time, in Dublin, in London, in Northern Ireland's different communities, and abroad. Finally, it describes the Agreement's implementation since 1998. For readers who are less familiar with Northern Ireland's story over the last quarter century, the material provides essential bedrock for the later chapters.

The 1998 Agreement

The agreement reached on 10 April 1998 is variously known as the Belfast Agreement or the Good Friday Agreement. The former name is favoured by most unionist politicians. The latter name, however, is more widespread, used by nationalists, the non-aligned, and by many unionists too. In the focus groups that we analyse in Chapter 4, we asked about these names and, across all communities, 'Good Friday Agreement' was much the more familiar term. We strive here for complete impartiality, and we will therefore follow the common practice of referring, simply, to 'the Agreement' or 'the 1998 Agreement'.

The Agreement was the culmination of a long process of negotiations that effectively ended the period of violent conflict known as 'the Troubles'. The Troubles had gripped Northern Ireland, and often Ireland and Great Britain, in a cycle of violence since the late 1960s. Over 3,500 people had lost their lives, and some 40,000 people had been injured (McKittrick et al. 2004; Smith 2019). The appalling suffering endured by people in Northern Ireland during the Troubles ran parallel to ongoing attempts to reach a compromise on the territory's constitutional status and system of government. By the early 1990s, it appeared that a political settlement acceptable to Irish nationalists and British unionists was at last possible. The Downing Street Declaration, agreed between UK Prime Minister John Major and Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds in 1993, established certain fundamental principles. A Northern Ireland Forum was elected in 1996 through a system designed to include smaller political parties; it provided the basis for representation in the talks that led to the 1998 Agreement itself (Whyte 1998; Cowell-Meyers 2014: 68).

The Agreement was signed by the British and Irish governments and endorsed by most major political parties in Northern Ireland. It comprises two parts: a multi-party agreement between the political parties in Northern Ireland and the British and Irish governments, and a bilateral international treaty signed by the two governments. Eight of the ten largest political parties in Northern Ireland took part in the final stages of negotiations. However, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) – at that time the second largest unionist party – and the small UK Unionist Party (UKUP) did not give their approval to the Agreement, having withdrawn from the negotiations after Sinn Féin was included.

Northern Ireland's status

The text of the Agreement begins with a declaration of commitment ‘to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands’.¹ All parties, including those with ties to paramilitary movements, committed themselves to ‘exclusively democratic and peaceful means of resolving differences on political issues’.

A section on ‘Constitutional Issues’ addresses the disputed status of Northern Ireland by fusing two principles: the unionist principle that Irish unification cannot happen without the consent of the people of Northern Ireland; and the nationalist principle of a right to Irish self-determination. That section states that the signatories

recognise that it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively and without external impediment, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish, accepting that this right must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

The Agreement does not provide much detail on how any future decision on whether Northern Ireland is to remain part of the UK or become part of a united Ireland should be made (see Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland 2021: 80). But it indicates that a change could not occur without a referendum in Northern Ireland, that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would have to call a referendum ‘if at any time it appears likely to him that a majority of those voting’ would support a united Ireland, and that majorities for unification both north and south would require unification to take place. The Agreement also required the replacement of Articles 2 and 3 in the Irish Constitution with less irredentist language.

Governance: three strands

The largest part of the Agreement sets out arrangements for governance. These are based around three ‘strands’, encompassing cross-community government within Northern Ireland (Strand 1), cross-border co-operation between the North and South on the island of Ireland (Strand 2), and co-operation between the UK and Ireland and among all the governing authorities on these islands (Strand 3). It was hoped that this structure would enable effective government within Northern Ireland and further alleviate the political tensions between communities.

Strand 1 sets out a new Northern Ireland Assembly and Northern Ireland Executive. These were to ‘exercise full legislative and executive authority in respect of those matters currently within the responsibility of the six Northern Ireland Government Departments’ (namely, Agriculture, Economic Development, Education, Environment, Finance and Personnel, and Health and Social Services) (Dubs 1999). Other matters were to remain within the domain of the UK government, subject to the provisions of Strand 3.

The Assembly was to have 108 members (MLAs) – six per Westminster constituency – elected via a proportional voting system. Parliamentary procedures were designed to ensure that no one

¹ The Agreement text does not contain section numbers or a unified system of paragraph numbers. Official sources also provide it with varying formatting and pagination. We therefore do not attempt to provide exact references for quotations. These can, however, all be found by searching the text.

community would exercise majoritarian control in the Assembly, as the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) had done in the Parliament of Northern Ireland between 1921 and 1972. Thus, the Agreement stipulated that 'key decisions' were to be taken 'on a cross-community basis', backed either by a majority of Assembly members and a majority of both unionists and nationalists, or by 60% of MLAs and at least 40% of both unionists and nationalists. To facilitate this, MLAs would be required on taking office to 'designate' themselves as 'nationalist', 'unionist', or 'other'. The Agreement specified certain decisions that were to use these cross-community procedures. Any other matter could also be made subject to these procedures through a 'petition of concern' brought by at least 30 MLAs. The Assembly would also have a system of committees, whose chairs, deputy chairs, and members would be allocated proportionally among the parties.

The Executive, meanwhile, was to comprise a First Minister, Deputy First Minister, and up to 10 further ministers. The First Minister and Deputy First Minister would be jointly elected by the Assembly using cross-community voting. The remaining ministers would be allocated to parties in proportion to their electoral strengths, again ensuring cross-community representation – though parties would be entitled to decline these posts. The First Minister and Deputy First Minister were to have precisely co-equal powers as, in effect, dual heads of government.

Beyond the core Strand 1 institutions of the Assembly and Executive, a consultative Civic Forum was also to be established to give a voice to community groups. It would 'comprise representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors, and such other sectors as agreed by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister' and would 'act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues'.

Strand 1 thus sets out a system of power-sharing government. In academic analysis, many of the Strand 1 provisions have been described as 'consociational' in character (McGarry and O'Leary 2006). Under consociationalism, divergent communities in divided societies share power, and democratic institutions are designed intentionally to facilitate this (Lijphart 1969).

Strand 2 focuses on economic and political ties between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. It stipulates the creation of a North/South Ministerial Council 'to bring together those with executive responsibilities in Northern Ireland and the Irish Government, to develop consultation, co-operation and action within the island of Ireland'. There would be biannual plenary meetings led by the First and Deputy First Ministers and the Taoiseach, and specialist meetings involving relevant ministers. The Council would 'exchange information, discuss and consult' and 'use best endeavours to reach agreement on the adoption of common policies, in areas where there is a mutual cross-border and all-island benefit, and which are within the competence of both Administrations'. At least six 'matters for co-operation and implementation' would be agreed, with the Agreement providing a list of 12 areas that these might be drawn from. This would 'take place through agreed implementation bodies on a cross-border or all-island level'. The North/South Ministerial Council and the Northern Ireland Assembly would be 'mutually inter-dependent', such that 'one cannot successfully function without the other'.

The Agreement also stated, under the heading of Strand 2, that consideration would be given to creating two further bodies: 'a joint parliamentary forum', bringing together equal numbers from the Assembly and the Oireachtas 'for discussion of matters of mutual interest and concern'; and 'an independent consultative forum appointed by the two Administrations, representative of civil

society, comprising the social partners and other members with expertise in social, cultural, economic and other issues’.

Strand 3 has two elements, focusing on UK–Irish cooperation and on cooperation across these islands. Regarding the first of these, and subsuming the institutional arrangements created in 1985 through the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the 1998 Agreement stated that a British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC) would be established. This would ‘bring together the British and Irish Governments to promote bilateral co-operation at all levels on all matters of mutual interest within the competence of both Governments’. In particular, it said:

In recognition of the Irish Government’s special interest in Northern Ireland and of the extent to which issues of mutual concern arise in relation to Northern Ireland, there will be regular and frequent meetings of the Conference concerned with non-devolved Northern Ireland matters, on which the Irish Government may put forward views and proposals.

The BIIGC would meet ‘as required at Summit level (Prime Minister and ‘Taoiseach)’ and otherwise at ministerial level.

The second core element of Strand 3 was a British–Irish Council (BIC), to be created ‘to promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands’. Its members would be representatives of the British and Irish governments, the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, and representatives of Guernsey, Jersey, and the Isle of Man. It would meet ‘at summit level, twice per year’ and ‘in specific sectoral formats on a regular basis’. It would ‘exchange information, discuss, consult and use best endeavours to reach agreement on co-operation on matters of mutual interest’. In parallel, the Agreement also suggested that a British–Irish Interparliamentary Body might be established.

Rights and equality

Beyond the arrangements set out in the three strands, a substantial part of the Agreement focuses on protecting rights and equality. Most fundamentally, it states that, whatever decision might in future be made about Northern Ireland’s status,

the power of the sovereign government with jurisdiction there shall be exercised with rigorous impartiality on behalf of all the people in the diversity of their identities and traditions and shall be founded on the principles of full respect for, and equality of, civil, political, social and cultural rights, of freedom from discrimination for all citizens, and of parity of esteem and of just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos, and aspirations of both communities.

It confirms ‘the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose’, recognised through the right to hold either Irish or British citizenship or both.

Beyond these broad principles, the Agreement stated that the UK would incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into Northern Ireland law. It would establish a Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (HRC), which would examine rights issues and make recommendations, and an Equality Commission. The HRC would advise on scope for ‘a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland’, which would contain ‘rights supplementary to those in the European Convention on Human Rights, to reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland’; this

would build on ‘the principles of mutual respect for the identity and ethos of both communities and parity of esteem’. Similar steps would also be taken in Ireland.

Peace and development

The Agreement addressed a range of matters related to the transition from conflict to peace and the revival of Northern Ireland’s flagging economy.

The issue of the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons was one of the most fraught subjects during the negotiations. In 1997, the parties had already affirmed their commitment to resolving this matter, and an Independent International Commission on Decommissioning had been established. In the 1998 Agreement, they reaffirmed ‘their commitment to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations’ and confirmed ‘their intention to continue to work constructively and in good faith with the Independent Commission, and to use any influence they may have, to achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms within two years’ of the Agreement’s endorsement in referendums. The UUP regarded these provisions as insufficient. Its acceptance was secured, however, through a letter from Tony Blair to party leader David Trimble, which, while separate from the 1998 Agreement, said they should be understood to mean ‘that the process of decommissioning should begin straight away’ (Blair 1998).

The UK government said it would ‘make progress towards the objective of as early a return as possible to normal security arrangements in Northern Ireland’, including reduction of the army presence ‘to levels compatible with a normal peaceful society’. The Agreement affirmed that the police service should be effective, representative, and ‘capable of attracting and sustaining support from the community as a whole’, and it set out terms of reference for a Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland to make recommendations on future arrangements. There would also be a review of the criminal justice system to ensure it was impartial, responsive, and effective and had ‘the confidence of all parts of the community’.

The governments agreed that they would accelerate the release of prisoners convicted during the Troubles who were affiliated with organisations that had renounced violence. The signatories affirmed their belief ‘that it is essential to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence as a necessary element of reconciliation’, and added that they looked forward ‘to the results of the work of the Northern Ireland Victims Commission’, which had been established in 1997. They recognised the importance of support for victims and of efforts at reconciliation, but did not pledge specific further steps.

The Agreement also recognised that rebuilding Northern Ireland would require sustained economic growth and measures ‘for promoting social inclusion, including in particular community development and the advancement of women in public life’. There would be new regional and economic development strategies and strengthened anti-discrimination legislation, as well as measures to promote the Irish language.

Implementation and review

Finally, the Agreement contained provisions on its own validation, implementation, and review. Referendums would be held in both Northern Ireland and the Republic on 22 May: on the Agreement as a whole in the former, and on constitutional amendments in the latter. If these

passed, elections to the Assembly – initially to operate in ‘shadow mode’ – would be held on 25 June, with the Strand 2 and 3 institutions coming into being at the same time.

Each of the institutions would be able to review its own operations and make changes where these did not have wider effects. A wider process of review was also allowed for if it was deemed necessary, and would be a matter for the ‘two Governments in consultation with the parties in the Assembly’.

Perspectives on the 1998 Agreement at the time

Before we explore the Agreement’s fortunes since 1998, it is useful to step back from the text itself to outline how it was perceived at the time. The sense of a historic new beginning was widely felt. On 10 April 1998, the day the Agreement was signed, the *Belfast Telegraph* ran with the prophetic headline ‘DESTINY DAY’ – though the next morning, the *Belfast News Letter* warned that ‘the hard work is only beginning’. *The Times* (London) ran with the headline ‘Ulster chooses hope over hate’, and continued:

courage had triumphed, says Blair as two Governments and eight political parties signed up to a new future for Northern Ireland. He hailed a settlement that would give everyone the chance to live in peace and raise their children free from the shadow of fear. (Fletcher and Webster 1998)

In Dublin, the *Irish Times* editorial said:

perhaps, in time, the date will resonate in the collective memory of our children and our grandchildren, just as 1916 or 1912, or 1689 or 1798 for those of earlier generations. [...] What has been achieved over these days is a beginning. It marks but the start of the challenging experiment, so often and so painstakingly prescribed over the years by John Hume; the bringing together of the representatives of the people of all of Ireland to agree how they might share this space of land upon which they have been cast by the tide of history. (*Irish Times* 1998)

And, further afield, the *New York Times* editorial read:

More than 3,000 deaths and 30 years after the Irish Troubles entered their bloodiest era, the political parties of Northern Ireland have signed a peace agreement. The accord, born of a convergence of political courage, perseverance and sheer good luck, will not end the division of Protestant and Catholic. But it will address some historic grievances and promote the use of politics, rather than violence, to solve the rest. (*New York Times* 1998)

Looking across relevant parliamentary debates, biographies, and comments from the Agreement’s early years, three ways to describe the Agreement recur with striking frequency: that it was ‘historic’ (McAleese 1998; Fearon and McWilliams 1998: 1262; O’Donnell 1998; Hanifin 1998; Mallon 1998; Ahern 1999; Campbell 2011: 355); that it embodied a ‘compromise’ (Mallon 1998; Mowlam 2002: 225; Harney 1998; Adams 2017: 319); and that it would finally bring about ‘an end to violence’ (Blair 2010: 190; Owen 1998; Mowlam 2002: 225; Dermot Gallagher quoted in Spencer 2020: 225; Kilmurray 2021).

All the same, when the Agreement was signed, it was accepted that different interpretations of and perspectives on it existed. Indeed, it could command such widespread support amongst divergent political viewpoints in part precisely because of the ‘constructive ambiguity’ used in its language

(McSweeney 1998: 96; Mitchell 2009; McCrudden 2021). We thus briefly outline some of the community and political perspectives that existed in those early days.

Views in Dublin

Opinion was perhaps most unambiguous in Dublin. Since 1937, the Constitution of Ireland (Bunreacht na hÉireann) had asserted that ‘the national territory consists of the whole island of Ireland’ (Article 2, 1937). However, from the 1950s onwards, most Irish political parties recognised that a united Ireland could only come about through a gradual, consensual process. During the Troubles, Irish governments, along with Northern Ireland’s nationalist leaders, advocated for an ‘Irish dimension’ to any peace settlement. Though that was often rejected by unionists, the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 gave Ireland a consultative role in Northern Ireland’s affairs. The 1998 Agreement also includes such a role for the Dublin government in the third ‘strand’.

The Irish government and all major political parties in the Republic supported the deal. The Dáil held a debate on the matter, in which, the Agreement was widely praised by all political parties. Summing up the mood, the Fianna Fáil minister Mary O’Rourke said:

It is interesting to note the level of enthusiasm in the various speeches this evening. People approached the issue from different points of view. The Good Friday Agreement is not an end in itself but the beginning of a whole new adventure. It gives to both parties rights, ambitions and aspirations. (O’Rourke 1998)

In the referendum campaign that followed (see below), the parties backed a Yes vote to amend Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution so as to remove the irredentist claim to the North. This referendum passed by a margin of 94.4% (Melaugh and McKenna 1998). The Agreement was seen as settling the northern constitutional dispute in Irish politics, opening up a new era of north/south relations, and at last normalising Ireland’s relationship with the United Kingdom.

Views in London

In the post-war era prior to the Troubles, the governance of Northern Ireland had not been a major issue in Westminster politics. During the period of violence, however, successive UK governments (led by Labour and the Conservatives) struggled to deal with the security situation on the ground or broker a political deal that could end it. An attempted path forward based on power-sharing was brokered in the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973, but quickly collapsed. By the mid-1980s it was accepted that bilateral co-operation with the Dublin government was necessary to creating a peace agreement that would endure.

The Blair government negotiated the 1998 Agreement on that basis, building on foundations laid under John Major. Cross-party consensus on the way forward was maintained. There was some opposition to the Agreement, including by then *Times* journalist and future cabinet minister Michael Gove (2000), who argued the British government had paid too high a price for peace. However, as in Dublin, politicians in London generally viewed the Agreement as the cornerstone of a new beginning, while also recognising that much further work still had to be done. Mo Mowlam, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at the time, said:

The Government's main aim throughout these negotiations has been to secure political stability and lasting peace for all the people of Northern Ireland. As a result of what is being called the Good Friday agreement, that goal is now in sight. (Mowlam 1998)

Speaking for the Conservative opposition, Andrew MacKay said:

This is as inclusive an agreement as is ever likely to be achieved. It is a crucial development in the history of Northern Ireland, upon which we hope all sides can build. The next step is to secure an overwhelming yes vote on both sides of the border in the referendum on 22 May. After all the horror, disappointments and false dawns of the past 30 years, this is perhaps the best opportunity that we shall ever have to secure a new beginning for Northern Ireland. Let no one be in any doubt that we in the Conservative party will do all in our power to ensure its success. (MacKay 1998)

Tony Blair later reflected:

The thing is, the Good Friday Agreement was a supreme achievement – without it, nothing else could have been done – but it wasn't the end, it was the beginning. It was a predictor of the course that the peace process should take if all went well. The implementation then had to begin; and whereas the agreement could be described as art – at least in concept – the implementation was more akin to heavy manufacturing. (Blair 2010: 178)

Nationalist views in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the terms 'nationalist' and 'republican' both refer to people who typically identify as 'Irish' and in principle oppose British sovereignty on the island. 'Nationalist' describes this community as a whole, while 'republican' refers in particular to the current or former supporters of paramilitary movements.

Since Northern Ireland's foundation, most nationalists had perceived it as a sectarian, discriminatory state. The civil rights movement led by nationalist leaders in the late 1960s, and the hostile reaction of the unionist government in Stormont to it, are often seen as having catalysed the violent unrest that followed. The Social Democratic & Labour Party (SDLP) was the largest political force within nationalism throughout the conflict. Since its foundation in the early years of the Troubles, it had argued against political violence, and for cross-community power-sharing and an 'Irish dimension' to solve the political division (Hume 1975). Moderate nationalists championed the 1998 Agreement as a framework to advance reconciliation on the island, whilst blunting the sharper edges on the question of where sovereignty lies. The SDLP campaigned for the Agreement, and the wider nationalist community gave its overwhelming support (circa 96%) to the Yes campaign in the May 1998 referendum (Melaugh and McKenna 1998).

In awarding the SDLP leader John Hume – alongside David Trimble – a Nobel Peace Prize in 1998, the prize committee praised him as 'the principal architect behind the peace agreement' (The Norwegian Nobel Institute n.d.). Hume himself said:

The Good Friday Agreement now opens a new future for all the people of Ireland. A future built on respect for diversity and for political difference. A future where all can rejoice in cherished aspirations and beliefs and where this can be a badge of honour, not a source of fear or division. (Hume 1998)

Republican views

Irish republicans had viewed partition as an illegitimate British imposition and rejected the political institutions that took shape on either side of the border after it. Throughout the Troubles, they called for a 'British withdrawal' from Northern Ireland and the creation of a 32-county Irish republic. In the 1990s, the most prominent political wing of the republican movement, Sinn Féin, inched towards a peace settlement following dialogue between party president Gerry Adams and the SDLP leader John Hume. There were also (often secret) talks with the British government seeking to find a compromise that republicans could accept. The UK government's statement in the Downing Street Declaration of 1993 that it had 'no selfish, strategic or economic interest' in Northern Ireland (Joint Declaration 1993), and the promise of the early release of paramilitary prisoners, provided further space for republicans to move towards a settlement that their grassroots would support (Taylor 1998: 318, 374).

The Agreement stretched existing divisions with republicanism over Sinn Féin's political direction, and several paramilitary splinter groups emerged that rejected the peace process. The 1998 bombing of Omagh (see Melaugh 1998) and continuing activity thereafter (see Whiting 2015) are indicative of an ongoing minority rejection of the Agreement.

But the dissident groups were and remain small and isolated. A clear majority of the republican community in Northern Ireland supported Sinn Féin's political strategy in 1998 and has continued to do so since (McKittrick and McVea 2012: 258). The party campaigned in favour of the Agreement in the 1998 referendums. Republicans viewed the Agreement as a means both to end violent conflict and to pursue a united Ireland democratically:

Republicans see these events, not as ends in themselves but as a starting point for a new phase of struggle. (An Phoblacht 1998)

Unionist views

Paralleling the distinction between 'nationalist' and 'republican', 'unionist' is generally understood to refer in general to supporters of Northern Ireland's continued union with Great Britain, while 'loyalist' refers particularly to current or former supporters of paramilitary movements. Loyalism is also often associated with a strong working-class identity.

Unionists had been in a majority position since the foundation of Northern Ireland, and held sole power within the devolved government until its suspension in 1972. They were united in opposing republican use of force against the state, but were deeply divided on how peace could be achieved and how Northern Ireland should be governed. The DUP, led by Ian Paisley, withdrew from the negotiations leading to the 1998 Agreement following Sinn Féin's inclusion after the 1997 Provisional IRA ceasefire. The UUP stayed, but suffered internal divisions.

The issue of republican commitments to decommissioning arms was prominent in these debates, and would remain so in the years immediately after 1998. Because the Agreement affirmed the principle of consent (that Northern Ireland will not be removed from the Union against its will), and unionism had written assurances from Tony Blair regarding IRA decommissioning, the UUP leadership including Trimble, endorsed it (McDonald 2001). But some members of the UUP

negotiating team (including Jeffrey Donaldson, now leader of the DUP), believing Trimble had compromised too far, left the talks and the UUP in the final stages.

For his efforts, Trimble was a co-recipient of the 1998 Nobel Prize alongside John Hume. He said:

We have a peace of sorts in Northern Ireland. But it is still something of an armed peace. [...] The paramilitaries are finished. But politics is not finished. It is the bedrock to which all societies return. (Trimble 1998)

By contrast, Ian Paisley thundered against the deal:

No wonder Dublin rejoiced. They could hardly believe it! Under the agreement they had destroyed Ulster's foundation, but to have a British Prime Minister, who was even prepared to have the name of his country diminished by its ancient foes, come and announce this was surely the icing on the cake. What he could also have done is tell the rest of the truth, that the Act of Union of 1800 and all the laws binding Northern Ireland to the United Kingdom had been superseded by the Belfast Agreement of treachery. (Paisley 1998)

When the referendum on the Agreement in Northern Ireland passed with the support of 71% of those voting, research indicated that a slim majority of the Protestant electorate had voted for it, thus buttressing the Agreement's perceived durability (Evans and O'Leary 2000; Melaugh and McKenna 1998).

Loyalist views

Loyalist acceptance was crucial to peace: opposition in this community has been instrumental in the collapse of the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement. Thus, attempts to reach an accommodation with republican paramilitaries were paralleled by negotiations with loyalists.

The inclusive voting system for the Northern Ireland Forum ensured that the small loyalist political parties – the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) – were included in the talks. Though outsiders might assume they would have adopted the most hardline stance on the unionist side, in fact they endorsed the Agreement and strongly backed its underpinning principles, viewing it as a means of ending the conflict and securing the Union. The Agreement brought loyalist paramilitaries similar conditions (such as decommissioning) and benefits (such as the early release of prisoners) as it did for armed republican movements. David Ervine, who was a powerful pro-Agreement voice within loyalism and who subsequently led the PUP, reflected:

What I'm doing is about the Good Friday Agreement, it is about delivering paramilitaries up the democratic path, bringing as many of them as I can with me and that's what it's about. [...] for me, it's about peace. (Ervine 2006)

'Others' and civil society in Northern Ireland

Several political parties that did not identify as either nationalist or unionist took part in the negotiations leading to the 1998 Agreement, including the cross-community Alliance Party of Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. These parties, led by John Alderdice and Monica McWilliams respectively, endorsed the Agreement and campaigned for it in the subsequent referendum (Alliance Party 1998; NIWC 1998). Many of their supporters viewed

the Agreement as a means towards ending the sectarian division in Northern Ireland and forming a new type of politics based on mutual respect and consensual dialogue. McWilliams said:

We need to examine how we can bring all sectors of our society to a point where they feel that they are respected, and that they can associate themselves with the peace-building process. (McWilliams 1997)

There were concerns during the referendum campaign that each party's efforts to pitch the Agreement's content to their own supporters could alienate those from other communities (McKittrick and McVea 2012: 258). A cross-community Yes campaign was therefore formed under the direction of civil society organiser Quintin Oliver to promote the content of the Agreement across the different communities and ensure it was not perceived as a single victory for any one side (Oliver 2018). The Irish Congress of Trade Unions backed a Yes vote (ICTU 2023), as did a variety of celebrities, including the rock bands U2 and Ash, who held a concert in Belfast to support the campaign. (RTÉ Archives n.d).

American and European views

Throughout the peace process, Irish American politicians took a strong interest. Former Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives Tip O'Neill, Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy, and Republican Congressman Peter King were among the prominent American politicians who gave bipartisan endorsement to the peace process and raised the profile of the issue in Washington politics (Dumbrell 1995). The Clinton administration took an active interest and provided a chair for the talks in former US Senator George Mitchell. President Clinton enthusiastically made multiple trips to Northern Ireland and endorsed the Agreement. He remarked at the time:

The terror in Omagh was not the last bomb of the troubles; it was the opening shot of a vicious attack on the peace [...]. From here on in Northern Ireland, you have said only one dividing line matters, the line between those who embrace peace and those who would destroy it, between those energised by hope and those paralysed by hatred, between those who choose to build up and those who want to keep on tearing down. (Clinton 1998)

The European Union (EU) was not an active player in the negotiations, but the text of the Agreement mentioned common EU membership as the context in which British–Irish co-operation took place. The EU also supported Northern Ireland and the border region financially through various funds at the time of the peace process and subsequently. European leaders welcomed the signing of the Agreement:

The European Council warmly welcomes the historic agreement reached in Belfast on 10 April, and its decisive endorsement in the subsequent referenda in both parts of the island of Ireland. It notes the generous practical help which the EU has provided over the years and reaffirms the conclusion [...] that the [European] Union should continue to play an active part in promoting lasting peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland. (European Council 1998)

The Agreement's implementation

In line with the Agreement's provisions, referendums were held in both Northern Ireland and Ireland on 22 May 1998. As already noted, both passed comfortably. Though cross-community

support in Northern Ireland was not legally required, that it was evidently secured provided greatly enhanced legitimacy. The Agreement came into effect, and the Irish Constitution was amended. The UK state fulfilled its immediate legal obligations through a series of laws, culminating in the passage in November that year of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.²

There is much focus at present on the Agreement's brittleness. But it is important also to reflect on what has been achieved. Twenty-five years on, the Agreement remains in force. Indeed, one remarkable success – which we explore further in the first part of Chapter 4 – is the extent to which its provisions have retained public and political support throughout this period. Many of the Agreement's provisions – though not all – have been put into effect. None of this has happened without considerable challenges at times, and modifications to certain elements of the Agreement have been required at several points – most notably through the St Andrews Agreement of 2006/7 and most recently through the New Decade, New Approach accord of 2020. The following paragraphs provide an overview of implementation.³

Given the Agreement's core purpose as a peace treaty aiming to bring about the end of violent conflict, we begin by examining implementation of the various elements directly related to this goal. We then explore the political institutions mandated through the Agreement's three strands, followed by the various rights provisions, and the clauses relating to Northern Ireland's constitutional status. We finally discuss the impact of Brexit and the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol.

Peace and development

As explained above, the Agreement made a variety of commitments around the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, the reduction in the presence of the British army, and the reform of policing. Immediately after the signing of the Agreement, these issues took centre stage. David Trimble, under pressure from critics in unionism, including many within the UUP, insisted that the Strand 1 and 2 institutions could meet only once the Provisional IRA had decommissioned its weapons. Sinn Féin, in turn, insisted that decommissioning could be done only in tandem with the Agreement's implementation. This stand-off caused a series of crises in the late 1990s and early 2000s, particularly within Strand 1. The Assembly and Executive were subject to several collapses and protracted periods of limbo as various sides pressed their case. By 2001, the Provisional IRA had begun to escalate its steps towards decommissioning its arsenal, which was independently verified by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD). In 2005, the Provisional IRA publicly declared that it had ended its armed campaign and formally disbanded. Loyalist groups also initially delayed steps to decommissioning in this period, though this attracted much less political attention, as they were not linked to a political party with a realistic chance of holding executive power (O'Leary 2020: 222; Cochrane 2013: 207). Nevertheless, they too took steps to decommission their weapons and held to the ceasefire announced before the Agreement.

Both republican and loyalist paramilitaries still exist today, but have little public or political support. Though considerable problems relating to 'punishment beatings' and other intra-communal

² One subtle difference between the Agreement and the Act was that, where the latter referred to the 'Deputy First Minister', the latter used 'deputy First Minister'. This form has been widely adopted, and we use it hereafter.

³ In the interests of brevity, we do not attempt a complete catalogue of the Agreement's implementation. The Peace Accords Matrix based at the University of Notre Dame has a systematic breakdown of implementation examining the Agreement clause by clause (Joshi et al. 2015).

violence remain, deaths through political violence are no longer a regular feature of life in Northern Ireland. This success has facilitated functioning of the power-sharing institutions (see below): the most recent collapses in those institutions have been unrelated to the issue of paramilitarism. All political parties in the Assembly are committed to pursuing their political aims through purely constitutional means.

As the security situation eased after the republican and loyalist ceasefires, the British army steadily decreased its presence over the course of the 2000s to levels normally seen elsewhere in society, and the British military operation formally concluded in 2007.

In line with the Agreement, the UK government established an Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland, chaired by former Conservative Cabinet minister Lord (Chris) Patten. This reported in 1999, leading in 2001 to the replacement of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) – which many in the nationalist community had long seen as a sectarian police force – with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). The PSNI enforced a policy of recruiting equal numbers of Catholics and Protestants until 2011. It also adopted new symbols, emblems, and uniforms, for the same reason. As part of the St Andrews Agreement (2006/7), Sinn Féin agreed to recognise the legitimacy of the PSNI and Northern Ireland's legal system, which in turn led to the devolution of justice matters to the Strand 1 institutions.

Thus, Northern Ireland's erstwhile security apparatus has all but disappeared, and its towns, cities, and border region have dramatically changed. The normalisation of life has allowed the generation born after the Agreement to grow up in a Northern Ireland largely free of violent conflict. At the same time, the political capital spent in the early years after 1998 on addressing these issues drew attention from implementing other aspects of the Agreement. It also contributed to lingering tension and distrust among the actors involved.

Movement on issues such as judicial reform, minority rights, and economic development was initially slow. But incremental progress was made through a series of reports, leading to legislative changes at Westminster (Joshi et al. 2015). The controversial issue of prisoner releases was dealt with more immediately. As the Peace Accords Matrix notes, 'The final batch of prisoners was released on 28 July. A total of 428 pro-British Loyalist and pro-Irish Republican guerrillas were released early under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement' (Joshi et al. 2015).

Governance: the three strands

The first elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly took place, as envisaged in the Agreement, on 25 June 1998. The Assembly first met – in shadow mode – on 1 July and elected UUP leader David Trimble and SDLP deputy leader Seamus Mallon as First Minister (Designate) and deputy First Minister (Designate) respectively. The DUP and UKUP, though they had opposed the Agreement, took part. So too did Sinn Féin, which changed its longstanding policy of abstention from the Northern Ireland institutions (whilst retaining the policy with respect to Westminster).

Preparations for the devolution of powers to the Assembly began, but the disagreements over decommissioning noted above led to delays. Devolution occurred on 2 December 1999 and the Assembly exited shadow mode. The Executive was established, comprising ministers from the UUP, SDLP, DUP, and Sinn Féin (though the DUP refused to attend meetings due to the presence of Sinn Féin). On the same day, the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), British–Irish

Council (BIC), British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC), and North/South implementation bodies were established too.⁴

These were all considerable achievements. As already noted, however, the Assembly and Executive have ceased operation multiple times since 1999, including for lengthy periods between 2002 and 2007, between 2017 and 2020, and since early 2022. Before 2007, collapse was largely related to the issue of unfulfilled paramilitary decommissioning and continued Provisional IRA operations. Recent suspensions have stemmed from policy disputes and a political scandal. In most (but not all) cases, the suspension of the institutions has been related to the two largest parties' power at a given time to force a collapse of Strand 1 by refusing to enter office with the other.

A core dynamic shift affecting the institutions was the growth of the DUP and Sinn Féin in their respective electorates in the early 2000s at the expense of the more moderate UUP and SDLP. Those latter two parties struggled to work with one another and smaller parties, but the prospect of Sinn Féin sharing power with Ian Paisley's DUP presented an even larger task. The gulf between those two parties was finally bridged by the St Andrews Agreement (2006/7), which, among other things, instigated a change to how the First Minister and deputy First Minister took office. The 1998 Agreement had stipulated a cross-community vote, which would require both parties to vote for the other's nominee for office. Now, the First Minister position would automatically go to the largest party and the deputy First Minister role to the largest party in the other of the two largest designations, without the need for a vote. This change created an effective veto over Executive formation for those two parties, and, as we will see in later chapters, therefore remains controversial.

More recently, another significant dynamic shift has been the growth of the 'other' designation in the Assembly, driven chiefly by the success of the cross-community Alliance Party. This move away from binary politics reflects a corresponding change in community identity, particularly among younger people, who are much more comfortable describing themselves as 'both British and Irish', 'Northern Irish' or a blend of several overlapping identities, rather than simply as 'Irish nationalist' or 'British unionist' (see McNicholl et al 2019). Notwithstanding this shift, Assembly procedures have not been altered to accommodate the 'other' designation: cross-community votes still give special protection only to the unionist and nationalist designations. As we will see in later chapters, this has prompted calls for reform.

Aside from the frequent collapses, the Strand 1 institutions have been criticised for their dysfunction on many fronts. Debates are condemned as acrimonious and often facile, and procedures established to promote equality between the communities (most notably the petition of concern mechanism) are said to have been abused (see Haughey 2019, Bramsen 2022). The New Decade, New Approach accord of 2020 sought to address some of these challenges. In particular, there was wide agreement that the petition of concern mechanism had been greatly overused: it was applied 116 times in the 2011–16 assembly (McVey 2019). A reduction in the size of the Assembly from 108 to 90 members in 2017 effectively raised the bar for such petitions: the 30 MLA threshold rose from 28% of members to 33%. But the 2020 deal went further, limiting

⁴ This brief account of the Assembly's early years is based on a chronology on the Assembly's website: Northern Ireland Assembly (2003).

the application of petitions and requiring signatories to come from at least two political parties (New Decade, New Approach 2020: 12–13).

The Civic Forum was established in 2000, with 60 members, and subsequently met 12 times. It was suspended along with the Assembly in 2002, however, and it has never subsequently been restored (Melaugh n.d.(a)). Relatedly, the all-island consultative forum envisaged under Strand 2 has not come into being. The New Decade, New Approach deal did not mention the Civic Forum, but the parties did recognise ‘the value of structured and flexible engagement with civic society to assist the Government to solve complex policy issues’. They agreed that ‘about 1–2 issues will be commissioned per year for civic engagement’, including an annual citizens’ assembly. However, no significant progress towards implementing these aspirations has been made.

Neither Strand 2 nor Strand 3 has operated consistently since 1998 either. The logic of the Agreement is that regularised all-island cooperation via the NSMC (Strand 2), along with British–Irish guardianship through the BIIGC and wider engagement through the BIC (Strand 3) would lead to an increased sense of security for both communities and build reconciliation across these islands (Kelly and Tannam 2022: 90). However, frequent suspension of the institutions at Stormont has required suspension of the NSMC too, preventing it from becoming a normal feature of politics on the island. Unionist hostility towards the institution endures, and it has very little visibility in daily politics. That being said, the implementation bodies established under Strand 2 (including Waterways Ireland and the Food Safety Promotion Board) do function, and their work is rarely a feature of political debate. One exception to this was the cross-border Special EU Programmes Body after Brexit. The UK government and the EU have since pledged to continue to support this body (European Parliament 2023).

In Strand 3, the BIIGC was used in an ad hoc fashion in its early years and did not meet at all between 2007 and 2018. A pattern of biannual meetings has, however, been established since 2021. The BIC is compelled by the Agreement to meet twice a year and has done so, but it is often viewed as a ‘talking shop’ without a serious or fixed agenda. UK governments in particular have afforded the council little priority, though, in late 2022, Rishi Sunak became the first Prime Minister since 2007 to attend a meeting.

The British–Irish Parliamentary Assembly, though existing in its current form since 2001, has likewise had a low-key impact. Similarly, the joint parliamentary forum envisaged under Strand 2 – the North/south Inter-Parliamentary Association – meets, but rarely makes headlines.

Rights, equality, and legacy

Besides affirming that different national identities were equally valid and legitimate, the Agreement pledged a series of new human rights protections and guarantees for individuals and communities. The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) was incorporated into domestic law for the whole of the UK, including Northern Ireland, through the Human Rights Act (1998). A Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and an Equality Commission for Northern Ireland were also established in 1999, placing statutory obligations on public authorities in Northern Ireland to carry out their work ‘with due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity’ as stipulated in the 1998 Agreement.

Relations between the communities have in many respects relaxed. For example, the Orange marching season in July (when Protestant marching bands and other organisations commemorate the victory of William of Orange over the Catholic King James II) is not as contentious as it once was and often passes without major incident. However, protests in 2012 over a decision by Belfast City Council to fly the Union flag only on designated days, and ongoing disputes about recognition of the Irish language in Northern Ireland, are just two examples that point to ongoing cultural grievances and anxieties between the communities – grievances that are often particularly felt by those experiencing greatest social deprivation (see Shirlow et al. 2021: 48–49).

The issue of how to deal with the legacy of the conflict is largely ignored by the 1998 Agreement, and perhaps inflames tensions most. The Stormont House Agreement (2014) offered some detail on how this could be done, with a degree of agreement across the key actors. At the time of writing, however, the UK government’s Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill (2023), which seeks to ‘promote reconciliation by establishing an Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery’, is opposed by every major party in Northern Ireland and by the Dublin government.

Another significant outstanding issue is a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, which the Agreement said could supplement the rights contained within the ECHR. The Agreement proposed local consultation with the new human rights organisations to draft these rights, leading to their incorporation in legislation at Westminster. Yet, despite several attempts to advance this process – most notably through a detailed report from the Human Rights Commission in 2008 (Human Rights Commission 2008) – the matter remains unresolved.

Northern Ireland’s status

Sections of the Agreement relating to possible future referendums on Irish unification specified few details, because there was little expectation in 1998 that they would be implemented in what was then the foreseeable future. So it has proved for the first 25 years of the Agreement. While there has been a growth in discussion of a possible ‘border poll’ in recent years – a point we return to in later chapters – no party sees such a vote as imminent. But there is much disagreement on likely trajectories beyond that point.

In 2018, a legal case was brought seeking to require the Secretary of State to specify how they would determine whether the requirement for a referendum to be called in certain circumstances had been met, but it was unsuccessful (*McCord* High Court Judgment 2018). Successive governments in both London and Dublin have had no inclination to pick the issue up. Accordingly, implementation of this aspect of the Agreement remains a matter for a hypothetical future, which may or may not arise soon.

Brexit and the Protocol

The Agreement makes no direct reference to maintaining joint membership of the EU. Nevertheless, it implicitly assumes such membership, and indeed explicitly envisages several areas where cooperation can take place in a European context, on both a North/South and East/West basis. Brexit now shapes a major part of the context within which the Agreement functions.

Nationalists overwhelmingly opposed Brexit, and subsequently insisted that any customs checks on the land border would constitute an attack on the 1998 settlement. By contrast, many unionists supported Brexit, but subsequently saw controls between Great Britain and Northern Ireland as violating the Union. Attitudes thus polarised, and the border returned as a salient issue on the political agenda.

The Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, which is contained within the EU/UK Withdrawal Agreement, seeks to protect the Agreement ‘in all its parts’. It moved the focal point of the customs union to the Irish Sea, between the islands of Ireland and Great Britain, and therefore within the UK. Both governments maintain that Northern Ireland’s constitutional status has not been changed – a point that the courts have also agreed with while acknowledging that the Protocol ‘conflicts’ with the Act of Union (1800) (*Clifford Peeples* Supreme Court Judgement 2023). But they recognised challenges, leading in February 2023 to revisions in the form of the Windsor Framework. In particular, the new deal sought to address some of the concerns of political unionism and businesses struggling to deal with the new system. At the time of writing however, the DUP had not accepted the framework as a basis for returning to power-sharing.

Conclusion

The signing of the Agreement on 10 April 1998 was in itself a remarkable achievement. It was crucial in bringing the period of armed conflict to a close, and it set out a framework for a new peaceful and democratic political order.

Examining the Agreement’s implementation since 1998 points to a positive but imperfect record. Life in Northern Ireland has been transformed by the ending of the Troubles. The political space that peace has provided has allowed Northern Ireland to develop economically and socially, with an entire generation growing up largely free from the violence their parents and grandparents directly experienced. The fact that this peace has been accompanied by sustained periods of devolved power-sharing by locally elected politicians and is underpinned by a wide range of human rights protections, gives considerable cause to celebrate.

Nevertheless, the Agreement has failed to deliver functioning power-sharing for long periods since 1998. Its second and third strands, which sought to address the totality of relations among communities across these islands, have often been neglected. Within Northern Ireland, debates continue around symbolism, deepening human rights protections, and respect for diverse identities. Underlying sectarian divisions remain, and often draw attention away from addressing economic underperformance and ongoing social deprivation. The UK’s decision to leave the EU, and later the Protocol, drew attention to these lingering issues and exacerbated tensions.

Chapter 2. Elite Perceptions: Analysis of Manifestos

The previous chapter set out the Agreement and the record of its implementation since 1998. We also hinted at the diverse perspectives that have existed on the Agreement since its inception. We now turn to examining those perspectives in further detail, beginning with those voiced by political and other elites.

Much has already been written about those elite perspectives, often particularly reflecting on the peace process itself. The work of Coakley and Todd (2020) ‘combines wide-ranging analysis with unparalleled use of witness seminars and interviews where the most senior British and Irish politicians, civil servants, and advisors discuss the process of coming to agreement’. Spencer (2020) focuses on the role of the Irish government and civil service. The BBC documentary ‘The Agreement’ (2023) is also based on interviews with key actors involved in the talks. In recent years, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in the House of Commons and the Oireachtas Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement have both held inquiries and witness sessions on the peace process, the Agreement, and the Agreement’s implementation.

This chapter examines the content of party manifestos since 1998. We focus solely on Northern Ireland, and specifically on the five parties that have been the largest throughout the period: the UUP, the DUP, the SDLP, Sinn Féin, and Alliance. We examine 13 manifestos for each party – for six UK general elections and seven Assembly elections. We look only at material relating to the Agreement. That includes, for example, references to the Agreement as a whole, and any discussions of institutions such as the British–Irish Council. It includes references to the Assembly or Executive only where these relate to institutional forms or directly to discussion of the Agreement. It includes topics such as policing or economic policy only where the discussions relate specifically to the matters within the Agreement.

Systematic manifesto analysis of this kind allows us to observe patterns of change in politicians’ perceptions of the Agreement since 1998, as well as to capture the parties’ most recent official thinking. It provides a useful overview before we delve into interview findings in Chapter 3.

Party positions on the Agreement as a whole

The parties’ stances towards the Agreement as a whole have evolved considerably over time. When the Agreement was new, most parties stated their attitudes towards it explicitly and frequently, and there were sharp contrasts between them. As these disagreements were eased, particularly after the St Andrews Agreement of 2006/7, and while devolved government endured in the decade that followed, many aspects of the 1998 Agreement substantially faded from view. There were calls for various specific reforms, which we examine below, but the Agreement in the round had become an assumed and accepted part of the political context across the parties. More recently still, with the devolved institutions again suspended for most of the period since 2017, and with tensions raised by Brexit and the Protocol, expressions of concern for the health of the Agreement have returned.

The party that was most unequivocally pro-Agreement in its early years was the SDLP. ‘The Good Friday Agreement, ratified overwhelmingly by the people of Ireland, north and south on May 22nd, is the key to our future’, it declared in its manifesto for the Assembly 1998 elections; ‘The Agreement is rooted in the fundamental principles of the SDLP’ (SDLP 1998: 2).⁵ In the Westminster elections three years later, it said:

In recent years this island has begun to glimpse a brighter future—a dramatic reduction in violence, increasing growth in our economy; the development of all-island co-operation; power transferred to our own representatives to run our affairs and unemployment at its lowest level in 25 years. This progress has only been possible as a result of the Good Friday Agreement.’ (SDLP 2001: 1)

And in the second Assembly elections, it said:

The SDLP is 100% for the Good Friday Agreement. We are convinced that it has the potential to transform relations on this island for the benefit of nationalists and unionists alike, allowing us to work together as equals to transform our society. (SDLP 2003: 3)

Sinn Féin was also positive, but emphasised more strongly that the Agreement was, from the party’s perspective, only a step in the right direction:

Last month, the people of Ireland took an historic step towards freedom, justice and democracy. There are many more steps to be taken, however, before we have the new future we all desire. The Yes vote in the referendum was a vote for change. It was a vote for a new beginning. We now face the challenge of delivering on that change and turning hope into reality. That will require inclusiveness and partnership and equality. (Sinn Féin 1998: 1)

We view the Good Friday agreement as a basis for advancement. It is transitional in character. (Sinn Féin 1998: 2)

Alliance also gave strong support, while acknowledging that compromises had been needed:

Alliance is a strongly pro-Agreement party. Alliance recognises that the Agreement constitutes an honourable accommodation among the varied traditions within Northern Ireland. While not every person may agree with every aspect of the Agreement, as a whole, it provides the best way forward for Northern Ireland. (Alliance 2001: 3)

At the same time, while emphasising its support and criticising those calling for renegotiation, the party from early on also stressed its desire to see changes:

Alliance will push for positive changes to make the Agreement work better for all. Our priorities will be to: remove the sectarian aspects of the Agreement, such as designations; provide for more effective government with collective responsibility; ensure that Loyalists and Republicans complete the final journey from violence to democracy (Alliance 2003: 2)

⁵ All citations in the remainder of this chapter are to party manifestos. Those from 2001, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2019 were for UK general elections. Those from 1998, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2016, and 2022 were for Assembly elections. There were both Westminster and Assembly elections in 2017, which we differentiate as ‘2017W’ and ‘2017A’. The manifestos are not listed separately in the bibliography. Most are available on the CAIN website (Melaugh n.d.(b)). Linen Hall Library in Belfast also contains manifestos in its archive. If readers have difficulty accessing any of the manifestos, please contact the authors.

Of the pro-Agreement parties, the UUP was most guarded. In 1998, it rarely mentioned the Agreement explicitly, but rather focused on what had been achieved:

The primary purpose of the Ulster Unionist Party is to maintain the Union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. We are satisfied that the future of the Union is now firmly in the hands of the people of Northern Ireland. The principle of consent is properly established, and the illegal territorial claim to our Province by the Irish Republic will soon be removed. (UUP 1998: 1)

For the first time in 26 years, the people of Northern Ireland have a wonderful opportunity to take under local control the public services that matter to us most. Furthermore we will also be able to exercise a veto over any cross border co-operation we do not feel to be in Ulster's best interests. For the first time in a generation Ulster Politicians will be deciding policies for Ulster people. (UUP 1998: 1)

As is evident from these quotations – and perfectly understandable – each party framed its support for the Agreement in ways reflecting the party's own aspirations: the UUP highlighted how it secured the Union and Sinn Féin how it provided a route to Irish unification; Alliance emphasised that it would enable peace and reduce divisions; and the SDLP argued it secured peace and all-island cooperation, which would eventually deliver unification.

Among the main parties, only the DUP opposed the Agreement in the 1998 referendum. Its manifesto for the elections a month later alluded to that opposition but did not say it would be maintained:

You can only be sure that the pledges extracted from Tony Blair and other unionists by those of us in the 'No' campaign are kept by ensuring a strong voice and presence in the new Assembly for those who won those pledges. (DUP 1998: 8)

It also reached out beyond No voters, saying, 'Whether you are one of the majority of Unionists who voted "No", or someone who voted "Yes" with reservations, we share your concerns' on several issues (DUP 1998: 8). Only in 2003 did the party's manifesto return to directly attacking the Agreement and demanding renegotiation:

We have consistently opposed the one-sided concessions the Agreement has delivered to republicans over the last five years. Unless the Belfast Agreement process is halted it will extend and entrench the gains republicans have made. (DUP 2003: 4)

By 2007, immediately following the St Andrews Agreement, the DUP promoted the extent of change that it said had been achieved:

In the last four years the DUP has transformed the political process in Northern Ireland. We have achieved what many of our opponents said was impossible. We have successfully renegotiated the Belfast Agreement, and required republicans to give up their weapons and all paramilitary and criminal activity before they could enter Government. (DUP 2007: 3)

The DUP has succeeded in rewriting the 1998 Belfast Agreement and making fundamental changes in the way in which we would be governed in Northern Ireland. (DUP 2007: 16)

By contrast, the SDLP at the same time claimed to have prevented adverse changes at St Andrews that has previously been negotiated between the DUP and Sinn Féin, and continued to voice support for the Agreement itself:

We do not believe that there is anything wrong with the Agreement. All that is wrong is that too often parties have failed to honour it. That is why we have stood by the Agreement – and opposed attempts by others to weaken its protections.’ (SDLP 2007: 7)

In the years following St Andrews, when devolved government was functioning, general statements about the 1998 Agreement became rarer. The UUP barely mentioned the Agreement in any manifesto between 2007 and 2016. The SDLP simply called, repeatedly, for ‘full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement’ (SDLP 2010: 23; 2015: 20). Sinn Féin expressed the same position, sometimes using exactly the same phrase (Sinn Féin 2015: 15). Alliance repeatedly said, ‘Alliance supported the Good Friday Agreement, despite our concerns over several aspects of the details, particularly relating to the institutions’ (Alliance 2010: 39; 2011: 134; 2016: 26), before on each occasion listing those concerns.

Strikingly, during this period, the DUP appeared to join the consensus that the Agreement (as modified) provided the basis for Northern Ireland’s future government, even if it wanted some further changes:

For the first time in generations, despite all of the challenges and difficulties, Northern Ireland has had almost eight years of uninterrupted devolution. Given the history of the last fifty years this is in itself a remarkable achievement. During this time we have overcome many problems and have put in place arrangements that have been robust and stable. We do not seek to do anything which will threaten the long term stability of the political institutions however, we must now make sure that it works better in delivering for the people we represent. (DUP 2015: 28)

The constitutional future of Northern Ireland has been settled for generations to come. This has been achieved by agreeing political structures in Northern Ireland that can command cross-community support and by ensuring everyone can play a full part in our society and community. (DUP 2015: 30)

In 2017, meanwhile, it made what appears to have been its first implicitly positive reference directly to the 1998 Agreement: it said, ‘We will oppose any Border Poll outside the terms of the Belfast Agreement’ (DUP 2017: 6), seemingly thereby acknowledging the Agreement as the source of legitimate guiding principles.

Thus, between around 2007 and around 2017, it appears that the 1998 Agreement was simply taken for granted as part of the background of politics in Northern Ireland. There were certainly many calls for reforms, which we explore below. But none of the parties contested the Agreement’s status as the legitimate basis for Northern Ireland’s politics, and they appeared to assume that it would remain in place.

Since the 2016 Brexit referendum, however, a greater sense of threat to the Agreement has prompted some of the parties to return to making more general statements about it. Alliance has repeatedly referred to a need ‘to protect the Good Friday Agreement’ (Alliance 2017: 5; 2019: 2). In its most recent manifesto, for the 2022 Assembly elections, it said:

Alliance is committed to stable and sustainable power-sharing that respects liberal, democratic principles and which reinforces the development of a normal, civic society and the creation of a shared future. Alliance supports the Good Friday Agreement, and endorses its underlying principles, its structures, and its interlocking relationships. (Alliance 2022: 90).

Sinn Féin (2017: 5) referred to the ‘threat’ posed by Brexit ‘to the economy of the island and to the all-island architecture of the Good Friday Agreement’. It listed one of its priorities as being ‘To defend the Good Friday Agreement’ (Sinn Féin 2017: 13). Most recently, it has said:

We are committed to power-sharing and the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement including the North-South institutions. (Sinn Féin 2022: 7)

The SDLP has changed its emphasis rather less than have Alliance and Sinn Féin, continuing to argue for the Agreement while also pressing the need for reforms. But it has suggested that the changed context has created a greater urgency:

Brexit’s risks to our interests and rights makes it imperative that we restore the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. (SDLP 2017: 2)

The UUP has, similarly, been relatively consistent in its tone. In 2017, however, it quoted from the 1998 Agreement at length and added:

The words of the original fresh start document, the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998, remain a guiding light to unionism for our second century. It is a matter of profound regret that the public discourse on that agreement has not focused on the underpinning values we and the SDLP sought to embed into our politics. (UUP 2017: 4)

Only the DUP has not offered a statement of commitment to the Agreement. It continues to back the principle of devolution (DUP 2022: 41). But, in contrast to the immediately preceding period, the only explicit mention of the Agreement in its most recent manifesto was negative:

The Belfast Agreement resulted in the early release of terrorists and ensured that anyone later convicted of a Troubles-related offence would serve a maximum of two years in prison. Letters of comfort were later provided to on-the-run suspects. This erosion of the rule of law was never justified. Two decades later, it is still unacceptable. The Government’s plan to grant an amnesty in all but name to those responsible for wrongdoing would extinguish the flame of justice for many innocent victims of terrorism. It must be rejected. (DUP 2022: 47)

The salience of the Agreement’s aspects

We can begin to examine the parties’ perspectives on the Agreement in further detail by looking at which aspects of the Agreement they have focused on in their election manifestos. Table 2.1 presents the results of a thematic analysis of the manifestos over time; Table 2.2 repeats the same analysis, this time by party. To do this, we ‘coded’ the material in each manifesto relating to the Agreement, identifying what aspect or aspects of the Agreement it related to. This section briefly describes the patterns in these tables, while the rest of the chapter digs deeper into what the parties have said.

The first line of figures in each table confirms what we found in the previous section. The parties talked a great deal about the Agreement as a whole during its first decade; such references then declined; but they have somewhat increased more recently, as the institutions were suspended again and in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum in 2016. The UUP has been markedly less inclined to refer to the Agreement as a whole than any of the other parties.

The tables contain a series of categories relating to the Agreement's peace and security dimensions, relating to matters such as decommissioning, demilitarisation, prisoner releases, and police reform. We have placed the 'Entry into government' category here too; this pertains to conditions for entering the Executive, and in practice relates almost entirely to the role of decommissioning as such a condition. Fitting the story that we told in Chapter 1, these matters were prominent in the early years, but they declined greatly in prominence after 2007. The one exception to that pattern concerns the 'Victims and legacy' category, which has never been common, but has become slightly more so over time. As explored in Chapter 1, this issue was addressed only briefly in the 1998 Agreement, but has subsequently become highly contentious. These various issues have drawn most attention from the unionist parties, except for policing, which has been prominent across the political spectrum, albeit with different views on the desirability of reform.

Aspects of the Agreement relating to equality and community identity – such as parity of esteem, parades, and respect for different cultures – show no strong patterns over time. Parity of esteem has been a concern predominantly for the nationalist parties, as, unsurprisingly, has respect for Irish/Gaelic culture. The DUP has been most likely to refer to parades, while the SDLP and Alliance have been most likely to focus on community relations.

The question of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland has been something of a perennial issue, whereas the Human Rights Commission (tasked with helping to deliver the Bill of Rights) has lost prominence over time. Rights matters are discussed much more by the nationalist parties and Alliance than by the unionist parties.

Of all the aspects of the Agreement, the Strand 1 institutions have received most attention, and many features have retained prominence over time. Alliance – which, as we will see below, often advocates in detail for institutional reforms – has discussed the institutions most, whereas Sinn Féin has done so very little.

Strand 2 has received substantial attention too, though markedly less than has Strand 1. It was much more prominent in the early years than more recently. It has been largely ignored in UUP manifestos, and has also been given limited attention by Alliance. The remaining three parties have all given it more prominence. Only Sinn Féin, however, has referred to the more minor Strand 2 institutions envisaged in 1998: the North/South Consultative Forum and what became the North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association.

Table 2.1. Thematic analysis of manifesto treatment of the Agreement, by election

	1998 A	2001 W	2003 A	2005 W	2007 A	2010 W	2011 A	2015 W	2016 A	2017 A	2017 W	2019 W	2022 A	Total
Agreement in general														
Whole Agreement	9	28	36	20	21	5	4	8	4	9	12	8	6	170
Procedure for reviewing Agreement	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Peace and security														
Ceasefires	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Decommissioning	9	7	17	14	15	0	0	0	5	2	1	0	1	71
Demilitarisation	0	1	4	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
Release of prisoners	7	4	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	16
Victims and legacy	0	1	0	3	1	1	0	2	4	2	3	3	7	27
Entry to government	7	3	12	9	8	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	40
Peace dividend	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Policing														
Policing (general)	1	12	12	6	4	1	3	0	1	2	0	1	1	44
Giving pledge of support to the police	0	2	1	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13
Devolution of policing	0	0	7	9	10	5	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	34
Equality, identity, communities														
Community relations	0	0	0	4	2	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	10
Equality, parity of esteem	3	0	9	8	4	5	4	1	3	5	0	1	1	44
Equality under NI Act, Section 75	0	0	1	0	2	3	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	10
Parades	0	1	1	3	2	5	2	3	1	1	2	0	1	22
Respect for British/Ulster culture	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Respect for Irish/Gaelic culture	0	0	2	1	5	6	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	17
Unemployment inequality policy	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Rights														
Human Rights (general)	0	2	4	2	2	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	13
Bill of Rights	3	5	8	4	5	11	8	6	3	2	5	3	4	67
ECHR	2	4	0	0	1	1	2	1	3	1	5	2	1	23
Human Rights Act	0	0	1	2	1	1	1	2	5	6	3	3	1	26
NI Human Rights Commission	1	6	8	8	3	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	30
All-Ireland Charter of Rights	0	0	1	2	2	2	3	2	0	0	1	1	0	14
Identity and citizenship	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	4	0	7

Note: Each column aggregates across the manifestos of the five largest parties – Alliance, the DUP, the SDLP, Sinn Féin, and the UUP – for the given election. Each election is denoted by its year and whether it was for the Northern Ireland Assembly (A) or the Westminster parliament (W).

(Table 2.1 continues on the following page.)

Table 2.1 (continued)

	1998 A	2001 W	2003 A	2005 W	2007 A	2010 W	2011 A	2015 W	2016 A	2017 A	2017 W	2019 W	2022 A	Total
Political institutions														
Interdependence of institutions	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
Strand 1														
Strand 1: Aggregate	8	8	16	15	28	10	22	8	14	15	8	15	26	193
Strand 1 (general)	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2
Power-sharing	0	3	2	9	8	5	7	2	2	2	2	3	9	54
Assembly: Aggregate	6	6	13	5	7	6	9	3	9	9	5	8	17	103
Assembly (general)	6	6	11	4	6	6	7	0	4	2	1	3	10	66
Designations	0	1	3	2	2	4	6	3	4	4	1	1	3	34
Petition of concern	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	5	4	5	3	21
Executive: Aggregate	5	0	11	4	16	4	16	1	7	5	2	5	16	92
Executive (general)	4	0	9	3	15	4	12	1	4	3	0	2	8	65
Programme for government	0	0	1	0	0	0	5	0	2	1	0	1	1	11
Exclusion mechanisms	1	0	2	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	10
Changing to 'Joint First Ministers'	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	1	1	1	3	9
Civic Forum	0	0	1	0	2	1	1	2	1	1	0	2	2	13
Strand 2														
Strand 2: Aggregate	11	10	21	13	23	9	5	3	1	4	6	1	8	115
Strand 2 (general)	5	7	9	2	4	2	1	1	0	3	2	1	6	43
North/South Ministerial Council	6	3	10	9	19	7	3	1	1	1	4	0	2	66
North/South Consultative Forum	0	0	2	1	1	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	8
North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association	0	0	1	1	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
Strand 3														
Strand 3: Aggregate	3	2	1	1	3	1	2	0	0	0	1	2	1	17
Strand 3 (general)	0	1	1	1	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	9
British–Irish Council	3	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	8
British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Constitutional issues														
Amendment to Irish Constitution	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Principle of consent	2	2	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	5	1	1	17
Provisions for a referendum	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	2	2	2	11

Note: Each column aggregates across the manifestos of the five largest parties – Alliance, the DUP, the SDLP, Sinn Féin, and the UUP – for the given election. Each election is denoted by its year and whether it was for the Northern Ireland Assembly (A) or the Westminster parliament (W).

Table 2.2. Thematic analysis of manifesto treatment of the Agreement, by party

	Sinn Féin	SDLP	Alliance	UUP	DUP	Total
Agreement in general						
Whole Agreement	39	41	50	8	32	170
Procedure for reviewing Agreement	0	0	2	0	0	2
Peace and security						
Ceasefires	0	0	0	0	2	2
Decommissioning	0	5	12	16	38	71
Demilitarisation	3	4	0	0	2	9
Release of prisoners	3	0	1	2	10	16
Victims and legacy	4	9	10	2	2	27
Entry to government	0	0	3	6	31	40
Peace dividend	2	0	0	0	0	2
Policing						
Policing (general)	12	11	5	6	10	44
Giving pledge of support to the police	1	0	3	0	9	13
Devolution of policing	9	8	3	4	10	34
Equality, identity, communities						
Community relations	0	5	5	0	0	10
Equality, parity of esteem	17	17	4	1	5	44
Equality under NI Act 1998, Section 75	6	1	2	0	1	10
Parades	4	2	2	4	10	22
Respect for British/Ulster culture	0	0	0	0	1	1
Respect for Irish/Gaelic culture	10	6	0	0	1	17
Unemployment inequality policy	2	0	0	0	0	2
Rights						
Human Rights (general)	1	7	1	0	4	13
Bill of Rights	22	15	25	2	3	67
ECHR	2	4	13	4	0	23
Human Rights Act	2	3	21	0	0	26
NI Human Rights Commission	6	8	10	2	4	30
All-Ireland Charter of Rights	9	5	0	0	0	14
Identity and citizenship	1	2	4	0	0	7

Note: Each column aggregates across manifestos for all Assembly or Westminster elections between 1998 and 2022, for the five largest parties.

(Table 2.1 continues on the following page.)

Table 2.2 (continued)

	Sinn Féin	SDLP	Alliance	UUP	DUP	Total
Political institutions						
Interdependence of institutions	0	1	1	0	2	4
Strand 1						
Strand 1: Aggregate	7	25	92	25	44	193
Strand 1 (general)	0	0	2	0	0	2
Power-sharing	3	3	32	3	13	54
Assembly: Aggregate	3	14	47	14	25	103
Assembly (general)	2	9	24	10	21	66
Designations	0	0	26	0	8	34
Petition of concern	1	5	11	4	0	21
Executive: Aggregate	2	14	26	23	27	92
Executive (general)	2	11	20	8	24	65
Programme for government	0	1	5	5	0	11
Exclusion mechanisms	0	0	5	2	3	10
Changing to 'Joint First Ministers'	0	2	7	0	0	9
Civic Forum	3	1	5	0	4	13
Strand 2						
Strand 2: Aggregate	38	31	13	3	30	115
Strand 2 (general)	11	15	4	2	11	43
North/South Ministerial Council	19	18	9	1	19	66
North/South Consultative Forum	8	0	0	0	0	8
North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association	6	0	0	0	0	6
Strand 3						
Strand 3: Aggregate	0	5	6	3	5	17
Strand 3 (general)	0	2	2	1	4	9
British–Irish Council	0	3	2	2	1	8
British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference	0	0	0	1	0	1
Constitutional future						
Amendment to Irish Constitution	0	0	0	1	0	1
Principle of consent	2	5	5	4	1	17
Provisions for a referendum	5	2	2	0	2	11

Note: Each column aggregates across manifestos for all Assembly or Westminster elections between 1998 and 2022, for the five largest parties.

In contrast to Strands 1 and 2, Strand 3 has received remarkably little attention at any time, and none at all for a period in the mid-2010s. Sinn Féin has never mentioned it in its manifestos, while the remaining parties have been similar to each other in levels of attention.

Finally, constitutional issues relating to Northern Ireland's future in the Union or in a united Ireland have also received only limited attention. The Agreement's provisions for a unification referendum have been slightly more prominent since Brexit than they were before, but remain marginal. There has been no marked pattern in the volume of references to these matters across the parties – though there has, of course, been a substantial difference in content, as explored below.

Peace and security

As seen above, one framing of the Agreement as a whole, seen particularly in SDLP and Alliance manifestos, is that it brought peace. Alliance, for example, said, 'The Agreement remains the only way forward to peace and stability in this society' (Alliance 2003: 2). We now explore positions on particular aspects of peace and security policy.

The Agreement's aftermath, as set out in Chapter 1, saw a stand-off among the parties over how issues relating to decommissioning, demilitarisation, and police reform should be resolved. Unionists resented the idea that they should share power with Sinn Féin before all IRA weapons had been put beyond use, and the early years of the Executive and Assembly were subject to several collapses that were either directly or indirectly related to the issue. In 1998, the UUP said:

Before any terrorist organisation and/or its political wing can benefit from the proposals contained in the Agreement on the release of terrorist prisoners and the holding of ministerial office in the Assembly, the commitment to exclusively peaceful and non-violent means must be established. (UUP 1998: 1)

It went on to list criteria by which it would assess whether this condition had been met. The DUP, meanwhile, declared:

No terrorists in government: Unrepentant and unreconstructed terrorists should not be in government with control over your life. The leader of the UUP said he would not sit down with IRA/Sinn Féin. In fact, he went further by entering into an Agreement with IRA/Sinn Féin under which he is pledged to work in Government alongside them! (DUP 1998: 3)

Alliance also expressed its commitment to decommissioning, and said, 'power-sharing in Government on the basis of trust can only be fully achieved when the threat of paramilitary action is removed' (Alliance 1993: 7). Neither the SDLP nor Sinn Féin raised the issue.

The unionist parties and (to a lesser degree) Alliance continued to press the matter in subsequent manifestos. The SDLP also added its voice, while linking decommissioning to other reforms:

Our party is working for the full implementation of the Agreement, including the outstanding issues such as decommissioning, demilitarization and policing. There is no place in a democracy for illegal weapons and the mechanisms arising from the Agreement must be exhausted to ensure that such weapons are put verifiably beyond use. (SDLP 2001: 17)

After 2007, however, the decommissioning issue largely disappeared. International observers verified in 2005 that the Provisional IRA had put its arms beyond use. The DUP dropped its opposition to Sinn Féin participation in the Executive. And the power-sharing institutions were restored in 2007.

The issue of prisoner releases followed a similar pattern. In their early manifestos, the UUP and Alliance both insisted that releases should be conditional on the dismantling of paramilitary organisations (e.g., UUP 1998: 1; Alliance 1998: 7). The DUP was more forthright:

Justice demands that terrorists stay in: All decent people recoil with moral contempt at the prospect of the mass release of those who have murdered and maimed the innocent, whilst the RUC is to be demoralised and disarmed. (DUP 1998: 3)

The SDLP did not mention the issue, but Sinn Féin did, framing it very differently from the other parties:

Sinn Féin advocates: Immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners held as a result of the British/Irish conflict. Pending this: Immediate transfer of all the remaining Irish political prisoners from British jails back to Ireland; No extradition of Irish citizens charged with political offences. (Sinn Féin 1998: 8)

The DUP and Sinn Féin continued to press their different cases on the issue in the 2001 Westminster and 2003 Assembly elections, whereas all other parties fell silent. Thereafter, no manifesto mentioned the matter until 2022, when the DUP (2022: 47), in words already quoted above, observed that ‘The Belfast Agreement resulted in the early release of terrorists and ensured that anyone later convicted of a Troubles-related offence would serve a maximum of two years in prison.’

As the SDLP quotation above indicates, the issue of decommissioning intersected with those of demilitarisation and police reform: just as unionist leaders insisted on IRA decommissioning, so nationalists demanded that commitments in the Agreement to reform state forces should be realised as soon as possible. Sinn Féin refused to recognise the policing and justice system until the changes were made:

The Good Friday Agreement promised a new police service that would be: ‘impartial; representative; free from partisan political control; efficient and effective; infused with a human rights culture; decentralised; democratically accountable at all levels’. Although Sinn Féin believes that the Patten recommendations did not go far enough, we made clear that, if implemented, they might provide a threshold from which a new police service could develop. Sinn Féin has worked hard on this issue because we want to see a new beginning to policing. (Sinn Féin 2001: 3)

The question of whether powers over policing and justice should be devolved to Northern Ireland was also contentious for a period in the early 2000s: the nationalist parties: wanted it, whereas unionists insisted that certain conditions should be met first. The DUP had initially opposed such devolution:

The DUP opposes the devolution of Policing and Justice to the institutions created under the Belfast Agreement as decisions would be taken by Sinn Fein members like Gerry Kelly as Minister and would not be accountable to the Assembly. This is entirely unacceptable. We support the devolution of Policing and Justice in the context of a new agreement and only following a cross-community vote of the Assembly. (DUP 2003: 24)

However, the terms for devolution of justice were largely agreed at St Andrews in 2007 and finally completed in 2010, and the issue was thereby settled.

As we noted above, one aspect of peace and security that has not been resolved relates to the victims and legacy of the Troubles. This matter was touched on only briefly in the 1998 Agreement, and early manifestos similarly offered no more than broad principles:

The SDLP is concerned that victims’ needs are not being met. The SDLP has a comprehensive package of proposals that places their needs and rights at the centre- not those of the victim-makers. We are determined to deliver on the Agreement’s proposals to victims. (SDLP 2005: 34)

Contention has grown more recently, however. Alliance argued for a return to principles agreed in the Stormont House accord of 2014 and has criticised the later Fresh Start deal (Alliance 2017: 22; 2019: 36). The SDLP criticised both the Stormont House and Fresh Start agreements, saying they did not sufficiently deal with the needs of victims (SDLP 2017: 23; 2019: 21). All of the parties dealt extensively with legacy concerns in their most recent manifestos. For the most part, however, they did so without invoking the 1998 Agreement.

Equality and identity

In the 1998 election, the SDLP presented the Agreement's equality provisions as a win for society as a whole: 'The Agreement protects the right of the people of the north of Ireland to the identity, ethos and way of life of their choice' (SDLP 1998: 1). Sinn Féin, meanwhile, stressed the need to press ahead with specific measures related to employment and issues like the Irish language:

Sinn Féin believes that the British government must: Set goals and timetables for the reduction of the Catholic-Protestant employment differential. (Sinn Féin 1998: 4).

To deliver parity of esteem for the Irish language, Sinn Féin proposes as a first step: Ratification of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages by the British government with respect to Irish. (Sinn Féin 1998: 5).

The two unionist parties did not focus on the Agreement's equality provisions in these early years. Meanwhile Alliance spoke about equality issues in more general terms.

As Table 2.1 showed, manifestos in 2003 and 2005 contained a noticeable uptick in references to equality and parity of esteem issues. The DUP used the language of equality and parity when referring to the need for more promotion of the Ulster Scots language: 'Ulster-Scots should have parity of esteem with Irish including equality of funding' (DUP 2003: 28). Meanwhile, Alliance was wary of the equality provisions in the Agreement being used as a means of promoting further segregation:

For some, the Agreement is about managing institutionalised differences and communities in Northern Ireland. This approach holds that separate but equal communities can be managed through some form of 'benign Apartheid'. (Alliance 2005: 7)

The SDLP argued that, in the event of a united Ireland, the Agreement's equality provisions should carry over into the new state:

The SDLP is also 100% for a United Ireland. Uniquely among parties in the North, the SDLP is clear that in a United Ireland the Agreement should endure [...] all its equality guarantees, and human rights protections should continue. (SDLP 2003: 5)

Like many other issues, equality and parity of esteem faded in prominence during the late 2000s and early 2010s, before re-emerging more recently. Matters of cultural identity are present, however, whether or not they are explicitly linked to the 1998 Agreement. In 2022, Sinn Féin wrote, 'We want to see parity of esteem for Irish culture and language as provided for in the Good Friday Agreement' (Sinn Féin 2022: 17). The SDLP dealt extensively with Irish language rights:

The SDLP has campaigned for the rights of Gaeilgeoirí in the North for a number of years and we believe that it is long overdue for those rights to be delivered here. [...]

We would also adopt and implement a 20 Year Irish Language Strategy based on a co-design and expert panel process as promised in successive agreements including New Decade, New Approach. (SDLP 2022: 37).

The DUP has long emphasised the importance of identity:

The role and importance of identity is an increasing issue of discussion across the Western world. The development and impact of globalisation had led many to assume that identity was inexorably fading away. This is not true. The desire to be from somewhere remains inherent in many and played an important role across many recent elections. Simply put, identity matters. (DUP 2017: 20)

In 2022, it said:

We firmly believe the Parades Commission must be disbanded and a new mechanism put in place which better recognises the right to parade, with dignity and respect. We will develop plans to regenerate Craigavon House and Fernhill House, and encourage further, the development of the Ulster Scots identity including a positive educational and research agenda, strengthening international relationships and a programme of celebration. (DUP 2022: 40)

By contrast, Alliance espoused a rather different approach:

We believe that the peace process remains under threat as the direct result of other politicians being unable to come to an agreement on tackling the controversial issues of parading, flags and the past. This has the potential to undermine public confidence in politics, in the Northern Ireland institutions, and in the peace process as a whole.

As people, we share much in common, but we clearly have political and cultural identities which divide us and at times challenge us. If we want to build a genuinely shared future then we cannot avoid or ignore these tensions, and need to tackle them head-on. (Alliance 2022: 15)

It said that it would be guided by the recommendations of the Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition Commission in developing its policies (ibid.).

Rights

The 1998 Agreement included a specific commitment for the UK government to incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into UK legislation, which it did via the Human Rights Act 1998. The UUP and Alliance supported this move (UUP 2001: 20; Alliance (1998 2; 2001: 8). The UUP also offered striking support for rights protections more broadly:

In line with domestic law, the European Convention on Human Rights, the United Nations International Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, we oppose any denial of the religious and civil liberties of groups and individuals. (UUP 1998: 3)

The ECHR faded almost completely as an issue over time, before reemerging in more recent manifestos in response to calls within the Conservative Party to repeal and replace the Human Rights Act:

The Tory party plan to scrap the 1998 Human Rights Act (HRA) and to remove the British Government from any international human rights accountability. The HRA gives effect to the

European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and grants access to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Access to the convention and court are fundamental commitments of the Good Friday Agreement. (Sinn Féin 2017: 10)

Table 2.1 showed that the related issue of a Bill of Rights has been continuously present in debate since 1998. As outlined in Chapter 1, a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights was proposed in the Agreement to supplement the ECHR by adding ‘additional rights to reflect the principles of mutual respect for the identity and ethos of both communities and parity of esteem’. The issue peaked around the 2010 election, reflecting debate after the Human Rights Commission published advice on a draft Bill of Rights in 2008:

As liberals, we recognise that human rights are inherent and universal.... Rights are important to protect individuals and minorities against the state and others. They are a cornerstone of democracy. (Alliance 2010: 29)

Sinn Féin continues to demand that legally enforceable economic and social rights are enshrined in law across Ireland and in a fully enforceable Bill of Rights. Sinn Féin advocates the right to social, economic, gender and cultural equality. This encompasses equality for all. The history of this jurisdiction has been one in which citizens rights were trampled on and ignored. (Sinn Féin 2010: 35)

The UUP offered an intermediate position, at a time when the party was in an electoral alliance with the Conservatives:

Provision for supplementary rights for Northern Ireland was contained in the 1998 Belfast Agreement, though twelve years on Labour are still consulting on this. A Conservative and Unionist Government will not legislate for a separate bill of rights for Northern Ireland but will incorporate any Northern Ireland specific rights within the UK Bill of Rights. This will fulfil the obligations in the Belfast Agreement. (UUP 2010: 69)

The DUP was sceptical of any Bill of Rights:

The DUP opposes a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights. We are unconvinced of the necessity for a UK Bill of Rights, and see a number of potential pitfalls, but consider a UK Bill with a Northern Ireland chapter to be infinitely more appropriate than the Northern Ireland version envisaged by rights zealots. (DUP, Westminster 2010: 69).

The DUP repeated that it would ‘oppose a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights’ in 2011 (DUP 2011: 22). But neither unionist party has expressed a view on the matter since then. By contrast, the other parties remain supportive. Sinn Féin’s most recent manifesto (2022: 17) simply stated ‘Bill of Rights’ as a priority. The SDLP and Alliance have said more:

Human rights provide vital protections for everyone in Northern Ireland. The SDLP believes it is the responsibility of all of us to respect the rights of others and we will continue to campaign for the adoption of a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights to protect, strengthen and uphold the social, cultural and economic rights we currently enjoy. (SDLP 2019: 19)

We support the creation of a strong Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland that reflects international human rights standards and meets the needs of all citizens, not least those who experience discrimination and marginalisation. We believe that the Bill of Rights would be useful as pre-scrutiny tool for legislation and policy decisions across regional and local government. (Alliance 2022: 15)

The idea of an all-Ireland Charter of Rights has been mentioned only rarely, and only by Sinn Féin and the SDLP. Both parties have supported the proposal whenever they have mentioned it, but without offering any detail.

Strand 1

In the Agreement's early years, most of the parties expressed support for the design of the Assembly and Executive:

THE NEW ASSEMBLY: For the first time in 26 years, the people of Northern Ireland have a wonderful opportunity to take under local control the public services that matter to us most. (UUP 1998: 1)

The elections to the new Assembly present us with a once in a lifetime opportunity to change the way Northern Ireland is governed. In future it will be the people of Northern Ireland who make the decisions about the real issues that affect our day to day lives. Our elected politicians will be given responsibility for government in a way that is quite different from the Direct Rule of the last 25 years. (Alliance 1998: 1)

The SDLP will enter the Assembly and the administration of Northern Ireland to secure social and economic justice for all. Our party negotiators in the all-party talks ensured that the new body would be effective, would be genuinely committed to responsibility sharing and would be operated on the principle of 'parallel consent' so that key decisions, in both the Assembly and the Executive will be taken on a cross community basis. (SDLP 1998: 3)

In 2001, there was also praise for the impact the institutions were having. Alliance (2001: 1) commented that 'the Assembly is beginning to make a real difference'. The UUP said:

The Assembly has made a good start, addressing the areas neglected under Direct Rule, notably our economic infrastructure. Crises such as Foot and Mouth show the value of locally accountable decision making. (UUP 2001: 7)

And in 2003:

There has been political progress. The Assembly and Executive was established. In it nationalists and republicans, for the first time ever, participated fully, helping to make Northern Ireland work as part of the Union. It demonstrated how the local administration could be more effective and more accountable. (UUP 2003: 2)

Sinn Féin was more circumspect, simply confirming its commitment to participating. The DUP, understandably, did not join the praise. We have already catalogued its criticisms of Sinn Féin participation in the Executive prior to full decommissioning. In more institutional terms, the party also argued that ministers were insufficiently accountable:

In the Belfast Agreement the Ulster Unionist Party not only created a form of devolution which placed Sinn Féin/IRA in the heart of government but they also created a system in which the Assembly was unable to control Sinn Féin/IRA Ministers. (DUP 2003: 12)

Under the Belfast Agreement Ministers were free to take decisions which were not accountable to the Assembly. It is critical that in any new settlement Executive decisions are accountable to the Assembly and the people of Northern Ireland. No decisions should be taken which are against

the wishes of the Assembly. Institutions should be created to ensure that decisions are accountable. (DUP 2003: 16)

Some other parties also called for reforms in these early years. The UUP, for example, argued for stronger ‘collective decision-making’ in the Executive and an enhanced role for committees in the Assembly (UUP 2001: 7).

As noted already, references to many aspects of the Agreement, including Strand 1, faded from party manifestos after St Andrews. More recently, however, parties have been more likely to express exasperation with the Strand 1 arrangements. In 2022, for example, Alliance said, ‘The nature and design of the institutions and the mechanisms of government currently magnify disagreement and disincentivise cooperation and progress’ (Alliance 2022: 90). The UUP observed, ‘the Assembly has proved painfully slow at passing long overdue legislation on key issues, not least with regard to Hate Crime and stalking’ (UUP 2022: 36). The opening words of the SDLP manifesto stated, ‘This Assembly mandate has finished exactly as it started – with the Executive in a state of collapse because political leaders continue to put their own narrow self-interest ahead of the needs of people in all of our communities’ (SDLP 2022: 2). The DUP headed a section of its manifesto ‘Fixing Stormont’ and acknowledged that ‘devolution is not perfect’ (DUP 2022: 41). Sinn Féin was perhaps least critical, saying ‘Until recently, the last two years had shown that these institutions can deliver. But we can and must do more’ (Sinn Féin 2022: 7).

Our analysis identified six principal areas of possible reform that remain current today – some of which go back to the Agreement’s early days, others of which are more recent.

Designation and cross-community voting

The first concerns the practice of community designation and cross-community voting in the Assembly. In every one of its manifestos since 2001, Alliance has argued for ending designation, saying that it leads to ‘the institutionalisation of sectarian division’ (e.g., Alliance 2011: 137). It has generally also advocated replacing current cross-community voting rules with weighted majority voting, though without specifying what this weighted majority should be. For example:

Ending the process of community designation in the Assembly and replacing it with a requirement for weighted majorities on defined key votes or in situations where a reformed Petition of Concern has been invoked. (Alliance 2019: 12)

The current cross-community voting system in the Assembly should be replaced by a weighted majority system, free from designations. (Alliance 2022: 91)

The DUP advocated very similar changes in each of its manifestos between 2007 and 2016, often specifying a weighted majority threshold of 65%. It tended to link these reforms also changes to the Executive formation process, which we will turn to shortly. It tended also to describe these as ‘long-term’ objectives:

We still firmly believe that the best form of government for Northern Ireland would be a voluntary coalition Executive with weighted majority voting in the Assembly of around 65%. This would bring an end to Community Designation. This will remain our long term goal. We have made slow but sure progress on reforming Stormont and will continue to focus on this important issue during the next Assembly term. (DUP 2016: 27)

The DUP has not returned explicitly to the matter of Assembly voting procedures in its manifestos since 2017, though, as we will see below, it did repeat its aspiration to change Executive formation in 2022. None of the other parties have expressed views.

Petition of concern

The second, closely related, area of possible reform focuses on the mechanism by which votes that otherwise would require only a simple majority can be turned into cross-community votes: the petition of concern. This matter was not raised by any of the parties until 2015; since then, however, criticisms of the arrangements have been made by all parties except the DUP. The UUP, the SDLP, and Alliance have all said that the system was being ‘abused’ by being deployed far more broadly than originally intended:

We must put an end to the abuse of Petitions of Concern, which were designed specifically to protect minority interests, not political parties. No one envisaged the situation where one party had sufficient MLAs to bring forward a PoC on their own. This has corrupted the intent of the PoC, allowing one party to hold a veto over the Assembly. (UUP 2017: 11)

The SDLP believes that the Petition of Concern has in recent years been abused. This mechanism should be restored to its original purpose and restricted to areas where there are clear and identifiable human rights or equality impacts. (SDLP 2016: 49)

Even Sinn Féin, which has generally shown less interest than the other parties in reforms to the Strand 1 institutions in its manifestos, cited the petition of concern as an ‘outstanding issue’ that ‘must be dealt with’ – though without saying anything about how (Sinn Féin 2019: 13).

The most commonly suggested reform was to restrict the mechanism’s application: Alliance, for example, said:

It should also be restricted to: matters of national identity; matters which relate to the legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland; or matters which relate to the constitutional structure and institutions established under the Good Friday Agreement. (Alliance 2017: 9)

In addition, the UUP said, ‘We would propose a requirement that the signatories must come from more than one party’ (UUP 2017: 11).

Reforms along these lines were agreed through the 2020 New Decade, New Approach deal and implemented in 2022. As a result, the issue was less prominent in the most recent set of manifestos, though the SDLP did still suggest that further change might be required (SDLP 2022: 27).

Executive formation

The third aspect of the Strand 1 institutions to have been frequently discussed concerns the formation of the Executive. As noted above, the DUP has repeatedly argued that voluntary coalitions should be the long-term goal. Most recently, it said:

The DUP wants to see politics and the government at Stormont normalised. We have had a long-term objective of seeing government established by those who can agree to govern together. We remain convinced that a voluntary coalition represents the best long-term option for Government in Northern Ireland. (DUP 2022: 41)

Alliance argued for voluntary coalitions as long ago as 2003:

Alliance argues that the Executive should be formed as a voluntary power-sharing coalition, endorsed by a weighted majority vote in the Assembly to ensure a cross-community composition. It should be possible for parties to negotiate a balanced executive, with an agreed programme for government. This would be required to achieve a cross-community weighted-majority vote in the Assembly in order for it to come into effect. (Alliance 2003: 4)

Its latest manifesto said, ‘The Executive should be formed by voluntary coalition, which is decided through negotiation between parties and which is subject to a vote in the Assembly. Collective responsibility should apply’ (Alliance 2022: 91).

Short of a move to voluntary coalitions, several parties have argued that the changes introduced through the St Andrews Agreement, whereby the First and deputy First Minister posts are automatically allocated to the largest party and to the largest party in the other of the largest two designations, have been harmful. Alliance said so at the time:

The removal of the need for any vote for either the joint election of First Minister and Deputy First Minister or for the Executive as a whole is a major flaw. The need for government parties to formally recognise each other’s mandates, and legitimacy of having a share of power and responsibility has been undermined. (Alliance 2007: 3)

In the most recent elections, the SDLP argued for a return to the pre-St Andrews arrangements:

The current mechanisms to elect First Ministers and an Executive facilitate the politics of veto and give no incentive to compromise. The simplest way to address this would be to reverse the change to the election of First Ministers which was added in at St Andrews. (SDLP 2022: 27)

It continued, ‘Our MPs have previously tabled amendments to allow a range of thresholds for the restored joint election of First Ministers to include parallel consent, qualified weighted majority and/or two thirds of MLAs’ (ibid.).

Programme for government

The fourth element is a related proposal that the parties forming the Executive should agree a ‘programme for government’ at the beginning of their term. Such calls have most often been made by the UUP and Alliance, and reflect a perception that Executives have too often functioned as a set of departmental silos, controlled by different parties and pursuing their own objectives. In 2011, for example, the UUP said:

The Programme for Government must be rooted in a commonly agreed agenda about what is good for Northern Ireland and good for the people of Northern Ireland. We must shift away from the pursuit of ‘us-and-them’ agendas and instead focus on building and promoting a post-conflict Northern Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party proposes that in the period between the election results being declared and the new Executive being formed, that the political parties eligible for and willing to take their places in that Executive should meet and agree a Programme for Government (PfG). (UUP 2011: 7)

In 2022, the idea was advocated by the SDLP (2022: 27) and DUP (2022: 41) and, implicitly, by the UUP (2022: 13) and Alliance (2022: 28).

Job titles: First Minister and deputy First Minister

Fifth, Alliance and the SDLP have both supported renaming the posts of First and deputy First Minister to 'Joint First Minister'. In 2022, Alliance said:

The First and deputy First Ministers should be renamed 'Joint First Ministers'. This would end what has become a contrived yet polarising contest over which party has a claim to the "higher" office, when in effect the posts are equal in standing in all respects. (Alliance 2022: 91; see also SDLP 2022: 27)

Further devolution of powers

Finally, several parties raise the question of whether further powers should be devolved from Westminster to Stormont. We saw above the earlier debate that took place over devolution of policing and justice. Today, the principal area of discussion concerns fiscal policy. Sinn Féin, though it has not engaged with the detail of reforms to institutional procedures set out above, does advocate further fiscal devolution:

The work of the Executive has been stifled by the lack of fiscal powers. Now is time to empower the Executive and devolve increased powers to allow us to make the decisions on the issues which affect workers and families across the North.

That includes powers for progressive taxation and the power to raise the minimum wage. We cannot rely on a British Government which will always put its own interests above that of ordinary workers and families. (Sinn Féin 2022: 7)

Similarly, the SDLP says that Northern Ireland needs 'more control over how we raise revenue and allocate spending. The last five years have illustrated decisively that the current system of improvised allocations and endless haggling between Stormont and the Treasury over the block grant is a barrier to devolved Government delivering' (SDLP 2022: 29).

Alliance also broadly supports change. It said in 2022 that the current limited fiscal devolution was 'not a tenable position', adding, 'It makes the Executive less accountable' as well as reducing scope for policy innovation (Alliance 2022: 28). It did not, however, offer specific proposals.

By contrast, the UUP said:

Northern Ireland isn't yet ready for the devolving of tax powers – a decade plus of DUP/SF fiscal mismanagement has left an inefficient and stove-piped structure that can't even spend all the money that is allocated to it. And hasn't for a decade. (UUP 2022: 14–15)

It added that its 'objective, over the next mandate, will be to demonstrate that Northern Ireland can manage its monies' (ibid.: 15).

The DUP understood why 'fiscal devolution might be considered important', but added, 'we are also pragmatic in our considerations and do not believe that the necessary capacity exists in the contemporary context of Northern Ireland to devolve additional fiscal powers at this time' (DUP 2022: 42). It continued, 'There is a need for a much greater level of stability before we should consider significant additional changes to the fiscal powers in Northern Ireland' (ibid.).

Civic Forum

The final element of Strand 1 that was set out in 1998 was the Civic Forum. As noted in Chapter 1, this functioned in the early years after the Agreement, but it was suspended in 2002 and has never subsequently been restored. It is evident from Tables 2.1 and 2.2 that the institution has received only limited attention.

In the early years, the DUP advocated the Civic Forum's abolition, calling it 'an expensive talking shop which delivers nothing' (DUP 2003: 22). It subsequently boasted, 'the DUP has prevented the return of the Civic Forum' (DUP 2010: 67). By contrast, Sinn Féin argued repeatedly for its restoration (Sinn Féin 2007: 19); 2015: 15). No other party mentioned the Forum before 2016.

More recently, only the SDLP (2019: 24) has appeared to advocate restoration of the Civic Forum in its original form – though it offered no detail. Several parties have suggested replacing the Forum with alternative models of civic or citizen engagement:

The Civic Forum has not been restored since 2007 and we see no case for its reintroduction. Nevertheless, where possible, we should seek to involve people from wider civic society where they can add value to decision-making. (DUP 2011: 24)

We believe that the previous model for the Civic Forum is not suitable for the current political climate but we believe that a new model, based on the Scottish Futures Forum, which has a small executive but plans a wide-ranging workload and engages with civic society as appropriate. (Alliance 2016: 27; similarly 2017: 12; 2022: 92)

A new Civic Forum should be formed, comprised of a combination of local politicians (33%) and a group of citizens (66%) drawn at random from the electoral register, which would hold a series of debates and evidence-based discussions focused on the restoration of the institutions. (Alliance 2019: 11)

Some have also advocated the use of citizens' assemblies, to tackle policy matters (Alliance 2022: 39, 92), to explore constitutional futures (Sinn Féin 2022: 7, 9), or for unspecified purposes (SDLP 2019: 24).

Strand 2

In the Agreement's early years, unionists and nationalists voice very different perspectives on the institutions of North/South cooperation that were set out in Strand 2 of the Agreement. The DUP said in 1998 that there should be 'no Cross-border executive bodies', adding:

Under the Agreement all-Ireland structures are proposed, in which unionists will always be a permanent minority. Dublin interference in Ulster's affairs is planned to increase and intensify. We will not collude with others to set up the embryo of a United Ireland. Northern Ireland's future is safe in our hands. (DUP 1998: 2)

The UUP was more supportive:

Ulster Unionists have always favoured any co-operation with the Republic of Ireland which has a sound economic and commercial basis and will work to the genuine benefit of people in Northern Ireland. [...] A pragmatic, good neighbourly approach dominated the policy of the

former Stormont Government and it is the way in which we will view the North-South Ministerial Council. (UUP 1998: 3).

But it also warned, 'We have opposed the naivete or malice of certain groups who have tried to use increased cross-border co-operation as a cloak for a united Ireland in disguise' (ibid.). And, in listing advantages of the Agreement, it included, 'we will also be able to exercise a veto over any cross border co-operation we do not feel to be in Ulster's best interests' (ibid.: 1).

The Alliance said simply that 'it is essential for Northern Ireland to play its full role' through participation in the North/South Ministerial Council (Alliance 1998: 10). By contrast, the SDLP and Sinn Féin were both, from their different perspectives, enthusiastic:

The SDLP has always highlighted the need for cross border economic co-operation and partnership and believes that the new cross border institutions brought into being by the Agreement offer unparalleled opportunity to begin to tackle the serious inequities in the economy particularly in border regions. (SDLP 1998: 3)

The all-Ireland executive bodies outlined in the Good Friday agreement are a crucial first step in the process of institutional change and the development of democratic all-Ireland economic institutions. Sinn Féin will strive to ensure that these embryonic bodies have a clear all-Ireland dimension. (Sinn Féin 1998: 3)

As Tables 2.1 and 2.2 showed, in the years since 1998, the UUP has barely mentioned the Strand 2 institutions again, and Alliance has likewise given them only limited attention. The remaining parties – the DUP, the SDLP, and Sinn Féin – have all given them greater prominence. As would be expected, the DUP's view has tended to be negative, while the nationalist parties have been positive. The DUP argued for 'cutting North-Southery' (DUP 2007: 41) and boasted that it had 'blocked any new North-South bodies; (DUP 2010: 67). By contrast, Sinn Féin said:

Sinn Féin negotiators ensured that the Good Friday Agreement put all-Ireland cooperation at its centre. Eight years on we must accelerate towards full delivery on all these provisions by 2012. This means increasing all-Ireland cooperation and planning politically, economically and socially. (Sinn Féin 2007: 18)

The SDLP criticised a DUP–Sinn Féin deal that, it said, 'did not offer a single extra area for North South cooperation or implementation'. It continued, 'That's why we launched our North South Makes Sense campaign. That campaign has done much to get the North South agenda moving again' (SDLP 2007: 6).

Since 2007, however, the DUP has joined the UUP and Alliance in largely ignoring the North/South dimension in its manifestos. The SDLP and Sinn Féin have also said less, though they have continued to emphasise the value of all-Ireland cooperation. In 2022, the SDLP called for 'a paradigm shift in the scale and working of North-South relationships and develop all-island plans for infrastructure, energy, planning, tourism, health, higher education, research and development and enterprise' (SDLP 2022: 35). Sinn Féin said, 'We are committed to power-sharing and the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement including the North-South institutions', adding that one of its priorities was 'to improve North–South co-operation and delivery by the all-Ireland bodies' (Sinn Féin 2022: 7, 9). Alliance also offered support, saying it would 'promote and encourage the delivery of services on a North-South basis', and providing a list of priority areas for such cooperation (Alliance 2022: 27).

As Table 2.2 showed, the North/South Ministerial Council was often mentioned explicitly in manifestos up to 2007, but such references have become much less common since then. The SDLP was the only party to mention the body in 2022, calling for ‘an enhanced role for the North–South Ministerial Council in EU affairs’ (SDLP 2022: 31). Meanwhile, the other Strand 2 institutions envisaged by the Agreement – the North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association and the North/South Consultative Forum – have been mentioned only rarely, only by Sinn Féin, and not at all since 2016.

Strand 3

We saw in Tables 2.1 and 2.2 that, of the three strands, Strand 3, relating to East/West cooperation, has received much the least attention. The UUP greeted it warmly in 1998:

THE BRITISH ISLES DIMENSION: The British Isles constitutes a natural social and economic unit. Northern Ireland Assembly representatives will sit as equals alongside counterparts from Cardiff, Edinburgh, Dublin and elsewhere to consider matters of common concern such as the Irish Sea environment, fisheries and transport and European policies. ... The British-Irish Council is a pioneering institution, recognising the multiplicity of East-West links within the British Isles. (UUP 1998: 3)

It remained supportive three years later:

The Joint Ministerial Committees with colleagues in London, Cardiff and Edinburgh have made a good start. We want to build on them. We also want to enhance the ‘Council of the Isles’ – the British Irish Council which we believe has real potential for the future. (UUP 2001: 7)

Other parties meanwhile ignored it (DUP, Sinn Féin) or simply said that they would play a full part (Alliance, SDLP).

In later years, while mentions of Strand 3 have been rare, it is striking that they have been uniformly positive. The UUP has been silent on the matter – perhaps surprisingly so given its early pronouncements. But the DUP backed Strand 3 in all three of its manifestos between 2003 and 2007: in 2003, it criticised ‘imbalanced north/south, east/west relationships’, saying, ‘Whilst there were dozens of North South meetings there were only a few British Isles meetings’ (DUP 2003: 17); in 2005, it advocated ‘Greater emphasis on the East-West dimension’ (DUP 2005: 8); in 2007, it again criticised ‘imbalance between north/south and east/west relationships’ (DUP 2007: 16). Over a decade later, it said it wanted to ‘expand the role and importance of the under-utilised British Irish Council based upon the Nordic Council model’ (DUP 2019: 25).

The SDLP made the specific suggestion in 2010 that, ‘through the British-Irish Council we should begin to assess the benefit for this maritime region of greater co-operation in the development of renewable energies’ (SDLP 2010: 12). In 2017, it offered a lengthy defence of the BIIGC:

Strand Three deals with the East–West axis between the Irish and UK Governments. The British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIC) could provide a forum for non-devolved matters that Irish and UK Governments have in common. BIIC can also include devolved ministers where matters under discussion touch on areas of devolved interests. In its remit to promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands, BIIC could offer a more worthwhile channel of engagement than the experience of the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU negotiations). (SDLP 2017: 6)

Alliance has been the most frequent backer of Strand 3 in recent years:

Alliance would enthusiastically support an intensification of co-operation on a North-South and/or East-West basis. To date, too many of the meetings in institutional format have been little more than infrequent discussions with little evidence of follow-up actions. (Alliance 2011: 139)

Revitalising the North-South and East-West bodies under strands two and three of the Good Friday Agreement in order to strengthen relationships across the UK and Ireland particularly but not exclusively in the context of Brexit. (Alliance 2019: 12)

North-South and East-West cooperation and collaboration on important infrastructure projects, creating sustainable transport links and jobs for the future, including the Ulster Canal, the Narrow Water Bridge, cross-border Greenways, and road safety upgrades of the A75 and A77 in Scotland. (Alliance 2022: 81)

Constitutional issues and Brexit

As we noted when looking at perspectives on the Agreement as a whole, the parties have often evoked the Agreement when discussing the question of Northern Ireland's constitutional future. All the parties have referred in some way to the principle of consent. For example:

While the 1998 Agreement enshrined the right of all our citizens to self-define as British, Irish or other, with no hierarchy, the same Agreement, endorsed by Nationalists and Republicans, also affirmed Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom. (UUP 2016: 39)

Preserve the letter and spirit of Northern Ireland's constitutional guarantee requiring the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland for any diminution in its status as part of the United Kingdom. (DUP (2022) Assembly: 29)

All parties except the UUP have also referred to the Agreement's provisions to hold a referendum on Irish unification. Unsurprisingly, Sinn Féin raises this most often, including in its most recent manifesto. The SDLP has also referred to the Agreement's border poll provisions, including in the post-Brexit context:

There is now a democratic process through referenda provided for in the Good Friday Agreement, to allow people to decide the future. (Sinn Féin 2022: 9)

The SDLP is committed to a united Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement established the democratic basis for unity and by providing the public with a credible and achievable vision we believe we can persuade the doubters. (SDLP 2010: 21)

The DUP raised the prospect of a united Ireland in the early years as part of its opposition to the Agreement.

Ask yourself this question, 'Is the Union stronger today as a result of the Belfast Agreement?' No it is not. As a result of the policies and actions of the Official Unionists we are closer to a united Ireland than we have ever been. (DUP 2003: 3)

More recently, however, the party has also argued that a border poll should not be held 'outside the terms of the Belfast Agreement' (DUP 2017: 7), perhaps indicating ongoing disagreement over when the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland can call a referendum on unification (see Working

Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland 2021: 130–57). The UUP has not mentioned a border poll in the context of discussing the Agreement.

UK exit from the EU was not envisaged at the time of the Agreement. In recent years, however, the parties have often related their opposition to Brexit or the Protocol to the need to protect the Agreement:

At Westminster, the Government is pursuing a recklessly hard Brexit, undermining how we live, learn, work and trade, and threatening the shared society that has been created under the Good Friday Agreement. (Alliance 2017: 2).

Brexit will have a detrimental impact on the Good Friday Agreement and the principles of the peace process as well as devastating consequences for the economy across Ireland. (Sinn Féin 2017: 4).

As it stands the Protocol does not protect the Belfast Agreement but instead damages its fine balance creating divisions and frictions. (UUP 2022: 12).

Conclusion

There were marked disagreements between the parties over the Agreement in the early years after 1998. Most obviously, the DUP had opposed it, whereas the other major parties were in support. But there were also divergences over unresolved matters such as decommissioning, demilitarisation, and policing. Even among the parties that backed the Agreement, there were notable differences in how they chose to present it.

The St Andrews Agreement and other accords brought many of these disagreements to a close. The period of sustained power-sharing that followed allowed the Agreement to become the settled will across the parties for how Northern Ireland would be governed.

Over the last seven years, however, debates around the Agreement have become more contentious again. That happened partly because St Andrews, while resolving some major conflicts, also generated new concerns about institutional structures that would later grow in intensity. More profoundly, however, it also happened because the UK's decision on Brexit and the recent dysfunction of the institutions greatly raised tensions.

Today, there is consensus on the need for change, but details are often lacking on what changes should look like. That point deserves attention: the parties voice concerns about how the institutions work; but, on the whole, they appear not to have offered detail proposals on possible reforms.

Where specific reform proposals are made, they sometimes diverge between the parties; but we do not see entrenched conflicts. The hardest challenges may relate to the formation of the Executive: outside the DUP and Sinn Féin, there is anger over how St Andrews changed the procedure for choosing the First and deputy First Ministers; whether consensus could be achieved on an alternative is unclear. On the other hand, renaming those posts to 'Joint First Ministers' seems unlikely to generate deep opposition. Agreement on reforms to the designation system within the Assembly may also be possible.

Manifestos have referred throughout the period to the Strand 2 institutions, but even the nationalist parties have provided little detail on what they should be doing. This is again notable: nationalists sometimes blame unionists for the failure of Strand 2 to deliver much, and there may be justice in their criticisms; but they have themselves presented little by way of an active agenda for what more it could be doing. Strand 3 has never been a primary issue for any of the parties. Again, that point deserves note: the British and Irish governments are often criticised for neglecting Strand 3; but, during the years between 2007 and 2018 when the BIIGC did not meet at all, Northern Ireland's parties, at least in their manifestos, voiced no concerns.

There are differences between the parties over a Bill of Rights and legal protections for the Irish language. These differences are sometimes seen as reflecting a deep divergence in outlook between unionists and nationalists; but reading through the manifestos over time does not suggest such a clearcut chasm. Early UUP manifestos contained strikingly pro-rights statements; and commitment to parity of esteem is mentioned by all parties.

We do not express a view here on whether reforms such as those just discussed would be desirable. Across all of these areas, however, it appears that, if the parties want to find agreed ways forward, they should be able – with effort, and engagement from the British and Irish governments – to do so.

Chapter 3. Elite Perceptions: Insights from Interviews

This chapter builds on the manifesto analysis in Chapter 2 in order to probe further into elite perceptions of the Agreement. It extends the range of the analysis beyond the five main parties in Northern Ireland: to some of the smaller parties; to non-party actors such as officials, commentators, academics, and civil society representations; and to people with relevant expertise in London in Dublin. It allows us to understand the thinking that underpins public statements and to explore thinking on matters where actors have, for whatever reason, chosen not to make public statements.

We conducted 20 interviews in total, in 2021 and 2022. The timing should be noted: most of the interviews took place while the Assembly and Executive were operating; all took place before the Assembly elections in May 2022. Boris Johnson was Prime Minister, and Micheál Martin was Taoiseach. A few aspects of what was discussed – notably in relation to the Northern Ireland Protocol – have been superseded by events; but most remain entirely relevant to the ongoing discussions about restoring the institutions.

To enable open conversation, interviewees were told that their comments would remain anonymous. Table 3.1, on the following page, contains information on who they were and when the interviews took place. All were senior figures in their respective domains: they included current or former members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the UK parliament, and the Oireachtas, and several past party leaders. Several played important roles in the 1998 negotiations.

The interviews were fully transcribed, with light editing for repetitions and hesitations. In the excerpts that we quote below, an ellipsis in brackets indicates that we have cut some of what was said; an ellipsis not in brackets indicates that the interviewee left a thought incomplete. In a few places we have added material in brackets to add clarity. At times, interviewees expressed themselves in forthright terms. We quote them in full, and we express no view ourselves on what they said.

We present the material from the interviews following roughly the same structure as in Chapter 2, beginning with the peace and security aspects of the Agreement that were at the core of the negotiations in 1998, before turning to rights, the three institutional strands, and the question of Northern Ireland's constitutional future. The interview material is rather more fluid than that in the manifestos, however, and so we have not attempted to apply a rigidly identical template to the two.

In some ways, the patterns that emerge from these interviews are the same as those seen from the manifestos in Chapter 2. In other ways, they are different, and in still others they open up different issues. We dwell on these patterns in the conclusion to the chapter.

Table 3.1. List of interviews and interviewees

Interview number	Interview date	Interviewee
1	6 October 2021	UUP politician
2	15 October 2021	Former SDLP politician
3	15 October 2021	Unionist commentator
4	19 November 2021	Civic society figure
5	24 November 2021	Former Alliance Party politician
6	2 December 2021	SDLP politician
7	10 December 2021	Fianna Fáil politician
8	10 December 2021	DUP politician
9	16 December 2021	Former Irish civil servant
10	16 December 2021	PUP politician
11	14 January 2022	Alliance Party politician
12	27 January 2022	Irish academic
13	28 January 2022	Former UK civil servant
14	1 February 2022	Irish academic
15	8 February 2022	Sinn Féin politician
16	14 February 2022	Lawyer from Northern Ireland
17	15 February 2022	Conservative Party (GB) politician
18	16 March 2022	Former UK civil servant
19	29 March 2022	(NI) Green Party politician
20	05 April 2022	Fine Gael politician

Peace and security

Our interviews confirmed the Agreement's considerable successes in the area of peace and security, but also pointed to continuing challenges. Northern Ireland has been transformed by the decommissioning of the leading paramilitary movements, along with general demilitarisation of society and the normalisation of policing arrangements; but low levels of paramilitary violence continue. The economy has developed and community relations have improved; but Northern Ireland continues to underperform economically, and working class loyalist and republican communities have missed out on many of the economic spoils of peace. Reconciliation between communities has not been as successful as was hoped in 1998.

Decommissioning and demilitarisation

Most interviewees agreed that the Agreement had been a key instrument in bringing about the end of the Troubles. Many thought this was its key objective and, despite frustrations with other elements of the Agreement, thought it had fulfilled this objective. Some added that the ending of the Troubles had precipitated a wider transformation of life and politics in Northern Ireland:

Well, I suppose the most obvious [change] is the downturn in terms of the level of violence. And clearly there is still some violence, but minimal compared to what we've lived through. (Interviewee 4 – civic society figure)

Violence isn't a huge feature of life, so in that sense it has fundamentally altered life in Northern Ireland. I think it's giving people the space to kind of figure out, you know, who they are, without the shadow of violence in the background. (Interviewee 3 – unionist commentator)

Despite the obvious success in reducing paramilitarism since 1998, some interviewees thought that more had to be done to tackle the groups that remain active. Across the political spectrum, our interviewees saw groups that continue to engage in illegal activity as illegitimate and lacking any significant political or community support. For example:

We have more or less the end of paramilitary violence. [There is] still some around. [It is] still not acceptable. (Interviewee 13 – former UK civil servant)

As we have already highlighted, the twin issues of paramilitary decommissioning and state demilitarisation were the key political objectives in the first decade of implementation. Several interviewees thought the long process of IRA decommissioning had distracted political attention from implementing other aspects of the Agreement, contributing to political instability at the time. One commented that 'it undermined faith in the institutions (Interviewee 5 – former Alliance Party politician). But many thought that unionist reluctance to commit to reform and devolution of policing also contributed to this early instability:

If anybody reads the terms of reference for a successful police service, the terms of reference that are given for the Independent Commission Policing, you could not have read those and thought that the RUC would have survived a clean bill of health against those tests. So, he's [David Trimble] very shocked at the scale of the radical reform in the Patten Report and that prevents him further from going ahead with implementing the institutions. (Interviewee 14 – Irish academic)

Meanwhile, the willingness of Sinn Féin to participate in the political process, and of the UUP, and later the DUP, to enter government with their former adversaries, was also seen as crucial:

I suppose the most obvious [change] is the downturn in terms of the level of violence.... And, to be quite honest, I attribute that largely to the fact that Sinn Féin was able to bring in the IRA in terms of sign-ups to the Agreement. And there was clearly ... a complete change in both attitude and atmosphere in terms of republicanism and they have basically invested all their eggs in the basket of a united Ireland, at some point, through constitutional means.... Obviously, there was all the sort of backwards and forwards over decommissioning and disbandment or whatever else. The actual real crunch point was when they signed up to policing in 2007. Because you know that is signing up to the state, to all intents and purposes.' (Interviewee 4 – civic society figure)

I think unionism still looks back to the 1998 Agreement as the mechanism, the instrument, to get us away from violence. To take the men of violence away from that, to[wards] political and democratic means. To put that up for discussion and progress. So, unionism always felt that was kind of a concession. I think it was read by unionism as a necessary mechanism to move us forward. (Interviewee 1 – UUP politician)

One of the key reforms brought about by Patten was a recruitment drive by the PSNI seeking new members from a Catholic background. Interviewees saw this as having improved relations between

the police and the nationalist community, but some also warned that a downturn in recruitment from the Catholic community in recent years is a possible risk to stability:

We have policing more or less by consent, though that is one of the areas in which we risk losing out. Where the achievements of the Agreement may be crumbling. (Interviewee 13, former UK civil servant)

I'm very worried about something you haven't mentioned. The Patten Report was eventually, and I do mean eventually, a great success. It materially changed the composition of the police force. The 10-year affirmative action programme was working. [...] Regrettably, we're now getting a reduction in the proportion of cultural Catholics. [...] I think that is very sad. It is important to have a representative police service. (Interviewee 14 – Irish academic)

Some other interviewees, by contrast, highlighted growing distrust of the police in sections of the loyalist community, reflecting a general dissatisfaction with the Agreement's implementation (see more below). Given that cross-community policing is seen as a key political success of the last quarter century, addressing these slippages in support from sections of the community will be important in the years ahead.

Political, social, and economic progress

Ending violent conflict was in itself a key objective in 1998. It was also hoped that greater security would usher in economic growth and improved relations between the communities. In these respects too, the Agreement was seen as a success by most of those we spoke with. But many also agreed that the 'peace dividend' had not been as big as hoped:

There is at least a process, you know? There is at least some locus and focus for how things get done and broadly a set of operating procedures in a way that there was not before that. (Interviewee 6 – SDLP politician)

We have had economic successes of various sorts. We have had periods in which we had almost good government, you know, we have had functioning government. (Interviewee 13 – former UK civil servant)

Northern Ireland is now a very different place than it was prior to 1998. Economically, while we are having still major challenges, we are more prosperous, and we are a more competitive location for investment than we were previously. I don't want to overstress that because there are some genuine issues as well. (Interviewee 11 – Alliance Party politician)

I don't think the economic signs, the signs of economic progress, are particularly healthy. I mean things are better than they were, but there are still areas of considerable deprivation obviously. (Interviewee 9 – former Irish civil servant)

Interviewees spoke of areas where social deprivation continued to be high, and agreed that some communities had not benefited from the peace dividend to the same extent as their more affluent neighbours:

I don't feel like the peace process has worked for everyone in Northern Ireland. Quite clearly, the middle class has benefited very significantly, I would say compared to communities that were damaged by the conflict. (Interviewee 3 – unionist commentator)

The atmosphere has changed [...] people socialise in the city centre [of Belfast] more than they did... It has a different offering than it would have 30 years ago in terms of food and drink and things like that. I think that that has changed things for younger generations... The other thing about this is that we have a large, sizeable group of young people who live in disadvantaged areas and can't afford to do that in the city centre. (Interviewee 10 – PUP politician)

A few interviewees referred specifically to a growing perception among loyalists that they had not gained economically or politically since 1998. This was contrasted both with middle class unionist gains from peace, and with the improved position of the republican community in politics and society. Interviewees argued that, within loyalism, this dissatisfaction was contributing to a discontent with politics and the Agreement itself:

I do worry about the loyalists. [...] They don't feel like they have gained anything. I mean, they are right; they are absolutely right. They look about and they say, 'well we're not being shot at anymore, but we have gained nothing economically'. The anti-agreement loyalists, I think, have been able to point to the agreement and say, 'well look, it's done, look what's happened now, Sinn Féin have got all this power and we've got nothing'. I think there's a real sense that what they voted for hasn't been delivered. (Interviewee 3 – unionist commentator)

Well, I think it [life in Northern Ireland] is massively different. [...] You occasionally hear people sort of saying nothing has changed. Now there are some communities I think which are still in various states of misery which may not be dissimilar from those of the Troubles. Many of them I think are those in the grip of loyalist paramilitaries. And you know that's something you often hear from people on the Shankill Road. [...] I don't think it's true even there, but there are people who have been perhaps left behind.' (Interviewee 13 – former UK civil servant)

[...] we have a large, sizeable piece of young people who live in disadvantaged areas and can't afford to do that [enjoy life] in the city centre. So they are coming together usually with parades and riots and all that sort of stuff. But they don't have the wherewithal [to enjoy peace]. So until we actually sort out the issues around poverty, you know we have not got there. (Interviewee 10 – PUP politician)

I think that the perception is that it is always about concessions. And when I speak to the loyalists in East Belfast, and look it is UVF, RHC, UDA...Loyalists feel that no one is listening...And you may say we are all listening and have been listening. But if they feel no one is listening still then we have a problem. We have to deal with that. So, I get this feeling that those loyalist communities feel that this stuff is happening around them. They are not being included in the conversations. (Interviewee 1 – UUP politician)

Community relations

In terms of relations among Northern Ireland's various communities, some interviewees said that progress had been made despite lingering sectarian divisions:

Is there still nervousness and insecurity? Yeah. Is there still an element of mistrust? Yes. But not to what it was 23 years ago. So yeah, certainly I think it has changed. (Interviewee 1 – UUP politician)

Others were less optimistic, arguing that success in ending violence should not distract from failure to deliver a reconciled and united society. Some highlighted deep challenges in fostering better community relations:

From almost the whole period of Troubles they were cross-community initiatives. Tens of thousands of school children from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds were taken to Holland or taken to the United States and they all had a great time, and all made great friends, then came back and chucked stones at each other when we get back to Northern Ireland. Because whatever about the individual engagement of people, that's not the problem. The problem isn't individual relationships, the problem is the [community] relationship. The historic disturbed relationships between communities of people. (Interviewee 5 – former Alliance Party politician)

What I would like to say about all of that is, there are a group of people that will always do that and then there will be groups of people who won't.... It does work for those people who engage in it. (Interviewee 10 – PUP politician)

The gatekeepers I suppose is the other thing. You know they're going through these gatekeepers within these communities where they should actually go right to the people, the people themselves. [Someone I know] said the women's groups are applying for some of these funds and being told, 'no, no that's our money'. You know, they've got guns! What do you expect those women to do? (Interviewee 3 – unionist commentator)

Rights

The Bill of Rights featured prominently in our interviews. We asked direct questions about it, but several interviewees also raised it unprompted:

The lack of the Bill of Rights and the lack of progress on equality issues has been a real frustration. (Interviewee 19 – (NI) Green Party politician)

Supporters of a Bill of Rights from all backgrounds agreed the main reason it had not been legislated for was opposition from unionism:

The Bill of Rights was increasingly seen as a nationalist mechanism. It wasn't. The whole point about human rights is that they are meant to be protection for and demonstration of the rights of every citizen. That's the point. [...] But what they could be used for and what affected the argument was that this was to protect nationalists. And unionists never identified with it and never felt that it was part of the deal. Which you might say, culturally and historically they ought to [...] have regarded as part of their culture. (Interviewee 5 – former Alliance Party politician)

Well, my view is that the reason it has not come in is because unionists oppose it. They see anything with rights in it as something for Catholics and not for Protestants or unionists. That is the problem. (Interviewee 10 – PUP politician)

The bottom line is the whole concept of rights and the equality agenda is antithetical to political unionism. It goes against their grain. The default is that it is seen in zero-sum terms. (Interviewee 15 – Sinn Féin politician)

Of course, one must recognise also cultural and ideological influences. Ulster unionists are much closer to British Conservatives in ideological disposition generally. And that means great reluctance to give judges Bills of Rights, which are not under controls of parliament. That's an ideological disposition. (Interviewee 14 – Irish academic)

The manifesto analysis in Chapter 2 suggests that such interpretations may oversimplify: in the Agreement's early years, the UUP supported a broad rights agenda. Unionist opposition to a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights derives partly from a view that any such instrument should be UK-

wide (despite the Agreement specifically saying a Bill of Rights should ‘reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland’). In addition, the unionist parties are located on the political right, where scepticism towards the economic and social rights that have at times been proposed for Northern Ireland, runs deep:

It was hijacked by people who have a very left-wing political agenda, and as such it’s kind of stopped any discussion on general rights. And anyway, I think that from a unionist point of view I would prefer to see that any safeguards of people’s rights were done in a UK context. (Interviewee 8 – DUP politician)

That is what they [mainstream unionists] are worried about. They will look after the economics, and you know big business and all the rest of it. And they don’t want any Bill of Rights that would interfere in that. The other thing is they are concerned with a Bill of Rights interfering in other parts of their lives in terms of their very sort of evangelical stuff that they would want to do. This whole notion that they don’t agree with homosexuality or whatever. (Interviewee 10 – PUP politician)

Many people we spoke with, including unionists or loyalists not associated with either the UUP or DUP, expressed deep frustrations with the two major unionist parties on this issue. Several highlighted that many unionist voters, including those from working-class loyalist communities, either supported or would greatly benefit from a Bill of Rights:

Actually, you know, when you sit down and talk to people in loyalist communities, it is the social and economic rights that actually they are interested in. (Interviewee 4 – civic society figure)

I find it really interesting that a lot of loyalist women are in favour of the Bill of Rights. You know it’s a good way to have Northern Ireland-specific rights in place that we can use to enforce in the courts. I think it would give people some guarantees. I think a Bill of Rights can be used to actually address concerns within communities, but particularly unionist and loyalist concerns. (Interviewee 3 – unionist commentator)

I think historically unionism and the mainstream unionist parties [have opposed the Bill of Rights]. But I think they’ve left behind large segments of people from PUL backgrounds or communities, who might be inclined to be unionist but who don’t see themselves represented by parties who historically have been opposed to human rights and have been socially conservative. (Interviewee 19 – (NI) Green Party politician)

Outside political unionism, there was broad support for a Bill of Rights. Some, particularly in nationalism, felt that the UK parliament should act on this consensus and legislate for a Bill of Rights, even if support from unionist parties was not forthcoming:

‘Rights’ appeared something like 40 times in the Agreement. [...] The idea of a Bill of Rights was posited as something that could emerge from recommendations from the Human Rights Commission and be legislated for at Westminster. [...] Remember the Agreement was very deliberate that it would be Westminster who would legislate for the Bill of Rights on the basis that we knew we weren’t going to get consensus on a Bill of Rights, [that] you weren’t going to get cross-party agreement in an Assembly to have a Bill of Rights. (Interviewee 2 – former SDLP politician)

However, there was also recognition that a Conservative government in London, given its scepticism over rights codification, would be unlikely to take such a course.

A Sinn Féin representative suggested that the Irish government could instead take the lead, by beginning discussion of an ‘All-Island Charter of Rights’. The 1998 Agreement envisaged that such a charter would be approved between the North and South ‘reflecting and endorsing agreed measures for the protection of the fundamental rights of everyone living in the island of Ireland’. But others thought such a course would only heighten unionist concerns, and a politician from the Republic said that a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland was ‘not an urgent political issue’ in the South (Interviewee 7, Fianna Fáil politician).

Several participants observed that unionist perceptions of a Bill of Rights might change in the future if it became clear that such an instrument could protect their community as society changes:

Yes, unionists do see rights as concessions to nationalists. Which is curious because one might imagine that they could see their self-interest if their demographic and electoral position is slipping. They might want rights that are not subject to the influence of a majority in the Northern Assembly. (Interviewee 14 – Irish academic)

I’ll try and be the optimistic hippy and say that [...] all of the major political traditions here will hopefully have some form of stock take and accept the reality that we are a collection of minorities. And that as a collection of minorities a Bill of Rights protects us all. And that will see a sea change, I hope, within unionist thinking, about how rights can protect and uphold unionist values, traditions, culture, and identity. Rather than historically always seeing it as, you know, that acquiescence to aggressive nationalism or republicanism. (Interviewee 19 – (NI) Green Party politician)

Some interviewees also saw opposition to a Bill of Rights as a self-defeating strategy for unionists: that a more accommodating approach to the concerns of those with an Irish identity would build political returns for unionism.

Finally, we asked some interviewees if it mattered whether the Bill of Rights was a feature of the Agreement that remained unimplemented, or was simply an aspiration that had gone unrealised. Perspectives varied:

I don’t think there were many people on any side saying a Bill of Rights is absolutely fundamental to the settlement. And indeed, the commitment in the Agreement is not actually to have a Bill of Rights, it’s the Human Rights Commission should go off and draft one and then we would see. (Interviewee 13 – former UK civil servant)

Again, you have to read it in context. And the context of respect, parity of esteem, etc. etc. it is really clear...If they had *agreed* that none was needed that would be one thing. But they didn’t agree. It just ended in clashes. (Interviewee 12 – Irish academic)

Strand 1

We examine the elements of Strand 1 in a similar sequence to that followed in Chapter 2, beginning with general statements, before moving to particular aspects.

General views on Strand 1

One interviewee, who was involved in the negotiations in 1998, said:

The peace process was always about two things and the Agreement is therefore always about two things. [...] One was about bringing an end to political violence. And which meant effectively bringing Sinn Féin in from the cold after an IRA ceasefire. And obviously with that objective in mind it has been an enormous success. [...] The other stream if you like [...] was the institutional stream. [...] And I think there you'd have to say that the verdict has to be very mixed. (Interviewee 9 – former Irish civil servant)

This view of the institutions summed up what many interviewees said about Strand 1. The Executive and Assembly have collapsed or been suspended multiple times, generating much frustration across the political spectrum. Nevertheless, there is a strong desire to make politics work, and wide agreement that devolved power-sharing is better than what came before.

Almost all interviewees saw the Assembly's primary achievement since 1998 as being that it had managed to operate at all, albeit intermittently. All agreed that more needed to be done to improve its stability and effectiveness. One involved in the negotiations in 1998 said:

In a sense the principle objective was to get it done, to get a partnership government up and running, and that was seen as the crucial first step, at least as a way forward. [...] And none of us really gave a great amount of thought I think to how exactly that would turn into good government. You know, that wasn't the priority of the moment and I think there may be a sort of lazy assumption [...] that it would sort itself out and turn into more regular politics. (Interviewee 13 – former UK civil servant)

Some commented on the positive effects of the Assembly functioning for periods. Speaking before the most recent suspension, one noted positive working relations among politicians:

We've got the power-sharing agreement that's fair, you know all the communities are in government. Everybody's working together around the table, most of the time. I think day to day outside of all the drama there, the work is going on, you know, if you go up to Stormont they tell you...Sinn Féin and the DUP are in cahoots half the time! (Interviewee 3 – unionist commentator)

Despite this, there was a general sense that power-sharing had not moved Northern Ireland to a post-sectarian form of politics. The enduring divisions in politics mirror those in wider society:

Has the functioning of the Executive and Assembly led to significantly improved relationships between politicians? Well, so far as they see each other and worked with each other, to some extent perhaps. But not very dramatically and I don't think they've necessarily improved much the mood between the communities on the ground. (Interviewee 9 – former Irish civil servant)

A loyalist highlighted underlying frailties in how Strand 1 operates:

And the whole point about this is that the Assembly only works if the two largest parties have confidence in each other to work with each other and deliver. And they haven't. (Interviewee 10 – PUP politician)

Nevertheless, participants saw the Assembly as an improvement on the period of direct rule before 1999, and indeed on the Northern Ireland Parliament of 1921–72:

It's fairly clear now that the Assembly level is accepted as the main focal point for decision making around a whole range of issues. (Interviewee 11 – Alliance Party politician)

As we saw in the analysis of party manifestos, many actors argue for changes in how Strand 1 operates: every interviewee expressed frustrations with how they work today. Yet they also voiced fears that further changes to the internal settlement could unintentionally undermine power-sharing, or indeed the Agreement as a whole.

Assembly reforms

Several interviewees brought up the issue of designation. They contended that, as the non-aligned parties and identities had grown, the operation of Strand 1 should change to accommodate them:

I don't want to get too far ahead of myself here, but say for example Alliance or other non-aligned parties were to collectively maybe get 20 seats. You are talking then over 20% of the MLAs not falling onto the unionist or nationalist designations. That would really pose a threat to the legitimacy of the voting rules. On contentious issues. It just would manifestly not be fair. I mean there's one thing having six or seven MLAs 20 years ago and putting it down to an unfortunate anomaly. 'Just suck it up'. If you are pushing over 20 seats or 20% that's a much bigger problem. (Interviewee 11 – Alliance Party politician)

The current mechanisms are completely not built for our current political landscape. You know, Alliance and the Greens, these parties that are growing now. There's a lot of people that are falling into that that designation. The system really isn't set up to allow them to have as much of a voice. (Interviewee 3 – unionist commentator)

The petition of concern also attracted criticisms. Several interviewees, particularly those not directly involved in Northern Ireland party politics, thought it had morphed into a blocking technique used by the larger parties on issues unrelated to the constitutional or cultural divide:

Well, the petition of concern was abused, of course it was abused. But it became abused because all the trusted relationships broke down. (Interviewee 5 – former Alliance Party politician)

The petition of concern, you know, constantly misused for various things. (Interviewee 3 – unionist commentator)

They wanted to reform the mechanism to prevent such abuse, not to abolish it. Whether the changes introduced through New Decade, New Approach will satisfy that wish remains to be seen.

Executive reforms

Interviewees presented a mixed assessment of the Executive too:

Not only is it a good in itself that people worked together in government in Northern Ireland but I think it has a wider societal impact. On the other hand, working together is really only excellent if it actually delivers something, and the record of delivery of the Executive has been a limited one. At times its great objective in life was indeed to just to remain in being. (Interviewee 13 – former UK civil servant)

Some interviewees expressed frustration with the institutions' inability to deal with certain social issues that have become prominent in recent years and with that fact that change had had to come from outside Northern Ireland's democratically elected institutions:

That [progress] we've made socially in the past couple of years have come from Westminster. Equal marriage and abortion rights, you know? That is ridiculous. That has not been allowed to

progress within the Assembly, despite the fact that most people in Northern Ireland supported it, because of one party, whose own supporters don't even really support them! You know, even when it comes to equal marriage and abortion rights, I think, mandatory coalition is on the way out, I think most people are exasperated by it. (Interviewee 3 – unionist commentator)

As to what could be done to improve how the Executive operates, participants were divided. Some, particularly those not closely associated with unionist or nationalist parties, favoured an end to the mandatory coalition model, arguing that much of the instability stemmed from the system of requiring Sinn Féin and the DUP, despite their sharply opposed views on some key issues, to work together. Mirroring their party's position, Alliance interviewees preferred a voluntary model, with a supermajority threshold to ensure a degree of cross-community support:

In [...] the forthcoming election there could be a situation where it isn't possible to form a government even under the mandatory coalition rules. [...] We've always pushed a voluntary coalition from a point of good governance. But it may become very soon the only way which Northern Ireland can actually sustain the institution. (Interviewee 11 – Alliance Party politician)

The Good Friday Agreement is par-excellence an experiment in pluralist government. Not power-sharing government. That's another issue.... And I think it could have been a better experiment and I think it needs to move on. (Interviewee 5 – former Alliance Party politician)

A DUP representative spoke positively about a similar model, though not without doubts:

You would still have, even with 60% of support within the Assembly, you would still have what was basically a cross-community government. Albeit you would have a cross-community government where if agreement could not be reached, partners could then go and look for somebody else who they could find it easier to work with. It would still be difficult. I mean I'm not underestimating the difficulty there and you would still have the tensions that you have at the moment. The problem is the tensions at the moment, if you don't resolve them, the only alternative is for those tensions to lead to a total break down. At least if you had a more flexible arrangement where a threshold of support had to be required, tensions don't have to lead to a break down. They simply have to lead to a different alignment. (Interviewee 8 – DUP politician)

But others opposed reform of this model. A Sinn Féin representative argued that the current stand-off over Executive formation was a result not of the formation rules, but of the alleged failure of political unionism to embrace the Agreement's power-sharing ethos:

The fact today is that we are now looking at a fundamental crisis around power-sharing itself. [...] And I actually think that it reaches into a potential or emergent crisis around the Good Friday Agreement itself. And potentially though this remains to be tested the degree to which political unionism are going to continue to remain aligned to the political arrangement set down by the Good Friday Agreement and fulfil their commitments and obligations under that agreement. (Interviewee 15 – Sinn Féin politician)

Across the spectrum, interviewees expressed reservations about the impact that changing the Executive formation model would have, irrespective of whether they backed it in the abstract. They saw a risk that opening up particular aspects of Strand 1 for renegotiation could undermine support of the wider settlement. Most also agreed that a perception that the rules were being changed in order to lock out the largest party of either unionism or nationalism would be disastrous:

We're not there yet. And we can't go there because that mindset of unionism which has brought us to this point continues to prevail. Any suggestion that we could set aside the requirement of power-sharing on a mandatory footing, and the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, would be a passport for going back to the days of majoritarianism. [...] And we all know the conditions that that created and the consequences that flow is a direct result of that form of institutionalised injustice. So any suggestion that we can break or depart from those core provisions of the Good Friday Agreement I think is an impossibilist agenda. (Interviewee 15 – Sinn Féin politician)

The difficulty with this is that if we want to keep moving forward in a positive way, then you know the only way we can do that is through mandatory coalitions. They are not going to work any other way. [...] If you do away with that then what you are going to move back to is majority rule in a sense, because there will always be more than one. (Interviewee 10 – PUP politician)

Some felt that, while reform now would be undesirable, that may change, particularly if the middle ground parties grow further:

Maybe as time goes on and people define themselves less as green and orange and different types of politics becomes more prevalent in the North, we would get away from that and you could have a functioning opposition and people wouldn't be divided based on the constitutional question. (Interviewee 7 – Fianna Fáil politician)

The stronger Alliance becomes the more they are able to influence. So, I think it has to go through that [the review procedure] [...] I think trying to change that top down is just against the entire process. (Interviewee 12 – Irish academic)

Another said that maintaining the mindset of power-sharing was the key:

You know it's about the ethos, really, and it is at the core about whether or not you're sharing power because you think it's in the best interest of everybody, or whether or not you're sharing power because it says it on the paper you have to share power. (Interviewee 6 – SDLP politician)

While there was general caution about moving to voluntary coalitions, the way St Andrews changed the selection of the First and deputy First Ministers was widely criticised. Though we rarely directly brought this issue up in our questions, several participants raised their deep frustration that St Andrews had turned elections into competitions for the First Minister position. They resented the move to an automatic right to these roles, and away from a more collegial cross-community vote. Many saw the DUP and Sinn Féin as having changed the Agreement to suit their own interests.

The idea of privatising the nomination of First Minister and deputy First Ministers [...] to specific parties just because of the numbers they've achieved in an election [...] is wrong. That's an aberration that was created at St Andrews, and it was created simply because the DUP didn't want to go through the embarrassment on that first day of their MLAs having to be in a division lobby with Sinn Féin MLAs, to vote for Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness. (Interviewee 2 – former SDLP politician)

There are lots of issues where people were messing about. The St Andrews Agreement and all of that. That probably needs to be changed back. But you know having a joint [vote]. Because the First and deputy First Minister are joint. (Interviewee 10 – PUP politician)

I just think St Andrews [...] was about getting the DUP and Sinn Féin into office. It is very much catered to them, and their concerns and I think that's at the expense of everybody else. (Interviewee 3 – unionist commentator)

[The focus on who gets First Minister] is a corruption from the St Andrews Agreement but, it has changed the, I suppose, the atmosphere. (Interviewee 6 – SDLP politician)

But not everyone agreed with this criticism. An Irish academic (Interviewee 14) argued that the St Andrews changes did not fundamentally alter the substance of how the Executive actually operates. DUP and Sinn Féin representatives argued the changes at St Andrews were necessary at the time.

I think that this is perhaps being diminished now, [but] it was always our understanding that the Good Friday Agreement is only an interim arrangement anyway and would be subject to change and the parties would look in a more mature way once things have settled as to whether or not the exact nature of the structures was commensurate with good government. (Interviewee 8 – DUP politician)

We are now where we are. And I think that it's a mistake to perceive that in some way or another all of this is tied up in the description of the office. Or the perception of how the office is described. It's not about that. It's much deeper. It is much more systemic. (Interviewee 15 – Sinn Féin politician)

Several interviewees suggested reverting to the original cross-community vote system contained in the 1998 Agreement, wherein the two positions were elected on a joint ticket through a cross-community vote in the Assembly. Another proposed, instead, that the First and deputy First Minister roles be filled as part of the D'Hondt system of ministerial allocation, which happens at the start of each Executive term for the other ministerial positions (except Justice) after a First and deputy First Minister have taken office.

Others suggested renaming the two positions as 'Joint First Ministers'.

Finally, one interviewee argued that, in forming an Executive, the parties should agree a programme for government. They hoped this would aid stability and encourage a focus on delivery:

At the moment in particular it's difficult to see what the Executive exists for [...] beyond managing the day to day. (Interviewee 13 – former UK civil servant)

However, none of our other interviewees mentioned the programme for government as a priority, reflecting its lack of prominence in party manifestos too.

Civic Forum

Some interviewees were more supportive of the Civil Forum than others; several questioned its value. Most agreed that the body was unlikely to be restored anytime soon:

I've always been very sceptical of the Civic Forum. I don't know why we need another layer of government like that. The interest groups do have, on the specific issues which they wish to deal with, they do have access to ministers and indeed having a devolved government means that they have very close access to ministers because Northern Ireland is so small and so parochial. So it's not that they can't have a voice. The voice is already there. And the avenues for their voice to be heard are you know, fairly open. And so for all those reasons, I think that it's wasteful to have yet another layer of government. (Interviewee 8 – DUP politician)

The Civic Forum itself really didn't make an impact. I mean, I think that they could have done a great deal more to effectively create themselves and make themselves into a second chamber. And there just seemed to be remarkably little creativity in the ideas and way of operating at that time. And it's hard to drag that back again. (Interviewee 5 – former Alliance Party politician)

Well, the parties parked it. And were very unhappy [...] because it was Secretary of State patronage, and they had no control over it. And then they shrank it, which was even worse – like creating a mini-Senate, but of no consequence. (Interviewee 14 – Irish academic)

I think it was alright for Sinn Féin to have it when they were not the largest party. [...] Once they got to power, they certainly did not want anyone giving them advice about how to run the country. (Interviewee 10 – PUP politician)

I would have thought that would be quite beneficial to have a Civic Forum to deal with contentious issues, you know. Like, there's a lot of people in the business community in Northern Ireland, in trade unions, who feel they are not being represented by the political parties there. But it's just the parties have a stranglehold when it comes to elections and it's very difficult for them to move beyond their bunkers. So I would have thought that the Civic Forum would have benefits. (Interviewee 7 – Fianna Fáil politician)

The issue of the Forum was often discussed alongside that of citizens' assemblies, which have become more prominent in Irish and British politics in recent years:

The Civic Forum I think should still exist in its own right. But as I say that's not in the absence of allowing for citizens' juries, citizens' assemblies or various input by lay people, even sitting alongside members of Assembly committees, say when it comes to pre-legislative scrutiny or post-legislative scrutiny. (Interviewee 2 – former SDLP politician)

We would be very emphatically in support of the ideas of citizens' assemblies or constitutional conventions as they've been done in the South as a model to try and address some of those blockages which keep leading to paralysis, crisis, or suspension of government. So thinking about using them as a mechanism which will, you know, look at designation, look at the petition of concern, and how we can have voluntary coalition while still protecting against majoritarianism. Looking at issues like legacy and re-invigorating that idea of a civic forum, or communities and, you know, citizens having a real input into governance in Northern Ireland. (Interviewee – (NI) Green Party politician)

As noted in Chapter 2, Sinn Féin has advocated use of the citizens' assembly model in preparing for Irish unification. A unionist interviewee cautioned against this, while supporting such assemblies in general:

The citizens' assemblies in the South have been really helpful. I have mixed feelings about citizens' assemblies on constitutional issues: I think we should stay the hell away from them unless they're going to deal with both [possible constitutional futures]. But, yeah, in terms of social issues, absolutely. (Interviewee 3 – unionist commentator)

Meanwhile, two other interviewees felt that citizens' assemblies were ill-suited to Northern Ireland's context:

And what's going to happen is that you're going to get a split in it. If it is actually representative of the rest of community it will split. So what exactly is it that people are thinking it is going to

contribute? Because it is a completely different situation in the South. And so I'm not really persuaded. (Interviewee 5 – former Alliance Party politician)

I see big problems. I think the civic conversation is good to feed into, to support, political positions. That is certainly a piece of this jigsaw that has been missing. But what civic conversations present you is a number of challenges. And, for example, when I've looked at this civic conversation, what is the make-up of that? Is it 50% Protestant? Or 50% Catholic? Or 50% Unionist? Or 50% Loyalist and Unionist? Or Republican? Or Republican/nationalist? Is it academics? Is it business? Is it politicians? Is it no politicians? Should there be politicians? So, I think the civic conversation is useful to inform and discuss and debate. But can civic conversation ultimately drive policy? I don't think so, I'm not convinced it can. Because you do that through the ballot box. (Interviewee 1 – UUP politician)

In sum, interviewees held a range of views on the issue of reviving the Civic Forum, and on the oft-associated idea of creating more citizens' assemblies in Northern Ireland. Both ideas have supporters, particularly in the nationalist and 'other' communities. But doubts are widespread too.

Strand 2

Most interviewees saw Strand 2 as underdeveloped and underused. Northern nationalists and participants from the Republic of Ireland, unsurprisingly, made this point most strongly. However, it was also put to us by interviews from the 'others' designation, and those from Great Britain. These interviewees felt that, even in times when the NSMC was meeting, the agenda was often thin and unambitious:

I suppose on Strand 2, you know again it's a cliché, but we haven't realised the potential that is so there, you know? There is not as much practical advance in terms of uniting the island. And synchronising the infrastructure and bringing communities together that there should have been (Interviewee 6 – SDLP politician)

I would say that they have been fairly invisible and marginal to the debate. The North/South stuff has been very under underdeveloped. We have a bit more energy now from the Irish government under their Shared Island Unit initiative. [...] The NSMC, it was looking at a range of piecemeal issues and it seemed at times just to eternally have the same items on the agenda and quite a few things weren't necessarily moving that quickly across the line. Other issues were constantly being blocked from being discussed. Things again became very formulaic in terms of the meetings that were taking place. But there wasn't any real sense of energy certainly on a collective basis across either government to really energise North/South cooperation. Some ministers may have done bits here and there, but it wasn't really being taken forward. (Interviewee 11 – Alliance Party politician)

Intermittent unionist boycotts of the NSMC were criticised by almost every non-unionist interviewee. There were also complaints that, when the NSMC did meet, unionists viewed it as a box-ticking exercise, and blocked more substantial ways the Council could develop:

Certainly, unionism have always sought to downplay the maximalist approach of Strand 2 that we require as a key element of implementing the Agreement. It is like power-sharing in Strand 1. They are neuralgic to the very idea that there should be a full-fat approach to the implementation of Strand 2. (Interviewee 15 – Sinn Féin politician)

When you look at the North/South ministerial bodies like, you know, you just get the impression that the majority of unionist politicians just don't want to be involved in it. So they just want to ignore it or they are embarrassed at even engaging in it, and they do it under duress. [...] And, of course, it is just fear of their base. Fear of the consequences for them if they do engage in it more you know? (Interviewee 7 – Fianna Fáil politician)

Nationalists, north and south, were extremely disappointed with how Strand 2 has been utilised, particularly as its scope was already significantly narrowed in the final weeks of negotiations in 1998 to win unionist acceptance (interviews with those present in 1998). Some unionists and loyalists also expressed disappointment with how Strand 2 functions:

The point I am making to you here is that we live on an island. And where we [can] cooperate let's cooperate. I mean, I don't want to sort of close the Republic down or do anything like that. I mean, it is there. And we need to build those relationships. But they should all be done through Strand 2, not via some Protocol. Because we are in control of it [Strand 2]. Both nationalism and unionism is in control of it. They are not in control of what happens in the Protocol but they are in Strand 2. (Interviewee 10 – PUP politician)

Multiple interviewees said that, though the institutions had been disappointing, cooperation across the island had been taking place organically since 1998. They particularly highlighted the all-island electricity market. This has been politically uncontroversial – which was possible, they said, precisely because it was not tied to the political structures of Strand 2. Accordingly, some thought that advocates of an all-Ireland approach to economic development should focus on the practical things that could be done to convince sceptics of the benefits of cooperation:

I mean, in a funny way, the single biggest advance in cross-border cooperation over the last 20 years has been the creation of the single electricity market. That was driven by the practical need and in fact it didn't – there is no institutional underpinning – it is in no way underpinned by the NSMC or otherwise. And in a way it kind of in some ways adds weight to the unionist argument which always was that you don't need elaborate structure – what we need to do is find areas of common interest. Now I think both are true. But I do think that there are obviously areas in health and education, to take two, where there is quite a lot that could be done with imagination and drive. (Interviewee 9 – former Irish civil servant)

Notwithstanding this point, some interviewees insisted that the two governments needed to lead on utilising Strand 2, irrespective of unionism's attitude or any other political circumstance. They felt that both governments should be doing more on this front:

This Tory administration that has been in power since 2010 have taken a deeply negative approach towards the management not only of the Agreement overall, but a hostile approach to working to the level of cooperation that is required for the implementation of Strand 2. (Interviewee 15, Sinn Féin politician)

[...] unless the two governments are properly engaged, and the Irish government as an element of Irish nationalism is sufficiently invested in that agenda, then we can bring forward proposals and ideas, but their implementation falls short. (Interviewee 15, Sinn Féin politician)

Meanwhile, a DUP politician insisted that, in the years prior to Brexit period, unionism was willing to work the Agreement's Strand 2 institutions:

Unionists have actually operated Strand 2, up until the Protocol. [We] have operated Strand 2 in a way which has not been showing reluctance or anything like that. (Interviewee 8 – DUP politician)

Perhaps partially in response to this view, the Shared Island Unit, launched by the Irish government in 2020, has been attempting to revitalise many of the all-Ireland economic and social programmes that have been discussed in Strand 2. Nevertheless, northern nationalists and some from the ‘other’ community contended that the government in Dublin had taken a very minimalist approach to what could be done on an all-island basis:

It wasn’t a case that the Irish government had this huge agenda that was blocked which they were pushing. It never really took off in a sense. And the irony of course is that the North/South aspects were the most difficult parts of the Good Friday Agreement negotiations in the final few days. And since then they became fairly marginal. (Interviewee 11 – Alliance Party politician)

Some participants highlighted a confluence of the return of power-sharing in 2007 and the economic crash of 2008 for distracting the Dublin government. In that context, they said, North/South issues were not a priority for the Irish government.

By contrast, unionists criticised the Shared Island Unit for not engaging effectively with unionists. One suggested a ‘Shared Islands’ (plural) approach. Some interviewees across the political spectrum speculated that Irish government policy in this area was motivated by a fear that Sinn Féin would capitalise electorally if the Dublin government did not do more on North/South cooperation:

It was farcical to present this optical about a shared island when you didn’t really want to engage. It is at arm’s length engagement. I can see in Southern politics that there is an appetite to engage with Northern unionists until such a point as when they will have influence or control over something. [...] I am not convinced that Northern unionists see a lot of this as genuine serious engagement. (Interviewee 1 – UUP politician)

Strand 3

As with Strand 2, interviewees from all backgrounds criticised how Strand 3 has been used since 1998. Several thought that the underdevelopment of the BIC and the BIIGC had made dealing with Brexit harder:

The problem is Strand 3. The British and Irish governments didn’t meet, you know, at the top level. The BIIGC did not operate basically, it didn’t operate at the top level for about 10 years. That’s why we got a problem with Brexit. Had Strand 3 of the GFA been operational we wouldn’t have had this big problem over Brexit. Because the British and Irish Prime Ministers would have been talking to each other. (Interviewee 5 – former Alliance Party politician)

While many interviewees cited Brexit as the clearest example of Strand 3 failing, most said that problems predated 2016. An SDLP politician (Interviewee 6), for example, commented, ‘it wasn’t in the rudest of health before [Brexit]’. A politician from the Republic who has worked extensively on Northern Ireland matters commented on his own lack of knowledge of the BIC’s meetings and said, ‘this is frightening that [someone like me] doesn’t even know that these events happen’ (Interviewee 7, Fianna Fáil politician).

Various reasons were given as to why Strand 3 had not developed as intended. As with Strand 2, interviewees cited the 2008 financial crisis, which came to dominate politics, particularly in Dublin. In addition, the devolution of justice and policing between 2007 and 2010 narrowed the set of substantive issues the BIIGC was being used to discuss. A mistaken sense emerged in London and Dublin that Northern Ireland was ‘sorted’:

I think Enda Kenny was far less interested in Northern Ireland really than his predecessors. And then of course there was the enormous financial crisis we had to deal with. So in a sense Northern Ireland was humming along okay. So therefore no real need to give this particular priority and I think at the same time there was a loss of interest. (Interviewee 9 – former Irish civil servant)

Now, to some degree understandably and to some degree unforgivably, that all changed around 2010. In 2010 we had devolution, which had been shaky, stabilised again with the devolution of policing and justice. Now, that had an institutional effect on the NIO because the NIO shrank massively. It had been the Home Affairs department for Northern Ireland as well. The Northern Ireland department remain[ed] separate, but [...] the old Home Affairs functions were spun off into the devolved Ministry of Justice. The result of that was that the NIO lost a lot of senior heft. But probably more importantly also, London rather took it that Northern Ireland was now sorted, with a bit of hesitation around security when you had the killing of the two soldiers and then of the policemen a couple of years later.’ (Interviewee 13 – former UK civil servant)

There was disagreement among interviewees as to what responsibility the UK government and unionists bore for Strand 3’s limits. One nationalist suggested they were to blame:

These institutions have been marginalised for far too long and, unfortunately, I believe that’s been part of the story, of the ‘Tories’ failed agenda. But it also gives cover for the Tories in the process [...] it helps the unionist agenda to push back against implementation of both the Good Friday Agreement and power-sharing in the North itself. (Interviewee 15 – Sinn Féin politician)

A UK government official voiced the commonly held perception that unionists remained sceptical of Strand 3 – even though many of its features had been included in the Agreement as a means of encouraging unionist support:

So, BIIGC has this association among unionists, partly because it’s derived [...] from the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, [over] which they then spent some years of civil disobedience and disengagement from politics. Refusing to meet ministers and all of that. (Interviewee 13, former UK civil servant)

But a unionist politician did not voice such scepticism, and suggested the problem lay elsewhere:

The first thing is that they’ve got to be given equal status and they’re not given equal status at the moment. All of the emphasis at the moment seems to be on Strand 2 and very little on Strand 3. And that’s not just in relation to the Northern Ireland Protocol. That’s in relation to the kind of frequency of meetings of Strand 3, and also the issues which are dealt with. [...] Strand 3 is more of a kind of a talking shop rather than action body. (Interviewee 8 – DUP politician)

Most interviewees across the political spectrum thought more should be done to revitalise Strand 3, but they disagreed on how best to do that. Some nationalists argued for a recommitment to the principles laid out in 1998 across all three strands, with leadership coming from Dublin and London:

What we need to do is get back to the resetting of relations, governmental relations, and ensuring that both the British and the Irish government bear down on their responsibilities for implementation of Strand 1, Strand 2, Strand 3. (Interviewee 15 – Sinn Féin politician)

Yeah, well, for Strand 3 it's both the BIC and the BIIGC, both of them obviously need to be looked at again and recognition to be given that, look, here's an under-used toolkit. There's an awful lot in here that can be done. The BIIGC, I think it's just scandalous and ridiculous that the two governments didn't meet. There's no reason why they couldn't meet. (Interviewee 2 – former SDLP politician)

The latter interviewee suggested that the revitalisation of Strand 3 should be part of a review of the Agreement, drawing on the expertise and experience now found in the Scottish and Welsh governments and parliaments as well as in the British and Irish governments and the Northern Ireland parties.

Nationalists, some 'others', and interviewees from Dublin and London all advocated more regular BIIGC meetings. The governments, they said, would thereby grow more accustomed to cooperating with one another. Indeed, in future crisis points, a regular schedule might help depoliticise the very fact of holding the meeting themselves. And institutionalised meetings would provide 'inertia', stopping a change in practice from happening unnoticed just because of a change in circumstances.

Yet the former officials we spoke with were sceptical of this idea. While they appreciated that structures and schedules might aid positive relations between Dublin and London, they felt that they are not always a prerequisite for good relations, and they also saw downsides:

I think it's a question of how important structures are. [...] There have been attempts to put the relationship on a more structured [footing]. But then what was quite clear, both at the meetings of the senior officials and at the meetings of the Prime Ministers, was the thinness of the agenda in many cases. (Interviewee 9 – former Irish civil servant)

I absolutely completely sympathise with the point that British governments are scandalously neglecting the relationship with Dublin. Nevertheless the relationship with Dublin went extremely well at times when we weren't having BIIGCs. (Interviewee 13 – former UK civil servant)

Dublin is not held in high regard by unionists at the moment. Whose fault that is one can argue, but there you are. The relationship is all-important but having institutions doesn't in itself necessarily achieve very much. (Interviewee 13 – former UK civil servant)

Interviewees also highlighted some challenges in revitalising Strand 3. First, many of the civil servants and politicians who nurtured the East/West relationship before 1998 have retired or passed away, leaving a new, less experienced generation:

There's one person left in our [Irish] system who was actively involved in the Good Friday negotiations. And a couple of others who were very junior at the time and who were around. [...] But I think in the British system really there's – you know, for a long time there has been virtually no institutional memory. (Interviewee 9 – former Irish civil servant)

Second, trust in both the British and Irish governments is low:

There was a good will around it in a lot of cases [in 1998]. And now [...] nobody trusts the British government. [...] Indeed, people don't trust the Irish government either. There is a degree of cynicism around aspects of it. (Interviewee 4 – civic society figure)

Interviewees tended to talk about the BIIGC and BIC collectively, while placing more emphasis on the former. When we asked directly about the BIC, all agreed it was largely a 'talking shop'. Yet most thought it could do a lot more, particularly in the post-Brexit context, to manage relations across the UK and Ireland – if the governments were willing:

If you really do want to empower the British–Irish Council, that implies a London government willing to give greater power and authority to Edinburgh, Cardiff, and Belfast. [...] I'm not sure there is a British willingness to do that. And from the Irish government's point of view, if you really do strengthen the BIC, they're a sovereign government, and the rest of the devolved institutions we're talking about are all controllable or run by the London government. (Interviewee 14 – Irish academic)

Some interviewees thought that BIC implementation bodies, akin to those in Strand 2, could help give Strand 3 substance; others, while not opposed, were sceptical such a move would have much effect.

We asked some interviewees whether they had any view on how a Sinn Féin-led government in Dublin would affect relations across Strand 3. The most common response was that, though it would create new tensions and challenges, it should not be viewed as something that would undermine the Agreement or Anglo-Irish relations:

We're all asking that question! And Sinn Féin in the South is busy saying, 'Look, we're just a normal party...you can trust us, it will be steady'. What implication does it have for British Irish leadership? I mean, the central thing about Sinn Féin is they won't expect to be best friends with the British. But they will do deals, obviously they will. (Interviewee 12 – Irish academic)

Finally, some participants said that, while good relations between London and Dublin were important, the governments should avoid 'hand holding' the process in Northern Ireland. Leadership needed to come from within Northern Ireland, and it was time to move beyond the tribalism that dominates its political discourse. Others disagreed, and reinforced the point that Strand 3 should be seen as crucially important to the overall delivery and durability of the Agreement. Indeed, they thought this was *the* crucial lesson of 1998. The drift that set in between 2008 and the Brexit period, should never be allowed to happen again. For these participants, leadership and sustained engagement from London and Dublin should be viewed as a prerequisite for progress in Northern Ireland.

Constitutional issues and Brexit

We asked interviewees for their views on the provisions of the 1998 Agreement relating to Northern Ireland's constitutional future, as well as the possibility of a united Ireland. Beyond the basic question of whether they wanted Northern Ireland to remain in the UK or become part of a united Ireland, most interviewees did not have developed thoughts. Most agreed that a 'border poll' was not an immediate prospect, though Brexit had disrupted many assumptions about the likelihood of a united Ireland. Indeed, Brexit-related constitutional concerns were raised on all sides. Some unionists expressed anger with the UK and Irish governments and the EU over the

Protocol, which they saw as harming Northern Ireland's place in the Union. Brexit's opponents, by contrast, thought Brexit's supporters had shown disregard for its impact on political relationships, fundamentally destabilising the current constitutional settlement.

We also asked interviewees for their thoughts on the current constitutional set-up within the UK and whether it should be changed. Views on this were even less defined than they were on Irish unity. Interviewees did have some thoughts on issues relating to the future of the Union, but most offered no particular ideas on models of change.

The prospect of a 'border poll' and Irish unification

Despite its requirement for a border poll if a majority for Irish unification appears 'likely', the 1998 Agreement is largely silent on many core questions related to how unification would come about, and what precise form it would take. We therefore asked interviewees whether they had any thoughts about filling these gaps. Most acknowledged that one impact of the 2016 Brexit referendum had been a notable uptick in campaigning for a border poll by Sinn Féin, some nationalist politicians from other political parties, and civic society organisations. Some, including one politician in Dublin, raised this point critically, arguing that Ireland, north and south, was not ready for a debate on unification:

I don't think adequate preparation has been put into making the argument for unity. (Interviewee 20 – Fine Gael politician)

A legal expert from Northern Ireland concurred, and said the debate was taking place in an information vacuum:

There's no mechanism for working out [...] politically, what would a united Ireland look like? What protections would there be for the various communities? How would it acknowledge the traditions of all the traditions of Ireland? (Interviewee 16 – lawyer from Northern Ireland)

A unionist politician we spoke with went further, arguing that Dublin was actively hostile to the idea of unification taking place.

Well, I think that, from the conversations I've had with some politicians in the Irish Republic, [there] are some of them who are scared stiff of not just unionists having to be accommodated in the united Ireland, but Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland, who they regard as almost a totally different breed. They say this to you privately. I'm not so sure they ever said publicly or even want it attributed to them publicly, but they are maybe even more scared of Irish or northern nationalists than they are of northern unionists. (Interviewee 8 – DUP politician)

A non-aligned politician largely agreed:

And the truth is, serious people in politics in the South are terrified of the idea of a united Ireland, but no one can actually say so without getting abuse. (Interviewee 5 – former Alliance Party politician)

Meanwhile, a Fianna Fáil politician (Interviewee 7) argued that the debate in Northern Ireland about its constitutional future was politically immature, and that the ultimate constitutional destiny would be won by those who were most willing to move away from traditional hardline visions.

A Sinn Féin representative did not argue for an immediate referendum, but instead said that preparations should be underway to prepare for constitutional change, which they thought was a real possibility in the coming years. Asked about how to balance the need for detailed plans for unification in advance of a referendum and the need to engage the different traditions on the island of Ireland in the debate about possible constitutional change, they raised the idea of holding a citizens' assembly:

I think we're going to have to take a very imaginative and joined up approach to how you facilitate those two different work streams or aspects. That's the importance of a national citizens' assembly, because I think that opens up the potential for very broad-ranging engagement and discussion. But it can't be on the basis of predetermining what the outcome is going to look like. I think it [could play a] very useful role in opening minds, stimulating discussion, getting both political and societal strategic consideration to how do we move through a transitional process. (Interviewee 15 – Sinn Féin politician)

Apart from these debates about when a border poll should take place, and how undefined aspects of a united Ireland should be worked out in advance of a referendum, we heard very few concrete ideas about what a unified state would look like. This aligned with the findings of the Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland (2021). One exception was from a unionist, who picked up on emerging debate in academic and political circles (see O'Leary 2022; Coakley 2022) around whether Northern Ireland should continue as a political entity *within* any future united Ireland:

I'm very much in the view that if a united Ireland happens that Northern Ireland should still exist. Or be federal in Ulster or something like that. I'm a big fan of that idea. I think it would be very popular, so I think it should carry over because the protections of the Good Friday Agreement, you know? [It] should be there to help with respect for communities, and commitment and respect for one another and equality. (Interviewee 3 – unionist commentator)

The current Union and constitutional reform in the UK

We also asked interviewees for their views towards the current Union and its future. We found that, if attitudes towards the specifics of a united Ireland were somewhat undefined, attitudes towards the current Union and its future were even more so. Almost every interviewee had little to say. Many openly admitted they had no view on how the Union might change, though most saw significant reform in the near future as unlikely.

However, a DUP politician did put forward the idea of devolving more powers to Stormont, though as we saw in the manifesto analysis, unionism is often divided on this point:

I'm a supporter of devolution. I do see a case for devolving more things locally and having greater local accountability for decisions made. And obviously there are huge issues which can't be devolved and have to be dealt with at a national level. But where you can devolve some of these things and have decisions made which are reflective of local problems then, yes, we should do it. (Interviewee 8 – DUP politician)

A British politician was wary of fundamental changes in the UK's constitutional settlement, and vehemently against any return to direct rule (in the context of the ongoing impasse at Stormont), saying it would be 'a monumental political failure' (Interviewee 17 – Conservative Party (GB) politician).

In response to a specific question from the authors, an academic pointed to a need for care in any reforms to the Union:

If Labour has a plan to federalise the UK, then it has to be very careful that the federal unit created in Northern Ireland, if there is one, retains all of the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement. It would then have all sorts of questions to address. Would there be the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference as a distinct arrangement with a foreign sovereign government over one part of the UK? That’s not normal in a federation. So I think it would inevitably be the case that Northern Ireland at least would have to be asymmetrically treated. (Interviewee 14 – Irish academic)

The Impact of Brexit and the Protocol

The academics and legal scholars we spoke with, echoing recent scholarly literature (Gormley-Heenan and Aughey 2017; Cochrane 2021; Hayward 2021), agreed that Brexit had destabilised the politics of Northern Ireland, and the Union as a whole:

the problem about Brexit is that once you decide that you’re going to have Brexit and that it is going to mean at least some level of regulatory divergence, that it’s always in my view going to have an impact on the Good Friday Agreement (Interviewee 16 – lawyer from Northern Ireland)

Over the longer run, I think the European question destabilises the UK as a whole in all sorts of ways. It makes the Scots more likely to succeed. It means that for those northerners who enthusiastically embraced Europe, the only way back into the EU for the foreseeable future is voting for Irish reunification. (Interviewee 14 – Irish academic)

A non-aligned politician agreed, and argued that Brexit has also undermined relations between the British and Irish governments:

You have the toxicity around Brexit. And you have the British and Irish governments pulling in different directions. So you have moved essentially towards the perfect storm of instability here. (Interviewee 11 – Alliance Party politician)

The Protocol was designed to obviate a need for customs checks on the Irish land border. It does so by keeping Northern Ireland in aspects of the EU’s single market and customs union. But this has created regulatory and customs barriers in the Irish Sea, especially for goods moving between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Unionist anger at this development was palpable during interviews. Though the situation has since moved on as a result of the Windsor Framework agreed in February 2023, the sense of isolation that many unionists and loyalists felt remains pertinent:

I think that a lot of the issues with the Protocol – there is a genuine feeling that its been hoisted upon us. That is has been imposed upon us. And I think what they, what both the UK and the Commission missed, was directly involving local people to make local decisions. Because that makes them take ownership. As it stands at the minute, it just seems to have been imposed on them. (Interviewee 1 – UUP politician)

There is this sense that the [threat of] republican violence was talked up during the Brexit process. And I’m not saying I agree with that, but that’s what people would say, you know? We were told that we could not have a hard border between North and South because the republicans would kick off. (Interviewee 3 – unionist commentator)

Another unionist politician agreed, and also argued that the Protocol arrangements violate the principle of consent in the Agreement.

Any change in the constitutional positioned on the island can only done with the consent of the people in Northern Ireland. Now there is absolutely no doubt that the Northern Ireland Protocol changes our constitutional position. It changes it in a number of ways. (Interviewee 8 – DUP politician)

Nationalists acknowledged there were legitimate concerns from businesses, consumers, and unionists about the Protocol, but were very critical of how unionist politicians had blocked the Strand 1 institutions to oppose it:

Some of it is absolutely about, whatever is the opposite of endearing is, un-endearing unionism to the Good Friday Agreement. (Interviewee 6 – SDLP politician)

All of the politicians we spoke with agreed that the 2016 referendum and Brexit itself had profoundly impacted politics. A non-aligned politician argued that this impact on constitutional politics went beyond Northern Ireland itself and was part of a much larger destabilisation of the UK's and Europe's political systems in recent years.

Well, I think the problem is that the ground underneath all our feet is shifting. In the first instance Brexit shifted the ground. It shifted attitudes in England in particular. Or more correctly perhaps, it represented and exemplified the shift that there had been in attitudes. And of course, this has destabilised the United Kingdom as a whole. Temporarily or permanently, well, that remains to be seen. But they're not just attitudes that have changed in Britain. They are attitudes that have changed right throughout Europe. (Interviewee 5 – former Alliance Party politician)

Conclusion

As we noted at the beginning of the chapter, the interview findings corroborate some of the conclusions of our manifesto analysis while diverging from others; they also raise new issues.

Most of the earlier findings in relation to peace and security are corroborated: the situation has considerably improved since 1998, and the deep contentiousness of the Agreement's early years has largely passed. On the other hand, the interviews highlighted concerns about the future direction of policing, particularly in relation to diminishing recruitment from nationalist or Catholic backgrounds. Furthermore, many interviewees from all political perspectives and none, expressed worries about communities that have not benefited fully from Northern Ireland's progress since 1998 and that see ongoing patterns of economic deprivation, political alienation, and violence. Loyalist communities were particularly mentioned in this regard. Interviewees were keen to emphasise that these problems had to be tackled if the Agreement was to prosper in the future.

The findings on rights provisions highlight the tensions that we saw in Chapter 2: nationalists and non-aligned interviewees supported a Bill of Rights, while some unionists were much more sceptical. On the other hand, as we suggested in Chapter 2, unionist opposition to a Bill of Rights may not be as entrenched as many non-unionists suppose it to be. Our non-unionist interviewees often expressed the view that unionist opposition runs deep. But the unionist commentator and the loyalist politician we spoke with both backed the idea, and the DUP politician did not express opposition as a matter of principle.

Findings in relation to Strand 1 also largely fit with those of Chapter 2: most interviewees wanted power-sharing government to work and were frustrated that the institutions were not operating more effectively. Some offered proposals for reform, but several acknowledged that how these might work in practice had not been thought through in depth. One difference from the manifesto analysis was that we heard much more scepticism about the wisdom of seeking to fundamentally reform the institutions: fears were expressed from multiple perspectives that opening up any individual aspects of the 1998 settlement would risk an unravelling of the whole.

As to Strands 2 and 3, the pictures given by the manifestos and the interviews are rather different: many interviewees attached importance to strengthening and extending the operation of both strands; yet they have been given little detailed treatment in party manifestos. It may be that many political actors in Northern Ireland want Strands 2 and 3 to work better, but have not yet devoted much attention to the question of how best to bring that about. Likewise, constitutional issues – whether in the UK or in a united Ireland – have received little detailed consideration from many participants.

Finally, we note the recurring concern that both London and Dublin have disengaged from Northern Ireland affairs and that, without re-engagement, progress on many matters will be difficult. Politicians, former officials, and academics were all keen to emphasise this point. While interviewees sometimes highlighted ways in which Northern Ireland's politicians themselves could do more to advance the Agreement's working, there was also recognition that both history and conflicting future aspirations make this difficult, and that great support from London and Dublin is essential to political progress in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 4. Public Perceptions of the Agreement

This chapter turns to an examination of public perceptions of the Agreement. We begin by outlining existing evidence on this subject, from surveys and from a small-scale deliberative exercise carried out by researchers in 2022. These studies have yielded much useful information, but provide only some insight into people's thinking on the Agreement and its component parts. For a more in-depth examination of those attitudes, we conducted a set of focus groups in summer 2022. The bulk of the chapter presents findings from those focus groups.

Our concentration in this chapter is solely on perceptions in Northern Ireland: we have not sought to gather evidence in the Republic of Ireland or in Great Britain. It is safe to assume, however, that few people outside Northern Ireland have many thoughts on specific elements of Agreement. Even in Northern Ireland, as we shall see, many aspects of the Agreement are little known to the public.

Existing research findings

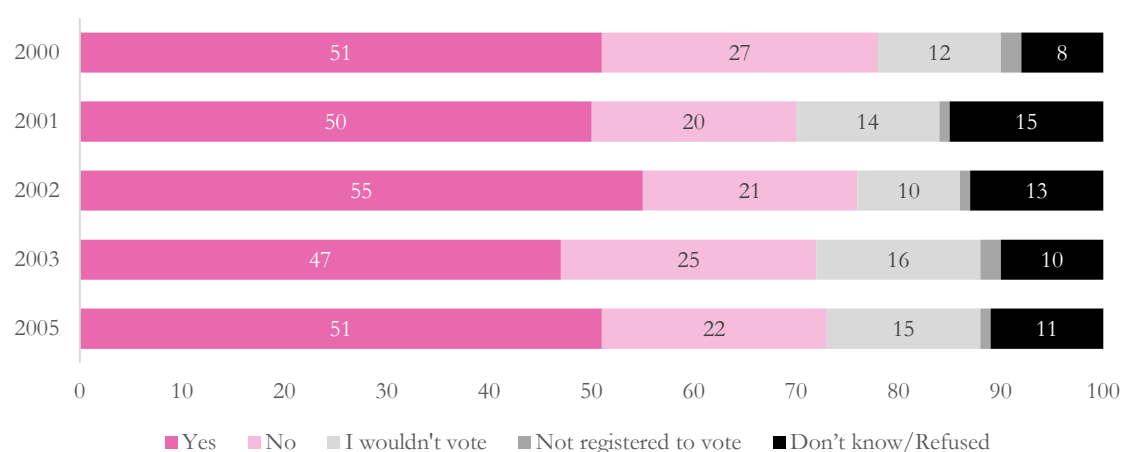
The earliest evidence that we have of public opinion towards the 1998 Agreement in Northern Ireland comes from the referendum of May 1998. The official result showed strong support for the arrangements overall – at 71% for, versus 29% against – but did not reveal how attitudes were spread across the population.

The Northern Ireland Referendum and Election survey, conducted in the summer of 1998, suggested that 91% of Catholics and 53% of Protestants supported the Agreement (Evans and O'Leary 2000: 85). A year later, the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey asked how respondents had voted. Claimed Yes voting was higher than the actual result, at 79% (excluding 'Don't know' responses) – which is interesting, as it suggests that some wanted to believe they had voted Yes who had not. Support was put at 98% among Catholic respondents and 61% among Protestants (again excluding Don't knows) (NILT 1999).

The annual NILT survey has been the primary source of evidence on public opinion in Northern Ireland in the quarter century since the Agreement. Questions asked in the survey vary considerably from year to year, making it difficult to track patterns of change over time. But several indicators of attitudes to the Agreement as a whole have been included, and, from time to time, there have also been questions on specific details.

Between 2000 and 2005, a question was asked five times on how people would vote if the referendum on the Agreement were repeated. As Figure 4.1 shows, backing for the Agreement remained broadly steady over those years. Excluding Don't knows, Yes supporters would have outvoted No supporters by roughly two to one.

Figure 4.1. Referendum voting intention, 2000–05

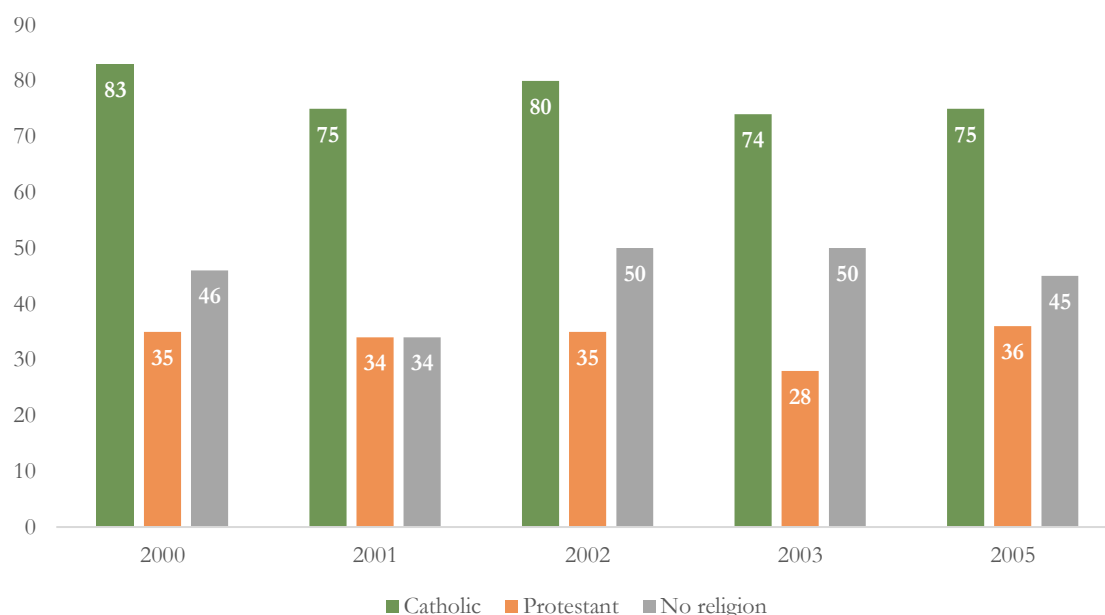


Question: If the vote on the Good Friday Agreement was held again today, how would you vote?

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys 2000–05.

Following the approach taken by Evans and O’Leary (2000), Figure 4.2 shows declared support for the Agreement (without excluding Don’t knows) among Catholics, Protestants, and those with no religion. We recognise that religion is a crude indicator of respondents’ community identities; but it does help to provide a broad snapshot. The patterns found in 1998 evidently persisted: support among Catholics remained overwhelming; that among Protestants was much lower. Indeed, in every year, more Protestants said they would vote No than Yes.

Figure 4.2. Support for the Agreement by religion, 2000–05



Question: If the vote on the Good Friday Agreement was held again today, how would you vote?

Support for ‘Yes’, by religion.

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys 2000–05.

The referendum voting intention question has not been repeated since 2005, but a different question examining overall attitudes to the Agreement has been asked in each of the last three years (with a slightly different version also asked in 2019). As Figure 4.3 shows, around a quarter of respondents back the Agreement as it stands. A further 40–45% support it but want to see changes. Only 14–16% think it needs to be ‘substantially changed’ or ‘removed’ entirely.

Figure 4.3. Views of the Agreement, 2020–22



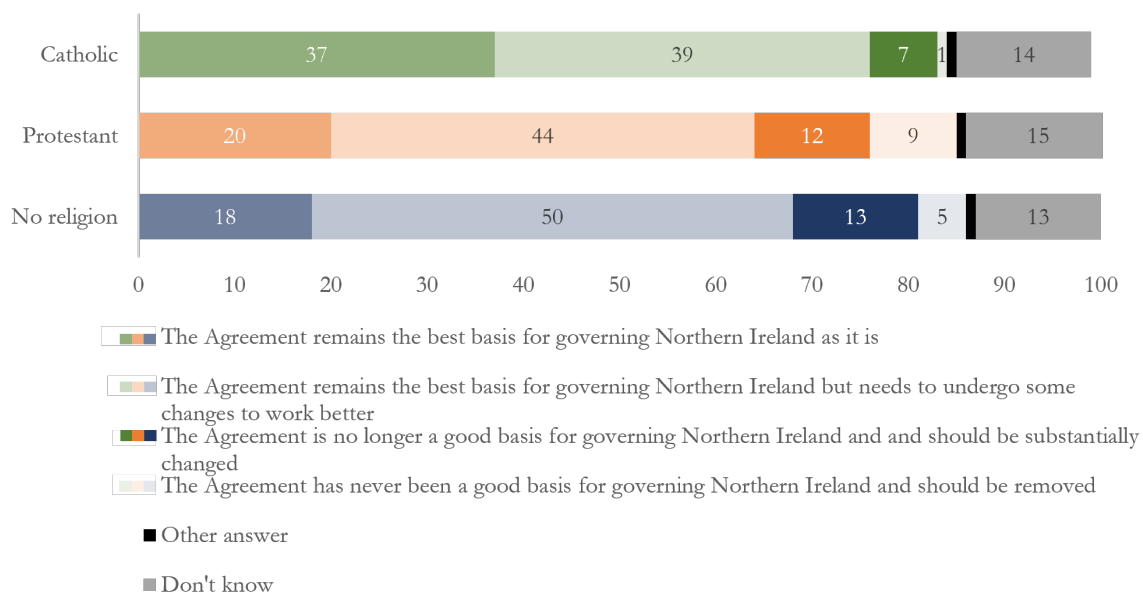
Question: There are a number of different opinions on the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement which was signed in 1998. Which one of these statements is closest to your view?

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys 2020–22.

Figure 4.4 breaks down the most recent set of results by religion (patterns were broadly similar in the other years too). It indicates that support for the Agreement as it stands is markedly higher among Catholics than among Protestants or those with no religion. But many in the latter categories back the Agreement with changes. Overall, it appears – strikingly – that support for the Agreement as the basis for governing Northern Ireland has an overwhelming majority in all communities.

Further insights about attitudes to the Agreement can be gleaned from a question asked seven times between 1998 and 2005 (though, alas, not subsequently): ‘Thinking back to the Good Friday Agreement now, would you say that it has benefited unionists more than nationalists, nationalists more than unionists, or that unionists and nationalists have benefited equally?’ Figure 4.5 shows how aggregate responses changed over time. In 1998 and 1999, most respondents said that unionists and nationalists benefited equally, though many also thought that nationalists benefited more. By 2005, the proportion seeing equal benefit had declined to below a third, while half of respondents thought that nationalists had benefited more.

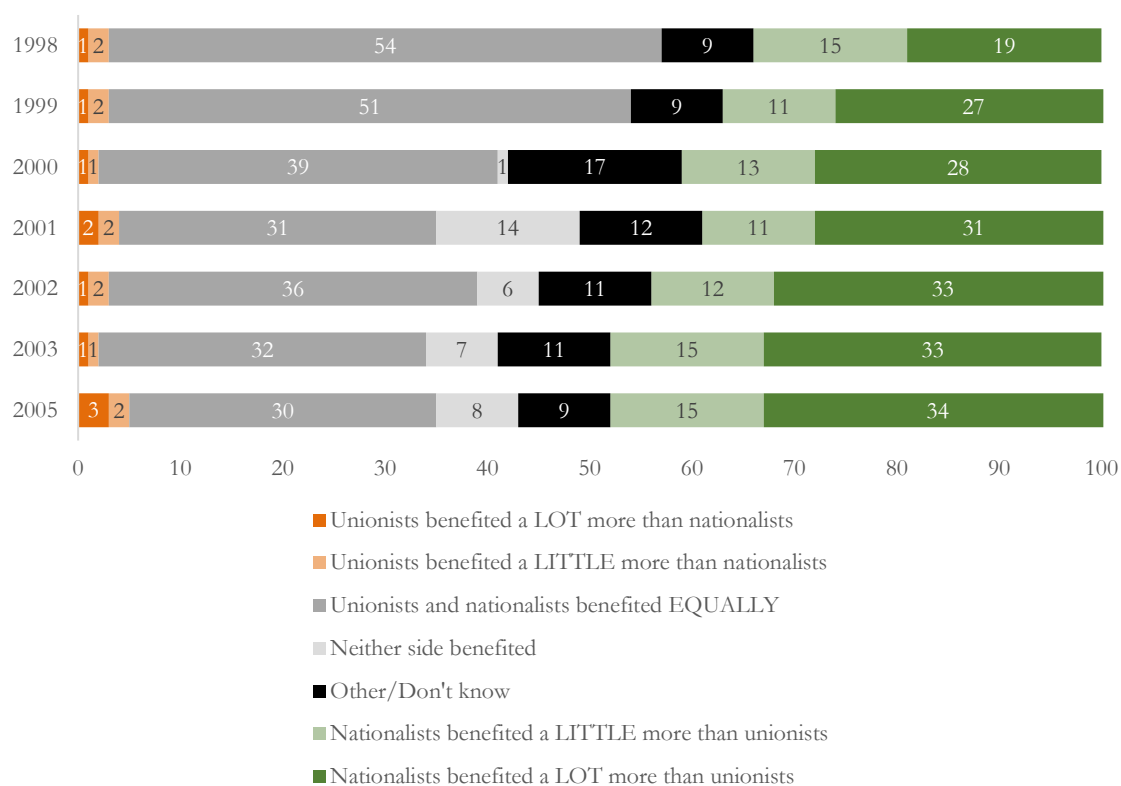
Figure 4.4. Views of the Agreement, 2020–22, by religion



Question: There are a number of different opinions on the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement which was signed in 1998. Which one of these statements is closest to your view?

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys 2020–22.

Figure 4.5. Perceptions of the Agreement's beneficiaries, 1998–2005



Question: Thinking back to the Good Friday Agreement now, would you say that it has benefited unionists more than nationalists, nationalists more than unionists, or that unionists and nationalists have benefited equally?

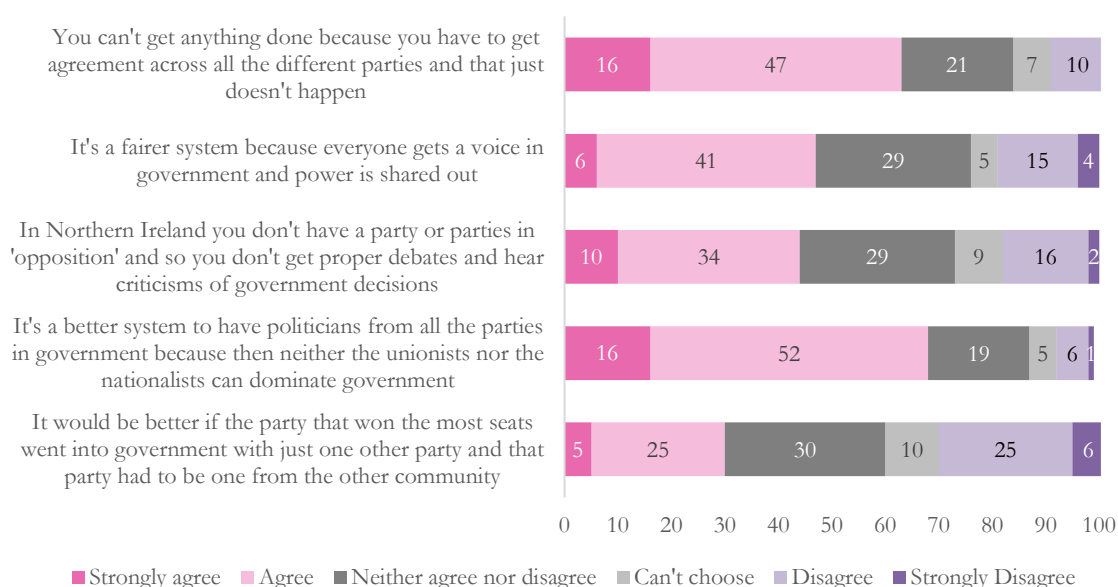
Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys 1998–2005.

It is difficult to extract evidence from the NILT about how people conceived of the Agreement. It is striking, however, that, in 1998, asked which of a list of possible policy goals they thought was 'the most important for the assembly to bring about', 40% chose 'Improving health service in Northern Ireland' and 37% 'Increasing employment opportunities in Northern Ireland', whereas only 8% chose 'Giving Northern Ireland a stronger voice in the UK', 2% chose 'Making it more likely that Northern Ireland will eventually leave the UK', and 3% each chose reducing discrimination against Protestants and against Catholics. Most people clearly prioritised day-to-day issues over constitutional matters, a pattern that was shared across all religious backgrounds (NILT 1998).

Attitudes to Strand 1

Questions have been asked on several occasions in the NILT survey that get at respondents' orientations towards the principle of power-sharing. As Figure 4.6 shows, many people had mixed views. Most liked the fact that all parties were in government, as this ensured that neither unionists nor nationalists could dominate. At the same time, most also felt this meant that 'you can't get anything done', and many were also concerned about the absence of institutionalised opposition. Caution must be exercised in interpreting a question such as this: when presented with statements and asked how far they agree or disagree, people have a tendency to agree (so-called 'acquiescence bias'). Nevertheless, it appears likely that the results point to genuinely conflicted feelings in many respondents.

Figure 4.6. Attitudes towards power-sharing governments, 2010

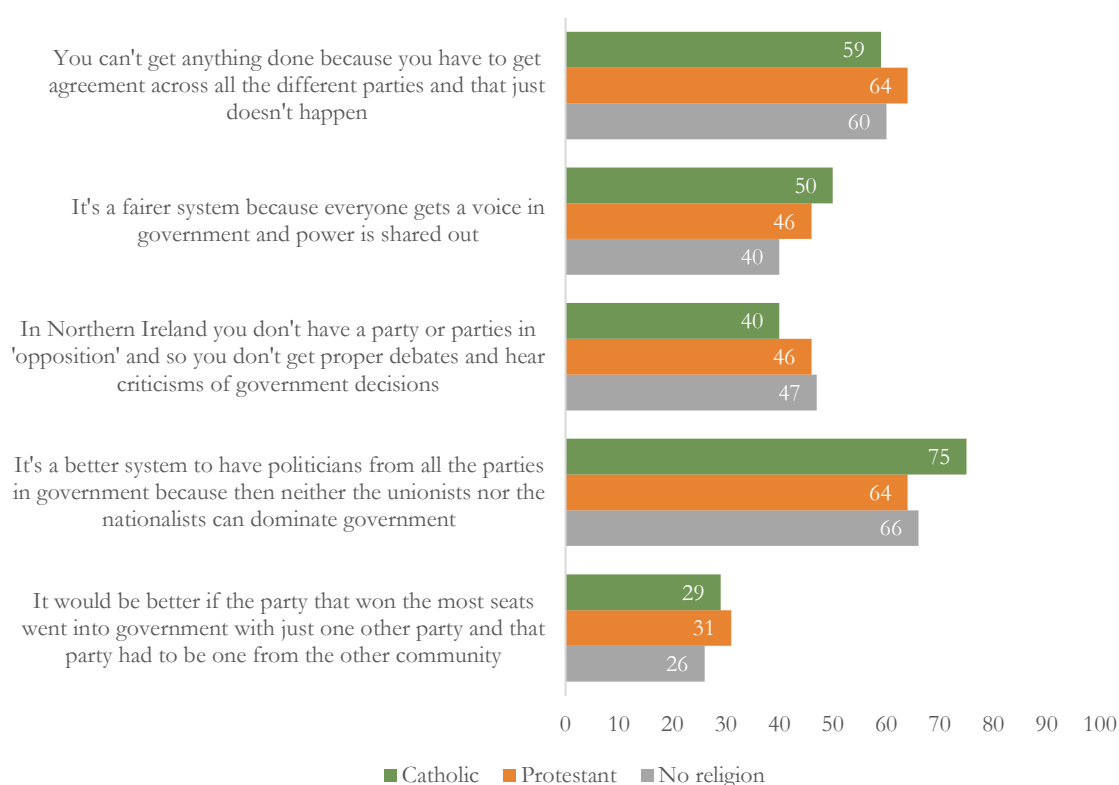


Question: After an Assembly election, our government is made up of ministers from all the different political parties. No single party 'wins' the election although the party which wins the most seats does get the most ministers. People have different opinions about how well government in Northern Ireland works when there are ministers from all the different political parties forming the government. Here are some of the things that have been said, how much do you agree or disagree with each of these statements?

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times survey 2010.

The patterns revealed in Figure 4.6 were notably similar across the different communities: Figure 4.7 shows the proportion of Catholics, Protestants, and those with no religion who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement.

Figure 4.7. Attitudes towards power-sharing governments, 2010, by religion



Question: After an Assembly election, our government is made up of ministers from all the different political parties. No single party 'wins' the election although the party which wins the most seats does get the most ministers. People have different opinions about how well government in Northern Ireland works when there are ministers from all the different political parties forming the government. Here are some of the things that have been said, how much do you agree or disagree with each of these statements?

Figure shows percentage answering 'agree' or 'strongly agree'.

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times survey 2010.

Beyond NILT, an independent survey conducted in autumn 2021 found most people agreed that 'power-sharing is the most appropriate form of government for Northern Ireland'. But an even larger proportion agreed that 'power-sharing could be improved with further reforms' (Haughey and Loughran 2023).

NILT respondents were asked in 2000 whether they supported or opposed 'the setting up of a Northern Ireland Assembly'. In reply, 69% said they supported or strongly supported it, including 80% of Catholics, 65% of Protestants, and 61% of those with no religion. Meanwhile, only 9% opposed or strongly opposed, including, respectively, 1%, 12%, and 16% of the three religious categories (NILT 2000).

In 2010, respondents were asked to consider two statements about the system of designation within the Assembly. In total 63% agreed or strongly agreed that ‘Because MLAs have to declare whether they are unionist or nationalist it just keeps us stuck in the old sectarian camps’, while just 10% disagreed. Meanwhile, 50% agreed or strongly agreed that ‘This is a good system because you can then see if big decisions are getting cross-community support’, against just 13% who disagreed. Thus, as with power-sharing in general, most people saw both strengths and weaknesses in designation: they were wary of pigeon-holing people by identity, but valued cross-community consensus-building. There was little difference between Catholics and Protestants in their responses to the first of these two statements, while Catholics were more slightly likely than Protestants to agree with the second (58% v. 48%) (NILT 2010).

In 2021, 58% of respondents agreed that ‘Key votes in the Assembly should be passed on the basis of a weighted majority, e.g. 60% of all MLAs regardless of their unionist/nationalist/other affiliation’, against only 7% who disagreed. Meanwhile, only 19% agreed that ‘30 MLAs from 2 or more parties should be able to use a ‘petition of concern’ to block legislation that has been passed by a majority in the Assembly’, while 38% disagreed. Neither question showed substantial differences between religious groups (NILT 2021). But both questions must be interpreted with caution, as no alternative to the stated arrangement was defined. We cannot assume, for example, that people were stating a preference for weighted majority voting over the current cross-community voting system.

A specific issue relating to the operation of the Assembly that we have not mentioned so far in this report but that, as we explore below, was a prevailing concern in the focus groups, involves what should happen to MLAs during periods when the Assembly is suspended. In 2018, during one such suspension, respondents were asked, ‘What do you think should happen to MLAs’ salaries during any time that the Assembly is suspended?’. Just 1% said that ‘MLAs should continue to receive their full salary’. Another 3% said they ‘should receive their full salary for a few months, and then this should be reduced or cut’. Meanwhile, 24% went for an immediate salary reduction, and 67% said ‘MLAs should not be paid at all’. There were no substantial differences across the religious groups (NILT 2018).

Questions have been asked about the Civic Forum in 2003 and 2020. In 2003, just 19% of respondents said they were ‘aware of the work of the Civic Forum’, compared to 78% who said they were not. Those who replied ‘Yes’ to that question were asked whether they thought the body had been effective or ineffective ‘as a consultative forum’. Just 28% thought it had been ‘quite’ or ‘very’ effective – 5% of all respondents (NILT 2003). In 2021, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that ‘Representatives of business, trade unions and voluntary sectors should be appointed to a Civic Forum for consultation by the NI Executive on social, economic and cultural issues’. While 59% agreed, against only 7% who disagreed, the absence of any context or explanation in the question should again make us wary of overinterpretation.

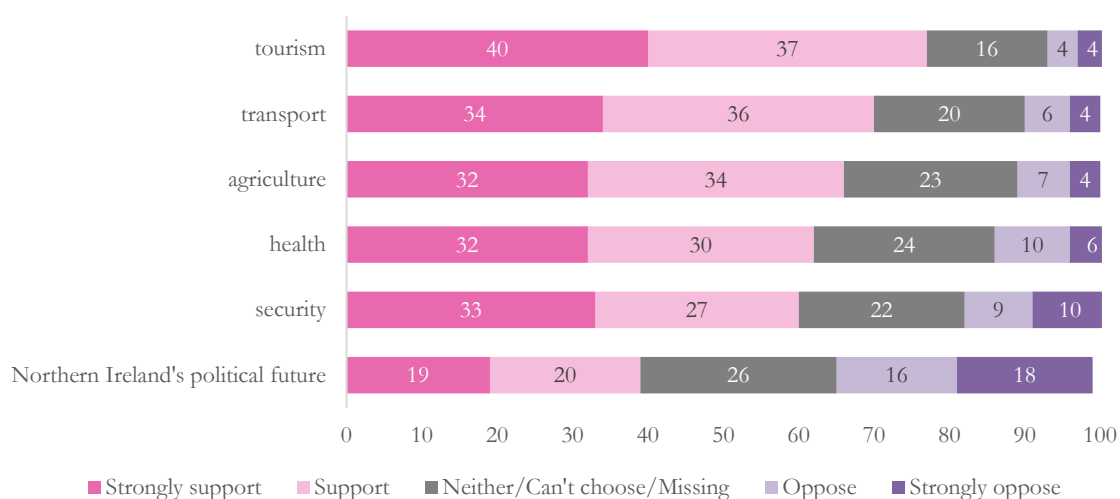
Attitudes to Strand 2

Few questions have been asked in the NILT about the North/South institutions of Strand 2. In 2000, 50% said they supported or strongly supported ‘the creation of North–South bodies’, against 17% who opposed. Support was markedly higher among Catholics (78% support or strong

support) than among Protestants (38%) – though even in the latter group, there were more supporters than opponents (25%) (NILT 2000).

In both 1999 and 2000, the survey asked about attitudes to cross-border cooperation in a variety of specific areas. Figure 4.8, which outlines the results for the latter year, shows that support was much higher for cooperation in some policy areas than in others.

Figure 4.8. Attitudes to cross-border cooperation, 2000

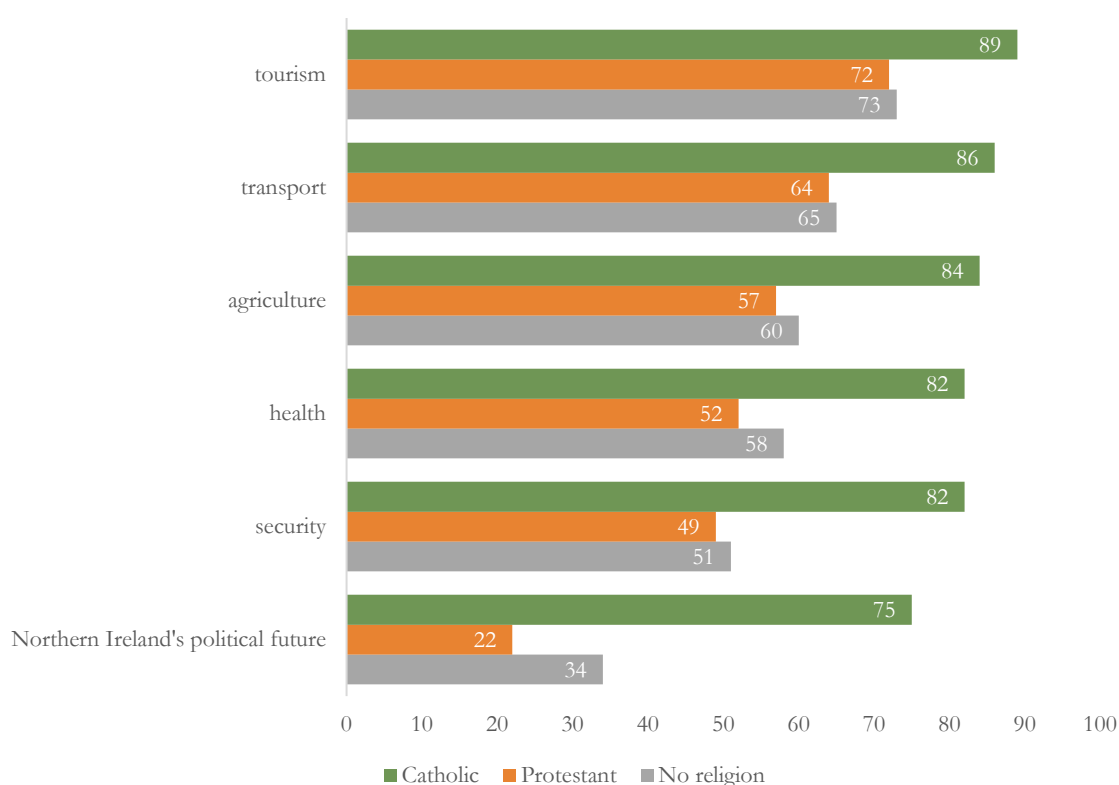


Question: How much do you support or oppose having cross-border co-operation with the Irish Republic in ...?

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times survey 2000.

As Figure 4.9 shows, these aggregate differences were largely attributable to contrasting patterns across the religious categories. Catholics overwhelmingly backed cooperation across all policy areas. By contrast, Protestants and, to a lesser extent, those with no religion, differentiated strongly among the policy areas: they were, on the whole, happy for cooperation to occur in relation to tourism or transport; but they were hostile to any role for the Republic in relation to Northern Ireland's political future, with opposition outrunning support by 50% to 22% (NILT 2000).

Figure 4.9. Attitudes to cross-border cooperation, 2000, by religion



Question: How much do you support or oppose having cross-border co-operation with the Irish Republic in ...?

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times survey 2000.

Other aspects of the Agreement

No NILT questions have been asked in relation to Strand 3, but a range of questions have touched on various further aspects of the Agreement. We do not attempt to cover them all here, but focus on two that are prominent elsewhere in this report: early release of prisoners; and the proposal for a Bill of Rights.

On the former, respondents were asked in 2000 whether they supported or opposed ‘the early release of prisoners’. Overall, just 12% supported or strongly supported the move, while 61% opposed or strongly opposed. There were large differences across the religious categories. Among Protestants, 53% strongly opposed early releases and another 23% opposed it; just 3% voiced support or strong support. Among Catholics, by contrast, 29% opposed or strongly opposed, while 31% supported or strongly supported (NILT 2000). This is a theme that we will return to in the focus groups, below.

Turning to rights, respondents in 2021 were asked how far they agreed or disagreed with the statement ‘Progress should be made on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, to expand the protection of rights and reflect NI's particular circumstances’. In total 62% agreed or strongly agreed; only 4% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Strikingly given the patterns in elite-level discourse, differences between religious groups were small: 69% of Catholics agreed or strongly agreed, as did 57% of Protestants and 62% of those with no religion (NILT 2021). Still, caution

should again be exercised in interpreting the answers to such a question: we should not presume that respondents knew how rights are currently guarded, or that they had developed thoughts on the relative merits of legal versus political forms of rights protection. Similar cautions apply to other, detailed research in this area (Harvey et al. 2021). Again, we return to the dangers of over-interpreting survey results below, when examining our focus groups.

Findings of deliberative research

Surveys such as NILT show how representative samples of people respond to specific questions. They provide much insight, but, as we have suggested, also have limitations: they do not show the thinking underlying those responses; they can be misleading if the questions are on issues that most people do not have clear views on. One way of filling that gap is to use focus groups, which we turn to shortly.

Another approach is to use deliberative methods, where members of the public come together to share their own perspectives, hear those of others, listen to experts, and, through discussion, come to conclusions. Whereas focus groups seek to find out people's current thinking, deliberative approaches explore what people think once they have had a chance to consider an issue, learn about it, and hear a range of views.

Valuable recent research has used deliberative methods to explore public attitudes to governance in Northern Ireland (Haughey and Pow 2022). This involved a short (three-hour) deliberative forum held in March 2022, comprising a representative sample of 46 people from across Northern Ireland. We do not attempt to summarise the rich qualitative results, which bear reading in full. But the exercise found majority support for power-sharing in Northern Ireland and overwhelming support for the view that power-sharing could be improved through further reforms. Furthermore, at least 75% of participants before the deliberations and at least 80% after thought it was somewhat or very important that 'Important decisions are decided on a cross-community basis', that 'The number of seats each party gets in the Executive is roughly proportional to the seats they have in the Assembly', and that 'All of the major political parties in the Assembly are guaranteed a place in the Executive' (ibid.: 31–33). Most thought it important that any reforms to the Agreement be supported by a majority of MLAs, including majorities of both unionist and nationalist MLAs (ibid.: 35). The greatest support (over 80% after the deliberations) came for the view that reforms should be backed by voters in a referendum (ibid.: 39). And most – both before, but particularly after – the deliberations thought any reforms should be recommended by an official citizens' assembly (ibid.: 41).

Focus groups on public perceptions of the Agreement

As we have suggested, we can best understand public thinking by combining survey results with qualitative evidence. The former show how a broad – and broadly representative – cross-section of the population respond to particular questions, but cannot go far in elucidating why they respond in the ways they do or what perceptions and ideas underpin these answers. The latter does provide such depth, enabling us to see far into people's patterns of thought; but it involves fewer people, so cannot necessarily be taken as representative. Given the wealth of NILT survey evidence, we have concentrated our research on focus groups.

We contracted Cognisense, a market research company based in Northern Ireland, to conduct eight mini-focus groups, each comprising four people, exploring perceptions of and attitudes towards the Agreement. Recruitment took place on the streets in various parts of Northern Ireland: professional recruiters approached potential participants and asked a series of questions about whether they would be interested in taking part and about their own backgrounds and political views. The recruiters continued this process until the target samples for each group (see below) had been achieved. The focus groups were conducted online in July 2022 and then transcribed verbatim.

In the analysis that follows, we begin by exploring who the focus group participants were and how they thought about politics. Then we examine their general perceptions of the Agreement, including their memories (if any) of 1998, their view of what the Agreement actual is, their perceptions of the Agreement's effects, and their overall feelings about the Agreement today. Having explored these general views, we then turn to perceptions of and attitudes towards specific parts of the Agreement: the three strands; the idea of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland; and the constitutional question. Finally, we turn to views that are relevant to how any process of reform of the Agreement's terms might be conducted. As with the elite interviews, an ellipsis in brackets in the quotations below indicates that we have cut some of what was said; an ellipsis not in brackets indicates that the participant left a thought incomplete.

Overall, the image that emerges from the focus groups of attitudes towards the Agreement is mixed. Most people, including people across all three communities, welcome the greater peace, security, ease of life, and prosperity that the Agreement has brought in. For most, these practical, day-to-day factors are what primarily matter. But some unionists and loyalists have a much more negative view and feel a deep sense of betrayal. Meanwhile, people across all communities are united in a strong sense of disillusionment – and often real anger – with the state of politics in Northern Ireland today. Many distrust all politicians. Particular vitriol was directed – even by some unionists – towards the DUP for its refusal, as they saw it, to cooperate. Some unionists agreed with the DUP's refusal to participate in the power-sharing institutions until the Protocol issue has been satisfactorily addressed, but even they were angry that politicians were being paid while, as they saw it, not doing their jobs.

Few participants had much interest in or knowledge of the details of the Agreement or of the institutions created under it. Except among harder-line unionists, support for the principle of power-sharing was high, though almost everyone had concerns around its practical functioning. Ideas about possible changes to the power-sharing arrangements were voiced, but few participants had thought these through in any detail. Knowledge of or interest in other parts of the institutional structure was very limited among most participants. This evidence informed the caution we expressed above when looking at responses to survey questions on these matters: on many of these issues, people have a gut instinct at most, and sometimes no opinion at all.

Focus group participants: backgrounds, identities, and political outlooks

Before examining what the focus group participants said about the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, it is important to consider who they were. That matters both to understand how far

they can be seen as representative of the wider population of Northern Ireland, and because their backgrounds and the ways they chose to describe themselves help frame what they said about the Agreement and other current political issues. Indeed, their self-descriptions in themselves offer insights into the lenses through which the participants viewed the world around them.

As already noted, the focus groups had 32 participants, spread across eight groups. All of the groups were designed to be mixed demographically. In the final sample, there were 17 women and 15 men, with four of the groups being balanced in gender terms and four being skewed one way or the other. Not all of the participants gave their exact age during the discussions, but those who did ranged from their 20s to their 70s. Variation was also sought in socio-economic backgrounds, where people lived in Northern Ireland, and whether they lived in urban or rural areas. In the opening part of the focus group discussions, many participants shared further information about their lives. Their occupations included farm worker, teacher, technician, construction manager, administrator, and civil servant; others were retired or had full-time caring responsibilities at home. Many were parents; some were grandparents.

The groups were primarily defined on the basis of political affiliations as set out in Table 4.1. Allocation to groups was based partly on partisanship, but recruiters were asked to talk with potential participants in order to understand their deeper identities as well. Groups 1–3 tended to vote Sinn Féin or SDLP and identified as nationalist and/or republican. Groups 4–6 tended to vote DUP, UUP, TUV, or PUP and identified as unionist and/or loyalist. Groups 7 and 8 tended to vote Alliance and did not view their identity primarily in nationalist or unionist terms. As Table 4.1 shows, each group had a particular target within these broad affiliations. We refer to ‘harder’ or ‘softer’ nationalist and unionist positions, these being common shorthand descriptions of views on the constitutional question; we express no normative view on these matters ourselves. As it turned out, and as will be evident in the analysis that follows, these differentiations were more pronounced between the unionist/loyalist groups than between the nationalist/republican groups. Another unplanned feature of the samples was that the older non-aligned group leaned unionist in terms of backgrounds, while the younger non-aligned group leaned nationalist.

Table 4.1. Focus Groups: Sample Plan

Group	Partisan leaning	Political identity
1	SDLP	Softer nationalist
2	Sinn Féin	Harder nationalist or republican
3	Sinn Féin or SDLP	Mixed nationalist/republican
4	DUP or TUV	Harder unionist
5	DUP or UUP	Softer unionist
6	PUP or other unionist	Loyalist
7	Alliance or other non-aligned	Non-aligned (older)
8	Alliance or other non-aligned	Non-aligned (younger)

During the focus group discussions, some participants, particularly in the unionist groups, reported their direct experiences of losing loved ones during the Troubles. One said that his grandfather

was murdered in the 1970s (Group 4, M1).⁶ Another commented, 'I grew up with my daddy checking underneath his car and my grandfather trying to be murdered in three places in one day including our own church where they placed a bomb outside it' (Group 4, F1). A third said he 'had experience of three major bombs within a very close vicinity to where I lived, where I was sitting' (Group 5, M1). Another said:

even in this house my children were born here and there was a bomb went off at the hotel beside us and I remember the anger in me, I had the children out of the bed on the floor, inside the wardrobes and away from the windows thinking if that bomb goes off it's coming through those windows (Group 5, F1)

By contrast, others – particularly in the groups identifying primarily as neither nationalist nor unionist – observed that they had not been touched directly by the Troubles: 'I personally didn't have anybody killed in the Troubles' (Group 7, F2); 'I didn't have anyone who was affected by it' (Group 7, M1); 'I would be very much the same, hadn't anybody killed or anything' (Group 7, F1). Such patterns in our samples may or may not reflect the picture in wider society.

Such differing experiences – or differing ways of relating to past experiences – appeared to shape and be shaped by political identities in the present, as the following pages explore. The sections below also show that many participants from all communities shared memories of the army presence, paramilitary presence, of wider insecurity, and of the inconveniences of everyday life – as well as some happier recollections.

The participants expressed their political identities in a range of ways and to varying degrees. Those from a nationalist/republican perspective occasionally used the words 'nationalist' or 'Catholic' to describe themselves or their background. They sometimes also highlighted their identity in other ways. One, for example, said, 'You ask any nationalist what are you? Are you British or Irish? What are they gonna say? I'm Irish. They're not even gonna say Northern Irish, they're just gonna say Irish' (Group 3, M1). Another referred to 'the nationalist part of Northern Ireland – or, as I call it, the North of Ireland' (Group 2, M3). These participants barely used the word 'republican': just three times across the three groups. There was strikingly little difference across Groups 1–3 in this respect, despite the differing recruitment frames. The closest any of these participants came to attaching the 'republican' label to themselves was when one jokingly explained his switch from the SDLP to Sinn Féin: 'I think I'm one of those people who after the Brexit referendum went to bed a nationalist and woke up a republican' (Group 3, M2).

For the most part, the participants in the unionist/loyalist groups used the term 'unionist' about as often as those in the nationalist groups used the term 'nationalist'. The one exception was one member of the loyalist group (Group 6, M3), who used 'unionist' frequently. He also frequently used 'loyalist', 'Protestant' and 'PUL'. He was the only participant to use 'PUL', but other members of the same group also used 'loyalist'. Members of these groups also described themselves as British: 'I'm not Irish, I'm British; I'm just not connected to the mainland of Britain' (Group 4, F1). Two of the unionist/loyalist groups (Groups 4 and 6) used 'Protestant' frequently, whereas the 'softer' unionist group (Group 5) did not use it once.

⁶ In what follows, participants are identified by their group number and a personal code: 'M' for men, 'F' for women, and a number that simply reflects the order in which participants first spoke during the discussion. Comments by the group facilitator are labelled 'Fac.'.

Some members of the groups that tended to vote Alliance were keen to express their nationalist or unionist roots, but to distance themselves from the contemporary political manifestations of these identities:

I vote Alliance only because I don't want to be classed as a hard-line unionist yet I do want to remain part of the union because I wonder what would happen to my pension and my health service and everything else if it went the other way. Alliance I feel they try to enter politics discussions without always harping on about the orange and the green, you want somebody that's going to talk about the hospital care, talk about education or transport or whatever without bringing orange and green into it. (Group 7, F2)

I'm not really interested in Us and Them politics. I do class myself as a unionist with a small U. I want to remain part of the UK for no other reason only that I think it fits my pocket better but I would be embarrassed to call myself a unionist because unionism to me stands for so much more than simply wanting to be part of the UK. You have to be anti-Irish, anti-Catholic, anti-migrants ... it's a horrible, it seems to be a right-wing sort of fundamentalist type thing which is not me. (Group 7, M2)

Others resisted even the underlying identities:

I hate being labelled. I was brought up in a mixed family but more or less I was brought up as Catholic but I don't count myself as a nationalist and yet I practice my religion and everything but I'm very happy to be part of Northern Ireland and my parents right through the generations, even the Catholic side, my mother loved the queen and my mother was a Catholic. So if you're not brought up, I hate being labelled a nationalist. (Group 7, F1)

We just need to move forward, we're stuck in a kind of cycle of hatred, I think, and that needs to ... because like my kids don't know anything about the Troubles, they don't know the difference between a Protestant and Catholic and that's the way I want them to be, so if they can be like that there's no reason that we all could not move on that way. Obviously it's a cycle of being bred into us but it needs to break. (Group 8, F4)

By contrast, some people in other groups criticised those who distanced themselves from their historic identities:

My concern would be a bit like what [F1] was touching on there. That unionism and loyalism or loyalism in particular has been demonised that much that middle-class and upper-class Protestants will distance themselves from it, will move towards Alliance and in my honest opinion, that's the people that will take us to a united Ireland, it will be middle-class Protestants. (Group 6, M3)

Indeed, this member of the loyalist group repeatedly returned to his perception that the loyalist community was now demonised: 'We are the community that is now furthest left behind, we are treated like dinosaurs in the media which is completely disappointing, we're just alienated everywhere we go and I just think we've been let down greatly' (Group 6, M3). And some from the 'harder' unionist group expressed similar sentiments: as we will examine below, for example, they sometimes expressed a feeling of betrayal by politicians in London.

Such thoughts were present to a degree among nationalist/republican participants as well. One focused particularly on class, explaining why he had switched his vote from the SDLP:

In my opinion, the SDLP, they lost my vote, I don't recognise them as a party for the working man, they're more middle class now and if you're a teacher or accountant or doctor, yeah, SDLP are for you. They're not for the working man any more. (Group 2, M2)

But expressions of a desire to overcome sectarian politics were also widespread, and extended across all the identities. Indeed, the same participant who voiced concerns over the demonisation of loyalism also hoped for a future beyond sectarianism, while remaining watchful of whether this was fair to his side:

I think because it will take a generation or two to be able to do so and move away from orange and green. It's always gonna be there and until we resolve those orange and green issues and are dealing with ordinary secular issues we're gonna face these problems, to be honest. I think it's a safety net, it certainly has been so for republicanism at the start of the process, it was a complete safety net. But I'm not sure the same safety net is in place for our community. (Group 6, M3)

Criticisms of 'orange and green' politics came up across the communities, though sometimes with differences of emphasis whose implications will return on the following pages:

People are needing the politicians to do a job for them at the minute and it is really just a green and orange issue at the minute and that's why they're not sitting down together. (Group 1, F3)

I think you have to take away all those, old names, old people, terrorists shouldn't be there. If there's anybody linked that has done jail time they shouldn't be in an office of telling you what to do in your country, but you have to take away orange and green and basically have equality that literally it is equality (Group 4, M2)

Many participants expressed the wish that politics would move away from sectarianism towards a focus on practical living:

This is going to sound really stupid and foolish, but I'd love them to take religion and politics out of Stormont and just do what needs to be done for the country and the people to prosper and the health system to prosper and education. [...] I know it sounds very stupid because it is all politics at the end of the day but our politics is very different from the politics on the mainland. Ours is religious politics. (Group 5, F1)

The small sample size across these focus groups means we should be wary of drawing inferences about the wider population. But the evidence here is consistent with the widely documented pattern that people tend to cling to certain identities more strongly when they feel those identities are more under threat; greater security can enable greater readiness to remould such identities (cf. Kelly and Tannam 2022: 86–88). The members of the non-aligned groups expressed the least insecurity, and indeed were conscious of their relative privilege in this regard. Perceptions of threat were very high in the 'harder' unionist and loyalist groups. Participants in the nationalist groups did not voice such strong feelings in either direction. All groups shared a deep anger at the political dysfunction of recent years (see below).

General perceptions of the Agreement

Memories of 1998

Some participants were too young to remember the signing of the Agreement, but others had distinct recollections:

I remember it was a big deal. It came into the house and sat on the kitchen table and everyone was made to read it and have a look at it. (Group 1, F3)

I remember the news stories with the cars driving up and down the road in Belfast dooting their horns, people waving flags. All that type of stuff. It was a significant moment and that it was to signify better times to come ahead. (Group 1, M1)

I do remember it happening. I remember it being a huge discussion in the house and obviously you were watching it on the news all the time, so it was played very much on the news. My daddy was very into what was happening so I do remember it happening. (Group 8, F3)

Some remembered the Agreement indirectly. Strikingly, in three of the eight groups, participants brought up the final episode of the Derry Girls television series, which aired shortly before the focus groups were held. One commented, ‘the last episode was all about the Good Friday Agreement and it kind of refreshed my memory of it all, as a matter of fact’ (Group 7, F2). Another said:

Well I’ll be honest to you, I forgot all about the Good Friday Agreement until about four or five weeks ago. Me and my wife are big fans of Derry Girls and they were voting for it and I’d forgotten clean about it until I’d seen it on that show. (Group 2, M3)

As these comments reflect, participants typically had only rather hazy recollections of how the Agreement came about. How they remembered the process sometimes revealed much about their perspective on the Agreement itself. One pro-Agreement Sinn Féin voter gave a rather sunny outline:

So, Mo Mowlam was the Secretary of State at the time and she got all the parties together. Tony Blair had a big hand in it as well and made all the parties sign an agreement that they would follow a political route instead of using the bullet and the bomb and violence and try to put a stop to the atrocities in the country. Everybody agreed it and it went to a vote in the whole island of Ireland and everybody resoundingly voted yes, we want to use it to go ahead with it. (Group 2, M1)

A participant in the ‘harder’ unionist group, by contrast, had very different recollections:

In my opinion, it was something that was drawn up between the English and the Irish government without much say from the people of Northern Ireland, the people that actually lived day to day with the nonsense that went on in our country. We weren’t consulted on it, that’s why people protested, it was just something that was thrown upon us on Good Friday. (Group 4, F1)

It should be noted that this participant elsewhere discussed how she voted in the 1998 referendum, so these comments appear not to reflect an absence of memory of that vote. Rather, her point seems to have been that, in her perception, the Agreement was declared on Good Friday 1998 without prior consultation; voters, she thought, were made a take-it-or-leave-it offer.

Memories of how the Agreement was seen in 1998

Members of most of the groups remembered viewing the Agreement positively. Some particularly thought that it would be good for their children or ‘the next generation’:

I felt good that, you know, in Belfast they would say that the war’s over, there’s no more fighting, the guns were gone and you felt good that there’d be no more bombs. (Group 1, F2)

It was time to move on. You had the bomb and the bullet and people were dying needlessly and it was going nowhere. [...] And when the Good Friday Agreement, the Belfast Agreement, when it came in as thing said there, it gave you hope, it gave you a sense to look forward rather than looking backward. You sort of get on with your neighbour a bit better, you know. (Group 2, M2)

in 1998 I had two young children so probably from an emotional point of view I was hoping that my children would be reared in a better place than I was. (Group 3, F2)

I felt it was going to be the best thing in the world. Being a normal guy living in the community I have had experience of three major bombs within a very close vicinity to where I lived, where I was sitting. You were walking wondering where’s safe, where’s not safe, there were certain areas you could have went into, certain areas you daren’t went into but after the Good Friday Agreement it was we’re all to be one but there’s still some areas out there but the majority of them is safe to go into where before you’d have never went in them places. So for my kid’s sake, it’s the best thing ever. (Group 5, M1)

Some remembered having a positive view while also harbouring some qualms. One commented, ‘At the time I remember feeling sort of a sudden sense of relief that change was coming and that it would be different for my children and my grandchildren, that they didn’t have to live the life that we lived’. But she added, ‘I had the hope but I still had the cynicism. I thought, how are you going to change all these die-hards, all these people so quickly? This is going to take as long as the Troubles maybe to try to turn people about in their thoughts’ (Group 5, F1). Another said:

I suppose I thought you were voting for peace but at a price. Yes, we had to try and let go of letting people out of jail and things like that which is all very well for me because I personally didn’t have anybody killed in the Troubles so it’s easier for me than people who would have. (Group 7, F2)

Among unionists and loyalists, some expressed greater doubts. One said that he would vote for the Agreement now; but he had not voted in 1998 and was unsure which way he would have gone had he cast a ballot (Group 5, M2). Others had shifted the other way:

You were happy to go along with it, if you thought it was going to bring peace and the two communities are gonna share and everything will be, the bombs and guns would be taken out of politics, the politics will do the work and the politics will hopefully bring the two communities together but unfortunately it hasn’t worked out that way. (Group 6, M1)

A few said they had always opposed the Agreement. The participant whose grandfather was killed in the 1970s said, ‘I never knew my grandfather, he was murdered in [year] [...] ultimately, he sacrificed his life for nothing which is a sad state of affairs.’ When asked to elaborate, he added, ‘Well, basically the person that murdered him got out of jail, got free and probably a pat on the back and financial reward for doing so.’ (Group 4, M2). Another in the same group said:

I voted No to the Agreement. It was too watery. How could we let murderers out of jail and pay them but yet prosecute soldiers who were doing their job. How could we let people walk this street and be in our government? Who know where the bodies of the missing are. (Group 4, F1)

Perceptions of what the Agreement was

As the quotations above already begin to illustrate, participants had a wide range of views on what the Agreement actually is, putting emphasis on different aspects. Some had a broad and positive view:

It's a mixture of what everybody said, so it's trying to get for Northern Ireland to have its own government, to be able to make its own rulings, spend its own government – which ties in with the cessation of violence, for the peace process to kick in to try to get tourism and investors into Northern Ireland to create more jobs, to create more housing and probably make decisions around our own future for our children and around infrastructure, jobs, hospitals, NHS – all that type of stuff that previously would have come across from across the water. (Group 1, M1)

Other participants similarly highlighted a range of aspects, but with much more scepticism:

Probably the removal of the military from Northern Ireland was a big thing. The British Army as they are conveniently known all the time now was removed, police reform, I think that was whenever they changed the name of the RUC to PSNI etc. There was civil and political rights were looked into in great detail, were meant to be power-sharing, issues around sovereignty and discrimination, making sure that all sides of the community were treated equally and then of course the get out of jail free cards as somebody said there, and turning in your arms, there wouldn't be ballistic checks and all the rest, just send them but in my opinion, it should have went far deeper than that nonsense, nobody should be given amnesty. Murder is murder. (Group 4, F1)

By far the most common view of what the Agreement was, which was voiced in every group, was that it was 'about peace'. Some of the remarks already quoted above illustrate this. Other such observations included:

[...] an agreement that they would follow a political route instead of using the bullet and the bomb and violence and try to put a stop to the atrocities in the country (Group 2, M1)

Yeah, I was quite young but to me then from my memories it was just the end of the war and the end of the fighting and it was supposed to be a more safer area to live in. (Group 2, F1)

It takes me back to the end of the Troubles, you know, the end of kind of ... that's how I felt, it was the end of people being afraid to go out, it kind of brought me to that. It was the end of the Troubles, we were going to be normal, a normal country. (Group 3, F1)

I suppose yeah, it was a bit of a truce where we were trying to get two main parties to work together, two sides to come together as everybody else has said, touching down on trying to bring peace and that bit of calm to Northern Ireland and everything that was going on. (Group 4, F2)

Well, from what I gather, basically it's because of all the Troubles and the murders from both sides of the community they made a Good Friday Agreement that if both sides of the communities could come together, get rid of their arms, that the government would give them lots of money to build their community, to help their community, to help them build a better life and for us to have peace so we can all live together. (Group 5, M1)

It was all about peace, to stop the Troubles. (Group 6, M1)

Is it not also to stop the innocent people being shot on the streets and innocent people getting killed in bombs and all? To stop the paramilitary activity so all that stopped. (Group 6, M2)

It was a process to end the Troubles, to end the violence and that's what I remember. (Group 8, F4)

The end of the Troubles and a multi-party agreement wasn't it, with the British and Irish. (Group 8, F2)

A few concurred with this view that the Agreement was supposed to be about peace, but questioned whether that was the reality: 'It's meant to be a peace process, but it's not' (Group 4, M2).

Participants from a range of backgrounds also expressed views that the Agreement was about bringing the communities together, ensuring equal respect across the communities, or providing for power-sharing government. Again, many were positive about these purposes, but some were not:

It's to try to bring everyone together, give everyone a say. (Group 3, F1)

The main one that stood out for me was the whole thing about anybody here had the right to either classify themselves as an Irish citizen or British citizen or both or whatever. (Group 3, M2)

It was supposed to be about the people, who we were voting for and our two main parties were supposed to be working together to have shared power to make these decisions but that is just not what's happening at all. To me, that's what it was about. (Group 4, F2)

Personally, I thought it was about bringing the two communities together after all the Troubles had gone on and move away from conflict. (Group 6, M1)

It's all about bringing both sides of the community in NI together. (Group 6, F1)

I thought at the time maybe if there is this agreement, I still think a lot of things are to do with respect. I was always brought up, I always respected both sides of the community and I just think nobody is better than anybody else. I thought with the agreement you were getting equality between both sides but it didn't all work out like that but that was what I was hoping for. (Group 7, F1)

For me, the underlying part of the thing was the fact it was power-sharing (Group 7, M1)

To me it's an agreement of both sides working together for the whole lot but that emphasis on working together. (Group 8, F1)

Elements of the Agreement relating to the question of Northern Ireland's constitutional future were mentioned only rarely without prompting. But two members of the nationalist/republican Group 3 did highlight this:

I don't know, was it not more to do with the majority, if you like. So say an all-Ireland poll if they wanted to be an all-Ireland then that's the way it would have to go or if they wanted to stay part of the UK then that's the way the majority voted. Maybe I'm wrong, I don't know. (Group 3, M1)

Yeah, had a right to self-determination. It was technically both governments washed their hands of it north and south and said we are saying we have no major claim over it, financial or economic or anything like that and the same as the south, they said it's up to yourselves, if you want to vote that way and if it comes to a point where you want to be united or stay in the UK it's up to yourselves so they left it that way. (Group 3, M2)

Meanwhile, two themes that were mentioned repeatedly, but only by unionists or loyalists, were police reform and prisoner releases. The former theme came up only in passing (Group 4, F1; Group 5, M2). But prisoner releases were a recurring and dominating concern for multiple participants. One of them (Group 4, F1) has already been quoted twice on this point. In addition:

The Good Friday Agreement, from what I understand of it was a get out of jail free card for terrorists, mainly from one side in particular (Group 4, M1)

I think to most people it's meant to be a peace process and ultimately to let prisoners out of jail are the main two parts that I took out of it. [...] one of the main things the Belfast Agreement, Good Friday Agreement to me still is that it's a get out of jail free card for terrorists that murdered innocent people in this country over 30 years. (Group 4, M2)

All I know what was in it was it was just that both sides had to come and give up their arms, their bombs and they were getting money off the government to rebuild their communities but also the release of prisoners was part of the bargain. So, these murderers were getting free for the Good Friday Agreement for both sides for them to give up their arms which still doesn't happen. (Group 5, M1)

Well, it was to release prisoners and to change everything, I mean they changed everything over here, the police force, just everything was completely changed and then both sides then agreed to go into government. I must admit, it was good to see them sitting down and talking but many people that sat down and talked have been involved in the Troubles since that. (Group 5, M2)

I thought it was about where both sides were going to take control and then there was so many people let out of prison under the Good Friday Agreement on both sides. Other than that, I really don't know an awful lot about it, to be honest. (Group 5, F2)

The last of these quoted participants later returned to the theme: 'there was murderers let free' (Group 5, F2).

Two participants in the non-aligned Group 7 – both of whom said elsewhere in the discussions that they wanted to maintain the Union – also mentioned prisoner releases. They also saw them negatively, but as a quid pro quo for the Agreement's positive elements, not as a compromise too far:

I suppose I thought you were voting for peace, but at a price. Yes, we had to try and let go of letting people out of jail and things like that, which is all very well for me because I personally didn't have anybody killed in the Troubles. So it's easier for me than people who would have. (Group 7, F2)

Well, I think it would have been, as F2 said, releasing prisoners on either side, releasing somebody who committed atrocities wasn't maybe.... But do you know what, where does it end? Somebody has to say let's stop this, we can't have another thirty years of the murdering and maiming and you wanted to move on, there was a real sense of we've a chance to move on. (Group 7, M2)

That this issue remains so present for some people a quarter of a century after the Agreement, and long after prisoner releases took place, is very striking. It contrasts sharply with the findings from our manifesto analysis and interviews, which suggested that prisoner releases were no longer a prominent concern.

Perceptions of the Agreement's effects

For most participants, their perceptions of what effects the Agreement has had over the intervening years understandably aligned closely with their views on what the Agreement was. Thus, perceptions of levels of violence and sectarianism were voiced most often. Many participants related these themes to the ease of everyday life, as well as to the health of the economy and the quality of public services (in both positive and negative ways).

Many participants focused simply on the positive changes that have occurred in respect of declining violence and improved security:

The best way to describe it is, my two kids say to me – what are the Troubles? So they don't understand. We were away for a weekend, we were up in Derry, went to museums, went down to Belfast, did the same thing, they're doing it in school but obviously because that period is technically older they don't know any of that, they haven't lived any of it, they haven't experienced any of it but for me, that would be the big take-aways out of it. That side of things, there's a real no fear of jumping on a bus and heading down to Belfast whereas previously that would have been a concern. So I'd say that's a huge bonus out of it. (Group 1, M1)

I think it's the cessation of violence, as M1 said, that was definitely a big plus. And it was the threat as well, you felt more free, you know, you weren't as nervous about maybe going out to Belfast. (Group 1, F2)

That's one thing I'd say as well: when the Good Friday Agreement came in my mother didn't have her handbag searched at the Marks & Spencer's in Belfast anymore, they used to search her handbag going into Marks & Spencer's in case my mother was an IRA terrorist or something. (Group 2, M2)

What really stuck out with me, I was actually up in Derry/Londonderry, I saw this policeman out on a bike at the mouth of the Bogside and I just, I was completely mesmerised by this. There he was going about his business like nothing had happened. And years ago the police were going about there in two, three Land Rover patrols with army Land Rover patrols, maybe a helicopter up with them as well. It really has changed. (Group 5, M2)

Things have really flourished in Northern Ireland and it's a better place to live, no doubt about it, and no searching you in the shops into Belfast. (Group 7, M2)

Yeah, I can remember them rioting and petrol bombs and the chinook going into the field beside us and soldiers coming out of the barley fields etc. when we were kids. Now it obviously doesn't happen, it was normal which was sad. (Group 8, F4)

Some also saw the communities coming together:

I'm Catholic and I'd have to say that 70–80% of my friends are all Protestants, and that's from going to an integrated school and having people from different backgrounds and making friends with them. And back in the day, if you like, that wouldn't have happened. Nine times out of ten, if your neighbour was a different religion to you, you probably weren't talking to them. You

know, I think things like that have moved on, and education in that sense, you know the younger generation, it has definitely helped. But in certain areas things like that aren't going to improve just because that's how people feel about certain things but I do think it has had a huge effect. (Group 1, F3)

It has moved us on I think with regards to the Troubles having died down. People are actually mixing better and, in particular, I think it has made a difference with young people. I think young people now – it used to be are you a Protestant or are you a Catholic. But I honestly don't think that young people care anymore, which I think is a good thing. I think from that respect it has helped. (Group 7, M1)

And some particularly emphasised the economic benefits of peace:

I don't think it would have done much for the tourism board for someone to look at Belfast as a good place to put a business when hotels were getting blown up left, right and centre. That wouldn't have enticed anybody in. So obviously when the assurances were there that that was going to be stopped, and businesses were willing to invest in coming here. (Group 1, F1)

I think jobs, job opportunities. Companies from America and Europe decided to see it as a better place maybe, I don't know why it was because they didn't have to pay as much, don't know whether it was tax related or whatever, but they started to see it as a safe zone to be able to come back in and maybe put in a hub for their business in Europe as a stepping stone to other places. So it probably did generate jobs which obviously is a bonus. (Group 1, M1)

Others saw the direction of travel as positive, while noting that some significant problems remained:

It's a lot safer now than it was probably then. People do feel a good bit safer. But as F1 said, there's areas you still probably wouldn't want to go in, you know. You'd always be a bit wary of where you're parking and stuff and seeing things in cars. But at the same time, you're still that bit safer. (Group 2, M3)

You were walking wondering where's safe, where's not safe. There were certain areas you could have went into, certain areas you daren't went into. But after the Good Friday Agreement it was, we're all to be one. But there's still some areas out there. But the majority of them is safe to go into, where before you'd have never went in them places. So for my kid's sake, it's the best thing ever. (Group 5, M1)

They have made progress but having said that, you know, like [F1] said, it's going to take another lifetime – 50 years, maybe more – to get some people to move on and they're stuck in a time warp. (Group 5, M2)

One loyalist saw a mix of positive and negative developments in relation to security:

When the Good Friday Agreement was signed it brought peace and when your kids were growing up they were never gonna be stuck in the Troubles or we never worried about them getting, a bomb going off or anything like that there – it just brought peace to the country like on both sides. The only problem it did bring was, see, with ceasefires, housing estates used to be run by loyalists or paramilitaries, now it's run by thugs as in people can do what they want and get away with it. That never happened before. If somebody was doing something wrong something happened to them. (Group 6, M2)

For others, however, the *lack* of progress was the dominant concern. This perspective was voiced particularly in the ‘harder’ unionist group:

Yes, we’ve maybe stopped the daily murders, but the punishment beatings still goes on, the underhandedness still goes on. [...] it hasn’t really moved forward apart from we’re not murdering anybody in their beds anymore or shooting police officers while they’re doing their job or murdering members of the UDR, prison service etc., etc. But that nonsense still goes on. We’re still planting bombs. You see a suspect device here, police man’s car here, prison officer’s car there. So that’s rolling back in. So it hasn’t really, to me, it hasn’t really done its job. (Group 4, F1)

It was to bring peace to the country, but it didn’t really from what I can gather. (Group 4, M1)

I don’t think the power-share has worked well at all and I think the element of peace in it – I’m not sure really what peace was brought because it feels, I think, very that there was promises made and these things were done and as people were saying there, there was murderers let free and these things were happening [inaudible] really at the end of the day, none of that brought any peace at all. (Group 4, F2)

I know for the next generation growing up it doesn’t give me any hope at all that our sides can come together to make decisions at all. (Group 4, F2)

I think it will be a struggle for any Protestant person to say that it’s worked in any way beneficial to the Protestant community. As [F1] said, there’s not bombs every day of the week but there’s still bombs. There’s not shootings every day of the week but there’s still shootings. There’s more cover up now and it’s not maybe [inaudible] it was, but those people that were using bombs decided to put on a suit one day. (Group 4, M2)

People are still no better off in Northern Ireland really. The minute we’re in a crisis, cost of living, cost of petrol etc. really it hasn’t done a lot. (Group 4, F1)

One member of the ‘softer’ unionist group, meanwhile, thought that violence was returning:

To me, the DUP sitting there waiting on the Protocol to change when they agreed on it is, that’s [inaudible], so now people are getting back to the same thing again – you start to see more violence. This past couple of days in Belfast, two teenagers asked what religion they were. Haven’t heard that in twenty years. Asked what religion they were, they were only teenagers, by other teenagers in Belfast. Told them what they were and they beat them up. That’s what used to happen years ago. (Group 5, M1)

Some participants mixed thoughts about the removal of the army from the streets into these reflections. Those thoughts were varied: nationalists saw the disappearance of British army troops as positive, while some unionists were more equivocal:

Well positive, there used to be army patrolling my estate when I was younger and that all stopped as well. And then there was checkpoints if we wanted to go to the South, the Newry Barracks which was a huge barracks when you were going from Newry to Dundalk. As well as that, we wouldn’t have travelled to Belfast etc. – only when my dad was in the Royal [Victoria Hospital], and it was a whole affair to go to Belfast. And now if you want to go to Belfast you just jump in the car and away you go. (Group 1, F1)

[...] it seemed to be things changed very quickly. There was helicopters and army men landing in fields behind our house for years, forever and then they weren’t. But it also didn’t seem to make

things any better either. I don't actually feel like the conditions we were living in, like anything changed either. That was really my memories. There maybe just wasn't as many army men standing out in front of the street or in the house or banging on the doors, you know, things like that that I witnessed as a child or checkpoints and getting checked and things like that. They all seemed to go away, but there was still quite an uneasiness. (Group 2, F1)

The only thing I can really remember is probably that you stopped seeing the army walking around because I was so used to seeing the army walking the streets. And that all sort of dulled down then. I don't know. (Group 5, F2)

After the Good Friday Agreement the police service changed their name but the army was took off the streets. People said for the Good Friday Agreement to work we want the army off the streets from patrolling. But when they used to patrol you felt safe but you also felt intimidated because you thought something was going on. (Group 5, M1)

And I suppose when you talk about the soldiers, I never feared the soldiers. To me they were there, they'd always been a part of my life. I suppose I had family that was in the forces as well. (Group 5, F1)

I do remember bits of it, but it's hearsay like prisoners getting out etc. of both sides and the army disappearing, because we would have had a lot of the army around here. So the army disappearing and no more chinook and people walking up the road asking to look at their gun and our ma and da near taking the head of you for asking them. But they disbanded a bit. (Group 8, F3)

The army barracks were all done away with. (Group 8, F1)

Some linked that also to the disappearance of border controls:

I was going to add, me being from Newry, one of the big things from it was mixed in as well, which has now gone full circle with this whole Brexit thing: the freedom of movement with the European Union. Like, I was living in an area where you were going through a checkpoint if you wanted to go to Dundalk. Bessbrook was the biggest heliport in Western Europe and suddenly everything just stopped – you didn't hear anything anymore and you could drive down to Dundalk, there was nobody stopping you, nothing. So there was a real sense of.... I had a taster of it before, in 1992 that was the [inaudible] Treaty. So freedom of movement came in – so it was already going – so you got this taste of it and thought, I want to keep it that way and copper-fast it. (Group 3, M2)

No border, as such. (Group 8, F2)

One criticism that emerged across the communities was that, whatever may have improved, the operation of politics was still deeply unsatisfactory. We return to this in greater depth in the following section. But the following views were expressed in the initial part of the focus groups, before specific questions about political institutions were asked:

I know it's not fully stopped in certain places, but all the violence and all the rest, sometimes you sort of look back and go, has it progressed the way they'd outlined it or is it still very much two-party, green/orange, us against them scenario? And it's really no further on bar the fact there's the cessation of violence. And each party is really out for itself to get a piece of the money and all the MLAs seem to be doing alright for themselves. (Group 1, M1)

I think things have come on. Like, I was eleven or something whenever the Good Friday Agreement was sorted all those years ago, and obviously those things have changed and a lot has

progressed and there's a lot less violence and stuff, but there's still a lot more work to be done. And I think Stormont at the minute proves that – that there's still people who aren't willing to move on and they'll say – the people, the MLAs that are getting paid the most will say, we're here for the people, we'll do this and do that. Well the people voted a few weeks ago and they still haven't sat round the table. They went and signed on in my opinion, to get paid, just like anybody else would that needs a job and they're still getting their full pay. If I didn't go into my work I wouldn't get paid. It is a disgrace. People are needing the politicians to do a job for them at the minute and it is really just a green and orange issue at the minute and that's why they're not sitting down together. (Group 1, F3)

Our politics is far from normal. It's a strange sort of nether world of politics in Northern Ireland. There's too many people can veto different things in the politics here. (Group 2, M2)

I think probably for me there's also that supposed to be shared power where two sides were supposed to work together where the government was concerned. And that's certainly not happening, because Northern Ireland is in a crisis at the minute from what's been happening in the last two years (Group 4, F2)

It [the Agreement] has worked to a certain point. I think there are flaws in it. See that oh, if one party doesn't agree they can throw their toys out of the pram, that shouldn't be the case, it's not two parties anymore so they should be told right, if you don't want it you aren't getting your wages, clear away off and the rest of us will work away. (Group 8, F4)

Finally, the participants in the loyalist group had a particular perspective on the Agreement's effects: as noted above, they expressed a strong sense of betrayal – and that they were now demonised by elites and other communities:

Every way we turn we seem to be the ones that are giving in. And unfortunately maybe when loyalism and unionism ran NI it was maybe somewhat heavy-handed people could say. And it was too – there might have been different classes or different levels of respect for both communities. But I think people need to remember that it's the PUL community that is now on the backfoot on all occasions. (Group 6, M3)

We are the community that is now furthest left behind. We are treated like dinosaurs in the media, which is completely disappointing. We're just alienated everywhere we go and I just think we've been let down greatly. (Group 6, M3)

While one group member expressed these ideas particularly forcefully, none demurred; others shared the view that equality between Northern Ireland's communities was lacking and that the loyalist identity was under threat.

Feelings towards the Agreement today

The preceding paragraphs illustrate a range of feelings about the Agreement. Nationalists and those voting for non-aligned parties were uniform in seeing the Agreement as positive overall – though they also saw problems. Unionists were much more equivocal: the 'softer' unionist group were broadly positive; the 'harder' unionist group, by contrast, was vociferously negative. The loyalist group, meanwhile, had tended to be supportive of the Agreement originally, but had become increasingly disillusioned over time.

Notwithstanding the clear support for the Agreement's principles among nationalists and the non-aligned, many in these groups also voiced considerable frustrations about how the Agreement is

working – or not working – at present. Indeed, when the members of Group 1 were asked to think of one word to describe their feelings towards the Agreement, one replied ‘frustrated’, and explained that his frustration stemmed from the ability of one party to stop the functioning of the institutions (Group 1, M1). He later continued, ‘look at the current situation, where there’s not a whole lot happening. So you sort of say, how far on actually is it when they still can’t sit round a table and have open discussions?’ (Group 1, M1). Other members of the group said they felt ‘hope’ (Group 1, F2) and believed the Agreement could still bring ‘change for the better’ (Group 1, F1).

Similar sentiments were expressed in other groups too:

I think a lot of it has got lost in translation, I think as [F1] had said earlier with the various political parties not taking up their seats in government, it’s caused a lot of it to get lost in translation. (Group 3, F2)

Yes, there was progress, but sure look at DUP now. They’re not even sitting. They’re cowboys, they do nothing, they’re getting this big money a month for nothing because they won’t sit over the protocol. (Group 5, M1)

A sense of apathy emerged from one participant in the ‘harder’ nationalist Group 2. Other participants in the same group pressed against that view, but appeared to agree that change was now needed:

M3: Well I’ll be honest to you, I forgot all about the Good Friday Agreement until about four or five weeks ago. Me and my wife are big fans of Derry Girls and they were voting for it and I’d forgotten clean about it until I’d seen it on that show.

Fac.: So it’s not relevant anymore you’re saying?

M3: It’s not relevant.

M1: But surely it’s relevant in as much as it was the thing that kicked the ball down the road. It’s the one that started it.

M2: Started the ball rolling.

M1: On the road to peace, for want of a better word, on the road to peace but I think now they need to revise it and start making them work it.

These views contrast with the wholly negative view of the Agreement articulated by members of the ‘harder’ unionist group. Responding to a question about what name the participants would use to refer to the Agreement, one said, ‘I would call it, how to quash the Protestant community’ (Group 4, F1). Asked whether there was anything about the Agreement that had worked well, another said:

Nah not really from what I have heard about it, I know wee bits about it and seen, not a chance, they handed letters out to people that murdered people, got them out of prison. (Group 4, M1)

No one in the group dissented from that view.

Loyalists, meanwhile, had supported the Agreement, but had become increasingly disillusioned. One expressed that view very directly:

It’s gone. In my opinion, it’s gone. Once they signed it. You have Billy Hutchinson from the PUP signed it and David Trimble signed it. And said they don’t back the Good Friday Agreement.

Well that's it, it's gone. People trying to hold onto it saying you have to uphold the Good Friday Agreement. Me personally, I don't believe in it – it's gone, it's finished. Most people within loyalism now would say that's it, it's gone, it's finished. (Group 6, M1)

Yet the member of the loyalist group who most forcefully expressed a sense of betrayal responded to these words with a more mixed view:

I personally feel it's still there. It's probably the one thing that's seen as an international tool, so it sort of gives a lot of people credibility and things like that throughout the world that they set this thing up. But I think on the ground people need to maybe be more aware that it's not this utopia that people hoped it would be. Unfortunately, the community that I come from has not benefited from the Good Friday Agreement the way people expected. I come from Newry which is a republican area. It's almost a no-go area for unionists/loyalists. It's a cold house completely for my cultural identity, and I think that it has been continually given to nationalists and in particular, to republicans. And there isn't anyone that is fighting the fight for us. I agree with some of the previous speakers. When David Ervine was fighting for Ulster, he was fighting for god and Ulster, as the sign on the UVF crest says. But nowadays people are getting backhanders, people are snorting it up their nose. It's almost as if it has been one big ploy to do away with loyalist paramilitaries through taking them out of the scene for a period of time which is a generation that has happened to date, and to be honest, I wouldn't want to see going back to Troubles. But to be honest, loyalist paramilitaries couldn't go back to trouble even if they wanted to. There's too many old man and the young community has either been poisoned with drugs, a bit like that other guy says, there's no respect, young people are just running wild in areas. Go to a loyalist area now and just see the deprivation, the lack of education, the lack of job opportunities. It's absolutely terrible and that wasn't what this deal was about. We were meant to benefit from it, our community was meant to benefit and move forward but it didn't. (Group 6, M3)

Strand 1: Knowledge, perceptions, and ideas about change

Knowledge of the Strand 1 institutions

Participants generally showed understanding of the principal contours of the Strand 1 institutions: the Assembly, the Executive, and the fact of power-sharing. They understood that power-sharing meant, in some sense, that all parties were involved in decision-making. They were also generally aware that if one of the main parties refused to participate in the Executive, the institutions could not function – a fact that, as we see below, many were unhappy about.

On the other hand, knowledge of further details was generally very sketchy. Sometimes, participants acknowledged this explicitly. For example, the facilitator asked one group whether they knew 'how power-sharing actually works once you get in there'. One participant responded, 'I think we need more information on that' (Group 1, F1), and others concurred. In another group, when asked what he would change, a participant said, 'I'd actually need to read the whole thing again' (Group 3, M1). Asked what they could remember of the specifics, others said, 'Not the great detail' (Group 4, M2) and 'I don't really know' (Group 8, F2). In other instances, participants gave inaccurate descriptions of how aspects of the system worked. For example, one set out what she understood the D'Hondt rule to be, but actually described something more akin to the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system used to elect MLAs (Group 5, F1).

Views on power-sharing

Members of the nationalist and non-aligned groups tended to support the principle of power-sharing. When asked to explain why, one said, 'Because there's not one party can make a decision, the decision has to be made jointly between the parties. So not one group has total control over everything' (Group 1, F1). The facilitator often struggled, however, to elicit thoughts about the abstract principle of power-sharing from these groups: participants were much keener to express views on how power-sharing was working – or not working – in practice. We explore these thoughts about the reality of power-sharing below.

The most hostile views on power-sharing were expressed in the 'harder' unionist group. Some rejected power-sharing as such: when asked for his view of it, one simply said, 'No, definitely not' (Group 4, M1). He went on to express a hankering for the pre-1998 arrangements before voicing a series of concerns about the direction of travel:

Personally, if you do away with power-sharing what's going to happen is you go back to the way it was. But sometimes you look at this country and you wonder, was it better the way it was thirty, forty years ago than it is today? Because they're getting nowhere, they're basically banging their head off a brick wall. We're getting nowhere as a country. The border doesn't belong in the middle of a sea – it belongs on land where it's meant to be. We're part of the UK and that's the way it's going to stay. And if not, I'll not be in Northern Ireland, I'll move to England. That's the way it is. (Group 4, M1)

Other participants in the same group tended to say simply that power-sharing had not worked and could not work in Northern Ireland:

I don't think it will work in this country because you come to any issue that we can't agree on it's go home and Stormont falls down. It's happened three, four, five times, it could have happened probably ten or fifteen times. (Group 4, M2)

From what I've seen it doesn't work, so there has to be something else. And I know this is what the debate is over, what is it? I don't think the power-sharing has worked. Going back to something F1 said at the very, very start of all of this was that the Agreement wasn't drew up with the people's opinion and I think if there was a new one that was, it would certainly put some good points forward. (Group 4, F2)

I'm not sure we've ever really properly experienced that, so we don't know. In my eyes, it never really worked. (Group 4, F1)

Several group members then suggested the core problem was that the institutions included people whom they deemed to be terrorists. One, asked whether there was 'something they could do to make you more comfortable' with power-sharing, replied, 'They could gather up all them terrorists and put them back in jail rather than put them in seats in Stormont' (Group 4, F1). Another said:

For example, the man who is accused of murdering my grandfather was a special adviser to one of the MLAs in Stormont. So, how can you ever believe in an institution who has that person working close and telling you how to live your life, for example, under rules and regulations of this country? It's never going to happen. That's not just my opinion, obviously there's multiple people who was murdered during the Troubles, both sides, some innocent, some not innocent and so on. For those innocent people who were doing their day to day job, for those people to

be in government it's never going to work for myself or my family or anybody connected to my family. (Group 4, M2)

Views on how power-sharing is working in practice

Some participants said that, at least during some periods, power-sharing had worked well. For example, one said 'I think at the start it was ran right, and when they decided to do it they were in it together to do it and they did make an effort' (Group 8, F4). Another responded, 'At the end of the day, Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley shook hands and became allies together' (Group 8, F1). One offered a positive assessment of performance during the Covid period:

I do look back to whenever we were in the midst of Covid and how, well... People can say what they want about the DUP and Sinn Féin for the two major parties, how well, in my opinion, they did work together and they came out every week and made their TV appearance and gave everybody the rundown and they were trying to do what they needed to do, because people needed their help. And I think actually now with the cost of living crisis, they need their help even more. But what I mean is, in my opinion, they're able to work together when they want to, but it's just whenever there's one tiny wee flicker in the background and they're just like no, I don't want to do that today because this is more important to us [...]. (Group 1, F3)

For others, however, the current non-functioning of the institutions dominated their thinking, and most viewed it very negatively:

I think it's a disgrace, I think it's disgusting the fact that we're in the middle of a cost of living crisis and there's nobody in Stormont can make decisions for us, or make decisions about the finances of the country and it's just wrong, you know. (Group 3, M3)

Some expressed contempt for current politicians. Group 5, for example, included the following exchange:

Fac.: I want to move on to talk a little bit about the power-sharing Executive at Stormont. First of all, the term 'Executive', is that something you've heard of, are aware of and know what it is?

M1: It's just the high and mighty of Northern Ireland.

Fac.: Anybody else on what the Executive is?

F1: The rule makers and breakers.

F2: All the clowns that work in Stormont.

M2: You were saying there about the work in Stormont, but it's really the lack of work, cos they're doing nothing.

Most were scathing about the fact, as they saw it, that politicians were being paid while not doing their jobs. This concern was voiced, unprompted, in every single group. For example:

It's as if it's one step forward and two steps back. It's as if they can't stay in government and make rules. They're always having arguments and then one won't go in. But I think if they didn't pay them I think they wouldn't be long getting round the table again, you know, and I think to take 20% off them. No – I think they should just stop their pay. (Group 1, F2)

I'm in the same position as everybody else, if I didn't go into work I wouldn't get paid so I don't see why people who have been voted into government and not doing their job are getting paid for it. And as F2 said there, it's one step forward, two steps back. (Group 1, F1)

I think it's a disgrace, I think it's disgusting the fact that we're in the middle of a cost of living crisis and there's nobody in Stormont can make decisions for us, or make decisions about the finances of the country and it's just wrong, you know. (Group 2, M3)

Yes, there was progress but sure look at DUP now, they're not even sitting, they're cowboys, they do nothing, they're getting this big money a month for nothing because they won't sit over the Protocol. (Group 5, M1)

They don't really do much. I don't like everybody I work with, but I'm still made to go, and if I didn't go I wouldn't get paid. Whereas if they don't go and [inaudible] because somebody disagrees – it will never be power-sharing because one will just throw their toys out of the pram and then it will be back to square one and it will be back to before lockdown and nobody willing to work so what's the point of it? (Group 6, F1)

Cut their money! It does my head in. If I didn't work when I was working I wouldn't have got paid. (Group 7, F1)

Even in the 'harder' unionist group (Group 4), where there was support for the suspension of the institutions pending resolution of the Protocol issue, participants shared this view:

Fac.: You mentioned power-sharing, you mentioned the Executive. What is going on in terms of power-sharing at the moment and what are your feelings about it? Have you any comments at all?

M2: Nothing [laughs].

Fac.: Nothing happening at the moment.

F1: But they're still getting paid.

Fac.: Should they be?

M2: No.

F2: I don't think so, no.

Fac.: So even the elected representatives, so if we voted for DUP then we feel that our elected representatives, even though we're DUP voters, should not be paid while there's nothing going on up there.

F2: No.

M1: No, if they can't do the job and they can't agree to do the job bring it back to the mainland, it mightn't be wonderful but at least they're half educated.

Ideas for reform of Strand 1

As the last of the preceding points illustrates, a few participants suggested that the abandonment of power-sharing devolution and resumption of 'direct rule' from London would be better than the current situation:

Yeah, back to Direct Rule because all they want to do is argue, fight and bitch up there in Stormont and get paid to do nothing, sit at home, get paid. If you don't go to your job in the morning do you get paid to sit at home? (Group 4, M1)

Surprisingly, even the members of the 'harder' nationalist group (Group 2) appeared to entertain the idea of direct rule if the parties at Stormont could not agree on forming the Executive – though it was not clear that this was a thought-through viewpoint on what form direct rule should take:

M1: There's no talking to them [the DUP]. I don't think there's any sort of reasoning, It's getting to the stage now there's absolutely no reasoning with them, they're all that staunch and I don't want to use the word but I will use it – bitter, stuck in their ways. Just gonna have to start using threats, I'm afraid start using ... either you get back into the government or we're gonna cut your funding and you're not gonna get paid.

M2: I think they will have to go to a sort of direct rule. They have to. Just say right, that's it, no Stormont – you are all out of a job.

F1: Yeah.

M2: And just deal with it like that.

For others, however, this idea was anathema. Asked whether they wanted direct rule or 'our own government here', the members of the 'softer' unionist Group 5 replied in unison, 'Our own government'. In Group 8, one said 'we can't be run from Westminster; they can't run themselves never mind run over here, and they don't want to run over here' (Group 8, F1). Another replied, 'That's what it boils down to: they don't want to run over here' (Group 8, F2).

While most participants thus wanted to see the power-sharing institutions restored, some – particularly among nationalists and the non-aligned – also saw structural flaws in those institutions. The most commonly expressed such view was that it should not be possible for one party to collapse the institutions:

When it's not going their way, they seem to just throw the toys out of the pram. And this veto is wrong – these vetoes to me are totally wrong, there shouldn't be any party fit. It should be coming down now to whoever has the strongest party or the biggest party and if the second party doesn't want to take their seats they should go to the third party and say right, you don't want to take your seats, move down the line. (Group 2, M3)

One party can just derail everything and it's wrong. As [M3] said, it should go to the next party, if they don't want to sit down with Sinn Féin or Sinn Féin don't want to sit down with the DUP, go with the next party and say right, that's the next majority, go. (Group 2, M1)

I don't feel like the Good Friday Agreement was wrong or... I feel like there has to be changes. I think we're 24 years on – I think it was made and it worked at that time and the generation that it was. Now I think there needs to be changes, just similar as to what M3 has said. If they're not gonna sit and they're not gonna do it, then stop them from being able to do this. (Group 2, F1)

I totally disagree with the fact that one person in a power-sharing environment can bring the whole thing to a halt. Because the DUP have said they're not going to go into talks, that's it, it doesn't work. I would say we're the only country that a party like that can hold the whole country to ransom. I think it's a disgrace. (Group 3, F2)

I do agree power-sharing should be happening but they shouldn't be held over a barrel because one party doesn't wanna play ball. (Group 8, F4)

Another concern related to the lack of any institutionalised opposition:

I love the proportion of representation here, I like the way it works that way. But there seems to be no kind of, I don't know, traditional opposition or something like that there [...]. You like to have somebody that is going to scrutinise stuff. Sometimes they get a free reign. But that's just down to the mechanics of it and the tweaking of it. (Group 3, M2)

I think we've moved past the power-sharing. I think there should be a properly funded opposition that can hold the government to account. We don't have that at the minute. We had maybe the committees to do that, but when we did have an opposition the whole thing collapsed, if you'll remember – the pressure was just too much for the DUP/Sinn Féin. (Group 7, M2)

A third concern, expressed exclusively in the non-aligned groups, was that the parties that do not designate as either unionist or nationalist are disadvantaged. These views were sometimes based on slight misunderstanding of what are very complex rules. One participant said:

in the last election and say it would have been Sinn Féin or DUP [in first place] and Alliance second, Alliance couldn't have taken that deputy First Minister role because there is no framework for anything other than. [...] Stormont is set up in a sectarian manner, you're either unionist or nationalist – that's it. You have to nominate unionists or nationalists. Only unionists or nationalists can take those seats, and Alliance elect a united communities and there is no box for united communities, they just go in as other so there is no 'other' can take that role. (Group 7, M2)

Another group member responded, 'That's correct. Only unionists or nationalists can be first or second minister. There is no provision for any other parties to take up those positions' (Group 7, M1).

Many nationalist and non-aligned participants thus appeared attracted to ideas around weakening the veto power of the largest parties over Executive formation and weakening the role of community designation in Stormont. Yet they were often evidently conflicted: there was no sense that they had thought through the implications of any such changes for the principles of power-sharing:

I think it should be a case of it's not mandatory. I think it might start to look better if it was a voluntary power-sharing, so if nobody wants to play ball they can sit on the side-lines or pitch in. I think the Good Friday Agreement, the essence of it is as relevant today if not more so, especially after 2016 when it started to get threatened. It was always there in our background not taken for granted. But it's there, it's keeping us safe. But then suddenly this comes to disrupt it and a lot of people are going, hold on a minute, don't go near that now as it's been used as a bit of a football. The essence of it, the spirit of it, if you would say, is relevant now as it is. It's a bit fragile but it's the best thing we have. (Group 3, M2)

In short, most participants wanted the parties in Stormont to work cooperatively together in order to deliver effective government for Northern Ireland. They were fed up with 'bickering' and parties 'throwing their toys out of the pram'. They wanted reasonableness to prevail. At least for many nationalist and non-aligned participants, that meant that one party that, in their eyes, was not behaving reasonably should not be able to stop the institutions from functioning. Yet many unionists and loyalists already had a strong sense that the system was stacked against them; it was

unclear that nationalist or non-aligned participants had thought through what the implications of forming an executive without the DUP would be.

One final aspect of the Executive that was raised in the discussions concerned the titles of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Many participants were aware that these two posts have co-equal powers, though some were not and assumed that the first had higher authority. A range of views were expressed on whether the titles should change.

In the nationalist groups, all of the participants agreed that the issue was being discussed now only because the DUP was no longer the largest party, and most resented what they saw as double standards. For example, one person commented:

Well it was okay when [inaudible] and now just because a different party is the leading party all of a sudden somebody wants to change it but it was okay up until then. I think in my opinion, that's tit for tat and another reason not to get along. (Group 1, F3)

Another explicitly connected the issue to whether Protestants viewed Catholics as having equal status: 'Ever since Ian Paisley was Mr Big in the DUP, it was basically Catholics are second class. And the DUP, they can't take it now that we're actually...' (Group 2, M2). As to whether it would be appropriate to change the titles to 'Joint First Minister', nationalists expressed a range of views. Some said no, on the basis that what had been acceptable when a unionist party was largest should remain acceptable when that had changed; others said yes, as equal titles would be more accurate:

I would totally agree that it was good enough for one side before to be First Minister and the other side to be deputy First Minister, well that's the way it should stay now. I think it would be very unfair if it was changed. (Group 1, F2)

Can I just say that I personally don't like the title First Minister and deputy First Minister because 'deputy' to me says underdog. First Minister is the person in control and I think Joint First Minister might be a better title, and I think maybe that's why the DUP has partly thrown the rattle out of the cot because they are no longer first person, they are deputy to a new First Minister. (Group 3, F2)

There was also a range of views among unionists. Some reversed the logic voiced by nationalists, offering a different interpretation of recent practice:

But sure Michelle O'Neill refers to herself as joint First Minister before the government was collapsed, she never referred to herself as the deputy, she was joint First Minister. The BBC referred to her as joint First Minister. Only would you have heard deputy being used in certain, you know, if somebody was talking about her in parliament, she used joint First Minister term herself, she didn't see that she was the deputy First Minister. (Group 4, F2)

Another agreed with this and, referring to the DUP leader, added, 'if Michelle is joint then he can be joint, in my opinion. If it's good enough for her it's good enough for us' (Group 4, F1).

Meanwhile, members of the 'softer' unionist and loyalist groups showed little interest in the titles. One loyalist said:

My point really on it was that I don't think it really matters to us about deputy First Minister and First Minister. The only people that it seems to really bother at the moment is the DUP – they seem to be the ones that their nose is out of joint. That's due to the lack of work that they're doing for the Protestant community. At the end of the day, the majority of the country is still

Protestant slightly and they have the opportunity to be First Minister, but they have to do more work and represent more people and be more inclusive. (Group 6, M3)

The non-aligned participants also suggested that the titles were unimportant. One said, 'No, leave it as it is, start no more controversy, we've enough going on in the country' (Group 7, M1). Another added, 'If I can accept being a deputy why can't the others. I think people would think like that' (Group 7, F1). A third said, 'We're trying to move on and create that everybody is happy for change then, instead of arguing over a title' (Group 8, F2).

Civic Forum

There was also almost no awareness of the Civic Forum, except from one participant who knew it was set up after the Agreement for 'civilian society' but was now 'defunct' (Group 7, M2). When the role and character of the forum were briefly described by the focus group facilitator, participants expressed considerable scepticism, based on two principal concerns. First, many questioned how the composition would be decided and who would actually be represented: 'who decides who is going to, who those 18 representatives are going to be?', 'Is that just jobs for the boys or mates?' (Group 7, M2); 'And who decides that education can only have two representatives but it's more important to have five representatives with the churches?' (Group 7, F1). Many doubted that a few representatives from each sector could reflect the diversity of interests and perspectives. One liked the idea in principle, but doubted it would work in reality:

I think it sort of takes the common people's opinion and it's people that are on the ground and seeing what's happening within NI and they can put their point of view across. But it's obviously, as has been said, you need to get the representation right, everybody is represented and everybody's culture and religion and rich/poor – the whole kind of economic.... So in theory it might be a good idea but maybe it would be hard to represent everybody. (Group 8, F3)

Second, many doubted that it would achieve anything, calling it 'another toothless tiger' (Group 2, M2) and 'a talking shop' (Group 2, M1). One liked the idea of 'grassroots' representation, but doubted its impact:

I think it serves a purpose in that it maybe goes down to grassroots and allows individual people from communities to get representation, and they've an opportunity to speak their mind and maybe influence things at a lower level. But what their impact can really be higher up the food chain I'm not really sure. (Group 6, M3)

Finally, in one group a member interpreted 'civic forum' to mean a citizens' assembly of people selected by lot, and discussion briefly focused around this idea. We pick up what was said in the following section.

Strand 2: Knowledge, perceptions, and ideas about change

Knowledge of the Strand 2 institutions

Focus group participants were asked specifically for their thoughts on the North/South Ministerial Council and associated institutions, established through Strand 2 of the Agreement. Most were aware of these institutions only to a very limited extent: some said that they had heard of them, but would not be able to offer any information on what they were; others initially said that they

had not heard of them, but then indicated that they did recognise them when information was provided by the focus group facilitator. A few participants did have more substantive knowledge, including on the areas of cross-border cooperation dealt with by the NSMC. Numbers were too low, however, for there to be any reliable evidence on patterns of awareness across the community.

Views on cross-border cooperation

Once the content of Strand 2 had been explained by the facilitator, and in some cases once information had been provided on the bodies that operate under the umbrella of the North/South Ministerial Council, most participants were able to express views.

The most consistent support for cross-border cooperation came from the non-aligned groups. Such support was largely pragmatic: 'It doesn't bother me. I would agree to anybody talking if it helps the country, you know' (Group 7, F1); 'It makes sense' (Group 8, F3). When shown a list of areas of current cooperation, members of Group 7 said:

F2: Agriculture makes sense, education makes sense, transport makes sense. That all makes sense.

M1: Makes total sense.

F1: Yeah, I was reading something the other day about opening up some canals and things and there was funding from the South for that.

F2: That all make sense, the waterways etc. that all makes sense.

Two members of Group 8 drew on personal experience of being able to use hospital services across the border in the Republic free of charge, through an agreement with the NHS. For example:

We were in Letterkenny about six, seven, eight years ago and my wee boy broke his arm and was in the hospital for three nights and had to get surgery in Letterkenny and we thought we had to pay but the doctor got us to sign a form and said no, you're completely covered by NHS agreement. (Group 8, F3)

One participant in Group 7 also came closer to praising cooperation as a matter of principle:

I think it's important that Ireland does have some sort of continuity between the Republic and the North because there is joint ventures and we are one island and there is no border and there's a common travel area. I think it's important that we have input from the South and projects that work together. (Group 7, M2)

Some members of the nationalist groups were supportive of cooperation in principle. One said:

Well I think it's there to protect the nationalist part of Northern Ireland or as I call it, the North of Ireland, it's here to protect us sort of thing, and it means that at least you're going to have somebody maybe fighting your corner in there, that they're not gonna be steamrolled into something. (Group 2, M3)

But most members of these groups, like those in the non-aligned groups, viewed the matter in purely pragmatic terms. Yet their high levels of scepticism towards politicians in general left them more dubious of whether much of value would be achieved:

It comes down to the same thing at the end of the day: are they actually actioning anything out of it or are they all just sitting round the table talking about it, having a great time, lifting their money and five years down the line no further on. (Group 1, M1)

Has it really changed anything? No. Will it change anything? I don't think so. (Group 3, F2)

I know they were having meetings in Armagh City quite a lot. What it actually done I would rack my brains to find out – what actually was rubberstamped out of it all. There was probably plenty of talking and fine food and wine and whatnot, but what they agreed on or what was rubberstamped. (Group 3, M1)

One member of the 'softer' unionist group agreed with the pragmatic value of cooperation. She first said it was needed to deal with smuggling in drugs, diesel, and people. When shown a list of areas of cooperation and asked whether she saw merit in these, she added:

I suppose the transport and environmental issues because if we are on the one land mass I think it's important we take the politics out of it and we try to manage this land mass. We are an island surrounded by water. We have to manage it. The environment and elements will work in whatever way they choose to work in. We have to try and harness that. Religion and politics don't come into any of that so I do think that's important, the waterways and that sort of stuff. Tourism. (Group 5, F1)

She later criticised politicians' tendency to focus on the constitutional divide and said, 'I'm thinking, just stop; let's deal with what affects people on a day-to-day basis' (Group 5, F1).

But others in this group and all members of the 'harder' unionist group took a different view, arguing that relations with Ireland should be the same as with any other 'foreign country'. That did not mean that there should be no cooperation – just that it should be on a par with other international relationships:

I think if they just worried about themselves and we worried about ourselves we'd be alright. (Group 5, F2)

Well, it's two different countries, two different parties. The party down south and the parties up in NI. It's part of the UK. I personally don't see why parties from Southern Ireland, which is another country, gets involved in politics in NI. (Group 5, M2)

I don't believe they should be treated differently to any other, it's a foreign country same way as any other country is, the border between the two and my understanding would be it's trying to make things work better between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. (Group 4, M2)

As [M2] said there, the South is a foreign country, we're a completely different country, it's no different if we want to speak to Germany or want to speak to France, that's outside our country. (Group 4, M1)

I don't think they should have much say over Northern Ireland but if they're going to help with trade issues and making sure that border isn't there then yes but they shouldn't be saying this is what's happening in the North of Ireland, as they call it, today because the South of Ireland government says so. Maybe that's just me being me but no other country in the world is telling people what to do apart from here, in Northern Ireland. It's daft. (Group 4, F1)

Northern Ireland I think we sort of stand on our own, to me this is our country and you know it's a different country whenever you go down to the South. So I don't think they've got any

reason to be telling us to do in our government or how to do it or having their twopence worth, I really don't. As everybody said, all other countries are individual and the decisions that they make within their governments. I don't know why we can't be either. (Group 4, F2)

Thoughts in the loyalist group were less definite. There was some recognition of pragmatic value in cooperation on particular issues, but also a deep underlying unease about where this might lead:

I think they're trying to maybe slowly but surely share services, have organisations that work on both sides of the border. And if you're a unionist or if you're a loyalist and you're seeing these things, it sort of all leads in one direction this, and while I wish them all success with regards to the good work I'm sure they're doing, surely it's all towards an all-Ireland strategy. [...] I just think it's a start of a process to get us into a united Ireland. (Group 6, M3)

Ideas for reform of Strand 2

Beyond these broad perspectives, participants did not have specific thoughts on possible changes to the Strand 2 institutions. In most groups, that was left implicit, but in some it was stated directly. In Group 1, for example, the discussion of the topic concluded with the following exchange:

Fac.: Do you think the arrangements for North/South cooperation should be changed? Any thoughts on that?

M1: Struggling to change something I don't really know enough about.

Fac.: Is that how we're all feeling?

F3: Yeah.

Strand 3: Knowledge, perceptions, and ideas about change

The focus groups also explored attitudes to Strand 3 of the Agreement, relating to East/West cooperation. That has two elements: relations between the British and Irish governments, institutionalised under the Agreement in the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC); and relations among all the administrations across these islands, principally in the British–Irish Council (BIC).

Responses to questions on this subject can be summarised very quickly: participants had almost no knowledge at all of Strand 3 or its institutions. When asked whether they had heard of the BIIGC, most simply said that they had not. When information was provided by the facilitator, almost none showed any flash of recognition. A few participants did claim some knowledge, but further probing suggested this was thin at most. One, for example, having said she had heard of the BIIGC, replied to a question about what she thought it was in very general terms that have already been quoted in part above:

That's the problem – British and Irish, I'm not Irish, I'm British, I'm just not connected to the mainland of Britain. Why can it not be just left as it is? What do we need them to interfere with us for? Every time the news came on after the recent elections, I seen more of Mary Lou McDonald than I seen of our own politicians. What did I need to see her for? Go on away home and mind your own business [...]. And the same with Britain, you're meant to be standing up for us, we are actually part, the money in our pockets has Lizzie's head on it, end of story. What are you interfering with somebody who is dealing in euros for? We don't need that. (Group 4, F1)

More representative, however, was the response in Group 3. when the facilitator asked about the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference, one participant replied, ‘Is that the new Star Wars film, is it?’ (Group 3, M2). Other participants laughed and confirmed they knew nothing about it.

Participants in several groups speculated that these institutions might have a mediating or guardianship role, stepping in when agreement in Stormont was impossible. Some were suspicious of this: ‘Is it just them [the two governments] talking about us?’ (Group 2, F1). Another said, ‘Isn’t it quite embarrassing to our government that they need two other governments to actually tell them what to do?’ (Group 3, F1). One loyalist participant, who had memories of BIC meetings and was clearly thinking of these throughout the discussions, doubted that his community was represented there:

You’ve Boris Johnson, whose Little England doesn’t really care two damns about Northern Ireland. You’ve Nicola Sturgeon, who wants to break up the Union. And you’ve a Welsh guy, who doesn’t really have any interest whatsoever in NI. So I’m not really sure who is representing us in that. Yes, I know who’s there, but I don’t know who’s representing the people of NI and certainly I don’t know who’s representing the loyalist community. (Group 6, M3)

But most were more positive, or at least relaxed about British–Irish cooperation in principle:

It’s like anything else, it’s a necessary mechanism at the moment. I wouldn’t call it a safety net, but those stabilisers to help out if anything starts to go wrong here – it’s a mechanism that they can bring two governments together to figure out what way to go forward. (Group 3, M2)

Well, if nobody else is doing something I think somebody, or something has to happen otherwise we’re just at a stalemate. (Group 5, F1)

If they’re gonna be able to do the work that needs done in NI by waiting on the DUP and the rest of them, so if they’re gonna help get our health service up to scratch, if they’re gonna get them things done, yeah, why not? If it’s gonna better our quality of life and our kid’s quality, yeah. (Group 5, M1)

It’s like giving NI godparents if the parents don’t work out then the godparents come in and overtake (Group 8, F2)

Bill of Rights

Participants were asked about the idea of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. This can again be discussed briefly, as the views expressed were scant on detail. Most participants said they had not heard of proposals for a Bill of Rights tailored specifically to Northern Ireland, and most had only sketchy ideas of what such a document would be. In none of the groups did the idea spark any particular enthusiasm. When participants were shown a list of the rights that might be involved, many said they thought these already existed, though some agreed that there could be value in ‘rubber-stamping’ them through a Bill of Rights (Group 7, M1). Some were attracted to the idea of a document setting out rights tailored for Northern Ireland (Group 3, M2); others were sceptical, saying that rights are ‘universal’ (Group 7, M1) or ‘global’ (Group 7, F2). One joked, ‘Who would write it up? That’s the problem. It would take a saint to write up something like that. The patience of a saint as well’ (Group 2, M1).

Scepticism was greatest in the unionist groups. One concern was that any such initiative would be driven by Sinn Féin (Group 5, M1). Another was that, whatever rights were put on paper would not translate into reality on the ground:

Personally I think it's a bit like communism: it's a wonderful idea, it's a great concept, but it requires people to act fairly and unfortunately that doesn't happen. (Group 6, M3)

You do have them rights, but at the same time, it all depends on what the situation is. Like political rights, you can have political rights as a Protestant in a Catholic community, you can't make your rights addressed, you can't address them properly because you're not in the right place to address them. (Group 6, M1)

Constitutional issues

Participants across the different groups, as would be expected, had widely varying views on the question of Northern Ireland's constitutional future. Discussion in this area primarily focused on whether Northern Ireland should remain in the UK or become part of a united Ireland: on unification itself, and on the processes that might be involved in getting there. We also sought to elicit views on possible Union reforms within the UK.

Unification v. Union

On the unification v. Union question, it was the participants in the unionist groups who were the most unequivocal: they wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK. Indeed, participants in both the 'harder' and 'softer' unionist groups said that they would leave Northern Ireland if unification were to happen. One said, 'I wouldn't have any interest in staying here, no' (Group 4, F2). Another, asked whether she would also leave, said:

I'd say my children would move so nanny would have to go too or she wouldn't see her grandsons so it would be a yes, 100%. I will not be ruled by people that think it's okay to murder and get away with it. (Group 4, F1)

In the 'softer' unionist group, one said:

I'd just have to uproot my kids and everything but there's no way, I wouldn't stay. It would just turn into World War III – they'd just kill each other. (Group 5, F2)

Views were understandably much more equivocal in the non-aligned groups. But it is striking that they were also very mixed in the nationalist groups. Several members of these groups had no doubt that they would vote for unification in the event of a referendum. They offered some pragmatic arguments for this position. One commented, 'Wages in the South are a hell of a lot better than they are in the North' (Group 3, M1). Another said, 'I would vote for it purely to get back into Europe' (Group 2, M1). More often, however, those who took this view did not set out a case for it: they evidently treated it as a matter of identity or of the heart. This was illustrated by an exchange in Group 3:

F1: There's no such place as Northern Ireland, it's Ireland is what I say.

M2: I just say Irish all the time.

M1: That's it, because you are. It's an island.

F2: As somebody said earlier, the wind doesn't stop at the border, we're one country.

Yet others in the nationalist groups, including both SDLP and Sinn Féin voters, said they would not vote for unification. One SDLP voter said:

I was going to say, growing up, a United Ireland was the big ticket, the thing to go after in my area and background, that's what was the driving force, that was the goal. But at that age I wasn't paying bills, didn't have a mortgage, didn't have two cars on the road, didn't have two kids to put through school. So I think what we've all touched on is you would need to know how it's going to affect you. So, previously I'd have said yeah, I'd have loved it. But now I'd say no. (Group 1, M1)

Another agreed, adding, 'I don't know the full figures of it now, but what I do know or the idea of what I know, it's a no' (Group 1, F3). A third was less sure: 'I really don't know enough about it, I would need to know more what was going to happen' (Group 1, F2). Similarly, in the 'harder' nationalist group, one said, "I would need persuaded. [...] I would need a lot of detail' (Group 2, M2). All four members of the mixed nationalist Group 3 – most of whom were Sinn Féin voters – said it was 'too early' or 'too soon' for a referendum on the issue:

I think it's too soon. I think we need to get our own Stormont Executive up and running and get them round the table and discuss more burning issues than the actual border poll. (Group 3, F2)

Such hesitations tended to stem from the practicalities of a united Ireland. Many brought up concerns about the economics of unification, about public services – including healthcare, education, water, and refuse collection – and about pensions. One participant summed up the thoughts of many:

You'd want to know how it's going to have a direct impact on, so your job, your cost of living is going to go up even further with everything that everybody said about rates, water charges, the health bills, it will be private insurances etc. Is your salary going to go up to match that? Price of housing, price of buying normal goods. [...] For each individual person you'd be saying to yourself, is it going to make it any cheaper for me to run my car, is it going to get me any more money when I go to work? All the things you have with monies coming in and monies going out, are you going to be able to live a comfortable life or are you going to be scraping from week to week? So you would want answers around how it's going to have a direct impact on normal, everyday Joe Soaps. (Group 1, M1)

Some unionists had stark views of life in southern Ireland. One said that houses there lacked clean drinking water (Group 4, M1). Another focused on public services:

My question is – can they afford to keep us because there's so many people. Whenever I was younger I can remember people saying oh, them coming over there to have their baby, because you have to pay to have your baby in the Republic of Ireland.

I know we've got rates and stuff here, but in the South you pay for your ambulance and your fire brigade whenever they come out to your house and you pay for your prescriptions, doctors, GP appointments. I think that would be too much of a culture shock for everybody, including nationalists. (Group 4, F1)

Many participants, pointing to economic concerns and dangers of violence, also doubted whether the South would accept the North in a united Ireland:

But the practicalities of a United Ireland would have to be ironed out. For instance, the like of us paying for donkeys years into the different NHS and all the [inaudible] you've paid and all the pensions you'd be owed and all that, I don't think Ireland could take us at the minute, I don't think they would want to take us at the minute, especially your man Michael Martin, he doesn't want us. (Group 2, M1)

The question is, do Ireland want us? I think it's inevitable that it will kind of happen. But there's the economics and all that, that I think is holding a lot of it back. And then, clearly, will it spark up the Troubles again? (Group 8, F3)

My question is – can they afford to keep us because there's so many people. Whenever I was younger I can remember people saying oh, them coming over there to have their baby, because you have to pay to have your baby in the Republic of Ireland. Health Service is free in Northern Ireland, so if you lived close to the border you just skipped across and said – ah I was here for the day and her waters broke. Bang, free, you don't have to pay the £2,000. Can they afford to keep us? Can they afford Northern Ireland. (Group 5, F1)

Unification referendums

In light of such considerations, it is perhaps unsurprising that none of the participants saw a unification referendum is likely soon. In Group 3, after all the participants said the time had not yet come for such a vote, one added, 'I actually think Michelle O'Neill would agree. I don't think she thinks it's time. I think she knows' (Group 3, F1).

In line with research that we have published elsewhere (Renwick et al. 2022), few participants had detailed thoughts on how any such referendums, were they to happen, should be conducted. The only point that recurred in several groups was that people should be able to make an informed choice. One nationalist, having argued that it was too early to hold a vote, said, 'I think the time is still right to start having a conversation about it' (Group 3, M2). He continued:

What would it look like? At least get, what do they have, citizens' councils in the South for different policies and stuff, what do you think it will look like, what are your fears about it so people are informed. Basically don't do the Brexit referendum again, promise everything and then Yes or No and then work it out afterwards. (Group 3, M2)

One participant suggested a supermajority threshold (Group 7, F2), which would be outside the stated terms of the 1998 Agreement. Another proposed that voting should be made compulsory (Group 5, F2).

Reforms within the UK

As in the interviews reported in Chapter 3, we also asked participants for their views on possible reforms within the UK. The only issue under this heading that had any resonance was the possibility of Scottish independence, which several participants saw as more likely than Irish unification (Group 7, F1; Group 8, F3). One thought that Scottish independence, if it happened, would throw 'a big, big spanner in the works in the UK', predicting that Wales would seek independence too (Group 3, M1). Other participants were less sure. One said, 'You don't really hear too much about Wales' (Group 8, F1). Members of the same group wryly – and tellingly – responded, 'They just keep quiet so everybody will leave them alone' (Group 8, F2), and 'They

may just be sitting back waiting to see what happens with the rest of us, let us do the hard work. Maybe they have the right idea' (Group 8, F3).

It is notable that, notwithstanding participants' disillusionment with the status quo, the possibility of Union reforms was simply not on their radars. That partly reflects most people's focus on day-to-day practicalities, rather than on institutional structures. But it also fits what we saw from the interviews in Chapter 3: no politicians in Northern Ireland have offered a positive agenda for improving the structure of the wider Union.

Mechanisms of change

In this final section of the chapter, we consider what focus group participants thought about how any changes to the 1998 Agreement or its operation would best be made.⁷ We did not ask questions specifically addressing possible mechanisms for achieving such change, but there were many opportunities for the discussions to move in this direction. Yet few participants volunteered such thoughts. Given that most felt very alienated from structures of power and did not have detailed thoughts on how the institutions operate, this is unsurprising. One Sinn Féin voter had heard of citizens' assemblies (what he called 'citizens' councils') and, in a passage quoted in the preceding section, proposed their use as a means of preparing for a possible future border poll (Group 3, M2). Others in the same group were, however, sceptical, thinking that such assemblies, in Northern Ireland's context, would become a 'bickering match' (Group 3, F2).

One important seam of evidence for thinking about mechanisms of change relates, however, to participants' attitudes towards politicians – in Northern Ireland and in both London and Dublin. Some participants did praise politicians of the generation of 1998 for showing leadership within their communities, reaching across divides, taking risks, and thereby delivering results. Those specifically mentioned included David Trimble, John Hume, Tony Blair, Mo Mowlam, and David Ervine. There was also praise for how Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness came together in 2007. But views were generally scathing towards current politicians.

Such negative attitudes were most vociferously directed towards the government in London, led, at the time of the focus groups, by Boris Johnson. Many participants expressed distrust in Westminster politicians, and particularly in the Johnson-led government. Some felt disconnected from Conservative politicians on the basis of class:

Change the Tory government would be a starter, all the boys with the silver spoon in their mouths, all the toffs who all give jobs to the boys, who are all well off who are making the rules where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and that's never been more evident than it is now. (Group 1, M1)

Some criticised perceived dishonesty over Brexit, and some thought Johnson had betrayed the DUP over the Northern Ireland Protocol:

Well it's with Boris promising there about the Protocol. He's made so many promises to NI and broke an awful lot of them. (Group 5, M2)

⁷ This section draws closely on our written evidence to the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's inquiry into 'The Effectiveness of the Institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement': Renwick and Kelly (2022: 7–8).

Many thought that London lacked either interest in or understanding of the lives of people in Northern Ireland. One loyalist summed up these thoughts, commenting, 'The scary thing is you might get more sense out of the Free State [the Republic of Ireland] than you would out of the British Government.' He went on:

Just honestly they're so disconnected with us, they've no idea of what it's like to live where we live how we live as unionists, loyalists in NI. They have no understanding whatsoever. I just feel there's a total disconnection between certainly the Conservatives. You might have more of a chance if Labour were in power, although they obviously sometimes favour the nationalist republican side when it comes to key issues – but at least they're from the same type of community that we're from, they understand what grassroots loyalism and the issues that we face. But certainly the Tories who are supposedly on our side, certainly they're not and they've continually shafted the DUP and they've been caught with their pants down more times than enough. It's embarrassing. (Group 6, M3)

Though they were not as widespread, suspicions were directed towards the government in Dublin as well. As noted above, some unionists rejected any role for the government of the South in Northern Ireland's affairs. One suggested that the Irish government would 'push the lack of opportunity for us to stand on our own' in order to advance the cause of Irish unification (Group 4, F2). Some nationalists also viewed the Dublin government with hostility. One Sinn Féin voter described his feelings towards it as 'half-hearted', and added:

Micheál Martin, he doesn't want to know. In my opinion, the Irish Government showed what they think of Sinn Féin when Sinn Féin got so many seats and they run about all over the place trying to get a coalition so they could keep Sinn Féin out of power down there. (Group 2, M2)

Some current politicians in Northern Ireland did receive praise: one Sinn Féin voter described Alliance Party leader Naomi Long: 'She says it as it is. Great mind, very clever person and has got a lot of good party colleagues' (Group 3, M1). Another, asked whether he saw 'an acceptable face of unionism currently', proposed UUP leader Doug Beattie, saying, 'He seems to have a forward look' (Group 2, M2). A DUP voter, responding to criticisms of the party from fellow group participants, said:

I know you're saying they're cowboys and all, but do you not think the way they're standing right now and standing their ground until they get rid of the Irish Sea border is the best thing for our little country cos that's what needs done? (Group 5, F2)

Much more often, however, today's Northern Ireland politicians were sharply criticised. We have already quoted above criticisms that the SDLP no longer represented workers and that many in Alliance had betrayed their Protestant heritage. In addition, a hardline unionist said 'the UUP sold the Protestant community out' (Group 4, F1). Another unionist accused Sinn Féin of hypocrisy:

Sinn Féin are sitting there in their high horse talking about our country is in the state and the mess it's in now and the NHS and everything is falling apart and blaming the DUP but if roles were reversed and they were in the same position, which they were years ago, they did the exact same thing. (Group 5, F1)

But it was the DUP that received the sharpest criticism, which came from across the political spectrum. The party's leaders were accused by nationalists of having 'thrown all their toys out of the pram because they weren't voted in' (Group 1, F1) and of 'sitting in the corner sulking because they now aren't in the strong position that they were before' (Group 1, F2). A Sinn Féin voter, in

particularly strongly worded comments, said, 'I hope I don't offend anybody but they just put me in mind now of the Ku Klux Klan in America. They're just bigoted, racist, you name it they are it' (Group 2, M1). A loyalist described the party as 'not representing grassroots loyalism', saying 'Their ideas are largely in the dark ages [...] in relation to things like abortion and things like that' (Group 6, M3). A disillusioned former DUP voter said:

Yes, there was progress, but sure look at DUP now, they're not even sitting, they're cowboys, they do nothing, they're getting this big money a month for nothing because they won't sit over the Protocol. (Group 5, M1)

Referring to the DUP, two non-aligned voters commented:

They cried they wanted Brexit and then when they got Brexit they weren't happy with it. Now they're not going in [to coalition] because they wanted a border. They don't know what they want. If they were a child you'd give it a slap on the arse and tell it to go out and play. (Group 8, F2)

They're too draconian, they're too far in the past, they're nearly as bad as the medieval times, they're too far and too engrossed in the past and they need to move forward. Their beliefs, some of the things is just mad. (Group 8, F4)

In quoting these opinions on the parties and named politicians, we make no presumption that any of them are justified. In fact, it seems clear that some are not, and that, on all sides, they reflect to some degree the 'othering' tendency that is a feature of polarised politics. Rather, our point is that such views are widespread, and that they reflect patterns of deep distrust both across communities and, within some communities, between members of the public and their elected politicians. Any efforts to move forward in Northern Ireland and to find ways of restoring and rejuvenating the ethos and institutions of the 1998 Agreement will need to grapple with the context that such views generate. We explore further the question of how that might be done in the concluding chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter has summarised existing research on public attitudes to the Agreement – particularly in the annual NILT survey – and presented findings from an original set of focus groups conducted in summer 2022.

One important finding is that, as in any other democracy, most people in Northern Ireland do not think much about political institutions. In some respects, the language used by focus group participants hints at a society in which politics has been unusually salient in people's lives: phrases such as 'power-sharing', 'sovereignty', and 'cessation of violence' trip off tongues in ways that we might not ordinarily expect. People also know the cast of characters in politics – both today and in the past – very well. And they are deeply angered that – as most see it – politicians are serving their own interests and taking a salary while not doing their job. Yet knowledge of institutions is limited. Most people are primarily concerned not with the details of political processes, but with how political decisions affect the cost of living and the quality of public services. The constitutional question is also secondary for most people to day-to-day practicalities.

Though few participants had detailed thoughts on institutions, most backed the principles of power-sharing. Most also saw value in North/South and East/West cooperation.

Most people view the Agreement warmly, associating it with substantially greater peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland. But there are stark exceptions to that pattern. Members of the 'harder' unionist group viewed the Agreement very negatively, associating it above all with the release of prisoners whom they described as terrorists and murderers. The strength of this association is remarkable given how long ago prisoner releases occurred. Members of the loyalist group, meanwhile, indicated that, while they had supported the Agreement in 1998, they struggled to do so today.

A strong sense of betrayal was expressed by many of the unionist and loyalist participants: they felt that their identities and aspirations were disparaged and misunderstood. In different ways, many participants in other groups had deep grievances too. They felt they were being held hostage by the DUP, whose refusal to allow the Assembly or Executive to function was, in their view, making effective government that might improve people's lives impossible. Many in the non-aligned groups also felt that the institutions discriminated against their political representatives. Any path forward will need to find ways to heal these divisions and develop common ground.

Conclusion: Summary and Implications

As we pointed out at the beginning of this report, perspectives on the 1998 Agreement are diverse, but that diversity is insufficiently understood. We have sought to reveal how the Agreement is seen, among politicians and other elite actors, and in the wider public. In this short conclusion, we summarise the findings, and then draw out reflections and implications.

Summary of findings

This report began by exploring the content of the 1998 Agreement, key attitudes towards it at the time, and the process of implementing its various components over the last quarter century. The Agreement was widely seen at the time (though with notable exceptions) above all as the basis for ending the decades-long conflict known as the Troubles. As later chapters further corroborate, the Agreement has, in this regard, been an enormous success. Violence has been dramatically reduced, and most people in Northern Ireland feel safer, more prosperous, and better able to live easily. Relationships between the communities, as well as political relations across these islands, are also unrecognisably better than they were during the Troubles, or indeed long before that time.

But that substantial record of delivering peace has not transferred seamlessly to other elements of the Agreement. Strand 1, with the exception of the 2007–17 period, has been prone to frequent collapses. Strands 2 and 3 do function but have not been utilised to the extent envisaged by the Agreement. While there have been successful reforms in areas such as policing and equality legislation, several elements of the Agreement have not materialised or been sustained, including the Civic Forum and Northern Ireland Bill of Rights. Notwithstanding the reduction of violence, dissident republican and loyalist groups continue to exist and exert a wholly unacceptable influence on sections of society.

Our analysis of party manifestos in Chapter 2 reflected these trends. Aspects of peace-building – such as decommissioning, demilitarisation, and police reform – dominated in the early years, but faded considerably after the St Andrews Agreement of 2006/7. The period of sustained devolution that followed also saw waning attention on many Strand 1 issues. The 1998 Agreement in these years became the settled will across the major parties for how Northern Ireland should be governed.

But the result of the UK's 2016 Brexit referendum, and the periods of political dysfunction that have followed in Westminster and Stormont, have brought renewed tensions. There is agreement across the parties on the need for change. But few concrete reform proposals have been made, and whether consensus can be achieved on them is unclear. Renaming the offices of First and deputy First Minister to better reflect their joint nature would be relatively uncontroversial, although some might resent the timing. Reforming the designation system to account for the growing cohort of non-aligned MLAs may be possible too. Changing the process of Executive formation would likely be much harder.

While Strand 2 has been referenced in manifestos throughout the last 25 years, even the nationalist parties have offered only general indications of what they think it should be doing. Meanwhile Strand 3 is mentioned strikingly rarely by all the parties. Indeed, throughout the long period when the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC) was not meeting (2007–18), the parties did not mention it. Most equality and rights issues meanwhile appear largely resolved. The exceptions are the Bill of Rights and legal protections for the Irish language, though, even there, it is unclear that differences are insoluble. Constitutional issues have been referenced throughout the 25 years, and became more pressing in the wake of the 2016 Brexit result and the Protocol.

In Chapter 3, interviewees praised the Agreement for bringing peace, but lamented its failures in delivering good governance. Many also highlighted communities, especially sections of loyalism, that feel left behind by the peace process economically and socially.

On Strand 1, our interviews largely confirmed the conclusions of the manifesto analysis. There was broad agreement that changes are required, but less consensus on what change should look like. There were also significant concerns that attempts at reform could lead to an unravelling of matters that have been settled by the 1998 Agreement. Most interviewees, including experts from civil society, academics, and former civil servants, agreed that Dublin’s and London’s disengagement from the peace process after 2007 was a mistake, and that recent turmoil arising from Brexit has compounded the problem. The interviews painted a different picture from the manifesto analysis on the salience of Strands 2 and 3, with many interviewees saying these bodies could and should do a lot more.

Chapter 4 turned to perspectives in the broader public. The Agreement is still seen across much of society as the basis of governing Northern Ireland. But there is strong and, in part, growing hostility to it among some unionists and loyalists. Across all groups, there is a clear desire for change in how the Agreement functions. People want stable, effective government that deals with everyday issues such as healthcare, education, and local infrastructure – though few engage with the details of institutions or have concrete ideas for reform. Across the groups, we heard repeated calls to move beyond ‘orange and green’ politics. Yet many people retain strong identities, and we saw some tendency towards ‘othering’ those with different identities. This often applied to people who reject unionist and nationalist identities as much as to those who embrace them.

The focus groups also reveal low awareness on Strands 2 and 3, and some hostility among unionists towards their remit. Views on a united Ireland were unsurprisingly mixed; and participants did not express views on possible reforms to how the existing Union functions. Participants were extremely distrustful of politicians at all levels. They were particularly frustrated that MLAs were being paid while Stormont was not functioning, and with the government in London (and to a lesser extent Dublin).

Reflections and implications

As researchers, examining views on the Agreement in these different ways has been for us an exceptionally rewarding intellectual experience. Doing so has added to our sense that all the voices whose perspectives we have sought to present in these pages matter, and that progress can come only if all are listened to. We would like to offer some brief thoughts by way of conclusion.

First, there is an elite consensus that the Agreement is ‘the only game in town’ for Northern Ireland’s future, at least for so long as Northern Ireland remains within the Union (indeed, for some, it is also the basis of how a united Ireland should deal with many issues). The Agreement became the increasingly settled will of politicians in the period after 2007. That consensus has been shaken in recent years, by Brexit and by the dysfunctions of the institutions, and there are many demands for reforms within the Agreement’s structures. But the consensus nevertheless holds. We share that view.

Second, however, the elite consensus is not universally accepted by the public. Particularly in unionism, but increasingly also in loyalism, some view the 1998 settlement in much more hostile terms. We were advised early in the project that ‘the Agreement’ can often become a totem for dissatisfaction with politics more generally or with how Stormont operates, but that, if questioned more deeply, people still believe that it delivered greater peace and prosperity and provides the best basis for governing Northern Ireland. Our research confirms this to a large extent. Even with that point in mind, however, ensuring that the benefits of peace are shared by everyone still needs work. The starting point for that needs to be good, stable governance, and more attention to the social and economic deprivation that many people in Northern Ireland continue to live with.

Third, there is general agreement that change is needed: that the status quo is not sustainable. People want government in Northern Ireland to work better, and most want to consign sectarian politics to the past. These are important aspirations.

Finally, however, there is also fear of change: fear that things will get worse rather than better, that the ‘other side’ will gain while one’s own side loses. Such fear reflects a lack of trust – between politicians of different parties, between voters and their elected representatives (particularly within unionism and loyalism), between Dublin and London, between politicians and voters in Northern Ireland and the two governments, and, perhaps most importantly, between the different communities in Northern Ireland. Change is needed, but change needs trust. In order to make progress in the coming years, political leadership from London, Dublin, and the major political parties will have a vital role in rebuilding trust. That will require them, above all, to listen, and to work by the Agreement’s ethos of respecting difference, sharing power, and seeking consensual ways forward.

If that endeavour succeeds, there is an opportunity for Northern Ireland to return to the trajectory of incremental progress that we saw during the peace process, in the early years of the Agreement, and again between 2007 and 2016. If it fails, this risks further undermining what remains a world-leading example of how to bring peace to a divided society.

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Twenty-five years ago, the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998 brought relative political stability to Northern Ireland. It was the culmination of decades of effort by both the British and Irish governments, and actors in Northern Ireland. It was approved by large majorities in popular referendums in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It is a unique and carefully constructed document, and it is the cornerstone of consensual politics on these islands. Its greatest legacy is peace.

But the passage of time has revealed weaknesses in implementing areas of the Agreement, which Brexit has exposed further. While the Agreement has had many successes, some aspects have not functioned as imagined in 1998, or indeed been implemented at all. Among the different political actors and communities within Northern Ireland, and beyond, there are varying and complex understandings of what the Agreement means, how it has been implemented, and how it should work in the future. Making progress will be possible only if these diverse perspectives are listened to and understood.

This report therefore sets out evidence on how the 1998 Agreement is seen, using interviews, focus groups, and manifesto analysis. It finds that the Agreement retains widespread, but not universal, support. Even many of its supporters want change, though whether agreement on reforms will be possible remains unclear. Low trust makes finding pathways forward much harder. Leadership and a spirit of compromise – from politicians and others in Northern Ireland, and from the governments in Dublin and London – will be essential in addressing these challenges.

About the Constitution Unit

The Constitution Unit is a research centre based in the UCL Department of Political Science. We conduct timely, rigorous, independent research into constitutional change and the reform of political institutions. Since our foundation in 1995, the Unit's research has had significant real-world impact, informing policy-makers engaged in such changes – both in the United Kingdom and around the world.

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