Victims of Their Own Success? Post-Agreement Dilemmas of Political Moderates in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) appeared to offer a great deal to the avowedly moderate parties in Northern Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) could point to the principle of consent at the core of the deal. The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) viewed the three stranded institutional arrangements of the deal as the culmination of its political thinking. The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (Alliance) had long advocated devolved power sharing as the most appropriate political arrangement. Each of these parties has been beset by difficulties, however, whilst Sinn Fein, whose pre-1998 political approach was entirely at odds with much of the Agreement's contents, and the anti-Agreement DUP have prospered. This article draws upon membership surveys of the Alliance Party and the SDLP and the ruling body of the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC), conducted between 1999 and 2002, to assess the extent to which internal party divisions have impaired the post-Agreement performance of each of these parties.[1]

The Crises within the UUP

The UUP has been beset by division over the GFA since the deal was clinched in April 1998. Eleven special meetings of its ruling, 858-member, UUC have been held, each backing the position of the party leader, David Trimble, by a average majority of 56 to 44 per cent. Although the UUP remains a pro-GFA party, the extent of dissent within the UUC, allied to the electoral threat of the DUP has ensured that backing for the GFA has been based upon critical support and particular interpretation, the latter translated into an insistence that the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) puts its arms beyond use and clarifies that its war is over. Despite being regularly defeated and at one point having three of its senior figures suspended, the unionist dissidents have declined to join forces with the DUP. Among the party's members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, admittedly largely pro-GFA, only Peter Weir defected to Paisley's party.

Whilst the DUP has strongly attacked the all-Ireland element to the GFA, the party has also stressed a moral dimension to its opposition. Combined with zero-sum game appeals that the 'equality agenda' of Strand One also threatens the economic fortunes of Protestants, the party has updated its traditional twin appeal, to rural evangelical or fundamentalist Protestants and to a more secular loyalist working-class (cf.: Bruce, 1986, 1994; Todd, 1987). Indeed the party has been described as a politico-religious organisation (Smyth, 1986) and its leader remains the embodiment of Ulster Protestant fundamentalism, albeit assisted by more secular deputies (Farrington, 2001). A majority of its election candidates during the 1970s were members of the Free Presbyterian Church, an organisation that has grown in size over the last three decades, but amounts to less than two per cent of Northern Ireland's Protestant population.

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[1] One other 'moderate' pro-Agreement party could have been selected. However, the centrist Northern Ireland Women's Coalition has not yet been surveyed by the author. To offer balance, the article thus evidence from one moderate party within each community and one 'non-aligned centrist party. The UUC survey received 299 replies from the 858 Council members (36 per cent); the Alliance survey 702 from 1,050 members (68 per cent) and the SDLP 528 from a claimed (but not verified) 3,000 members (the SDLP's figure *may* be exaggerated, but the response rate here is given at a low 18 per cent). The differences in response rate are acknowledged. As these are the first datasets ever constructed on party members, the representativeness of replies cannot be reliably tested, even if, intuitively, responses appeared in accordance with what might be expected. The attitudes of the UUC may not necessarily replicate those found among the wider party. However, results were tested against a sample of 100 ordinary members, with no significant differences found. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that the vast bulk (688) of UUC members are ordinary constituency delegates.

The DUP's moral opposition to such items as prisoner releases and changes in policing has been a useful political marketing device. The party performed particularly well at the 2001 elections. Its percentage share of the vote in the 2001 Westminster contest rose by 9.4 per cent, against a fall for the UUP of 5.9 per cent (Table 1).

The Westminster election figures pre-2001 underestimate the extent of DUP support, given the party's willingness to step aside to allow UUP candidates a free run at SDLP and Sinn Fein candidates, as happened in North Belfast and West Tyrone in 1997. Overall, the Unionist bloc vote rose at the last Westminster election, yet despite the new vibrancy of intra-unionist electoral rivalries, turnout remains substantially lower than in nationalist-held seats (Mitchell, 2001). Of the six remaining UUP-held seats, only North Down, South Belfast and Lagan Valley still appear safe, the other seats having an average 'cushion' of only 3.2 per cent. From 1997 to 2001, the UUP lost 41, 600 votes, whilst the DUP gained almost 75,000 (Mitchell, O'Leary and Evans, 2001). Perhaps most dramatically of all, the UUP vote share of the overall UUP-DUP total fell from 71 per cent to only 54 per cent.

Table 1: UUP-DUP Electoral Rivalries, 1982-2001

Year	Election type	% share of total vote	
		UUP	**DUP**
1982	Assembly	29.7	23.0
1983	Westminster	34.0	20.0
1984	European	21.5	33.6
1985	Local	29.5	24.3
1987	Westminster	37.9	11.7
1989	Local	30.4	18.7
1992	Westminster	34.5	13.1
1993	Local	29.4	17.3
1994	European	23.8	29.2
1996	Forum	24.2	18.8
1997	Westminster	32.7	13.1
1997	Local	27.8	15.6
1998	Assembly	21.3	18.1
1999	European	17.7	28.5
2001	General	26.8	22.5
2001	Local	23.0	21.5

A realignment of Unionist forces has not, however, occurred thus far. A number of different factors underlie the apparent stasis in unionism. Firstly as noted, there have been few defections from the UUP to the DUP, despite the loss of confidence in the deal among the Protestant population and the consequent electoral popularity of the DUP. By 2001, the number of Protestants opposing the GFA outweighed supporters (Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2001). In October 2002, as the institutions were suspended, a BBC Northern Ireland *Hearts and Minds* poll reported that only 33 per cent of Protestants still backed the deal.

Secondly, the DUP has oscillated between outright rejection of the GFA and 'renegotiation' of the deal, to ward off charges of negativity. Untainted by involvement in production of the Agreement, having quit multi-party negotiations in July 1997, the DUP has highlighted its unsavoury aspects, describing it as a 'failed Agreement', yet it has not rejected power sharing with Sinn Fein *per se*, arguing, for example, that loyalist-republican cooperation on Belfast City Council, 'shows that if you have a different structure, it (power-sharing) can work' (BBC Northern Ireland, *Heart and Minds*, 25 September 2003). DUP electoral success was accompanied by 'a more subtle and less

hysterical critique' of the GFA (Patterson, 2002). With one-third of its supporters claiming to have supported the GFA in the 1998 referendum and half wishing the deal to work, the DUP has attempted to avoid the charge of outright rejectionism (Irwin, 2002). Pro-Agreement fellow loyalists have argued that emotive aspects of the package were isolated and elevated (McMichael, 1999). However, the DUP's critique was comprehensive, on constitutional and moral grounds. The DUP has outlined its seven 'principles' designed to underpin any renegotiated agreement (DUP, 2003). Its document, *Towards a New Agreement*, restates the critique evident in the party's 2001 election manifesto, *Leadership to Put Things Right* (DUP, 2001). Both criticise the presence of 'terrorists' in government; the dilution of British culture; the all-island dimension to the deal and the morally unacceptable aspects of prisoner releases and policing changes (Tonge, 2001). In defence of the Agreement, the UUP has highlighted how it constructed a 'Unionist veto' on Assembly decisions and North-South expansion, whilst arguing that 'unreconstructed terrorists' would not be allowed in government (UUP, 1998).

Thirdly, the evidence from unionist voting patterns provides little support for the perception that the major faultline in unionism is the division between pro- and anti- GFA forces. In the 1998 Assembly elections, held during the 'honeymoon period' of the Agreement, when the distinction between pro- and anti-GFA unionists was stark, there was evidence of such divisions in voting patterns, but the distinction was not overwhelming. Indeed the *combined* lower preference transfer vote to anti-Agreement unionists undertaken by voters recording first preferences for pro-Agreement unionists matched the figure recorded for all the other pro-Agreement parties combined (Evans and O'Leary 1999). In other words, pro-Agreement unionists preferred to keep their votes 'in bloc', even if this meant supporting anti-Agreement unionists. The solidarity of DUP voters was impressive, almost four-fifths transferring 'in house' but even here 44 per cent recorded lower preference votes for pro-GFA UUP candidates (Ibid). The evidence suggests that a reshaping of unionist forces around attitudes to the GFA remains unlikely.

The election results and party stances described above only partially confirm attitudes to the GFA. The question begged is whether the anti-Agreement wing of the UUP holds the same views, in its critique of the GFA and outline of constitutional alternatives, as does the DUP. If this anti-agreement wing were to hold identical views to its unionist rival, the possibility of unionist realignment might remain, particularly in the event of an attempt to revive the deal on terms seen as unfavourable by many unionists. To examine the attitudes of the anti-GFA wing of the UUC in this respect, we use, initially, a breakdown of attitudes according to voting in the 1998 referendum on the GFA.

Table 2 indicates that, whatever the level of support for devolved government within the UUC, there is only lukewarm support for parallel consent within the Assembly and similarly tepid backing for the attachment of cross-border bodies to the institutions created under Strand One (see Wolff in this volume for an outline of the institutions). Elsewhere, it was reported that there was minimal difference between UUP and DUP supporters in their widespread opposition to involvement of the Irish Government in the affairs of Northern Ireland (Evans and Sinnott, 1999). The high standard deviations in Table 2 indicate the presence of a large number of opponents of both aspects of the GFA among those who voted yes to the deal.

Given that cross-community backing for Assembly legislation and an all-island dimension were always going to be integral aspects of any political settlement, the modest support for these aspects, even from those who supported the deal, might be seen as perturbing. Of course, there have been debates over the mechanics of cross-community power sharing, with some supporters of the GFA questioning the rigidity of unionist and nationalist bloc designations within the Assembly. Furthermore, the extent of the all-island dimension was always set to be an arena of negotiation, with unionists reasonably successful in watering down the more substantial all-island proposals of the 1995

Framework Document. However, the questions asked of UUC members were on the principles of such ideas and it is apparent that even pro-GFA supporters were not particularly enthusiastic concerning power sharing. Anti-GFA voters on the UUC are hostile to enforced power sharing via parallel consent, with, surprisingly, such hostility outweighing even the opposition to the all-island dimension of the GFA. The assumption, therefore, that opposition to the GFA has been primarily based upon concerns over an unpalatable 'micro-agenda' of prisoner releases and policing changes, allied to greater input from the Irish Republic, clearly needs some modification.

Table 2: UUC Vote in the GFA referendum and attitudes to
dual majority voting/power-sharing with cross-border bodies

| Mean position (s.d.) | How voted in GFA referendum | | |
	Yes	No	N
Assembly decisions should have a dual majority	.27 (1.31)	-1.36 (.92)	284
Power sharing with cross-border bodies is best solution	.30 (1.16)	-.57 (1.14)	278

-2 = strongly disagree   +2 = strongly agree

Nonetheless, as Table 3 indicates, hostility to the prisoners and policing issues unites pro- and anti-GFA wings of the UUC. As one would expect, hostility to the early release of paramilitary prisoners and the policing changes wrought by the Patten Report is considerably greater among opponents of the GFA.

Table 3: Attitudes to prisoners, policing and parades according to vote
in GFA referendum within the UUC

| Mean position (s.d.) | Vote in GFA referendum | | |
	Support	Reject	N
Patten should be fully implemented	-.66 (.90)	1.67 (1.20)	292
Prisoner releases justified	-.75 (1.24)	-1.54 (1.10)	288
Orange Order should be allowed in RC areas	.15 (1.20)	1.11 (.97)	281

-2 = strongly disagree; +2 = strongly agree

Opponents of the GFA are also insistent that the Orange Order should be allowed to march through nationalist areas, an issue that remains controversial despite the diminution of the Drumcree problem (discussed in detail by Jarman in this volume).

Whatever its flaws, the GFA has been sold as the 'only show in town' by the four Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, Mowlam, Mandelson, Reid and Murphy, who have presided over the deal. Such an argument is, unsurprisingly, not subscribed to by

opponents of the GFA. Table 4 confirms that the integrationist wing of the UUP remains alive, drawing support, in particular, from 'No' voters.

Table 4: Vote in the GFA referendum and attitudes to
political integration within the UK within the UUC

	Vote in GFA referendum		
Mean position (s.d.)	**Support**	**Reject**	**N**
Full integration of Northern Ireland into the UK	-.05 (1.37)	1.14 (1.03)	282
Direct rule	-.98 (.88)	-.10 (1.26)	279
Electoral integration (British parties to contest Northern Ireland elections	.00 (1.27)	.30 (1.25)	285

-2 = strongly disagree +2 = strongly agree

The above table offers evidence that the legacy of the Molyneaux leadership of the UUP, from 1979 until 1995, is intact. Molyneaux has indeed been a critic of the GFA and 'recognised the fragility of belief in Stormont as a bulwark against a united Ireland' (Hume, 1996:12). His leadership of the UUP saw the party committed to administrative integration of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. Molyneaux's aspiration was impeded by the intergovernmentalism and bi-nationalism of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement. Nonetheless, despite the 'carrots' for the return of devolution offered under the Agreement, Molyneaux did not steer the UUP on a devolutionist course post-1985. Furthermore, despite the arrival of a pro-devolution leader in Trimble in 1995 and notwithstanding the restructuring of the United Kingdom by the Labour Government since 1997, there is clearly still an integrationist constituency within unionism's largest party. This constituency is not especially keen upon the logic of integration, by which 'mainland' political parties would contest elections in Northern Ireland. Meanwhile, supporters of the GFA are hostile to direct rule from Westminster, although this temporary scenario is less unacceptable to anti-GFA unionists.

The integrationist approach of anti-GFA UUC members indicates how they occupy a different political terrain from the DUP, which has long been a devolutionist party. Of course, it is possible that DUP members dissent from the leadership's pro-devolution stance. In the absence of comparable data from Paisley's party, this cannot be measured, although it *appears* unlikely. Whatever their differences with the DUP over the most appropriate arrangements for the governance of Northern Ireland, the anti-GFA wing of the UUC is more favourably disposed to its unionist electoral rival than pro-GFA UUC members, as Table 5 indicates.

Clearly anti-GFA UUC members are more favourably disposed to the idea of supporting DUP candidates with lower preference votes than are UUC supporters of the Agreement. The relatively low standard deviations are indicative of few anti-DUP forces among the UUC anti-GFA wing. This is not, however, to suggest that pro-GFA UUC members wish to make common cause with other pro-GFA parties. Such UUC members are more hostile to the pro-GFA Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) than to the anti-GFA DUP. This hostility is evident even though the PUP helped deliver a section of the wavering Protestant working-class to the Yes camp during the 1998 referendum and praised Trimble for his handling of the campaign. For some UUC members, however, the PUP's link with the Ulster Volunteer Force places the party outside the domain of 'acceptable' politics. The

pro- and anti-GFA wings of the UUC are both very hostile to the pro-GFA Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) for reasons meriting further research, although misogyny cannot be ruled out. Although not shown in the above table, both wings are overwhelmingly hostile to vote transfers across the divide to the SDLP and Sinn Fein.

Table 5: Potential lower preference vote transfers for parties,
according to vote in the GFA referendum among UUC members
(where significant difference (<.05))

Mean position (s.d)	Vote in GFA referendum		
	Yes	No	N
DUP	2.65 (1.14)	1.52 (.95)	264
UKUP	2.72 (1.09)	1.46 (.82)	251
PUP	2.85 (1.03)	3.37 (.86)	226
NIWC	3.02 (.94)	3.63 (.79)	222

1= very likely   4 = no possibility

Pan-unionism?

Thus far, we have examined the extent of commonalities according to vote in the GFA referendum. What though, of those who advocate electoral alliances with anti-Agreement forces? After all, any impetus for realignment is likely to come not merely from those who oppose the UUP's support for the GFA, but also from those who already support unionist electoral pacts with other anti-Agreement unionists.

Table 6 indicates the extent to which those willing or unwilling to vote transfer to other unionist parties hold common views in rejecting policing changes, prisoner releases and restrictions on Orange Order parades. In this and Table 7, the 'support' versus 'reject' categorisation has been deployed as follows. The 'support' category covers all respondents who indicated a willingness to form electoral alliances with the anti-GFA DUP and United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP) or who wrote 'all Unionists' when asked with which parties would they support such alliances. The 'reject' category covers all those opposed to the idea of electoral alliances. Overall, 54 per cent of the UUC support electoral alliances, with 46 per cent opposed.

Clearly those in favour of tactical electoral unionist alliances are more strongly opposed to aspects of the GFA on policing and prisoners and are more strident in respect of Orange parades than those rejecting pan-unionist alliances. Nonetheless, there are common overall views on these subjects, across the electoral pact divide. As such, opposition to the micro-agenda of the GFA provided a basis for the development of pan-unionism, although the moment has surely gone, with prisoner releases completed and Patten largely implemented, despite some dilution.

Table 6: Vote in GFA referendum and policing, prisoners and parades according to views on pan-Unionist electoral alliances

Mean position (s.d.)	View on pan-Unionist electoral alliances		
	Support	Reject	N
Patten should be fully implemented	1.40 (.90)	-.70 (1.20)	294
Prisoner releases justified	-1.35 (1.10)	-.78 (1.28)	290
Orange Order should be allowed in RC areas	.94 (1.03)	.15 (1.21)	286

-2 = strongly disagree; +2 = strongly agree

Pan-unionism nonetheless has its limits, as Table 7 indicates.

Table 7: Vote in GFA referendum and attitudes to political integration within the UK, according to views on pan-unionist electoral alliances

Mean position (s.d.)	View on pan-unionist electoral alliances		
	Support	Reject	N
Full integration of Northern Ireland into the UK	.66 (1.28)	.14 (1.41)	287
Direct rule	.51 (1.15)	-.84 (1.02)	284
Electoral integration (British parties to contest Northern Ireland elections	.25 (1.30)	.02 (1.26)	290

-2 = strongly disagree; +2 = strongly agree

Opponents of electoral pacts, i.e. those hostile to the DUP, do not see direct British rule as an option, whereas supporters of electoral alliances favour direct rule or full integration. Again, this suggests differences between anti-GFA UUC members and the DUP, even though the anti-GFA wing of the UUC favours tactical electoral alliances with the UUP's main rival. Hostility to the GFA and part of its agenda, allied to a desire for pan-unionist unity, may bring anti-GFA forces together across parties, but the alliance is far from a bonding. Instead, what may be apparent are three forms of unionism across two main parties, as the broad summary of positions in Figure 1 indicates.

Table 8: Socio-demographic profile of those
supporting/rejecting pan-Unionist electoral alliances

	Reject	Support
Gender		
Male	78.4	84.8
Age		
15-24	0.0	8.6
25-34	3.6	14.3
35-44	5.7	15.2
45-54	16.1	16.2
55-64	31.6	21.0
65-74	26.4	17.1
75+	16.6	7.6
Education		
None	27.5	17.1
O/GCSE	19.7	20.0
ILC	2.1	7.6
A	8.3	9.5
UG	17.1	20.0
PG	10.9	14.3
Other	14.5	11.4
Occupation		
Secretarial/clerical	2.7	2.8
Trades	5.9	5.7
Manual labour	1.1	0.0
Civil servant	9.7	11.3
Junior/middle management	9.2	12.3
Student	0.5	3.8
Housewife	3.2	2.8
Retired	26.5	16.0
Farmer	16.2	15.1
Professional	5.9	12.3
Teacher	7.0	7.5
University academic	1.6	1.9
Senior management	7.6	4.7
Other	2.7	3.8
Religion		
Roman Catholic	0.5	0.9
Presbyterian	54.4	51.9
Church of Ireland	36.3	34.0
Methodist	5.2	3.8
Other Prot.	2.1	3.8
None	0.5	2.8
Other	1.0	2.8
Member of the Orange Order		
Yes	48.1	51.5

The anti-GFA wing within the UUC thus holds little in common with the DUP, despite the unity in opposing the GFA. The summary presented in the table suggests that, in fact, the pro-GFA wing of the UUC has more in common with the DUP on policy than the anti-GFA wing. These policy distinctions may be important in partly explaining why so few UUC members have 'jumped ship' to their unionist rival.

Traditionally, the DUP has been disdained by sections of the UUP, not least because it has been seen as a 'tribal', more working-class loyalist party, prepared to engage in civil disobedience or dubious activity, such as involvement with Ulster Resistance during the 1980s. Among Protestants, support for the DUP has been weakest in the professional and managerial class (Ruane and Todd, 1996: 61). In contrast, the UUP has been seen as the party of the 'respectable' Protestant middle-class. Such perceptions may indeed be important, but the socio-demographic profile presented in Table 8 indicates few occupational differences between those supporting or rejecting greater unity with the DUP.

Figure 1: Indicative summary of policy positions within the UUC and DUP

	Pro-GFA UUC	**Anti-GFA UUC**	**DUP**
Good Friday Agreement	PRO	ANTI	ANTI
Devolution	PRO	ANTI	PRO
Pan-Unionism	ANTI	PRO	ANTI
Direct Rule	ANTI	NEUTRAL	ANTI
Integration	ANTI	PRO	ANTI
Electoral Integration	NEUTRAL	NEUTRAL	NOT TESTED

Insofar as a demographic variable is important, there is evidence that younger UUC members are more supportive to the idea of an electoral alliance with the DUP. Despite regular pleas from the Orange Order for unionist unity, there is little difference between Order and non-Order members regarding alliances. There are no discernible denominational or gender effects and the impact of education is slight. Overall, it appears possible that socio-demographic factors are not crucial in determining the attitudes of UUC members towards the DUP.

Facing Redundancy? The SDLP
As moderate unionism has attempted to come to terms with the GFA, moderate nationalism has also been beset by difficulties. The three-stranded arrangements of the GFA reflected much SDLP thinking, yet the party has suffered electorally since the deal. Its nationalist rival, having been committed to the violent overthrow of British colonial rule, has now ended its support for the IRA's armed campaign and has entered into Stormont and is now active in the management of Northern Ireland under British rule. The SDLP membership could feel aggrieved over the apparent unfairness of it all. The Hume-Adams dialogue now appears the ultimate piece of altruism by the former SDLP leader, even it was preceded by Adams' own secret moves towards ending the armed struggle (Moloney, 2003). As Sinn Fein has occupied the SDLP's political territory, the future of Northern Ireland's moderate constitutional nationalist party has appeared in doubt.

Sinn Fein's new constitutionalism, allied to successful promotion of nationalist bloc politics, is an appealing mixture to a nationalist electorate, many of whom were previously disdainful of the association of the republican movement with violence (Table 9). This support for Republican politics is evident despite the lack of a clear strategy on how to unite Ireland, (any faith in a united Ireland through demographic change has been thwarted by the 2001 census, which revealed a mere 2 per cent increase in the Catholic population since 1991).

Table 9: Sinn Fein-SDLP electoral rivalry 1982-2001

Year	Election type	% share of total vote	
		SDLP	Sinn Fein
1982	Assembly	18.8	10.1
1983	Westminster	17.9	13.4
1984	European	22.1	13.3
1985	Local	21.1	11.4
1987	Westminster	21.1	11.4
1989	Local	21.0	11.2
1992	Westminster	23.5	10.0
1993	Local	22.0	12.4
1994	European	28.9	9.0
1996	Forum	21.4	15.5
1997	Westminster	24.1	16.1
1997	Local	20.7	16.9
1998	Assembly	22.0	17.6
1999	European	28.2	17.4
2001	General	21.0	21.7
2001	Local	19.4	20.7

Nationalist Convergence and the Erosion of SDLP Territory by Sinn Fein

Nationalist convergence during the peace process had a long gestation. Although it is often traced to the Hume-Adams dialogue of 1988, it is evident that Gerry Adams, as President of Sinn Fein from 1983 onwards, had formulated a strategy to forge a pan-nationalist alliance, centred upon a concept of Irish self-determination that might not necessarily result in physical British withdrawal from Northern Ireland (Moloney, 2003). Furthermore, a 'greening' of the SDLP was evident after the collapse of the Sunningdale power sharing deal in 1974 (Evans, Tonge and Murray, 2000).

The SDLP moved from its socialist origins, which in 1970 formed a basis for replacing the Northern Ireland Labour Party. From 1975 onwards, a new type of SDLP member emerged, less concerned with 'red' politics, instead favouring a greener, nationalist outlook. The SDLP was always more nationalist than the NILP, which favoured maintaining the Union with Britain, whereas the SDLP made clear that Irish unity, or an 'agreed Ireland', was its preferred solution. According to the first leader of the SDLP, Gerry Fitt, the party's aim was to be a 'social democratic and labour party that would engage the sympathies across the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland' (*Irish News*, 17 August 1995). It failed; the party's electoral support is overwhelmingly Catholic and its membership is 95 per cent Catholic. Furthermore, the party's members are more extensively nationalist than socialist. 88 per cent agree the party is nationalist; only 51 per cent view the party as socialist. Despite this, only a bare majority of the SDLP membership sees a united Ireland as the optimum constitutional solution (Table 10).

The post-1975 greening of the SDLP led to the party pressing the Dublin government to adopt a bi-national approach to Northern Ireland. This followed the unwillingness of unionists in the 1970s to share power if a cross-border dimension also existed. The New Ireland Forum of 1983-84 brought together constitutional nationalist forces on the island of Ireland, to argue, in order of preference, the cases for Irish unity, a federal or confederal Ireland, or joint British-Irish sovereignty. Unsurprisingly, the British response was to concede only an 'Irish dimension' to political arrangements for Northern Ireland, with the Republic afforded consultative rights via the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Although a modest arrangement, the Anglo-Irish Agreement nonetheless acknowledged a bilateral dimension to any solution for Northern Ireland.

Table 10: Attitudes of SDLP members to Northern Ireland's constitutional future (%)

Opinions on: 'The best solution for Northern Ireland is….'

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly
United Ireland	20.5	29.5	25.8	16.9	2.8
Remain in the UK	1.5	6.4	18.4	34.8	36.7
Joint Sovereignty	6.8	27.7	21.6	26.9	8.9
GFA/Power-sharing	41.1	39.4	11.2	4.0	1.3

The new role for the Irish Republic and the willingness of the British Government to ignore Unionist opposition caused mild interest among a Sinn Fein leadership already looking for a possible route away from violence for the republican movement. As early as 1984, Gerry Adams had embarked on private approaches to the British government, followed by secret dialogue with the Irish government (Moloney, 2003). By the 1990s, a heavily watered down version of Irish self-determination, co-determination (with a continuing Northern veto) formed the background to the peace process and eventually the 1998 GFA.

The route from violence involved the development of pan-nationalist dialogue between the SDLP and Sinn Fein in 1988, labelled as Hume-Adams, paving the way for the development of a broad nationalist consensus. Hume, who assumed leadership of his party in 1979, offered a political, electoral and moral case to the President of Sinn Fein to end republican violence. Hume's analysis, shared by a growing number of republicans, was that the IRA was fighting an unwinnable war, as neither violence, nor the post-1981 'ballot box and armalite' strategy, could force British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. The problem was not the British government's presence in Northern Ireland, but instead the barrier was that one million Unionists, the British presence on the island, could not be coerced into a united Ireland. Self-determination for all the Irish people was a legitimate demand, but this, under the Hume formulation (and the private Adams' initiative) would not automatically lead to a united Ireland. There were contradictions within the SDLP approach, notably whether unionists were a separate people or merely a different tradition, but this did not alter the substance of Hume's approach. The electoral case advanced by Hume was altruistic and ultimately damaging to the SDLP. If the IRA ended violence, Sinn Fein's vote in Northern Ireland would surely rise. In this respect, Hume went beyond narrow sectional interest. Indeed his leadership of the party was at times incidental to his wider statesman role. The moral case was that the IRA was not fighting a just war. The IRA was not acting against a colonial oppressor, given Hume's argument that the British government was essentially neutral on the future of Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the IRA did not enjoy the support of a majority of nationalists.

Is there a future for the SDLP?
On first inspection the electoral prospects for the SDLP should be good. The GFA can be viewed as a vindication of the SDLP's approach to conflict resolution. Support for the Agreement from Sinn Fein was indicative of a considerable strategic rethink by republicans prompted by Hume-Adams, the first public sign of which arrived in Sinn Fein's 1992 policy document *Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland*. The GFA contained the three types of political institutions seen by the SDLP as a necessary part of any political accommodation: 'North-

North' arrangements, creating devolved, power-sharing government in Northern Ireland; 'North-South' institutions, with cross-border bodies implementing co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic and, finally, continuing 'East-West' intergovernmental relations between London and Dublin. The recycling of old SDLP ideas evident in the 1974 power-sharing experiment prompted the SDLP's leader to label the new version as 'Sunningdale for slow learners'. It is little wonder therefore that over 80 percent of SDLP members concluded that the GFA achieved most of the party's objectives, although there were additional signs of 'negative unity' in the significant degree of pessimism over the likelihood of its rapid implementation (see table 11).

Table 11: Attitudes to the Good Friday Agreement and related issues
among SDLP members (%)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly
The SDLP has achieved the bulk of its objectives through the GFA	25	57	9	6	1
The GFA makes a united Ireland more attainable	14	55	22	7	1
The GFA will give Irish nationalism equal status to unionism	15	53	18	11	2
The GFA will lead to real power-sharing in the Belfast Assembly	10	58	20	7	2

(N = 528)

Despite its considerable political achievements in diluting republicanism and producing the GFA, the SDLP nonetheless has organisational and image problems. The party leader's willingness to take initiatives for peace had, it was argued even by sympathisers, led to neglect of internal party matters (Murray, 1998). With the SDLP less able to condemn Sinn Fein's association with violence, the party needs to convince the nationalist electorate that it can offer the same benefits from the Agreement as could be extracted by Sinn Fein's form of politics. The SDLP attempts to portray itself as the party best placed to deal with post-constitutional issues through its longer experience of politics compared to its nationalist rival. When it comes to policy issues, differences with Sinn Fein over Europe or the future role of the nation state are scarcely designed to excite the nationalist electorate. The issues which do excite the electorate do not necessarily work to the SDLP's advantage either.

The Northern Ireland electorate has identified the peace process as the most important election issue. Second and third respectively lay the NHS and education. With Sinn Fein

ministers in charge of these two key ministries, it was evident that the SDLP might struggle to engage the nationalist electorate and maintain its lead over Sinn Fein. The party faces the strategic difficulty of whether its best tactical approach is to reinforce pan-nationalist commonalities with Sinn Fein, or attempt to forge a new centre with pro-Agreement elements within the UUP. Neither strategy can be guaranteed to stem the flow of votes to Sinn Fein.

The SDLP's members also support much of the micro-agenda of the GFA so important to Sinn Fein. Fifty nine per cent supported the early release of republican prisoners, with 18 per cent dissenting. An overwhelming 94 per cent backed radical reform of the RUC and 79 per cent opposed Orange Order parades through nationalist areas (see Tonge and Evans, 2002).

Convergence has occurred at elite, membership and voter levels among Northern Ireland's nationalist rivals. Pan-nationalism is not a term for an identikit ideology transcending homogeneous parties and institutions. There are inter and intra nationalist party differences. Although its membership sees their party as nationalist, the SDLP elite regards the party as a post-nationalist one, placing the Northern Ireland problem within wider European and bi-national contexts.

The SDLP lacks the Sinn Fein's structural and demographic advantages. As an exclusively Northern Ireland party, the SDLP's room for expansion is limited. One possible option was merger with the Irish Labour Party (ILP) to form an all-Ireland organisation, a move advocated by the then leader of the ILP, Ruairi Quinn, in an address to the SDLP's annual conference in 1998. The call fell on stony ground, only 22 per cent of SDLP members supporting merger. SDLP recruitment has not collapsed; 27 per cent of its membership claimed to have joined the party between 1996 and 1999. However, the average age of a party member is 57 and working class members comprise less than 15 per cent of the party. Sinn Fein has held its working class base, whilst proving its ability to expand into a middle class nationalist constituency.

Sinn Fein has stolen many of the political clothes of the SDLP. Nonetheless, Sinn Fein's concept of Irish unity continues to lay greater stress upon territorial aspects, despite the party's tacit acceptance of a unionist right to self-determination under the GFA. The party has dropped its former opposition to the European Union, preferring a policy of 'critical engagement'. Nonetheless, Sinn Fein continues to view the nation state as the most appropriate means of territorial organisation. In this respect, Sinn Fein continues to offer a form of territorial nationalism distinct from its northern electoral rival. The SDLP has a difficult task in determining whether the promotion of (pan) nationalist commonalities or post nationalist politics offers the more promising way forward. The GFA attempted to reconcile problems of identity. The main architects of that Agreement need do likewise in respect of their own party. The retirement of John Hume as party leader, replaced by Mark Durkan after the 2001 Westminster elections removed the SDLP's one highly prominent figure and added to the party's vulnerability.

With the GFA having been supported by 97 per cent of nationalists in the 1998 referendum, the electoral rivalry between the two nationalist parties now concentrates upon which can best deliver its full implementation. In the 2001 contests, Sinn Fein emerged triumphant over the SDLP. Fielding candidates in all 18 constituencies for the first time, Sinn Fein won 51 per cent of the nationalist vote in the Westminster contest, compared with the SDLP's 49 per cent. The accelerating growth of support for Sinn Fein was confirmed, evident since the first Provisional IRA ceasefire in 1994. Sinn Fein increased its share of the vote in every constituency except South Belfast. Overall, the nationalist bloc was much more successful than its unionist counterpart in mobilising voters, turnout in nationalist constituencies being nearly 11 per cent higher than in unionist held seats.

Successful implementation of the GFA might offer the prospect of the form of cross-community politics once envisaged by the SDLP. The alternative for the SDLP is to attempt to retain its position as the main repository of nationalist votes through promotion of a 'green' agenda. This would involve strident activity in support of the GFA's micro changes, which would satisfy the SDLP's own members. SDLP supporters were anxious to see the party's nationalist rival join the government of Northern Ireland. According to one survey, 68 per cent supported the inclusion of Sinn Fein, even if the IRA did not decommission its weapons and only 15 per cent of SDLP supporters believed it worthwhile to form an Executive without Sinn Fein (*Irish Times*, 27 April 1999). The difficulty with the SDLP's adoption of a green agenda is that it fails to check Sinn Fein's advance and further legitimises the approach of the SDLP's republican rival. The nationalist electorate appears to be turning increasingly to what it sees as the stoutest defender of its bloc interests.

The SDLP needs to decide whether to position itself as a major repository of Alliance and 'soft' Ulster Unionist Party vote transfers. There was limited evidence of cross-community vote transfers in the 1998 Assembly elections. Staged amid the euphoria of the aftermath of the GFA, the elections indicated an increase in the willingness of pro-Agreement electors to vote on a cross-community basis, one survey finding a 5 per cent increase in unionist transfers to the SDLP (Kelly and Doyle, 2000). Obviously under the first-past-the-post Westminster election system, lower preference transfer possibilities are irrelevant, but, for the district council elections, the SDLP could position itself as a repository of moderate, pro-Agreement unionist or Alliance transfers. Even among the ruling body of the UUP, there is an avowed willingness to bridge electoral division. Fifteen per cent of Ulster Unionist Council members say that they 'definitely' or 'might' consider transferring lower preference votes to the SDLP, with a further 26 per cent describing such a prospect as a 'slight possibility'.

SDLP gains relative to Sinn Fein, through tentative breaches of the sectarian divide, were always likely to be outweighed by the increasing trend for SDLP voters to transfer lower preference votes to Sinn Fein. Two-thirds of SDLP voters transferred 'in-house' in this manner in the 1998 Assembly elections. Whereas in the past the strength of Sinn Fein's associations with the IRA led a substantial body of SDLP supporters to vote transfer to the centrist, avowedly non-sectarian Alliance Party, the new moderation of Sinn Fein meant this was no longer the case. Sinn Fein's position as the main repository of nationalist vote transfers is unlikely to change, given the continuing demise of Northern Ireland's political centre. Sinn Fein's new hegemonic position has led to a cooling of the party's interest in electoral pacts with the SDLP. Whilst such pacts had tactical (electoral gains) and strategic (legitimation) value in the past, Sinn Fein's new dominance has diminished the utility of electoral alliances to republicans. Not everyone welcomed the electoral battle for the nationalist vote, as almost half of Sinn Fein supporters argued that there should be an electoral pact between their party and the SDLP, although less than one-third of SDLP supporters were prepared to reciprocate (*Belfast Telegraph*, 18 May 2001). SDLP members are divided on the merits of such an alliance, 47 per cent agreeing, but 36 per cent dissenting. Those most hostile tended to be older party members, implacably opposed to the form of republicanism offered by Sinn Fein during the previous thirty years.

Sinn Fein's agenda stresses the party's continuing green credentials. It demands further all-Ireland political and electoral arrangements, including the advancement of all-Ireland bodies; the right of those elected in parliamentary contests in Northern Ireland to participate in the Irish parliament and for Northern Ireland's citizens to be given the right to participate in presidential elections and referendums in the Irish Republic. Sinn Fein demanded further changes in policing, with full implementation of the Patten Report constituting the minimum demand. Sinn Fein's electoral strategy, emphasising support

for the GFA, was always likely to pay dividends among an electoral base strongly favouring the accord and desirous of robust political representatives.

Structural differences between the two nationalist parties have assumed greater importance than ideological distinctions. Sinn Fein's position as the only significant all-Ireland party, consolidated by election successes north and south of the border has made the SDLP look, in comparison, a narrow, sectional northern nationalist party, accentuating that party's problems of an ageing membership, low recruitment and loss of electoral (and moral) superiority. SDLP electoral losses have not been sufficiently compensated by a political realignment allowing transfers from pro-Agreement unionist electors. Sinn Fein is reliant merely upon a vague, unsubstantiated 'inevitability' thesis, rather than a specific strategy, in terms of the achievement of its goal of a united Ireland. In the meantime, its vigorous participatory politics and its civil rights based agenda are likely to yield further gains at the expense of rivals throughout Ireland.

The Crisis of the Existing Centre: Alliance and the Bloc System

As long-standing advocates of devolved power sharing, the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (Alliance) endorsed the GFA. Its members overwhelmingly backed the deal (Table 12) and 90 per cent declare themselves still in support of the deal. Yet the deal posed theoretical and practical problems for Northern Ireland's main bi-confessional centre party. The consociational underpinnings of the GFA appeared to institutionalise a unionist-nationalist dichotomy within Northern Ireland politics, at odds with the Alliance's view that the construction of 'one community' was required. Since the party's establishment in 1970, it has clung to a belief that a third tradition, post-nationalist or -unionist, could be established. In practical terms, the GFA threatened to further reduce the narrow centre ground farmed by Alliance. The reductionism of the GFA, in obliging Northern Ireland Assembly members to self-designate as 'Unionist', 'Nationalist', or 'Other', allied to weighted majority provisions with no role for the 'Other' bloc, has arguably further entrenched ethnic bloc politics. Extending this argument, the supposed legitimation of Unionist versus Nationalist politics has moved voters further from what, in any case, has been described as the 'mythical' centre (Arthur and Jeffrey, 1996). Alliance Party support has fallen to a very low level, matched only by the period during Northern Ireland's earlier experiment in consociationalism, the Sunningdale power-sharing executive of 1974.

Table 12: Alliance members' attitudes to the Good Friday Agreement

Vote in Good Friday Agreement (%)	Yes	No	Didn't Vote
(N = 698)	94.7	0.9	4.4

The lack of a pro-Agreement Unionist majority has caused Alliance to compromise its stated principles of being neither nationalist nor unionist. In November 2001, three Alliance Members of the Legislative Assembly re-designated themselves as Unionist to ensure the re-election of the UUP leader, David Trimble, as First Minister and to thus shore up the GFA. The posts of First and Deputy First Minister require parallel Unionist and Nationalist majorities. In the first contest in November 2001, Trimble failed to obtain majority Unionist support and his subsequent re-election was thus dependent upon re-designation by sufficient Alliance Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). Although only temporary, the re-designations of three MLAs as Unionists occurred against the wishes of the majority (60 per cent) of Alliance party members. Indeed, two other Alliance MLAs declined to re-designate (the final Alliance MLA acts as Speaker). Furthermore, re-designation compromises long held Alliance principles and may have profound implications for the continued existence of centrist politics.

The basis of Alliance Party thinking has been a rejection of the 'two communities' approach to politics evident in the GFA. Alliance does not dwell on why 'two communities'

have emerged; the party offers a vision of societal integration, but does not explain the origins of fracture. Instead, the party has tended to regard the pursuit of ambitions, unionist or nationalist, as innately sectarian and thus pernicious (Evans and Tonge, 2002). Whatever the limits of unionist or nationalist analyses, immersed in blame location, they at least offer a 'how-we-got-here' component, with historical referents. For Alliance, however, there has been the difficulty of explaining why the differences between the competing populations on the island were sufficient to justify partition and separate states, but so minimal as to be compressed into a one-community approach within the northern state.

Alliance insists that its politics do not amount to a mix of unionism and nationalism, or a historical compromise between the two traditions. Instead, the party claims to offer a radical third tradition (source?). The optimum form of governance, according to Alliance, is devolved government with power sharing. Yet acceptance of power sharing, with its attendant weighted majority voting rules and acknowledgement of two traditions, belied the party's faith in one community politics. In defence of its support for such arrangements, the party offers a vision of what might be termed consensual consociationalism. In its model of ethnic conflict reduction Alliance believes that incentives for moderation need to accompany power-sharing institutional arrangements.

The party is uneasy with the rigid segmental designations of the Northern Ireland Assembly created through the GFA, which contravenes the 'one community' approach of Alliance and, arguably, breaches its liberal principles. Non-key decisions within the Assembly, including the *Programme for Government*, can be taken on the basis of a simple majority. Key decisions, however, require cross-community support and a petition of concern from 30 of the 108 MLAs requires may initiate this requirement. Furthermore, the insistence that MLAs designate as 'unionist', 'nationalist' or 'other' may even breach consociational ideas. Consociational institutions should be fully accommodating of parties without bloc identities. Elections and institutional representation should be based upon the self-determination of the universal populace, rather than be rigidly based upon representation via pre-determined ethnic blocs (Lijphart, 1977). However, this desire is perhaps contradicted by the requirement for segmental autonomy to be facilitated by consociational structures. Whilst supportive of the GFA, some Alliance members urged an Executive, elected through proportionality, to be 'aloof' from a legislature in which MLAs would not be required to self-designate as unionist, nationalist or other (Leonard, 1999).

Alliance offers a vision of integrative power sharing in Northern Ireland, attached to North-South structures. The party lays great stress upon the 'democratic accountability' of North-South structures, arguably reflective of the party's (unionist-leaning?) opposition towards any freestanding all-Ireland dimension to Northern Ireland's political arrangements. The party's support for the GFA was based upon the premise that consociational democracy is merely a transitional phase towards more integrative forms of association. Senior party figures have expressed pessimism over the ability of consociational settlements to work in societies with clear ethnic or ethno-national divisions, describing the GFA as a mere 'band-aid' agreement, which would not in itself resolve the conflict (Farry and Neeson, 1999). Alliance favours what it sees as a milder form of consociationalism, based upon structures emphasising inter-communal reconciliation and co-operation.

Alliance has always been anxious to avoid definition as unionist or nationalist. The party has seen itself as a Northern Irish party in promoting the replacement of the unionist-nationalist dichotomy with a liberal, pluralist, non-ethnic form of politics. However, there are indications from the party membership that such a position is idealised at best, and does not conform to the membership's views of the party, let alone those of outsiders.

For instance, the party leadership has asserted that 'only Alliance supporters more strongly associate with a concept of Northern Irishness ahead of Britishness or Irishness' (Farry and Neeson, 1999, p. 1224). However, this is untrue of party members. The largest single category of identification is British (Table 13). Moreover, there are clear differences in national identity according to religious affiliation, with a relative majority of Catholic Alliance members viewing themselves as Irish.

Table 13: Alliance members' national identity by religious affiliation

National Identification	All	Protestant	Catholic	None
Irish	16.2	11.0	32.0	17.3
British	29.1	34.4	10.4	30.6
British-Irish	27.2	30.8	20.9	19.4
Northern Irish	22.9	21.8	30.6	17.3
European	2.7	1.3	3.7	7.1
Other	1.9	0.7	1.5	8.2
N	677	417	134	98

Whilst the party may reject the sectarian basis of politics, the differing national affiliations suggest that the religious divide may still indicate a basis for divergent – and thus potentially divisive – perceptions of identity.

Table 14: Alliance views of the Good Friday Agreement

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly
Alliance vision of Unionists and Nationalists separate but equal	11.5	28.7	13.2	33.8	12.8
The GFA increases sectarianism by dividing parties into blocs	8.8	20.9	20.4	42.2	7.6
Decisions in the Assembly should require a simple majority only	11.0	37.8	12.3	32.0	6.8

(n = 674)

The Alliance vision of commonality, rather than unionism or nationalism, is also, surprisingly, not shared by many members. Alliance members are divided over whether the Alliance vision comprises a united society or one of two 'separate but equal' communities. There is, however, disagreement over the Alliance vision and the mechanics of the Agreement (Table 14).

For a party trying to promote a coherent vision for Northern Ireland's future, the level of support for the idea of separate Unionist and Nationalist blocs is perhaps surprising. Alliance's ideal is to see the replacement of these blocs by consensual power sharing amongst different communities, to the extent that such blocs become redundant. The

retention of the blocs implies that some in the party view Alliance's future as a permanent alternative to bloc politics. Less than one third of the membership believe, however, that the GFA increases sectarianism by dividing parties into ethnic blocs, although fewer than half of party members disagree with this proposition. Almost half of Alliance members believe that Assembly votes should be taken on the basis of a simple majority, rather than weighted majority voting. Of course, it might be argued that the party's ideal vision is a Northern Ireland community devoid of sectarian divides, which can vote on issues without the need for weighted or dual majorities.

Finally, whatever the sensitivity of Alliance to the charge that it is the party of 'soft' unionism, a section of the members (27 per cent) believe this to be true with less than half (48 per cent) dissenting. Only seven per cent of party members see their organisation as a nationalist party. The party sees itself as a radical centrist organisation, although only around one-third of members agree that Alliance is a radical party. The reluctance of Alliance to be considered as unionist, even with a small 'u', is understandable: application of a unionist label would destroy the party's *raison d'être* as a party promoting the eradication of unionist or nationalist communal politics. But the self-perception of even the Alliance's core support brings into question the vision of the radical third tradition. Is the party's clinging to its 'Other' status thus an artificial construct borne of the circumstances of the GFA, which would be reset to the norm by a tactical re-designation to the 'Unionist' bloc?

The Decline of the Centre
From its inception, Alliance attempted to operate as a bi-confessional party within a confessional party system (McAllister and Wilson, 1978). The party attracted support from Protestants and Catholics. Its members are also drawn from both communities, although only 20 per cent are Catholics. Averaging 7.5 per cent support in elections, the electoral tale is one of slow decline, from peak of over 14 per cent in 1977 to the 2001 election levels of 4 per cent.

Although the death of the centre has been associated with the implementation of the GFA, it is apparent that the decline in Alliance support precedes the Agreement. Northern Ireland's 'third pillar' has been crumbling during periods of, successively, political stalemate; inter-governmentalism; and, finally, consociationalism. Alliance has attracted cross-communal support to an extent not enjoyed by any of Northern Ireland's other parties. However, its unrepresentative class base of Alliance prevented the furtherance of any such labourist tradition in the centre. Alliance was not in a position in which it could promote cross-community politics from below.

There are three possible futures for the political centre in Northern Ireland. One, unlikely given the new moderation of republican and unionist politics, is the collapse of centre politics *per se* in Northern Ireland. The second possibility, also unlikely, is that of a revival in Alliance fortunes, with the party's radical post-nationalist, post-unionist concept of one community Northern Irishness endorsed by the electorate in post-conflict Northern Ireland. The third scenario is the swallowing of the existing centre by the SDLP and the pro-Agreement UUP. Given Alliance's avowed hostility to unionism and nationalism, compromises between ethnic blocs would not amount, in the party's view, to genuine centre politics. Such a scenario begs the question, whither Alliance? The moderate centre has already been pressurised by the centrifugal force of the anti-Agreement DUP, leading to temporary re-designation of Alliance as unionist, to bolster overall unionist support for the (as yet) unstable GFA. Yet a prolonged re-designation would be anathema to many within the party: the Alliance Party Organiser, Stephen Farry argued that 'Hell would freeze over' before the party's MLAs engaged in the 'false solution' of re-designation (interview with author, 27 August 2001).

Yet Farry, in common with several other Alliance prospective parliamentary candidates, effectively re-designated Alliance supporters as pro-GFA moderate unionists during the 2001 Westminster election campaign. He withdrew as Alliance candidate in North Down to encourage Alliance voters (7,500 in the 1997 general election) to vote for the pro-Agreement UUP candidate, Sylvia Hermon. Although the tactic was successful, facilitating the defeat of the anti-GFA, United Kingdom Unionist Party incumbent, Robert McCartney, it was not easy to reconcile Alliance's electoral strategy with its avowed 'plague on both houses' attitude to unionism and nationalism. The party's idea of distinctive radical, centre politics appeared compromised. Alliance had always prided itself on being untainted by association with unionism or nationalism. Indeed the party is critical of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC), the alternative source of 'Other' (two) MLAs in the Assembly, arguing that the coalition offers mere difference-splitting between unionism and nationalism (Leonard, 1999). In the contest to re-elect Trimble described above, the two NIWC MLAs re-designated; one as Unionist; the other as Nationalist. For Alliance, re-designation was of greater import. The distinctiveness that acted as its marketing tool was compromised when it played the re-designation game.

Conclusion

The three moderate pro-Agreement parties surveyed have problems in the post-Agreement polity, as the electorate has shifted to the stouter defenders of their ethnic blocs and in the case of Alliance, aligned themselves with a bloc. Within the UUP, the social characteristics of opponents of the GFA are not markedly different from those of the pro-GFA wing, other than being found more among younger age categories. There is little evidence that GFA rejectionists are the less well off within the UUC, ready to join forces with the ostensibly more working-class DUP. There are, however, important political reasons beyond personality or partisanship that inhibit a realignment of unionism. UUC opponents of the GFA are less enthusiastic over devolution than either the pro-GFA wing of their party or the DUP. For a substantial section of this grouping, direct rule is tolerable, as is full integration of Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom. However, whatever their difference with the devolutionist DUP, this group is sympathetic to the concept of pan-unionism, involving electoral alliances with unionism's second party. The maintenance of three distinct wings of unionism; pro-GFA UUP; anti-GFA UUP integrationist and anti-GFA DUP devolutionist is likely to contribute to continued division over strategy and may prevent a realignment of unionist political parties.

For the SDLP, the belief of the majority of party members that the party has achieved its objectives highlights its dilemma. Having helped bring Sinn Fein into the political mainstream and secured a political deal recognising the Irishness of its constituency, the question begged is what future role the party can fulfil. The structural advantage of Sinn Fein in being an all-island party and the political gain in appearing the stouter defender of constitutional nationalism are pitted against a ageing rival, confined to a middle class, Six County base. There was initial optimism among some within the SDLP that the First and Deputy First Minister UUP-SDLP institutional axis would have a spillover effect in terms of cross-community pro-Agreement transfer votes; this remains a possibility, but an increasingly remote one.

The GFA has further marginalised the already diminishing existing centre in Northern Ireland in two ways. Firstly, the Agreement may produce a new cross-community moderate centre, but the GFA rejects the 'one community' approach to politics offered by Northern Ireland's existing centre. The two communities approach undermines the value of Alliance representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Secondly, the instability of the Agreement has obliged Alliance to compromise its rejection of the unionist-nationalist model of politics by aligning itself on occasion with the Unionist bloc to rescue the GFA. The reward for such political altruism may be scant, as the existing centre continues to be marginalised. The re-designation of Alliance MLAs as unionist in 2001 was unpopular with the party membership. Loyalty to Alliance was derived from the monopoly position

of the party as an advocate of a particular type of politics. Alliance members have no natural 'second home' and their instincts match the (redundant) words of the party leader; David Ford, that 'if the GFA is so flawed it requires me to tell lies, it is an agreement not worth saving' (interview with author, 27 August 2001). On constitutional questions, Alliance has always been pro-consent and thus pro-union. Yet, Alliance refuses to label itself as a unionist party (even though all parties in Northern Ireland, having accepted the 'consent principle', might be labelled as unionist, at least in the short-term). Movement by Alliance MLAs into a unionist bloc, even for purely tactical reasons to shore up the GFA, would alienate many within the party and risk the removal of Catholic members. Re-designation into a unionist bloc would be at odds not merely with long-held principles. It would also be a device at odds with the expressed wishes of the remaining party stalwarts of Northern Ireland's vanishing old centre ground.

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