



The Erosion of Consent: Protestant Disillusionment with the Agreement

By Ian McAllister, Bernadette C. Hayes and Lizanne Dowds

Since 1972 there have been eight separate attempts to establish a devolved, powersharing government in Northern Ireland. All have been loosely based on the notion of consociationalism - an association of communities - using a model pioneered by the Dutch in 1917 and subsequently adapted for Lebanon and Austria in the 1940s. The most recent of the eight attempts, the 1998 Belfast Agreement, has produced a sophisticated institutional architecture, which contains many elements that transcend the simple notion of a 'grand coalition' that lies at the heart of the idea of consociationalism. It has required the consent of national leaders, as well as community representatives, and concurrent majorities were required in different sovereign jurisdictions before it could be implemented.

The very complexity of the Belfast Agreement - through overlapping guarantees and vetoes, and external associations-has tended to obscure the most basic requirement of any consociational arrangement: the consent of the conflict-prone communities for the arrangements. Consociational theories assume that either political parties or group representatives deliver the consent of their communities, with the Northern Ireland case tending towards the latter. When the consent of a community is in doubt, then the legitimacy (and perhaps even

the existence) of the institutional arrangements are themselves undermined. This is what has occurred in the Protestant community since the Agreement was formally ratified in the May 1998 referendum.

The key parts of the Belfast Agreement have been characterized as reflecting 'constructive ambiguity', so that the key details 'could be interpreted in various ways to suit the receiving audience'. For unionists, the Agreement was portrayed as a means of cementing Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the United Kingdom, by delivering reform and as a consequence, bringing republicans into the political process and stopping the violence. This was a message that the British government emphasised continually to unionists. For republicans, the Agreement was seen as means of furthering the goal of Irish unity, this time by guaranteeing republicans a formal role in government, a process that they argued would eventually result in reconciling unionists to a united Ireland. This 'constructive ambiguity', so vital in securing the consent of the main parties, has also been the Agreement's major weakness. The unionists believed that Sinn Fein's participation in the Agreement meant that they would disarm and become an exclusively political organisation; republicans, by contrast, believed that

they had committed themselves to a phased disarmament, the pace of which would be determined by the degree of political progress that was achieved. The British government themselves suspended the Assembly and the Executive in February 2000 for four months when there was inadequate progress towards decommissioning. In July 2001 Trimble resigned as first minister, also citing lack of progress on decommissioning, taking up his position again in November after General John de Chastelain, the Canadian head of an international commission set up to monitor decommissioning, said he had witnessed a 'significant' disposal of arms. Trimble again resigned in October 2002 after allegations that Sinn Fein was continuing to gather intelligence on potential military targets.

Trends in Public Opinion Towards the Agreement

Given the political instability in the five years since 1998, it is hardly surprising that unionist opinion has exhibited a slow decline in support for the Agreement and for the political institutions embodied in it. The referendum on the Agreement, held on 22 May 1998, was supported by 71.1% of voters in Northern Ireland, with a turnout of 81.1%. However, the overwhelming public endorsement of the Agreement masked major differences between the two communities. While Catholics were almost universally in favour, and during the course of the election campaign that support deviated little, Protestants were deeply divided. In the early stages of the campaign, positive media attention ensured favourable early reactions to the Agreement, but as

more unionist leaders raised concerns, Protestant support declined markedly, to between 50% and 60%, even dropping to 52% just five days before polling day according to one survey. The 1998 Northern Ireland Referendum and Election Study found that 57% of Protestants voted for the Agreement, compared to 99% of Catholics.

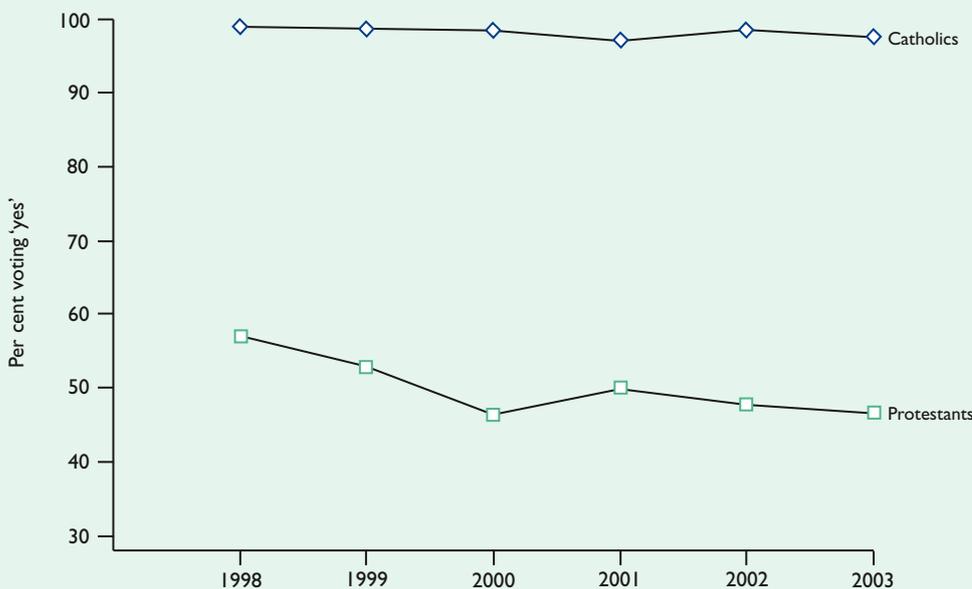
The 1998 referendum thus only narrowly produced majority support among Protestant voters; just two

since it would have failed to gain majority support in both communities.

The fragility of unionist support for the Agreement was always a matter of concern to the British and Irish governments. While a majority of Protestants voted for the Agreement in 1998, many of those who were prepared to give their consent were anything but firm in their views. The 1998 Referendum and Election Study found that about one quarter

is examined in the next section, the short answer is easy: most Protestants believed, and continue to believe, that the Agreement disproportionately benefited nationalists, at the expense of unionists. When unionist respondents are asked which community benefited most from the Agreement, or whether the benefits were equally shared, a large majority say that nationalists were the net beneficiaries of the Agreement. In the 1998 Referendum and Election Study, for example, 40% of Protestants believed that nationalists benefited 'a lot more' and a further 16% a 'little more' from the Agreement, with 40% saying that both unionists and nationalists benefited equally; just 1% believed that unionists benefited more than nationalists. Since 1998, the trend towards Protestants seeing nationalists as benefiting more from the Agreement has been increasing incrementally and by 2003, three quarters took this view. Protestant disillusionment with the Agreement thus began almost as soon as the referendum was over.

Figure 1: 'Yes' Vote if Agreement Referendum Repeated, 1998-2003



years later that support had declined to a minority. The surveys conducted since 1998 have shown that while the vast majority of Catholics continue to favour the Agreement, Protestant support has slowly eroded. The steepest decline took place in the two years immediately following the referendum; in 1999 it stood at 53% and in 2000, at just 47%. Since then, less than half of the Protestants interviewed in the surveys have said that they would vote yes if the referendum was repeated. In 2003, for example, 96% of Catholics and 46% of Protestants said they would vote yes again; while this would deliver an overall yes vote of about two-thirds of those turning out to vote, the popular legitimacy of the Agreement would be undermined

of Protestant voters had considered changing their vote during the course of the election campaign, compared to just 7% of Catholics. Similarly, 44% of Protestants said that they had decided on their vote during the last week of the campaign, compared to 16% of Catholics. Clearly, then, indecision and less than wholehearted support for the Agreement was an underlying characteristic of unionist support.

What accounts for post-1998 Protestant disillusionment with the Agreement - or, perhaps more accurately, what occurred to alienate the lukewarm support that existed among a sizeable proportion of the unionist community? While the detailed answer to this question

Explaining Protestant Disillusionment

Beyond the general feeling that the nationalists had gained considerably more from the Agreement than the unionists, what specific parts of the Agreement did Protestants object to? There are obviously different dimensions to Protestant opposition to the Agreement. One is simply those who, when asked how they would vote if the referendum were held again today, said 'no'. This is a useful measure of contemporary views about the Agreement and reflects a general sense of disillusionment. Table I shows that 44% of Protestants said that they would vote 'no' in this context, and 37% said they would vote 'yes'; if those in the 'other' category are excluded, 'no' voters are 54% of eligible voters, and 'yes' voters 46%.

The second dimension is to examine change in voting over time, and to identify those who reported voting 'yes' in 1998, but by 2003 had changed their vote to 'no', and compare their views to consistent 'yes' voters. This is a measure of the specific disillusionment felt by by former supporters of the Agreement. Table 1 shows that those who were consistent 'yes' voters were just three in ten of all Protestants, with consistent 'no' voters making

up just under one in four. Of those who changed their views, the vast majority -16% compared to 2% - moved from 'yes' to 'no' rather than from 'no' to 'yes.' In theory this latter dimension provides a third possible contrast, but in practice the numbers are too small for reliable analysis. These two contrasts - 'no' versus 'yes' voters, reflecting general disillusionment, and 'yes' to 'no' versus consistent 'yes', showing the disillusionment of former supporters of

the Agreement - should help us to evaluate the relative importance of the differing explanations. Table 2 shows the results of two logistic regression equations, predicting these two contrasts among Protestant voters from the range of opinions outlined previously. The results suggest that the two dimensions have different mainsprings within the Protestant electorate, with one exception: both sets of results show that the most important predictor in each equation is the belief that nationalists gained more benefit from the Agreement than unionists. This provides an important backdrop to all Protestant opinion about the Agreement, regardless of which of the two sets of contrasts we focus upon.

In terms of the general disillusionment with the Agreement evident among Protestants, besides the view that nationalists had benefited more than unionists, the first equation in Table 2 shows that opposition to the creation of north-south bodies in the Agreement was a major factor, followed by opposition to a powersharing Assembly. Third in order of importance is opposition to the view that powersharing would make nationalists want Northern Ireland to remain as part of the UK, followed by the belief that reform of the police had gone too far, and fourth, opposition to the view that powersharing would make unionists want to join the Irish Republic. This general sense of disillusionment therefore has a variety of motivations, and is not focused on any one part of the peace process.

What motivated early Protestant supporters of the Agreement to become opponents? Aside from a general sense of unfairness in who benefits from the Agreement, two factors are important. First, opponents were motivated in their change by opposition to the Assembly though not, interestingly, to the principle of powersharing as such. Second, they

Table 1: Aspects of the Referendum Vote, 2003

	Vote if held now			Votes in 1998, 2003	
	Prot	Cath		Prot	Cath
Yes	37	84	Consistent yes	30	76
No	44	4	Consistent no	23	1
Other	19	12	Yes to no	16	2
Total	100	100	No to yes	2	<1
(N)	(535)	(355)	Other	29	21
			Total	100	100
			(N)	(535)	(355)

Table 2: Explaining Protestant Disillusionment with the Agreement

	General		Specific	
	Est	(SE)	Est	(SE)
<i>Nationalists benefit more from Agreement</i>	.67**	(.18)	.82**	(.28)
<i>Agreement principles (support)</i>				
N Ireland remain part of UK	-.02	(.23)	.11	(.37)
North-South bodies	-.55**	(.16)	-.20	(.22)
N Ireland Assembly	-.49*	(.21)	-.85**	(.31)
Removal of claim to N Ireland	.13	(.17)	.18	(.30)
Power-sharing	-.63**	(.22)	-.35	(.30)
<i>Police reform gone too far</i>	.44*	(.22)	.60*	(.31)
<i>Constitutional future (agree)</i>				
N Ireland join Irish Republic	.19	(.21)	.17	(.27)
N Ireland stay in UK	.01	(.21)	-.15	(.28)
Powersharing make nationalists stay in UK	-.52**	(.16)	-.48	(.23)
Powersharing make unionists join Irish Republic	-.29*	(.19)	-.38	(.31)
Constant	-9.67		-11.11	
R-squared	.327		.307	
(N)	(320)		(180)	

** statistically significant at $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Note Equation 1 predicts current 'no' versus current 'yes' voters. Equation 2 predicts 'yes' in 1998 and 'no' in 2003 versus 'yes' voters in both 1998 and 2003.

believed that police reform had gone too far. It is notable that opposition to the principle of north-south bodies, which is so important in underpinning a general sense of Protestant disillusionment, is unimportant, and nor is there any association with views about what the Agreement implies about the constitutional future. These results provide an insight into changes in Protestant opinions towards the 1998 Northern Ireland Agreement. A common underlying theme among all of those opposed to the Agreement is the perceived unfairness of the new arrangements. But while general disillusionment has its origins in different aspects of the Agreement, those who have turned against the Agreement since 1998 clearly felt that the Assembly had not performed adequately enough to retain their support. The dysfunctional operation of the Assembly and the Executive is therefore a major underlying cause of early supporters of the Agreement

subsequently turning against it. If the political institutions created by the Agreement had operated as expected, we might have expected Protestant support for the Agreement to be maintained or, perhaps, to have declined slightly in response to opposition to reform of the police. The results presented here suggest that the four suspensions of the Assembly and Executive turned a significant minority of Protestants away from the Agreement in the five years since 1998.

Conclusion

Consociational solutions to communal conflict depend crucially on the consent of the participants to the new institutional arrangements. The most recent attempt to solve the Northern Ireland conflict, the 1998 Belfast Agreement, initially attracted majority support from Protestants, but since then consent had steadily declined. All opponents of the Agreement

share a strong underlying view that it unduly benefits nationalists at the expense of unionists. In addition, those who are generally disillusioned identify North-South bodies, reform of the police, and powersharing as major concerns. By contrast, those who have become disillusioned since 1998 identify the dysfunctional nature of the Assembly and Executive as a major cause of their dissent. The results suggest that Protestant consent for the Agreement will only return if and when the institutions it created are seen to operate efficiently.

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Key Points

- All opponents of the Agreement share a strong underlying view that it unduly benefits nationalists at the expense of unionists.
- Respondents who are generally disillusioned and who voted against the referendum in 1998, identify North-South bodies and powersharing as major concerns.
- However, respondents who have become disillusioned only since 1998 identify the dysfunctional nature of the Assembly and Executive as a major cause of their dissent.
- The results suggest that Protestant consent for the Agreement will only return if and when the institutions it created are seen to operate efficiently.

The 2003 Northern Ireland Election Survey was carried out between November 2003 and February 2004. 1000 adults were interviewed in their own homes. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services. The survey was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

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