Flagging Identities: assessing the display and regulation of political symbols across Northern Ireland in 2006

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One of the key issues that arises out of *A Shared Future* policy is the relationship between people's right to express their identity through forms of public celebration and commemoration and the processes of demarcation of territory that are recognised as so damaging for social and economic well-being of people in Northern Ireland. It is not always easy, or indeed possible, to differentiate acts of territorial marking from processes of commemorative identification and community celebration. However, one reasonable criterion on which we might differentiate these activities is the amount of time that displays of flags, bunting and other emblems are left up. Most periods of celebration in societies around the world last periods of days and weeks, not months.

This paper looks at the results of two surveys undertaken by researchers at the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen's Belfast in the summer of 2006.[1] It was commissioned by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister as a part of the process of exploring the policy of *A Shared Future*.

The two surveys discussed in this paper were conducted between 29 June – 9 July and 18 September – 27 September 2006 as this two and a half month period appeared to be a reasonable amount of time to assess the display and regulation of flags over the summer period. We have noted in this report that these survey dates gave considerable time for displays marking the anniversaries of the Battle of the Somme and the Battle of the Boyne to be taken down. It offered less time for those marking the 25th Anniversary Hunger Strike to remove flags. Nevertheless, as of November 2006, there were still flags flying, tatty and dirty, that were put up through each of these anniversaries.

Survey data, such as the material in this research, can never capture the nuances of issues at a local level. As such, this paper does not reflect local circumstances in which the displays of symbols and emblems take place. Rather, it gives a broad picture and allows some comparison to take place across Northern Ireland. The second stage of the research, a qualitative investigation of case studies of flags disputes and negotiations, is currently in progress and will shed light on the ways in which controversies surrounding flags are manifest at local level. A third stage of survey questions included in the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey will shed light on the prevalence of attitudes towards flags across the population in Northern Ireland. The results presented here therefore constitute only the first stage in our broader investigation.

Introduction

In March 2005 the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister published the core policy document, *A Shared Future*, outlining a vision for the future of good community relations in Northern Ireland.[2]

The foreword, by Paul Murphy, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, stated:

> *The Government's vision for the future of Northern Ireland is for a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society firmly founded on the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust and the protection and vindication of human rights for all. It will be founded on partnership, equality and mutual respect as a basis of good relationships. (p.3)*

The overall aim of *A Shared Future* is:

> *…to establish, over time, a shared society defined by a culture of tolerance: a normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere, and where all individuals are treated impartially. A society where there is equity, respect for diversity and recognition of our interdependence. (1.2.1)*

Amongst the impediments to a shared society are the territorial divisions that mark Northern Ireland deriving from sectarian communal demarcation that has itself been marked by years of political and sectarian violence. As such, rural and urban areas of Northern Ireland have both visible and invisible boundaries, or interfaces as they are locally termed, which are an impediment to shared public space. *A Shared Future* noted that

> …the costs of a divided society - whilst recognising, of course, the very real fears of people around safety and security considerations - are abundantly clear: segregated housing and education, security costs, less than efficient public service provision, and deep-rooted intolerance that has too often been used to justify violent sectarianism and racism. Policy that simply adapts to, but does not alter these challenges, results in inefficient resource allocations. These are not sustainable in the medium to longterm**.** (1.4.1)

A Shared Future then sets out a number of priority areas in order to achieve progress on building a shared society. Two of these, which relate to the territorial nature of Northern Ireland, are:

> 2.1 Tackling the visible manifestations of sectarianism and racism
>
> Freeing the public realm (including public property) from displays of sectarian aggression through:
>
> active promotion of local dialogue involving elected representatives, community leaders, police and other stakeholders to reduce and eliminate displays of sectarian and racial aggression; and
>
> the police, in conjunction with other agencies, acting to remove such displays where no accommodation can be reached.

and

> 2.2 Reclaiming shared space
>
> Developing and protecting town and city centres as safe and welcoming places for people of all walks of life.
>
> Creating safe and shared space for meeting, sharing, playing, working and living.
>
> Freeing the public realm from threat, aggression and intimidation while allowing for legitimate expression of cultural celebration.

A Shared Future particularly concentrates upon the issues around the flying of flags. However, it is clearly the intent of the policy area that this should cover a range of cultural/political expressions including murals, memorials, the painting of kerbstones, graffiti and the erecting of arches. Further to that, the issue of parades, festivals, demonstrations and bonfires

should also be included. All of these cultural political expressions provide the context within which public space is managed.

A number of issues are identified as important:

- Such cultural practices are part of local communal 'traditions' and are, to a degree, popular.
- Many of these cultural expressions are present all year round and, given the degree of religious segregation across Northern Ireland, thus also act as territorial markers.
- There is a relationship, either perceived or actual, between paramilitary groups and some of these displays.
- There is survey and anecdotal evidence that people feel intimidated by these displays.
- Inappropriate displays of flags and emblems can lead to economic damage.
- There can be problems in identifying which agencies have responsibility for dealing with such practices.
- Particular attention needs to be paid to making town centres safe and welcoming spaces for everyone.

Central to dealing with the marking and ownership of territory is an understanding of the local context of intra- and inter-community relations.

> 2.1.4 Whilst many people would be in favour of clearer guidelines or rules of enforcement around the flying of flags or painting of kerbstones nearly all those interviewed stressed the importance of changing the context within which displays of symbols take place. It is vital to understand why people feel the need to make symbolic displays. It has been clear in many of the cases studied that flag flying was part of a tit-for-tat display around territory. As such, improved relationships around interfaces can see the reduction of flags or changes in the murals.

However, *A Shared Future* makes it clear that practices legitimising illegal organisations and effectively threatening communities are unacceptable (2.1.4).

In conclusion *A Shared Future* argues that 'we must continue to reclaim the public realm for people who are living and working in, or as visitors to, Northern Ireland…' (2.2.2).

A range of actions are proposed:

- In town and city centres and arterial routes and other main thoroughfares 'the display of any flags on lamp-posts should be off limits' (2.2.3)
- The removal of all paramilitary flags.
- The control of flags and emblems in sensitive areas (near buildings such as schools, hospitals and churches)
- That popular flying of flags for commemoration and celebration should be limited to particular times and dates.

The mechanisms proposed for undertaking this are:

- 'the development of an agreed protocol between PSNI and all key agencies outlining precise responsibilities for removing 'inappropriate and aggressive' displays…' (2.1.5)
- 'the development of contact procedures for all agencies with responsibility for removing 'aggressive' and 'inappropriate' displays…' (2.1.5)
- 'increasing the number of individuals willing and able to mediate disputes involving symbols, whether flags, murals, memorials, racist graffiti, painted kerbstones or other forms of 'marking'…' (2.1.5)
- 'sustained support for organisations engaged in transforming the environment in which people live…' (2.1.5)
- 'development of a more co-ordinated approach to the management of conflict and conflict transformation through the use of dedicated fieldworkers…' (2.1.5)
- 'enforcement by the police (acting jointly with key agencies)' (2.1.5)
- That the CRC will be asked to develop a triennial plan and local protocols in conjunctions with other agencies. (2.1.6)
- The use of the DOE's statutory planning process to develop key themes in the Regional Development Strategy into local development plan policies. (2.2.4 and 2.2.5)

The above framework for dealing with flags, emblems and other cultural manifestations must be viewed in the context of other policy areas such as 'Reducing Tension at Interface Areas' (2.3), 'Shared Communities' (2.5), 'Supporting Good Relations through Diversity and Cultural Diversity (2.6), and the delivery of Shared Services (2.10). It should also be viewed in the context of the obligation public authorities have under Section 75 of the 1998 Northern Ireland Act. In particular this places Good Relations at 'the centre of policy, practice and delivery of public services' (3.1.2), and with a commitment to develop support for 'an enhanced and more broadly

representative Community Relations Council' (3.2.3). Additionally, the Review of Public Administration could lead to an enhanced role for a large District Council. District Councils were required from April 2007 to prepare a good relations plan (3.3.4).

The PSNI are lead agency in *The Joint Protocol In Relation To The Display Of Flags In Public Areas* which aims to address:

- The removal of all flags and emblems from arterial routes and town centres;
- The removal of all paramilitary flags and displays;
- The control of displays of flags and emblems in particular areas e.g. mixed and interface areas and near buildings such as schools, hospitals, places of worship and community halls;
- Flag flying should be limited to particular times and particular dates and:
    - where flags are displayed for a festive or other occasion that the display is reasonably time bounded.
    - Flags, including plastic ties, tape and poles, should be removed by the community after the agreed period.
- To encourage communities to accept that flags displayed which are tattered, torn or discoloured do not enhance the environment and should be removed.

In *A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009* OFMDFM and the PSNI are responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of the flags protocol.

How many and what flags where there in July 2006?

Over the summer of 2006 Institute of Irish Studies undertook a survey of major arterial routes (Protected Roads) in Northern Ireland, mapping the display of flags, murals, graffiti, bunting, memorials and arches. The first survey was undertaken between 29 June – 9 July 2006 and the second between 18 September - 27 September. A detailed description of the research methodology can be found in the preliminary report (http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/flags-monitoring.pdf).

The first round of the census recorded 4136 different political symbols along arterial routes and town centres across Northern Ireland.

Forms of symbols

Symbol	Frequency	Percentage of total
arch	20	0.5
bannerette	134	3.2
bunting	66	1.6
flag	3638	88.0
graffiti	14	0.3
kerbstones	25	0.6
lamppost	32	0.8
memorial	37	0.9
mural	84	2.0
placard	76	1.8
other	10	0.2
Total	4136	100.0

As expected from research on public displays of political symbols in recent years, flags constitute by far the greatest number of political symbols across the arterial routes of Northern Ireland. This is likely to be due to a combination of the appeal of the national and regional symbols available in flag form as well as the relatively inexpensive and easily organised mode of display. Painted kerbs and lampposts comprise a relatively small proportion of the overall number of emblems. We would suggest that this reflects an overall decline in the popularity of this type of display.

By way of contrast there is an increasing use of bannerettes, especially in urban areas. These high quality printed plastic sheets are attached by brackets to lampposts and are often sponsored by lodges of Loyal Orders, local businesses, local politicians or marching bands. Murals and memorials constitute a small but significant proportion of the overall total. However, given their relative immutability they are less likely to be linked to seasonal festivals and more likely to be permanent features of local areas. More transient forms of display such as graffiti constitute a very small proportion of the overall total. This is likely to be partly due to the poor visibility of many small scale graffiti displays as well as frequent removal by District Councils.

These symbols could be displayed in a variety of ways and the most frequent are detailed below:

	buildings	lamppost	private house	stand alone	flagpole	other	**total**
arch	0	2	0	18	0	0	**20**
bannerette	0	134	0	0	0	0	**134**
bunting	3	59	0	0	0	4	**66**
flag	203	3140	176	0	74	45	**3638**
graffiti	11	1	0	2	0	1	**14**
kerbstones	0	0	0	24	0	1	**25**
lamppost	0	32	0	0	0	0	**32**
memorial	4	1	0	32	0	0	**37**
mural	74	2	0	2	0	6	**84**
placard	4	66	0	2	0	4	**76**

The majority of flags were attached to lampposts or telegraph poles or other buildings such as shops and community halls. Only a small proportion of flags were displayed from private houses, though this was the only type of symbol displayed from private housing. A further small proportion were flown from dedicated flagpoles in public areas. Bunting, bannerettes and placards were almost exclusively displayed from lampposts. Memorials and arches tended not to be attached to public property, but to stand alone.

We recorded 38 main types of political symbol on arterial routes across Northern Ireland. In order to make meaningful statements about the frequency and location of these varieties we need to put them together in analytic categories, rather than deal with each individually. This can be a challenging process, as the interpretation of some emblems is ambiguous because people in Northern Ireland do not necessarily interpret these symbols in the same way. On the other hand the process of categorising these symbols makes us consider the motivations behind their display as well as the different ways in which they can be interpreted.

Symbol category	Frequency	Percentage of total
national	1827	44.2
regional	1385	33.5
paramilitary	194	4.7
sport	114	2.8
commemorative	263	6.4
Loyal Order	232	5.6
political party/statement	41	1.0
other	80	1.9
Total	4136	100.0

Broadly speaking the largest category contains national symbols and these, along with regional symbols, account for 77.8% of all symbols in the first round of the census. Given that the summer months constitute the height of the marching season, it is unsurprising that symbols associated with the Loyal Orders should constitute a proportion of the total. Likewise, the summer of 2006 saw the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1981 Hunger Strike and the ninetieth anniversary of the Battle of the Somme and commemorative emblems were therefore much in evidence. Paramilitary emblems constituted 4.7% of the total, this means that there are 193 paramilitary emblems on arterial routes and town centres alone. Party political emblems were relatively infrequent, perhaps because the census did not fall near local or national elections.

The locations of the symbols were recorded in a variety of ways to allow a breakdown of the different types of symbol in terms of District Council area. Great care needs to be taken in interpreting these figures. Much depends on the number of arterial routes in each Council area as well as local contextual factors, such as the hosting of particular parades over this summer, which may affect the level of symbol display.

District Council	Total number of political symbols	Percentage of Total	Total number of of paramilitary symbols	Percentage of total	Ratio of paramilitary to total symbols
Antrim	52	1.3	1	.5	0.02
Ards	183	4.4	17	8.8	0.09
Armagh	143	3.5	6	3.1	0.03
Ballymena	137	3.3	2	1.0	0.01
Ballymoney	34	0.8	0	0	0
Banbridge	134	3.2	1	.5	0.01
Belfast	996	24.1	94	48.5	0.09
Carrickfergus	67	1.6	8	4.1	0.12
Castlereagh	86	2.1	0	0	0
Coleraine	187	4.5	9	4.6	0.05
Cookstown	58	1.4	1	.5	0.02
Craigavon	317	7.7	1	.5	0.00
Derry	233	5.6	14	7.2	0.06
Down	206	5.0	10	5.2	0.05
Dungannon	89	2.2	0	0	0
Fermanagh	144	3.5	2	1.0	0.01
Larne	83	2.0	5	2.6	0.06
Limavady	79	1.9	0	0	0
Lisburn	371	9.0	0	0	0
Magherafelt	147	3.6	3	1.5	0.02
Moyle	62	1.5	4	2.1	0.06
Newry & Mourne	131	3.2	6	3.1	0.05
Newtownabbey	65	1.6	8	4.1	0.12
North Down	13	.3	1	.5	0.07
Omagh	32	.8	0	0	0
Strabane	87	2.1	1	.5	0.01
Total	4136	100.0	194	100.0	0.04

While Belfast accounts for almost 1000, or one quarter, of the political symbols in the census, it also contains almost half (94) of the paramilitary emblems. Outside Belfast, Craigavon, Lisburn, Down and Derry each have 5% or more of the total political symbols. Outside of Belfast, Ards, Derry and Down have 10 or more paramilitary symbols. Ards, Newtownabbey, and Carrickfergus have ratios of paramilitary symbols which are as high, if not higher, than Belfast.

Interpretation of these figures is difficult. Nevertheless, it is notable that there were a number of areas where no paramilitary symbols appear at all. It is worth highlighting that in Craigavon, an area with a recent history of difficulties and some high density urban areas, there was only one recognisable paramilitary symbol on an arterial route. In contrast Ards had quite a large number (17) of visible paramilitary symbols on arterial routes. Belfast should be looked at separately from other areas given that many arterial routes are much more distinctly going through different religious/political communities.

How many and what types of symbols were there in September 2006?

The second round of the census took place between 18th and 27th of September. The total number of symbols recorded is detailed below:

	Round 1	**Round 2**	**Change**	**Percent change**
arch	20	3	-17	**-85.0%**
bannerette	134	72	-62	**-46.3%**
bunting	66	51	-15	**-22.7%**
flag	3638	2025	-1613	**-44.3%**
graffiti	14	20	+6	**+42.9%**
kerbstones	25	37	+12	**+48.0%**
lamppost	32	60	+28	**+87.5%**
memorial	37	45	+8	**+21.6%**
mural	84	91	+7	**+8.3%**
placard	76	80	+4	**+5.3%**
other	10	15	+5	**+50%**
Total	4136	2499	-1637	**-39.6%**

If we simply take the total numbers of different forms of symbols counted in the first and second rounds we see that the overall the number of political symbols along arterial routes and centres has deceased by almost 40% and the numbers of flags have decreased by around 44% in total. Likewise, bannerettes and bunting have all decreased with almost all arches removed. However, more permanent forms of display such as kerbstones, lampposts, murals and memorials have all shown an increase. The number of placards has remained relatively stable.

These figures need to be read with care. Since a large number of items were put up as well as those taken down the statistics need to be broken down further. However, one particular point can be made: memorials are at the very least semi-permanent and often effectively permanent. We know that an increasing number of these are being erected and they are often accompanied by flags, murals and other emblems. Given that they are memorials they create a potentially sacred space; however, they also mark territory. Issues and disputes over memorials are only likely to increase in the coming years.

The total figure for symbols in September masks the fact that there have been symbols put up as well as taken down in the time period between the two census dates. If we have a look at the totals of different types of emblems taken down as well as put up we see a very different pattern:

	Round 1 total	**Emblems removed**	*Percent Decrease*	**New emblems**	*Percent Increase*	**Round 2 total**
arch	20	18	*90.0%*	1	*5.0%*	**3**
bannerette	134	84	*62.7%*	22	*16.4%*	**72**
bunting	66	52	*78.8%*	37	*56.1%*	**51**
flag	3638	2474	*68.0%*	861	*23.7%*	**2025**
graffiti	14	6	*25.0%*	12	*85.7%*	**20**
kerbstones	25	4	*16.0%*	16	*64.0%*	**37**
lamppost	32	10	*31.2%*	38	*118.8%*	**60**
memorial	37	2	*5.4%*	10	*27.0%*	**45**
mural	84	6	*7.1%*	13	*15.5%*	**91**
placard	76	29	*38.2%*	33	*43.4%*	**80**
other	10	4	*40.0%*	9	*90.0%*	**15**
Total	4136	2689	*65.0%*	1052	*25.4%*	**2499**

Overall the finding is that for most symbols there was considerable flux over the summer with substantial numbers both removed and displayed anew. Together these opposing trends give an impression of stasis or moderate reduction in numbers. For example, the numbers of placards removed and displayed are roughly equivalent giving the false impression of consistency over the two census dates. Over two-thirds of flags and bannerettes and over three quarters of the original bunting had been removed by the second census. However, these large reductions have been offset by substantial numbers of new items. As we would expect for the more immutable symbols such as memorials and murals, there are fewer items removed and few displayed in the interim.

A large number of flags (2,474) were removed over the summer. Observations would suggest that this is often in town centres. Lisburn and Ballyclare, for example, were free of flags in the centre of towns. On the other hand, if we take Lisburn as an example, a large number of flags remained on some of the approach roads to the town.

If we examine the ways in which these symbols were originally displayed we see differences in the proportions of emblems removed and replaced:

How displayed	Round 1 total	Emblems removed	New emblems	Round 2 total	Total change
On arch	**19**	19	7	**7**	**-63.2%**
On building	**303**	117	98	**284**	**-6.3%**
Displayed bunting-style	**19**	19	5	**5**	**-73.7%**
On flagpole	**74**	42	57	**89**	**+20.2%**
On lamppost	**3438**	2308	800	**1930**	**-43.9%**
On mural	**14**	6	9	**17**	**+21.4%**
On private house	**176**	146	34	**64**	**-63.7%**
Stand alone	**85**	28	34	**91**	**+7.1%**
Other	**8**	4	8	**12**	**+50%**
Total	**4136**	2689	1052	**2499**	**-40.3%**

As all original arches were removed, all symbols displayed from these are also taken down. The highest proportion of symbols removed were from private residences, again suggesting that people take more responsibility for emblems when displayed from their own property. Symbols displayed from public and commercial premises had much lower levels of removal.

One of the more obvious patterns revealed by the survey is that where displays are directly attributable – erected by Councils in town centres or by Orangemen around their halls and arches or by people on their own homes – the flags and bunting tend to be taken down. In these instances people appear to be taking more responsibility for the regulation and care of these emblems.

If we examine how each of the analytic categories have shifted over the summer we can get a better idea of exactly how these changes impact upon the different types of symbols.

	Round 1 total	**Emblems removed**	**New emblems**	**Round 2 total**	**Total change**
national	**1827**	1182	457	**1102**	**-39.7%**
regional	**1385**	966	176	**595**	**-57.0%**
paramilitary	**194**	100	67	**161**	**-17.0%**
sport	**114**	78	71	**107**	**-6.1%**
commemorative	**263**	106	224	**381**	**+44.9%**
Loyal Order	**232**	202	23	**53**	**-77.2%**
political party /statement	**41**	8	18	**51**	**+24.4%**
other	**80**	47	16	**49**	**-38.8%**
Total	**4136**	2689	1052	**2499**	**-39.6%**

Both national and regional symbols show a general trend towards removal, with the numbers of fresh symbols constituting a small proportion of the overall total. However, large numbers still remain. The biggest flux in symbols is in sporting emblems with over two-thirds of the original symbols removed and almost the same number being displayed anew. In other words of the total number of symbols on display on the second census date, only one third of

these emblems are those recorded originally. This no doubt reflects the sporting calendar. Likewise, commemorative symbols show a high degree of replacement as well as a sharp increase in the second round. This increase was undoubtedly due to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Hunger Strike. One exception to the pattern of removal and replacement is the category of Loyal Order symbols which, in the main, were removed without fresh symbols being erected. Political party or statement symbols appear to be increasing consistently.

We can now look at these results in terms of council areas.

Council	Round 1 political symbols	Symbols removed	New symbols displayed	Round 2 total	Percentage change
Antrim	52	21	19	50	-3.8%
Ards	183	163	13	33	-90.0%
Armagh	143	72	36	107	-25.2%
Ballymena	137	114	12	35	-74.5%
Ballymoney	34	8	3	29	-14.7%
Banbridge	134	116	31	49	-63.4%
Belfast	996	452	385	929	-6.7%
Carrickfergus	67	63	2	6	-66.9%
Castlereagh	86	49	33	70	-18.6%
Coleraine	187	158	57	86	-54.0%
Cookstown	58	43	1	16	-72.4%
Craigavon	317	238	31	110	-65.3%
Derry	233	143	39	129	-44.6%
Down	206	153	40	93	-54.9%
Dungannon	89	75	32	46	-48.3%
Fermanagh	144	118	18	44	-69.4%
Larne	83	58	21	46	-44.6%
Limavady	79	65	0	14	-82.3%
Lisburn	371	234	62	199	-46.4%
Magherafelt	147	74	35	108	-26.5%
Moyle	62	53	3	12	-80.6%
Newry and Mourne	131	64	112	179	+36.6%
Newtownabbey	65	42	25	48	-26.1%
North Down	13	6	9	16	+23.1%
Omagh	32	22	17	27	-15.6%
Strabane	87	85	16	18	-79.3%
Total	4136	2689	1052	2499	-39.7%

In all areas except North Down, the level of political symbolism was lower in the second round. In 12 Council areas, the level of political symbolism had been reduced by over 50%, while in the 14 others the level of reduction was lower than this. Belfast retains the largest proportion of political symbols, though it should be pointed out that high numbers of emblems have been removed and replaced. It is also worth bearing in mind that of those removed in the Belfast area, 324 were loyalist and 25 were republican; of the new emblems 103 were loyalist and 281 republican.

Paramilitary symbols in each Council area

Council	Round 1 paramilitary symbols	Symbols removed	New symbols displayed	Round 2 total	Percentage change
Antrim	1			1	0.0%
Ards	17	17			-100%
Armagh	6	4	3	5	-16.6%
Ballymena	2	2	1	1	-50%
Ballymoney					
Banbridge	1		2	3	+200.0%
Belfast	94	32	36	98	+4.3%
Carrickfergus	8	7		1	-87.5%
Castlereagh					
Coleraine	9	6		3	-66.7%
Cookstown	1	1			-100%
Craigavon	1	1	1	1	0.0%
Derry	14	7	4	11	-21.4%
Down	10	9	7	8	-20.0%
Dungannon					
Fermanagh	2		2	4	+100%
Larne	5	1	1	5	0.0%
Limavady					
Lisburn			3	3	n/a
Magherafelt	3	1		2	-33.3%
Moyle	4	2		2	-50.0%
Newry & Mourne	6	2	5	9	+50%
Newtownabbey	8	6	2	4	-50.0%
North Down	1	1			-100%
Omagh					
Strabane	1	1			-100%
Total	194	100	67	161	-17.0%

Five Council areas are free of paramilitary emblems along their arterial routes and town centres: Ballymoney, Castlereagh, Dungannon, Limivady and Omagh. In three Council areas all paramilitary emblems were removed by the second census date. In Strabane and North Down, single paramilitary symbols have been removed while in Ards all 17 paramilitary emblems were removed. In two areas, there was no change in the level of paramilitary symbols. In Antrim and Larne, paramilitary emblems have remained at the same (low) level across both census dates. In three areas, the level of symbolism increased. In Belfast, Lisburn and Newry and Mourne, paramilitary symbols have actually increased since the first census.

Some Conclusions and Limitations

We have undertaken a relatively basic analysis of the two surveys, combined those with our own ethnographic observations and knowledge of the subject, to provide some provisional conclusions. Given the bulk and detail of the data collected, the database of results has the potential to be explored in much more depth, for example yielding greater understanding of the geographical variation of displays within council areas. However, it is important that we take care over the interpretation of the two surveys that have been undertaken and firstly consider the limitations as well as the strengths of the approach we have taken:

Limitations to the study:

Evidence of the display of these flags and emblems is not evidence of how people interpret the displays. For example, we have offered some reasoning behind the categories we have used but these are clearly open to reinterpretation. Many people may pass by a paramilitary flag and not recognise it, or perhaps even notice it. There may also be particular local reasons and meaning behind displays of which we will be unaware. The second phase of the investigation into specific cases of flags disputes and negotiation will complement the findings here by providing an insight into the local meanings attached to displays of flags and emblems. In addition, survey research into attitudes towards flags conducted as part of the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey will help establish the prevalence of these attitudes across Northern Ireland.

We were asked to undertake these surveys over a particular period of time. There are good reasons to suggest that the two survey dates are a good indicator of activities around the display of symbols but clearly there are difficulties. Most obviously the period of June to September covers the

marching season. We took the dates in mid-September as reasonable for an expectation the flags might be taken down; however, this could be disputed. Our survey also coincided with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Hunger Strike. However, the dates of the survey came right at the end of the period in which these commemorations were taking place (the hunger strikers called off their campaign on 3 October 1981; the last hunger striker, Michael Devine, died on the 20th August). If the flags and 'temporary' memorial structures are to be taken down then there has been a relatively short period of time for this to happen. Even in mid-October many of the commemorative flags were still being displayed in Belfast.

We have attempted to develop a method that is as accurate as possible and have established that our researchers were over 95% consistent in their findings. Moreover, the successful replication of the survey in round two shows that our method is robust, hence establishing a reliable baseline to assess any change in the prevalence and location of displays of flags and emblems across Northern Ireland in future years. However, it must be acknowledged that a very small proportion of items may have been missed in both surveys, and, when there are large displays, a small proportion of flags may have been mis-recognised or mis-counted.

These surveys were undertaken on arterial routes. Arterial routes have been defined as those main roads described by the Roads Service as 'protected routes'. In addition we surveyed the main roads in Belfast and Derry and some town centres. As such, this survey does not cover the totality of displays across Northern Ireland.

As we have pointed out in our methodology we cannot know exactly the meanings that people apply to the displays that they see. We know from previous Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys[3] that around 1 in 5 people report feeling intimidated by such displays. It should also be noted that a large number of people in both Protestant and Catholic communities report are ambivalent to both the Union flag and Tricolour.[4] However, 66% of people agreed or strongly agreed that the police should remove all paramilitary flags; 11% disagreed.

It is reasonable to surmise, however, that attitudes towards the flags vary depending on the context in which they are viewed. We have not categorised the Union flag, the Tricolour or the Northern Ireland (Ulster flag) as paramilitary. However, since these flags are frequently used in conjunction with paramilitary flags and murals, and it may well be widely believed that it is people with paramilitary connections that put the flags up, and that this takes

place in areas in which paramilitary groups may have particular strengths, then these flags may well be associated with the paramilitaries. What is displayed does not tell us how people understand the symbols but it does offer some evidence.

Patterns of symbol display

Taking into consideration the caveats above, it is possible to identify a range of activities and patterns in the use of symbols and, from that, make some observations as to the possible reasons behind these patterns and therefore make potential policy observations. It is possible to identify places where displays of flags and emblems are more likely to take place. Displays on arterial routes can be found most commonly at road junctions, in town centres and when the route goes on, or close to, areas that might routinely be defined as housing estates. Displays sometimes reflect the existence of a nearby interface. Some flags are clearly placed in a position of such prominence so that they are designed to be seen by others outside a particular area. Put bluntly, displays appear in working-class areas rather than middle-class areas.

Certain buildings and structures are the focus for displays – most obviously Orange Halls, but also memorials, arches, bars and churches. Whilst some displays on arterial routes are there simply because that route goes through a particular estate or town centre or past an important site, on other occasions the displays are clearly designed so all on that route should see it. This is particularly true of loyalist flags around road junctions and a range of, apparently temporary, Hunger Strike memorials designed to face on-coming traffic.

The largest numbers of displays are of flags on lampposts. There were much fewer on private houses; however, given that our survey covered arterial routes there were clearly going to be fewer private houses. Flags and emblems frequently appear around schools and other places of education, places of worship (as well as on places of worship) and other public services. In particular there were a number of examples of displays of both republican and loyalist symbols outside schools and further education colleges. We also noted a loyalist paramilitary flag on buildings over a Housing Executive Office. Flags were found around other services such as swimming pools and leisure centres. Some of these buildings have Union flags on them as well in accordance with existing District Council policies. [5]

We have broken the figures down into District Council areas. Care must be taken when examining these since there are substantial variations in the number of arterial routes in each Council area and the circumstances of each particular area will vary. It should also be noted that Councils are not legally obliged to deal with some of these issues. As has been pointed out elsewhere a range of agencies have responsibility.[6]

Although District Councils are not part of the *Joint Protocol in Relation to the Display of Flags and Emblems*, some interesting observations can be made. No Council area is without issues and problems with regard to the public display of political symbols. A number of areas had no paramilitary symbols displayed on arterial routes (Ballymoney, Castlereagh, Limavady and Omagh). Others, such as Portadown (with just one), may reflect some of the work that we have been aware has been taking place in these areas. Still other areas, such as Armagh, Derry, Down, Newtownabbey, and Newry and Mourne show larger numbers but not so many that they could not be dealt with

Clearly, in terms of the overall numbers, Belfast has the largest number. This is a reflection of the particular circumstances in the city and the fact that we undertook the most comprehensive survey along all main roads, many traversing housing estates and interfaces. We know from travelling away from the arterial routes in areas all around Northern Ireland that there are significant displays in almost every Council area. That said, given the amount of people travelling into Belfast, and in spite of a number of good projects (some areas, such as Donegall Pass and the Albertbridge Road, were predominantly clear of flags in our second survey) many routes into the city have tatty displays of bunting and flags and paramilitary displays of flags and murals.

Patterns of regulation

Whilst displays of flags and emblems of both the loyalist/unionist and republican/nationalist tradition are frequent there can be no doubt that more long term territorial marking around arterial routes and town centres derives from the loyalist/unionist traditions. Even at the end of phase two of the survey, six weeks after the Twelfth of July but right at the end of the Hunger Strike commemorations, there were still 1,754 items reflecting loyalism as opposed to 737 reflecting republicanism.

No Council areas were free of displays on arterial routes at the end of our second survey although a number, such as Carrickfergus, were almost clear.

Whilst a small number of these items appear to be permanent or semi-permanent, such as murals or memorials, the bulk of items are flags left on lampposts. Orange Arches had been almost completely removed (although sometimes some of the structure is left all year round) although paramilitary arches in Belfast (e.g. Shankill, Tigers Bay, Mount Vernon) seem to be left in place all year round. Interestingly, as well as Orange Arches, most of the flags defined in the category of 'Loyal Orders' were also removed. Ethnographic evidence would suggest that displays around Orange halls were also usually removed. One clear conclusion of this is that displays organised by the Loyal Orders, reflecting 1st July, the Twelfth and the Last Saturday are being removed. Also, the number of flags removed from private houses (146 out of 176 with 34 new appearances in the second survey) suggests that people displaying emblems on their own homes take responsibility for removal in a way that people placing emblems on lampposts do not. Together these findings suggest that flags and emblems that are clearly attributable to individuals and organisations are more likely to be regulated than those put up anonymously.

There appears to be a reduction in certain practices, particularly the marking of kerbstones. However, again this might be a reflection of the survey being conducted on arterial routes. One more recent form of symbolic display has been the use of bannerettes attached to lampposts. We are aware that in some areas there was a belief that these might replace flags and that it would be easier to remove these items. Of the 134 that were counted in the first survey 84 were removed and 22 replaced. However, in many areas these bannerettes were being used in conjunction with flags. In addition, paramilitary subject matters have also appeared on some bannerettes.

There remains a particular problem with the number of Union and Northern Ireland (Ulster) flags left flying at the end of the summer. At the end of the second survey 1,277 of these flags remain visible on arterial routes and town centres. Given that commemorative occasions are over the most obvious conclusion is that they are left in place to act as territorial markers.

As has been noted throughout this report the second survey was conducted at the end of a particularly intensive period of commemorations marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Hunger Strikes. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the figures for the number of republican/nationalist items are higher than might have been expected in an average year. As such, between the two survey dates, there was a significant increase in republican/nationalist symbols from 394 to 737. However, our survey period has not covered other key dates, notably St Patrick's Day and Easter Sunday when displays of the Tricolour can be particularly in evidence.

It has been our observation over recent years that after key dates through the calendar the displays of Irish tricolours are very often removed from lampposts. That said, when we conducted our first survey we still recorded 66 Tricolours that had presumably gone up on occasions earlier in the year or were left from the previous year. In addition, as we finished this report in mid-October many of the displays of Tricolours and Hunger Strike flags were still evident around parts of Belfast.

We are aware, however, that in some areas efforts were made to take down flags after the second survey period. For example, in Belfast, the areas of the Shankill, the Newtownards Road and Sandy Row flags were taken down during October. Together the flags on these roads comprised over half of the loyalist flags and emblems remaining on main roads in Belfast after the second census date. Clearly significant work has taken place within these communities.

This said, however, many of these flags were up for a period of three to four months. This is longer than can be reasonably described as a period of commemoration and celebration, longer than most of the displays that were directly connected to Orange halls, weeks and months longer than in other Protestant/unionist areas of Northern Ireland, and, we also believe, considerably longer periods of time than displays used to be up for in the past.

Notes

1 A fuller version of the report is available at http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/flags-monitoring.pdf .
This project was funded by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister but the original project exploring the use of symbols in Northern Ireland was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

2 OFMDFM, 2005.

3 Life and Times Survey, 2000 and 2001.

4 See discussion in Bryan and Gillespie, 2005, pp10-11.

5 see Bryan and Gillespie, pp35-43.

6 Bryan and Gillespie.

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