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Taighde Éireann
Research Ireland

Contents

Acronyms

AIA	Anglo-Irish Agreement
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BCC	Belfast City Council
BoR	Bill of Rights
CAJ	Committee for the Administration of Justice
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
DCAL	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
DfC	Department for Communities
DSD	Down Street Declaration
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
EA	Education Authority
EC	European Council
EEC	European Economic Community
EPIC	Ex-Prisoners Interpretive Centre
ERG	European Research Group
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
FEA	Flags and Emblems Act
FM/DFM	First Minister/ Deputy First Minister
FOI	Freedom of Information request
GE	General Election
GFA	Good Friday Agreement
IF	Ireland's Future
IRA	Irish Republican Army

LCC	Loyalist Communities Council
NDNA	New Decade, New Approach
NHS	National Health Service
NICRA	Norther Ireland Civil Rights Association
NICVA	Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action
NIP	Northern Ireland Protocol
NIPB	Northern Ireland Policing Board
OO	Orange Order
PoC	Petition of Concern
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
PUL	Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist
PUP	Progressive Unionist Party
QUB	Queen's University, Belfast
RAF	Royal Air Force
RTE	Raidió Teilifís Éireann
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
SAA	St. Andrew's Agreement
SCCF	Short Strand Community Forum
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party
SF	Sinn Féin
SoS	Secretary of State
SPA	Special Powers Act
TD	Teachta Dála
TNCCL	The National Council of Civil Liberties
UCD	University College Dublin
UDA	Ulster Defence Association

UDP	Ulster Democratic Party
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
URC	Ulster Reform Club
UUC	Ulster Unionist Council
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force
UVPS	Unionist Voice Policy Studies
WW I	World War I

Abstract

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Title: Identity narrative and constitutional flux. Nationalist and Unionist civil society perspectives on Irish unification.

This study investigates the evolving identity narratives articulated by Nationalist and Unionist civil society actors in the context of ongoing constitutional uncertainty and debates around Irish unity. It situates these narratives within the broader framework of post-Brexit political realignment and the increasing salience of constitutional change across the island of Ireland. Drawing on qualitative data gleaned through a semi-structured interview approach with civil society actors, along with a historical and political analysis, the research explores how questions of belonging, sovereignty, and constitutional fluctuation is being mediated.

The paper argues that both Nationalist and Unionist actors, and others, are engaged in processes of re-articulation and boundary-making as they confront the prospect—real or perceived—of a constitutional referendum. Nationalist narratives tend to frame Irish unity as a pathway to reconciliation and social justice, embedding their visions within a discourse of inclusivity and pluralism. In contrast, many Unionist narratives express anxiety over potential marginalisation and cultural erosion, often invoking themes of preservation and acceptance of current realities.

This analysis reveals that civil society actors play a pivotal role in shaping public discourse around constitutional issues, not passively, but as proactive agents that aid the construction political meaning. The paper highlights the strategic use of narrative framing to mobilize support, bridge community divides, or resist constitutional transformation. It also examines the limitations of dialogue in a post-conflict context as well as the potential for new discursive spaces to emerge that transcend binary identity categories.

By centering on the perspectives of non-state actors, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of constitutional flux. It underscores the importance of identity construction in periods of political transition and enriches debates on the democratic legitimacy of constitutional change processes in deeply divided societies.

1.Introduction

> The problem starts when one expects to find the 'identity' within the body or mind of the individual. This is to look in the wrong place for the operation of identity. As far as nationality is concerned, one needs to look at the reasons why people in the contemporary world do not forget their nationality (Billig 1995:7).

Heavily laden with historical resonance, national identity intersects the social and the political with the capacity to unite or differentiate. It is intangible yet very real and deeply subjective. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'the *habitus*' offers a 'correct place' to look for the 'operation of identity'. He defines it as 'embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history – is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product' (Bourdieu 1990:56). Bourdieu's habitus helps explain that instinctual reflexivity to given situations that go beyond cognitive reasoning ingrained with nationality and identity.

History becomes embodied through the intergenerational transmutation of stories that go beyond the 'psychological state' taking form in the 'social life' around which identities form and develop. Stories of this nature may be described as *identity narratives* which are themselves 'ideological creations caught up in the historical processes of nationhood' (Billig 1995:24). Identity narratives founded on conflicting 'nationhoods' achieve ideological form through Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism in the current context.

Narratives are not simply subjective interpretations of the past manifest in the present through personal expression, they are descriptors of a given culture, acting as a guide for 'thoughts, beliefs, values and behaviours' (McLean and Syed 2015:323). They are also an indication of power dynamics. The normative nature of a dominant narrative in juxtaposition to one that challenges it, demonstrates the 'active presence of the whole past' in a symbiotic and competitive interplay.

Attachments to differing nations, that is, between Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK), are at the crux of this historic fissure that has its genesis in the colonial past. As Billig submits 'national identity is more than an inner psychological state or an individual self-definition; it is a form of life, which is daily lived' (Billig 1995:69). Narrative is an important instrument in the reproduction of this form of life. Concentrating on nationalism, he argues that if it is 'an ideology of the first person plural, which tells 'us' who 'we' are, then it is also an ideology of the third person. There can be no 'us' without a 'them' (Billig 1995:78). In this respect Ulster unionism could be legitimately considered a form of nationalism in opposition to the 'them' of Irish nationalism with competing narratives.

Conflicting positions within asymmetrical power relations required bespoke arrangements created through the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) to deliver good governance. Addressing three decades of civil conflict emerging from five decades of domination by one grouping over the other was contextualised within a deeper colonial history spanning centuries. The 'reasons why' for innate attachment to nationality therefore, become apparent around which associated identities and cleavages formed. Advancing peace necessitated a 'strategy for managing difference' (McCrudden and O'Leary 2013:1), achieved through a consociational power-sharing model. As McCrudden and O'Leary submit:

> It is a power-sharing approach that addresses the management of places divided by nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, and other powerful non-class cleavages, including ideological cleavages (McCrudden and O'Leary 2013:2).

Power-sharing post GFA has faced numerous challenges to becoming fully embedded as a stop-start pattern emerged in relation to the functioning of the political institutions. It was only after the St. Andrew's Agreement (SAA) in 2006 when the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) embraced the power-sharing arrangements that Stormont experienced its first sustained period of functioning of nearly a decade. Political stability brought about through cooperative governance between 2007 and 2017 had rendered the constitutional question all but answered to many, leaving Sinn Féin (SF) as the sole voice prioritising constitutional change. Relative internal cohesion at Stormont, however, was no safeguard against external developments beyond the control of the Assembly.

1.1 Brexit

Scotland had been granted permission by the British government to exercise their right to self-determination in 2014, momentarily invalidating the perceived permanence of the UK construct. Independence was subsequently rejected. Buoyed by the result, David Cameron went on to lead the Tories to win the 2015 Westminster General Election (GE) outright. With a manifesto promise to hold an 'in/out' referendum on EU membership he hoped to finally settle 'the European question in British politics' once and for all (BBC News 2013). The UK electorate went to the polls in June 2016 and declared its wish to leave the EU. Shockwaves were sent through the British body politic causing international reverberations. Through a mixture of simplistic slogans, jingoism and xenophobia, Vote Leave un-expectantly secured victory for a resurgent English nationalism. Cameron immediately resigned. The British desire to exit the EU entered into the political lexicon abbreviated as 'Brexit', a concept so ill-defined and ill-prepared as to produce inevitable negative repercussions. British politics took a swing to the right as several years of chaos ensued in Downing Street. The threads of UK stability appeared to be unravelling as the kingdom appeared increasingly disunited.

2017 ended a decade of political stability at Stormont as Martin McGuinness resigned as Deputy First Minister (DFM) amidst allegations of DUP financial corruption and disrespect, particularly towards the Irish language, ultimately collapsing the Assembly. Increasingly the DUP were viewed as playing a malign role in Westminster, having helped bring down the Theresa May government. Their strident stance in pursuit of the hardest of Brexits left them accused of a sustained assault on the GFA by attempting to re-introduce a hard border in Ireland. Acting as a conduit for the funnelling of 'dark money' during the Brexit campaign designed to evade electoral law amplified these overtones.[1] Politics became polarized along pro and anti Brexit lines against a backdrop of implacable politics and plummeting living standards. Despite Northern Ireland/North of Ireland (NI/NoI)[2] voting remain by 56% to 44% they were, like their counterparts in Scotland, leaving the EU regardless. As post-Brexit negotiations commenced the European Council (EC), that April, formally acknowledged that GFA 'expressly provides for an agreed mechanism whereby a united Ireland may be brought about through peaceful and democratic means.' In that event and 'in accordance with international law, the entire territory of such a united Ireland would thus be part of the EU'[3]. A clear and unhindered pathway was now presented by the EC to enable 'peaceful and democratic' constitutional change with guaranteed re-entry into the EU. Within the context of political instability and Brexit the case for Irish unity was given a significant boost.

Scant regard was paid by the British government to the effect that Brexit would have on the peace process, if at all, during the referendum campaign. Compatibility with the GFA upon which the fragile peace process rested, and which assumed EU membership, was an afterthought that came to dominate Brexit negotiations. Constitutional viability began to be considerably questioned. Political instability intensified by Brexit, and the prospect of a diminution of rights and entitlements secured through EU membership, led naturally to the consideration of viable alternatives that would ensure pre-Brexit advantages. 'Brexit', as Brendan O'Leary explains, 'initially, was a mistaken abbreviation, a misnomer… Yet, as it turns out, Brexit is what happened, not a complete UKexit' (O'Leary 2022:30). Creating a constitutional pressure-point, pro-Brexit Unionists felt increased detachment from the UK while pro-Remain Unionists, and others, questioned the validity of the status quo. Irish unity as a viable means for automatic re-entry into the EU entered the frame.

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[1] The DUP received a recorded donation of £435,000 during the 2016 EU referendum campaign to evade British electoral law in order to support a Vote Leave campaign by placing an advertisement in London's Metro newspaper. See, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-44624299 , (accessed 10 March 2024).

[2] As this inquiry was based on the dominant nationalist unionist communities with their respective vernaculars NI/NoI will be used in the same vein as Derry/Londonderry as an acknowledgement of both positions.

[3] 'Special Meeting of the European Council (Art.50) Held on 29 April 2017' (23 June 2017) 4.

1.2 Towards reunification?

As an aspiration Irish unity has been associated with militant Republicanism since partition, imbued with emotional attachment and an opaque sense of what that meant. On the precise terminology O'Leary contends that ''reunification' is the right word, rather than 'unification', because the two units were created by the British partition of 1920.' Countering the arguments of Unionist and 'revisionist' historians who argue that Ireland 'was never previously united', O'Leary submits that while not unified 'politically' it was unified 'culturally' (O'Leary 2022:22), through language, dress, sports as well as a sophisticated legal system of Brehon law. As such, it will be used here henceforth.

Reunification, as a concept, although lacking in any significant detail, the mechanism by which it could be achieved is clear, that is, via a unity referendum as per the GFA. While crucial to obtaining Republican endorsement for the agreement it is silent on what the broader process will require before, during and after such a referendum, particularly in the event of a pro-reunification result. In this regard 2016 has been the catalyst that ignited significant inquiry from a broad range of sources to address these deficiencies and concretize, as far as possible, what a process of reunification could entail along with potential implications. The failings of the Brexit process provided lessons not to be repeated.

Post-2016 uncertainties invigorated a significant amount of academic research which set about investigating the complexities of disentangling from Britain in a reunification scenario. Integral to deliberations around constitutional change was the elemental issue of national identity, a historic central thread to societal and political discord in NI/NoI. National identity and constitutional preference, while closely entwined, are distinct phenomena. Current discussions around complex and multi-layered issues tend to be simplified to a binary choice. Accepted narratives of competing nationalities, invoking tensions and deep-seated enmities among supposedly monolithic groups ideologically eclipse the wider social, economic and political landscape.

As an issue of contention party political positions on the 'national question' are publicly familiar. It is by circumventing these party structures and seeking the views of people in civil society that this investigation seeks to illuminate the multiple complexities related to any future constitutional change. Civil society for the purposes of this inquiry is therefore defined as that middle layer of active society, both NGOs and community activists excluding party political organisations, and is examined further below.

The decoupling of constitutional preference and national identity challenges perceptions of socio-political homogeneity and reveals more nuanced inter and intra community realities along political and class intersections. This investigation seeks to establish whether, among this group of civil society activists constitutional preferences are relatively ingrained, inflexible and non-negotiable, or whether in the context of Brexit are the once immutable constitutional positions now undergoing a process of modification to allow for a redefinition of that same national question?

This dissertation seeks to explore the post Brexit narratives around identity and constitutional change, among a group of civil society leaders and activists in the Belfast region. This group was chosen as reflecting a segment of society which operates outside the purely party-political world but which is nonetheless operating in a space which navigates political change, and which has the capacity to reflect on these changes with a researcher. In particular, the thesis will explore the veracity of assumptive positions based on community background, by exploring the identity narratives of those from a Nationalist and Unionist civil society perspective, to discuss the extent, if any, to which they have begun to alter in a post Brexit context, and if there is a sense of change what are the elements of that change.

Progressing from this introduction, chapter two will place identity narratives in context, both in the context of the political conflict in NI/NoI, but also more widely in the academic literature. Chapter three introduces the *Master Narrative Framework* as a methodological approach and discusses how it pertains to the current investigation. Chapters four to nine outlines the findings of the fieldwork and will contain significant interview material from this original research. Each of these six chapters will follow the same structure in order to contrast the positions of Nationalists, Unionists and 'others'. Chapters four and five will be based on Nationalist perspectives, six and seven on Unionist perspectives and chapters eight and nine on 'other' perspectives, that is those who do not self-define as Nationalist or Unionist, but rather use some other political framing. Each of these chapters contains a similar set of subsections - *Interpretations and the lived experience, Structural factors and objective facts, Changing narratives? Good Friday Agreement and Brexit.* Chapter ten will be the final chapter with a summary of the findings with an analysis as to the perceived rigidity of flexibility of identity narratives amidst this period of constitutional flux, with final remarks.

Chapter 2: Identity narratives in context

Introduction

Identity narratives are absorbed into the habitus of the individual and community through processes of reproduction that reaffirm, either consciously or unconsciously, one's position within the structure of society. A person's or a community's location to the master narrative provides a   thread from the past to the present around which national identities are formed. History, in this regard, is not simply a study of past events but rather a guide through which sense can be made of the present and the future.

This chapter will illuminate some of the main characteristics of contemporary Irish Nationalist and Ulster Unionist identity narratives by situating them historically. While not an exhaustive list of relevant literature or chronology of events, it will chart the primary attitudinal patterns that link contemporary identity narratives, and their reproduction, within a historical and political context. To achieve this, this chapter will be broken down into several main sections and sub-sections. The first section is, Cogito, ergo sum, *I think therefore I am*, which examines the issue of identity narratives and their utility. In section 2, the issue of empire will be discussed in *Empire Genesis: Mythical portraits*, with subsection entitled, *Constitutional change: British empire mark 1*, followed by a further sub-section, *Constitutional change: Partition*. Section 3 will be *A totally un-British response*. Section 4 is entitled *Hegemonic reproduction*, containing the sub-sections of, *Manufacturing consent, followed by The bigoted and bloodthirsty: a conflict narrative*. The next section will be, *Peace process and Good Friday Agreement*, followed by, *Brexit: the fruit of empire*. This chapter will end with a brief conclusion.

2.1 Cogito, ergo sum, *I think therefore I am*

Identity is a meta concept that forms in the subjective cognition of the individual at its most basic level. As an academic area of study *identity* rose to prominence through the work of renowned developmental psychologist Erik Erikson from the 1940s onward. Erikson believed that the identity of the individual was inextricably bound with that of the community and vice versa in a mutually interlocking process he called *psychosocial relativity.* He stated that one:

> cannot separate personal growth and communal change, nor can we separate the identity crisis in individual life and contemporary crises in historical development because the two help to define each other and are truly relative to each other (Erikson 1968:23).

Based on an Eriksonian analysis Leondra Onnie Rogers in, *Who Am I, Who Are We?* (2018)*,* contends that identity 'represents the "interplay" of self and society; it manifests where the "personal" and "communal," the "individual" and "historical," intersect' (Onnie Rodgers

2018:285). She refers to this symbiosis as *transactional,* that is, the interplay between 'two agents: self and society' in a co-dependent 'bidirectional manner'. According to Onnie Rogers, a transactional analysis of identity allows for broader research 'beyond an individual-level construct... to a social construct that carries significance for relationships, communities, societies, and cultures' (Onnie Rogers 2018:286). The utility in adopting a transactional approach, she argues, allows the researcher, among other things, to tie 'identity to inequality.' Examining the intersection of the historical and the contemporary beyond the individual, concentrating at community level, enables this study, borrowing from social psychology, to query not only 'who we were and are', but also 'who we may become' specifically in the event of a future constitutional change.

Portraying a similarly transactional process, Philip Hammack in, *Narrative and the Cultural Psychology of Identity* (2008), defines identity as:

> Ideology cognized through the individual engagement with discourse, made manifest in a personal narrative constructed and reconstructed across the life course and scripted through social interaction and social practice (Hammack 2008:230).

If, as Erikson contends, ideology is 'the social institution which is the guardian of identity' (Erikson 1968:133), then, for Hammack, narrative provides the structure, 'realized in and through social experience' providing identity a 'content' that is 'inherently ideological' (Hammack 2008:230). This ideological content provides a functional utility that synthesizes the 'shared representations of a group', 'culture', or 'nation' with that of the individual, creating coherence that simultaneously reproduces 'a given social order with its collective narrative' (Hammack 2008:231).

Identity formation with 'ideological content' is therefore 'given meaning' through a transactional process with a given discourse extant within a 'particular social ecology.' Connecting individual identity with adherence to group narrative and ideology can oscillate depending on circumstances in that ecology. 'Negative interdependence' between competing narratives 'reveals the way in which identity threat occurs by mere virtue of the existence of some other group', thereby constructing a 'zero sum' contestation. By identifying the opposing faction as the 'clear antagonist', identity becomes 'constructed always in reference' to the 'other'. Hammack's solution to this dynamic is via a 'reconciliation and reconstruction' of the respective narratives, 'from negative to positive interdependence' (Hammack 2008:233).

Entwined within interdependences, narrative is integral to identity, belief and value formation according to Kate McLean and Moin Syed in, *Personal, Master, and Alternative Narratives: An Integrative Framework for Understanding Identity Development in Context* (2015)*.* McLean and Syed argue that narratives allow individuals and communities to make sense of

themselves 'across time' and 'across contexts' that 'explain and illustrate' the continuities of their associated identity (McLean and Syed 2015:320). Connections are made between individuals, and one community with another, providing a lens through which meaning can be derived. Narrative is integral to identity, belief and value-forming, as well as being an essential component to the broader 'human experience' (McLean and Syed 2015:321). Paraphrasing Psychologist Theodore R. Sarbin (1986), in whose opinion narrative analysis provides 'an ideal framework for making sense of very complex, contextual phenomena', McLean and Syed, in their conceptual development of master narratives, and adhering to those same principles, seek to broaden the 'lens' of Sarbinian individualist-focus, to encapsulate a more group-orientated model beyond that of 'personal stories' (McLean and Syed 2015:323). *Narrative* therefore is central to the transactional process of identity formation. The intersectionality of both *narrative* and *identity* lie at the heart of a centuries-long conflict in NI/NoI and very much to the fore at the current political juncture.

Interactions between individuals provide space for the sharing and acceptance of stories that both shape and influence narratives in a dynamic manner, permitting singular narrative incorporation into a wider group narrative. McLean and Syed refer to this collective chronicle as the concept of the *master narrative*:

> culturally shared stories that tell us about a given culture, and provide guidance for how to be a 'good' member of a culture; they are a part of the structure of society. As individuals construct a personal narrative, they negotiate with and internalize these master narratives – they are the material they have to work with to understand how to live a good life (McLean and Syed 2015:320).

Master narratives have clear application in a community setting, providing a functional and unproblematic linchpin for those 'whose lives' are consistent with the specific master narrative. When there is inconsistency between the values and beliefs within, or between one group to another, and incongruity with societal structures, the differing and 'at maximum' resisting group constructs a separate narrative, what McLean and Syed call the *alternative narrative* (McLean and Syed 2015:320).

Alternative narratives emanate from those marginalised by group or societal structures in an act of resistance to the master narrative, thus contributing to group dignity, solidarity and meaning. Indeed, it is impossible to create an alternative narrative without a juxtaposing master narrative against which to position 'against' or 'in contrast to'. The study of narrative 'provides a uniform metaphor for understanding both the [group] and the structure' representing both group and 'structural factors as storied *aligns'* (McLean and Syed 2015:322).

Identifying with a master narrative, for McLean and Syed, possesses a 'psychological toll', they maintain, can be 'stifling' in that it can limit agency. Through uncritical internalisation, alignment with the master narrative can, in many instances, be passive and unconscious. McLean and Syed argue that, 'internalization without negotiation . . . serves to perpetuate, and even to strengthen, the master narrative' (McLean and Syed 2015:34) at the expense of critical engagement with it. This is most evident in communities who feel marginalised or unrepresented and whose adherence to a dominant narrative is in many respects instinctual, a subjectivity that provides meaning yet lacking in analytic examination. Such 'internalization without negotiation' can, undoubtedly, amount to a form of control by those in positions of power over passive adherents to a dominant narrative. By stifling the emergence of alternative narratives, master narratives ensure that those viewpoints 'are literally unheard by a larger audience' (McLean and Syed 2015:336).

Absence of 'critical questioning', according to McLean and Syed, an obstacle is created for the majority; the inability to 'hold two stories' simultaneously inevitably leads to 'the one that threatens the dominant view' being dismissed (McLean and Syed 2015:336). They argue that the structures created around master narratives 'derive their strength from not accommodating' alternatives thus perpetuating the intractability that inhibits an ideological transition from negative to positive interdependence. They continue:

> To maintain the validity of the original narrative, structures of societies constrain and confine interpretive activities where the subjectivity of interpretation meets the facts on the ground. These facts – the weight of law, the pervasive socialization messages in the media, and the values that are upheld in the very architecture of society – are not easily ignored, dismissed, or revised (McLean and Syed 2015: 336-337).

Narratives are not 'neutral' according to Hammack and Toolis (2015). Identity formation is both a process, that is 'deeply social and political' and a product of 'human development.' Relative to engagement with the master narrative it is 'value-laden' and 'always constructed from social and political locations' with implications of 'power and status at both the individual and collective levels' (Hammack and Toolis 2015:355-36). It is through this process of identity formation that the narratives of a 'given social order' serve the 'interests of those in power' becoming either 'reproduced or repudiated' (Hammack 2008:224). A narrative approach expands on the link between 'self and society' by dictating 'a temporal and sequential order to the telling of events' (McLean and Syed 2015:321) in the embodying of history.

2.2 Empire Genesis: Mythical portraits

Applying the 'dynamics of time and sequence' a narrative approach can locate 'concepts, such as stereotypes' with their functional utility within a power structure (McLean and Syed

2015:321). Contextualised within a colonial/imperial social order, embodied history accentuated asymmetry of privilege and oppression, domination and marginalisation, relative to one's position within the structure. Ireland became 'Britain's oldest and closest colony' (McEvoy et al 2020:620) through the expansionism of what John Gillingham refers to as the 'English Empire.' Founded on 'the wealth, population and resources of southern England' their metaphysical conviction of superiority justified dominance 'over the rest of the British Isles' (Gillingham 1995:48). According to Gillingham, 'in the course of British history this was to be the great divide, the creation of an imperialist English culture' (Gillingham 1995:60). Culturally superior, they were the antithetical embodiment of the barbarian, 'prosperous, urbanised, enterprising, peaceful, law-abiding and with higher moral standards':

> When they called them [the Celts] barbarians they did not merely mean 'we are better than you'. They meant 'we are so much better as to have reached a higher stage of human development than you' (Gillingham 1995:62).

Attitudinal superiority reverberated temporally as E. Montgomery described feeling 'ashamed' to being linked 'forever with the south and with a stage-Irish interpretation of our character'. For him, 'separateness from Eire… would enable us to propagate our own picture of the Ulster character and of our modern industrial state' (Montgomery (1959) quoted in Miller 1998:12), inferring a 'higher stage' of development to the antiquated Republic. Supremacist assumptions ensured Ulster Unionists detached from Ireland as England had repudiated assimilation of Celtic Britain and Ireland into the distinctively English political community. This fact 'was to be of critical significance' (Gillingham 1995:48), as expressions of this dominant-dominated agglutination played out over centuries, often in bloody conflict. Indeed, as Gillingham comments, 'if English power tended to unite Britain and Ireland, English attitudes tended to divide; hence the long history of a disunited Kingdom' (Gillingham 1995:49).

Assertions by Cambrensis, or Gerald of Wales, describing the native Irish as 'a filthy people, wallowing in vice' (Gerald of Wales, 1983:106), became accepted orthodoxy for English colonisation (McVeigh and Rolston 2021:74), providing 'paradigm cases of some of the central motifs of imperialism elsewhere – including plantation, crusade and genocide' (McVeigh and Rolston 2021:67). Colonialism rationalised in 'racialized' terms would remain an enduring feature of the settler-colonial dynamic. Pamela Clayton in, *Enemies and Passing Friends* (1996) argues that racial beliefs become 'an integral part of settler consciousness and national identity' (Clayton 1998:7). Sir Basil Brooke reaffirmed this when on a diplomatic tour of North America in 1950, in a reference to partition, asserted that 'it was not merely a line on a map. It was a barrier of race, of history and of outlook' (Smyth 2007:14). Former Ulster Unionist politician, John Taylor more recently corroborates Brooke's view when stating, 'I'm an

Ulsterman, not an Irishman... I don't jig at the crossroads or play Gaelic football. We've got two races on this island' (quoted in Rolston 1998:253). Denied skin pigment as a means of demarcation, religion, imbued with racial undertones, was the chosen line of distinction which for Clayton, was 'a sixteenth century word for nationalism' (Clayton 1998:44). Had there been no religious difference between the English and native Irish, she argues, 'some other cultural marker of distinction between the coloniser and the colonised would undoubtedly have been sought and found' (Clayton 1998:47). Moving 'recognisably towards capitalism' (Clayton 1998:45) Protestant England was increasingly in conflict with the Catholic nation-states of Europe. Controlling Catholic Ireland, therefore, made strategic sense. 'Religion was a factor but it was a political factor' (Clayton 1998:46). Colonial conventionalism required the dehumanisation of the native population to validate their expansion. As the last Gaelic stronghold to resist subjugation, Ulster required a bespoke solution to pacify the most rebellious province to ensure the successful completion of the English takeover. Colonists such as Thomas Blennerhasset, in an attempt to entice further colonisation, produced a promotional pamphlet stating, 'Art thou a Gentleman that takest pleasure in hunt? the Fox, the Woolfe, and the Wood-Kerne doe expect thy coming' (Hunter 2018:20). 'Filthy' and 'wallowing in vice' the Wood-Kerne, who of course were native Irish people, were categorised as fauna to be hunted for sport.

Military conquest that utilised 'plantation, crusade and genocide' was followed by the introduction of a loyal population of Protestant 'planters' who were sold a commercial opportunity. For Albert Memmi in, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (2016), the colony, for the settler, is a place 'where one earns more and spends less', where 'jobs are guaranteed, wages high, careers more rapid and business more profitable' (Memmi 2016:48). At the crux of settler-colonial relations was the required asymmetrical 'market relations' favouring settler over native that had to be maintained. For Michael MacDonald, in *Children of Wrath* (1986), this provides a 'particularly compelling' logic for settlers lest they 'slip to the level of natives' particularly those whose livelihoods would be at risk 'without colonial privilege' (MacDonald 1986:21).

Structurally, the colonial system instils prejudice as a necessary legitimating prerequisite to absolve the colonist of the methods needed to establish and maintain the colony. With the English clearing their own lands of some of their most undesirable occupants[4] and sending them to Ulster, alongside a mix of former soldiers, the calibre of colonists, unable to work the land effectively, 'forced in 1628... a modification of the regulation that they [the English] accept

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[4] Reverend Andrew Stewart described these settlers as 'the verie scum of both nations, fleeing from debt or fleeing from justice' (O'Cahan 1968:36).

only British tenants on their land' (Canny 1988:53-4)[5]. Never truly exterminated or banished, many native Irish returned to their ancestral homelands to find 'plantations of aliens in their midst, owning the lands which had once been theirs, and growing rich and powerful.' Humiliated to work for the enrichment of these 'aliens' in their former territories, seething resentment is palpable. Indeed, James Froude (1969) states that the 'colonists... were an ever-present affront, whom, by all the laws of Gods and man, they were entitled, when they had the advantage, to destroy' (Froude 1969:84). Native indignation at their territorial usurpation was counterpoised by settler insecurity of possessing the stolen land of their aboriginal neighbours. Even in times of peace, settler paranoia found no respite:

> For although there be no apparent enemy, nor any visible maine force, yet the wood-kerne and many other (who now have put on the smiling countenance of contentment) doe threaten every houre, if opportunitie of time and place doth serve, to burne and steale whatever (Blennerhasset, 1972: B).

The uneasy proximity of settler and native allowed the animus of the dispossessed to be directed toward the colonialists who, in turn, lived with the omnipresent fear, whether perceived or real, of native Catholic insurrection. Visceral insecurity from this era forth became the underlying characteristic of the Protestant/Unionist community coupled with a Catholic/Nationalist moral grievance of injustice. Animosities founded on distinct aspects of cultural difference 'religion, ethnicity, settler-native status, stereotypical notions of modernity and backwardness, national identity and allegiance' were all 'compounded by structures of power and inequality' (Ruane and Todd 1998:65). Catholics were deemed:

> lazy, dirty, devious, treacherous, violent, over-fecund, irrational, emotional, inferior in education and skills, ungrateful, easily manipulated, superstitious, priest-dominated and in thrall to manipulative leaders. By contrast, Protestants portray themselves as hard-working and competent, independent in deed and thought, peaceful and law-abiding, but manly and resolute. All these stereotypes mirror those found in other settler colonies, and constitute the 'mythical portraits' of the colonised and the coloniser (Clayton 1998:54).

Vicious stereotypes imposed by the 'dominant (but insecure) group' upon the 'inferior (but threatening) group' created a 'peculiar mixture of contempt, hatred and fear' (Clayton 1998:53). Frantz Fanon in, *The Wretched of the Earth*, terms the utilisation of such derogatory stereotypes as 'cultural racism' (Fanon 1967:32-3). Within this social order the 'one historical fact', Clayton argues, 'that is difficult to deny, is the 'conquest of territory' 'began' the history

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[5] Interestingly, 'British' is used to describe the new colonists prior to official British identity formation in the eighteenth century after the 1707 Act of Union.

of the colony… This was a clear act of usurpation which colonisers needed to transform into legitimacy' (Clayton 1998:15). For Memmi:

> Accepting the reality of being a colonizer means agreeing to be a nonlegitimate privileged person, that is, a usurper... to possess victory completely he needs to absolve himself of it and the conditions under which it was attained... He endeavours to falsify history, he rewrites laws, he would extinguish memories – anything to succeed in transforming his usurpation into legitimacy (Memmi 2016:96).

Absolution through legitimation required a reinforcing narrative that propagated a historical revision whereby obstinate religious opponents were the root source of communal division. Challenged by Brendan O'Leary, he illuminates that what is considered an ethno-political dichotomy is in fact rooted in a tripartite nexus, what he refers to as a 'fateful triangle of relationships in modern Ireland', that is between 'the English state, Irish Catholics, and Protestant settlers, and their respective partisans and descendants' (O'Leary, 2020:154). McVeigh and Rolston contend that 'the recurrent reference to England and Englishness in the colonial project accurately names the central tension in the relationship' (McVeigh and Rolston, 2021:70). O'Leary's 'fateful triangle' thesis was in no way equilateral. An unambiguous hierarchical class structure formed with the English at its apex, the Protestant settler in the middle rung and the majority native Catholic Irish categorically third class. Driven by an imperial disposition that justified expansionism in racially supremacist terms, the Ulster plantation intensified interrelations between colonist and native. O'Leary contends that without such a history:

> Northern Ireland would not exist as a distinct entity, in which a majority of its population descends from or identifies with the colonial settlers, and a large minority descends from or identifies with precolonial inhabitants (O'Leary 2020:154).

Use of the word 'identifies' by O'Leary is significant as many contemporary Unionists reject the settler/planter categorization. Such explanations are linked to ancestors arriving on Irish shores much later than the plantation or that the passage of time makes such a term redundant. There is clear logic to these assertions which is why 'identifying' is of primary importance. As Brian Walker acknowledges, 'the events of 1641, 1689 and 1690… became important to Ulster Protestants,' because they 'served to unite Protestants in a purposeful sense that was understandable to them and the wider world' and still 'do today' (Walker 1992:63). Through 'representation or schemas about the expectations for behaviour, cognitions, emotions and values of particular social groups' (McLean and Syed 2015:321-323) stereotypes of an 'other' can embed, augmenting legitimacy of a particular narrative within the

power structure (Clayton 1998:51). Identification with the culture and legacy of the 'colonizer and the colonized' spans the distance of time and therefore cannot be so readily dismissed.

2.2.1 Constitutional change: British empire mark 1

Ireland's colonial status was revised with *The Act of Union* (1800) precipitated by the United Irish Rebellion just two years earlier. Regarded as Britain's defensive 'weak-spot' the United Irish willingness to seek the assistance of European allies exposed Britain's vulnerability to attack through the 'backdoor'. As a consequence, the days of the Irish parliament were numbered. According to Patrick M. Geoghegan:

> the 1798 rebellion had discredited the Irish Parliament in many eyes... the Irish polity was on its last legs in 1800: the cancer of corruption ensured that the illness was terminal (Geoghegan 2018:129).

Driven by English interests the Protestant oligarchy followed the Scottish example a century earlier, by voting the semi-autonomous Irish parliament out of existence. England and Scotland merged in 1707, 'United into One Kingdom by the name of GREAT BRITAIN' (Devine 2012:16). Linda Colley in *Britons, Forging a Nation, 1707-1837* (2003) states that from its inception the creation of the *United Kingdom* (UK) was driven by the selfish strategic interests of England that underpinned the construct as a 'union of policy, not affection' (Colley 2003:12). The Act of Union 1800 created the new *United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland*, with the Irish nexus specifically making this construct 'united' (McVeigh and Rolston 2021:100). According to Ian Lustick in, *Unsettled States Disputed Lands* (1995), it was only after absorbing Ireland constitutionally in January 1801 that Westminster officially declared itself the 'Imperial Parliament', thereby ending, legislatively at least, Ireland's status as a colony beginning more than six hundred years previous.

The original British empire incorporated none of its far-off possessions but rather the kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland only, remaining the case until the 1860s (Lustick 1995:69-70). Reinforcing separateness from the enemies of Catholic Europe, this was the conception of the British empire (McVeigh and Rolston 2021:x), and the British imperial identity. Union with Britain created an Irish unionism linking:

> Protestant landlords… Protestant graduates of Trinity College, the Protestant professional and business elite of Belfast and its neighbourhood, the Orange working class in Lagan valley, and Protestant farmers and laborers(sic) demographically concentrated or dispersed largely in accordance with the strength of colonial settlements of previous centuries (O'Leary 2019:294).

Present-day Unionist strongholds remain largely based on these same colonial settlements concentrated in north-east Ulster and the greater Belfast hinterland adding further relevance to the colonial paradigm.

Constitutional absorption was something of a double-edged sword for Irish Unionists containing a latent threat to the colonial architecture in that 'the subjects of Ireland' were 'to have the same privileges, and be on the same footing as his Majesty's subjects of Great Britain' (Edwards 2023:4). The shift from 'pre-democratic to proto-democratic' politics was to have significant political implications (O'Callaghan 2006:629), presenting an appalling vista for those vested in the structure as British standards necessitated uniform application, endangering a 'slip to the level of natives.' A growing Irish Nationalist political assertiveness had coalesced around the notion of self-government within the British empire by the eighteen-seventies. Home Rule, unsurprisingly, was viewed by the capitalist class with dismay. Fearing the ruin of industry cut off from 'the British empire and markets' and the expropriation of ''landlords' estates' and threatening 'property in general' (Farrell 1983:2), Home Rule, for MacDonald 'struck directly at the very nexus of the colonial apparatus - political control' (MacDonald 1986:51), dominating British politics for over thirty years. For Patrick Buckland:

> British Unionists were not primarily concerned with the fate of their allies in Ireland. They took up the Ulster question for tactical reasons, because it was the weakest point in the Home Rule argument. The placing of a solid block of loyal Protestants under the jurisdiction of a predominantly Catholic parliament in Dublin was an issue which could swing British opinion against Home Rule, and it was taken up with a vengeance (Buckland 1973b:42)

For Walker, religion and politics became entwined during the Home Rule period giving us 'the special type of politics and sectarian confrontation found today' (Walker 1992:61). By the 1890s Irish unionism became increasingly 'Ulster-based and business-dominated' although Ulster was 'still defined by the nine counties' (O'Leary 2019:294). 1905, formalised the split with the inauguration of the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) (O'Leary 2019:294), fracturing Irish unionism permanently, the same year Sinn Féin was formed (O'Leary 2019:296). An Ulster Unionist narrative now developed that demanded special treatment fearing a verso-colonisation and all that implied.

Resisting Home Rule, Ulster Unionists would bring the gun into Irish politics for the first time in the twentieth century. Mutinous intent in the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in 1912 proved 'precedent-setting and contagious' through the founding of the Irish Volunteers the following year (O'Leary 2019:300-302). Home Rule was suspended by the onset of World War I. Wider imperial exigencies and participation in the war acted as a 'rallying point' for

Ulster Unionists to accept the partition to follow (Clayton 1996:119). Instilling deep feelings of affection with Ulster unionism, they declared:

> We Loyalists of the North of Ireland give precedence to no others in the British Empire… we labour under a sense of detachment from the centre of national life and government… this feeling engenders in us a fonder and a keener appreciation of what Sovereignty stands for as the binding link in the nation and the Empire… our loyalty… is much more decisive (quoted in Clayton 1996:119-120).

Simultaneously loyal and disloyal, Ireland's detachment from Britain as a geographic and political fact had an enduring psychological impact on the Unionist psyche engendering exaggerated expressions of a 'much more decisive' loyalty. Ulster Unionists, by accepting the partition of the six north-eastern counties of Ulster had 'for the sake of the Empire made the supreme sacrifice asked of her' (quoted in Clayton 1996:119). Partition, as an act of constitutional change, was definitive in shaping modern-day nationalism and unionism, invoking a readjustment in response to the impending realities and inserting a crucial episodic dimension (McLean and Syed 2015:333) to their respective narratives. At the dawn of European fascism, a regime suffused with prejudice and intolerance would germinate within the purview of the British constitution.

2.2.2 Constitutional change: Partition

NI/NoI became a constitutional reality through the Government of Ireland Act (1920). The 1918 General Election (GE), considered a de facto independence referendum, returned 73 out of 105 seats to Sinn Féin (SF) and the United Irish League (Farrell 1983:21). Ignoring the democratic mandate, the British government imposed a partition 'no one in Ireland wanted' (Elliott 2021). The British Imperial parliament unilaterally imposed two 'Home Rule Parliaments in Ireland', despite Ulster Unionists signing the *Ulster Solemn League and Covenant*, 'to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland' (Connell 2012) less than a decade earlier. Marianne Elliot argues that Unionist preference to keep 'the entire island… with Britain' was not incompatible with the Nationalist demand for a devolved parliament. 'Why Unionists fought so hard against a moderate measure has long been a matter of historical debate. Yet they did and they were the first to threaten armed resistance' (Elliot 2021).

It is entirely conceivable that Unionists would have held prominent positions within an Irish Home Rule parliament as their southern counterparts went on to do, according to Ó'Beacháin 'as the once unthinkable became politically viable' (Ó'Beacháin 2015:45). Ulster Unionists in abandoning their covenant co-signatories of Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan, retreated behind their defensive bulwark carved out to meet their specific needs. What O'Leary references as 'a new and impregnable Pale' (O'Leary 2022:12), reanimated the colonial 'siege mentality'

embodied geographically. Sacrosanct loyalty above all other considerations was tied to the defence of territory, giving expression to the worst vestiges of colonial insecurity. Exhibiting racial, religious and classist characteristics that reinforced Unionist exceptionalism, a Unionist re-plantation of Ulster transpired.

James Connolly's anticipated 'carnival of reaction' in the event of partition proved prophetic. Both jurisdictions baptised in violence would leave 267 Catholics, 185 Protestants dead and over 2,000 wounded between July 1920 and June 1922 according to G.B Kenna (Kenna 2013:159) in what became known to Nationalists as the *Belfast Pogrom*. The Irish Civil War (1922-23) left somewhere in the region of 1,500 dead in the south[6]. The intensity of violence within a concentrated timeframe, encompassing a particular sectarian tinge in the north, left circa 2,000 people dead in Ireland in three years, compared to approximately 3,500 dead over thirty years in the modern northern conflict.

Within this context Ernest Blythe, from county Antrim, had advocated a policy of acceptance of the northern regime, by both the Free State government and northern Catholics, from 1922. He believed such a stance would leave the Free State 'accused of letting down the Northern Catholics' against the 'Pogromists'. To counter this Blythe argued that:

> The 'Outrage' propaganda should be dropped in the Twenty-Six Counties. It can have no effect but to make certain of our people see red which will never do *us* [emphasis added] any good (Blythe 1922).

A Blythe-ist approach to northern affairs became de facto policy of the Free State government following the assassination of Michael Collins and consecutive governments of the Republic. Similarly, in Westminster, a convention was established in 1923 when the Speaker of the House of Commons, in a reply to a question, answered, 'with regard to those subjects which have been delegated to the Government of Northern Ireland, questions must be asked of Ministers in Northern Ireland, and not in this House' (Hansard 1923). Partition became a double evasion where both British and Free State parliaments were complicit by convention. The plight of northern Nationalist went 'literally unheard' in both parliaments and by their respective publics in order to solidify the new dispensation.

2.3. A totally un-British response

Partitionist politics north and south came to be dominated by the middle-class. The *petit-bourgeois* ascendancy in the south reassured 'Britain and the few remaining Protestants' through their conservatism (MacDonald 1986:56) while 'Big House unionism', the landed

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[6] No exact figures exist at present for total deaths or casualties. For further reading on this see, Gemma Clarke (2014), *Everyday violence in the Irish Civil War* (Cambridge University Press), p.3.

gentry with close connections with the Tory party, maintained privilege in the north through their assured loyalty. Given carte blanche via the Westminster convention to govern in any manner they saw fit, Ulster Unionist one-party rule came to be associated with sectarianism, inequality and discrimination.

A Unionist oligarchy whose façade was impeccably Protestant, Orange and British utilised sectarianism as a control mechanism, what Aaron Edwards refers to as 'the principle of *divide et impera*' (Edwards 2023:55), to deliberately suppress working-class solidarity. Stoking sectarian division required the identification of an appropriate antagonist designed to exploit historic insecurities to maintain political control, with Nationalists becoming stereotyped as the 'dangerous other' (Hennessey et al 2019:131), becoming engrained in the Unionist narrative.

A state of perpetual 'threat' required special legislation. The temporary *Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act, (Northern Ireland), 1922* (SPA) was introduced by the fledgling Unionist government putting an array of sweeping powers at their disposal, upheld by the 'ramparts' of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and B Specials (O'Leary 2022:12). Expansive as they were draconian, provisions included indefinite detention, censorship, prohibiting inquests (Art.10), flogging (Art. 5) and the death penalty (Art.6) (CAIN), to name but a few. Such was the gravity of the Act's implementation that *The National Council of Civil Liberties* (TNCCL) set up an independent commission of inquiry. The forty-one paged report can legitimately be described as scathing of the Unionist government's abuse of SPA (TNCCL, 1936).

Despite violent beginnings a semblance of calm had ensued by 1933. Nonetheless, the 'tranquillity of the Six Counties was advanced as an argument in support of making that temporary legislation permanent' (TNCCL 1936:12) not being repealed until 1973 (McGuffin 1973:23) by the British under Direct Rule. Incompatibility with English legal norms, abrogating the twin cardinals of the 'British Constitution' of 'sovereignty of parliament and the rule of law', the 'Northern Irish Government' had 'ravished the heritage for which generations of Britons have fought and suffered... the bases of Special Powers cannot be described otherwise as totally un-British' (TNCCL 1936:39-40). As such, SPA and the Unionist oligarchy were an affront to English legal and societal standards:

> Wherever… Parliamentary sovereignty and the rule of law are overthrown there exists the essential conditions of dictatorship. It is sad that in the guise of temporary and emergency legislation there should have been created under the shadow of the British Constitution a permanent machine of dictatorship- a standing temptation to whatever intolerant and bigoted section may attain power to abuse its authority at the expense of the people it rules (TNCCL 1936:40).

Westminster disregard created an exceptionalism that reached a crescendo in 1969 with the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of catholic families from their homes in Belfast, as the campaign for civil equality was deemed an existential threat to the state. Bookended by pogroms the 'narrative arc' (McLean and Syed 2015:321) of the fifty-year experiment of Unionist rule would be unilaterally brought to an end by the government they espoused loyalty to.

2.4 Hegemonic reproduction

Proceeding from the partition period onward is the normalisation of both jurisdictions through legitimating narratives that seek to de-historicise the context of their respective geneses, what Jacques Derrida refers to as an '*après coup'*, the discourse of 'self-legitimation' (Derrida 1992:36). The legitimacy of each jurisdiction depended on a re-calibration of the official narrative involving a revision of how it was framed or an *active forgetting* entirely.

> Forgetting, I would even say historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation and it is for this reason that the progress of historical studies often poses a threat to nationality. Historical inquiry, in effect, throws light on the violent acts that have taken place at the origin of every political formation (Ernest Renan, *What is a Nation?* 1882 quoted in Elkins 2022:37).

Violent birth pangs require a 'genesis amnesia'' which 'is also encouraged', in order to legitimate the origin narrative 'as an *opus operatum, a fait accompli'* (Bourdieu 1977:79). Indeed, the Republic's government illustrated an amnesiac sense of history when in 2014 they released a promotional video to mark the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising that failed to mention 'the uprising or... the executed signatories of the Proclamation'. In contrast, the video did include footage of 'Ian Paisley, Queen Elizabeth, Bono, David Cameron and Bob Geldof' (Ó'Caollaí 2014). In the north the pogrom in 1920s Belfast appears largely written out of the Unionist narrative. Partition created a redoubt behind which Unionists could construct a society in their own image, where 'communal solidarity' was 'an end in itself'. As such it did not require justification 'in terms of other moral principles':

> because that would posit some form of universal morality existing outside of 'our' community. Therefore, 'our' society is not in need of its own legitimation, for it is the source of legitimation (Billig 1995:162-163).

Unionist identity in this regard became integral to the northern polity in a mutually reinforcing legitimating symbiosis of the two, explaining why it is an ideology 'primarily polity-centred rather than people centred' (Todd 2021:59). Communal solidarity built upon the 'mythical portraits' of the dominant and the dominated, imposed a Unionist biographical narrative on northern society as to how lives 'should unfold' (McLean and Syed 2015:328) Justification of

an asymmetrical social order, dismissed entirely the 'sharing of any degree of real power' suggesting 'a form of racism little distinguishable from settler racism' (Clayton 1998:54). Narratives that serve to legitimate a 'given social order', ultimately produce hegemonic conditions. Social hegemonies, as an effect of particular strategies, for Antonio Gramsci in, *Prison Notebooks* (1971), operate at 'two major super-structural "levels"', that is between 'civil society' and 'political society' or 'the State':

> These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of "hegemony" which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of "direct domination" or command exercised through the State and "juridical" government. The functions in question are precisely organisational and connective (Gramsci 1971:12).

The establishment of two distinct jurisdictions in Ireland created a *hegemony of partition* around which separate social orders formed. 'The battle for nationhood' according to Michael Billig, 'is the battle for hegemony, by which a part claims to speak for the whole nation and to represent the national essence' (Billig 1995:27). If, as Billig argues, 'the world of nations is to be reproduced, then nationhood has to be imagined, communicated, believed in, remembered, and so on' (Billig 1995:17). Essential to the reproduction and communication of 'nationhood' is what he refers to as 'the nationalized syntax of hegemony' (Billig 1995:114), that is, the authorised language of the dominant. 'The official language is bound with the state, both in its genesis and in its social uses' according to Pierre Bourdieu, and it 'is in the process of state formation that the conditions are created for the constitution of a unified linguistic market, dominated by the official language' (Bourdieu 1992:45). The integration 'into a single 'linguistic community', which for Bourdieu 'is a product of… political domination' is 'endlessly reproduced by institutions capable of imposing universal recognition of the dominant language' (1992:46). Inevitably this leads to the development of a syntax of counter-hegemony. It is within this realm that contestation over nomenclature and phraseology emerges. This is observable in the Unionist use of 'Northern Ireland' and the Nationalist use of 'north of Ireland' or 'six counties, for example, or 'Derry' and 'Londonderry', and more besides. For Billig, language plays 'a vital role in the operation of ideology and in the framing of ideological consciousness' (Billig 1995:17) which is why such divergences are not mere dogmatic positioning but, importantly, are manifestations of power competition. As Bourdieu argues, 'linguistic exchanges – are also relations in symbolic power in which power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized (Bourdieu 1992: 37).

Partition represented a double abandoning by Unionists, not only of their compatriots in the jettisoned Ulster counties, but also of any remnants of their once Irish identity, creating a void. A 'national' essence was therefore formed around an 'Ulster' identity requiring the 'invention

of Protestant (as opposed to British) rights to Ulster' and 'the usurpation of Ulster both from Ireland and Ulster Catholics' (Clayton 1998:87). As E. Montgomery explains:

> one of the biggest steps we could take towards clearing up permanently this confusion… [is] to change the title of the state to something that would exclude the word Ireland… 'Ulster' is such a title and is already widely known… there would be many advantages in using a name that would also imply a connection with Britain. I say this in part because it would emphasise our 'oneness' with the mainland (whereas the 'Ulster' still implies a province of Ireland) (Montgomery (1959) quoted in Miller 1998:12).

The 'democratic-bureaucratic' systems that inevitably follow hegemonic control, in Gramscian terms, give rise to 'a great mass of functions which are not all justified by the social necessities of production' but rather 'are justified by the political necessities of the dominant fundamental group' and 'upheld in the very architecture of society'(Gramsci 1971:13). Distinguished 'separateness' communicated through seemingly benevolent organisations carrying out a 'mass of functions' with an underlying ideological message, is what Michael Billig refers to as 'banal nationalism' (1995). 'Ulster' normalcy, despite emergency legislation being in place for most of the lifespan of the northern polity was promoted banally through, for example, the Ulster Motorcycle Club whose incipient race in 1922 which went on to become the Ulster Grand Prix. The Ulster Museum, built between 1924-29 (RIBA), the Ulster Way, a walking trail 'taking in the six counties of Northern Ireland' conceptualised in 1946 (WalkNI), all later encapsulated by the anti-Anglo Irish Agreement (AIA) slogan, 'Ulster says No!' Ulster of course, being Protestant/Unionist six county Ulster. As Bourdieu argues, 'there are no neutral words' (Bourdieu 1992:40). A varied architecture was thus created to relay a specific ideological message that remains self-generating:

> Once a system of mechanisms has been constituted capable of objectively ensuring the reproduction of the established order by its own motion… the dominant class have only to *let the system they dominate take its own course* in order to exercise their domination (Bourdieu 1977:190).

The Unionist elite welcomed such a 'system of mechanisms' that embedded its 'separateness'. Billig describes the 'metonymic image of banal nationalism', not as the 'flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building (Billig 1995:8). It is 'low key' with an 'understated tone.' 'In routine practices and everyday discourses, especially those in the mass media, the idea of nationhood is regularly flagged. Even the daily weather forecast can do this' (Billig 1995:155). Indeed, for decades, weather forecasts in NI/NoI stopped at Newry or Derry. Similarly, graphics on RTE often show the six

counties of NI/NoI entirely absent, where particular programmes are barred for northern viewers, what has been termed 'geo-blocking', and where northern issues are in the portfolio of the Minister for Foreign Affairs. It is through 'daily reproduction' that the absorption of such 'banal' symbolism comes to be regarded as normative creating:

> a whole complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations and practices [which] must also be reproduced. Moreover, this complex must be reproduced in a banally mundane way, for the world of nations is the everyday world, the familiar terrain of contemporary time (Billig 1995:6).

It is the through the inculcation of seemingly mundane ideological representations, from which the habitus becomes a 'product', that enables 'those products of collective history… to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions' (Bourdieu 1977:85), invisible to those in alignment with the official narrative 2015:327).

2.4.1 Manufacturing consent

Durability of a particular narrative is partly explained by David Miller through Gramsci's concept of hegemony as 'the dominance of the state in the circulation of ideas in civil society, by means not simply of coercion but by winning consent' (Miller 1998:21). A powerful actor in the perpetuation of a given narrative is, for sure, the mainstream media and particularly state broadcasters. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, in their study, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1994), argue that the role of the media is to:

> SERVE AS A SYSTEM FOR COMMUNICATING(sic) messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society (Herman and Chomsky 1994:1).

BBC Northern Ireland was a localised product of a globalised empire, in which British bureaucrats, military personnel, and so on, as discussed by Caroline Elkins (2022), would rotate. Gerald Beadle, one of the first Directors of BBC Radio NI arrived in Belfast after helping to establish the BBC in Durban, South Africa. From the outset Beadle believed that 'our position will be strengthened immediately if we can persuade the Northern Ireland government to look upon us as their mouthpiece' (Cathcart 1984:37). According to Robert Savage, in *The BBC's 'Irish Troubles',* Beadle 'quickly became part of the Unionist establishment' through his membership of the exclusive *Ulster Reform Club* (URC) (Savage 2015:7-8), a precedent followed by several of his successors (Savage 2015:15).

Unsurprisingly, Nationalists judged the BBC as an organ of the state (Savage 2015:7). Discussion on partition or the 'constitutional question' was considered 'unacceptable for broadcasting' (Savage 2015:8). Moreover, all things Irish or Irish-ness were to be repudiated entirely to safeguard Unionist sensitivities (Savage 2015:10-15). For Beadle's successor, George Marshall, even the title of a programme, *The Irish,* was unacceptable, commenting:

> There is no such thing today as an Irishman. One is either a citizen of the Free State or a citizen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Irishmen as such ceased to exist after the partition (Scannell and Cardiff 1991:288).

The year the TNCCL published their withering report into SPA, the BBC's Director of Regional Relations, Charles Siepmann, used similar language describing the political environment as no more 'than a Loyalist dictatorship' stating:

> A system of government developed by and for a great nation has been imposed on a province the size of Yorkshire and a population a little larger than Glasgow... Broadcasting in Northern Ireland is necessitated by political considerations (Charles Siepmann quoted in McLoone 1996:22).

Considerations of a political nature with sectarian bias were accompanied by social prejudice in the local BBC. According to Pat Loughrey, it wasn't until 1947 that a working-class voice was heard in Broadcasting House (Loughrey 1996:68-69) due to the BBC guarding the 'sensibilities of the Ulster bourgeoisie' who were repulsed by the thoughts of how local accents would be received by 'the rest of Britain.' Loughrey describes this as a 'display of pure provincialism', stating that, 'that kind of insecurity and middle-class intolerance bred a rather narrow social perspective for the first couple of decades of the BBC in Belfast' (Loughrey 1996:68). What Martin McLoone refers to as an 'expression of 'Malone Road' Britishness' rejected the 'culture and accents of the working-class Protestant and the rural Ulsterman as easily as it did the southerner' (McLoone 1996:27).

Post-World War II, BCC NI saw fit to extend their remit to social engineering by 'carefully increasing' dedicated programming specifically to 'create an Ulster identity' distinct from the countries of Britain while 'not undermining the 'Britishness' of the province' (Savage 2015:13). As a consequence, Unionists 'were determined that the image of Ulster presented to the outside world should be a British one' which 'marginalised the Nationalist community and its culture' (Savage 2015:12-13). BBC programming contained a dearth of items Gaelic or Irish, employing 'few Catholics' well 'into the 1950s' (Savage 2015:13). Rejection of Irish-ness required an alternative filled by the nascent 'Ulster identity' that also desired the 'Britishness of Ulster' to be accepted as equivalent to the Britishness of London.

In her book *The force of culture: Unionist identities in twentieth-century Ireland*, Gillian McIntosh describes BBC Radio NI as going through two distinct phases. Pre-World War II involved 'ignoring the nature of state' and post-war adopting 'aspects of local culture' so as not to 'offend Unionist sensibilities' highlighting 'only the positive features of the state and underplay the negative or the contentious' (McIntosh 1999:31). Indeed, according to McLoone 'no expression of political opposition to the Northern Ireland state itself' was permitted (McLoone 1996:33) as the BBC assumed a gatekeeper role concerning culture and current affairs. Winning the consent of one section of the community came at the cost of entirely alienating the other. The corollary of advancing an 'Ulster identity', with orange-ism as a fundamental component, ensured increased disconnect with the 'British culture' of which they wished to be a part. Bemusement towards Orange Order (OO) parades was illustrated by Sunday Telegraph correspondent, Peregrine Worsthorne, who described them as bizarre and 'as incomprehensible to the people here in Britain as a Zulu war dance' (quoted in Savage 2015:69). Together with deliberate policies to manufacture an 'Ulster identity' the BBC proved itself a powerful and partial political actor consistent with the thesis of Herman and Chomsky.

2.4.2 The bigoted and bloodthirsty: a conflict narrative

Deference 'to the Unionist establishment' according to Savage, 'came under tremendous pressure' with the advent of television, 'proving subversive in destabilising archaic political and social structures that failed to gain cross-community support' (Savage 2015:13). The 'carefully' controlled image of NI/NoI the Unionist government wished to portray was fractured, throwing 'the complacent certainties of southern Irish nationalism into considerable disarray' and playing a 'hugely influential role... in undermining the Unionist state' (McLoone 1996:33). All pretensions of the fabricated 'Ulster' idyll, manufactured by the BBC exposed to the world's media who flocked to NI/NoI the true 'nature of the state'.

The peaceful campaign by the *Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association* (NICRA) modelled on the non-violent agitation in the US led by Martin Luther King Jr., was met with violent state repression. In Belfast, co-ordinated attacks on Nationalist areas saw numerous streets burned to the ground with direct involvement of the RUC. For Michael McCann, in *Burnt Out,* 'the greatest omission surely lies in the failure to acknowledge that it was RUC machine-gunners who spearheaded the assault' (McCann 2019:20). This is corroborated by the eye-witness account of English journalist Max Hastings who recounts how:

> A police armoured car suddenly stopped in front of me. The turret traversed and its gun began to stammer, hosing the building. Idiotically I thought it must be firing blanks, because since the Troubles began nobody had hitherto done much shooting - petrol-filled milk bottles and paving stones were weapons of choice (Hasting 2022).

In describing the killing of 9 year-old Patrick Rooney by RUC machine gun fire, Hastings also unequivocally stated that the 'Provisional IRA did not exist' (Hasting 2022). Christopher Andrew in *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5*, also points out that MI5 judged the IRA to have formed in 1970 (Andrew 2009:618). As McCann submits out the first RUC man to be killed was shot by Loyalists[7]. This first British soldier killed was shot by the RUC[8], all 'before the Provisional Irish Republican Army had even been founded' (McCann 2019:20). This sequencing is problematic for the maintenance of the dominant Unionist narrative. In the face of an uncontrollable dynamic news-scape narration still had to be controlled. Former BBC correspondent Martin Bell recounts:

> We made a mistake... in 1969, in August of that year when Catholics were burned out of their homes in the Falls by Protestants who attacked them from the Shankill. The BBC reports gave no indication of who these refugees were. They just spoke of refugees. The public was not to know whether they were Catholic or Protestant or who was attacking whom. That has been a grave mistake (Cathcart 1984:174).

Bell recounts how he was instructed 'from high within the BBC in Belfast' not to disclose that the victims were Catholic (Baker 1996:119-120). As early as 1970 former head of MI5, Sir Martin Purcival Jones, in a meeting with the then British Prime Minister, Ted Heath, opined that the 'most intelligence could do was to define the problem' (Andrew 2009:618), which they did. Simplified to a sectarian conflict devoid of any socio-historical context, Anderson, in *Rewriting the Troubles*, explains:

> if religion was/is the cause of conflict, then Irish Republicanism is sectarian rather than a movement to reverse the injustice of partition. But if the conflict is the legacy of colonialism, then the focus will be on unionism and the policies of London (Anderson 2022:20).

Graham Ellison and Jim Smyth in, *The Crowned Harp: Policing Northern Ireland* (2000), contend that the onset of conflict in the north was to harness the 'colonial war model of supressing dissent' developed in the imperial outposts of Aden, Cyprus, Kenya and Malaya (2000:73). Some of the most senior British army officers deployed from the early seventies were 'experts in colonial counter insurgency' (Ellison and Smyth 2000:75), including Brigadier Frank Kitson, who's publication *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency and Peacekeeping* (1971) was to become the 'received dogma' of British government policy to the

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[7] Victor Arbuckle was a member of the RUC and killed by 'non-specific loyalist group', https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/sutton/chron/1969.html (18 October 2023).
[8] Hugh McCabe was off-duty and killed in the Divis area https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/sutton/chron/1969.html (18 October 2023).

conflict 'for over two decades' (Ellison and Smyth 2000:75) further reinforcing the colonial paradigm.

Adopting the propaganda model of Herman and Chomsky, Anderson argues that 'the official British narrative benefitted from a culture within the media that propagates one dominant concept: Britain's basic benevolence' (Anderson 2022:17):

> The official view was of a dutiful Britain acting as umpire. The troops were selflessly separating two religious tribes until they reached political agreement. Violence was never justified because Northern Ireland was legitimate and the UK a democracy (Anderson 2022:18).

As O'Leary's 'fateful triangle' demonstrates, Britain was very much a critical factor in the equation with colonialism being the consistent thread in the dynamic. Despite the policy decisions of the British government the lived experience of many citizens in NI/NoI did not reflect the 'conventional wisdom' promulgated by the media of a few fanatical 'terrorists' inflicting violence on the 'otherwise married people of Northern Ireland' (MacDonald 1986:viiii). Emphasising the religious dimension of the conflict was reaffirmed as the 'standard English line' by Terry Eagleton. Forwarding the 'two warring sectarian communities… each as bigoted and blood thirsty as the other' view left a mediation role for the British government (Eagleton 2023). For Anderson, this avoids scrutiny of Britain's colonial legacy in Ireland which was at the root of hostilities. Parliamentary differences were cast aside on matters of 'British army operations in the north' creating an 'all-party' consensus which 'framed the debate' (Anderson 2022:18). According to Anderson, this version was 'successfully propagated internationally' and one which successive 'Irish governments came to repeat' (Anderson 2022:18). Political unanimity stifled any critical debate of British actions or divergent analyses of the unfolding conflict, with the religious paradigm gaining prominence, including amongst Unionists.

2.5 Peace process and Good Friday Agreement

Miller argues that the use of hegemony in the case of NI/NoI was because 'key elements' for the 'production of consent' have rested on coercion and that this method is primarily because of the 'counter-hegemonic project of Irish nationalism/Republicanism' (Miller 1998:21). The 'specific period' of 1969 to 1998, according to Miller, was 'indelibly marked by colonial and neo-colonial ideology' (Miller 1998:36).

In a bid to see-off the rising Sinn Féin following the 1981 Hunger Strike, the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA), 1985, between the British and Irish governments, contained an 'Irish dimension' to bolster the SDLP position which they had long sought. Intending to be the primary voice of northern nationalism required the political defeat of Republicanism who,

symbiotically, they depended on for leverage with the British government. As MacDonald points out, 'without the Provisionals [IRA], the SDLP's attraction would have vanished' (MacDonald 1986:120). For Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald, this involved very much putting Irish unity on the 'backburner' and 'reconciling northern Nationalists to British rule' until numerical advantage determined otherwise, to which John Hume agreed (Coughlan 1986:76). Some Unionists viewed themselves as peering in from 'the window ledge of the Union' (Farrington 2006:57). Ultimately rejecting the agreement 'which they regarded as treachery and a betrayal' (Edwards 2023:150), the 'Ulster Says No' rally at Belfast City Hall attracted an estimated one-hundred thousand Unionists. According to Edwards, 'feelings of physical insecurity now fused with Unionist political anxiety to produce a febrile atmosphere ripe for radicalising Ulster Loyalists' (Edwards 2023:152).

The SDLP remained the chosen party of the northern Catholic middle-class and broader nationalism, despite a sustained challenge from SF after the AIA. Under the leadership of John Hume, who had cultivated significant personal approval amongst the electorate and further afield, the SDLP espoused a popular message of nonviolence and reconciliation. In his attempts to end armed conflict Hume entered secret talks with the Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams, in 1988 to persuade the IRA to end its campaign, becoming known as the Hume-Adams talks, the first shoots of the peace process.

The colonial security response developed by Brigadier Frank Kitson, began to give way to the embryonic peace process developing by the late nineteen-eighties. Yet, Margaret Thatcher remained determined to deny Republicans the 'oxygen of publicity.' Censorship had been discussed by the British government with the BBC on eight separate occasions between 1972 and 1987 but never implemented due to advice from senior civil servants who assessed that it would be 'counter-productive' (Savage 2015:259). Emulating Section 31 of her southern Irish counterparts, in place since 1971, Thatcher introduced restrictions in October 1988 which 'forbade the voices of all those supporting being broadcast on radio or television (Savage 2015:262). 'Aimed directly at Sinn Féin', BBC controller Collin Morris believed that the ban would hamper the journey towards reconciliation (Savage 2015:259). He said:

> Broadcasters have always faced an uphill struggle trying to maintain some semblance of impartiality. Now the government has, in effect, declared impartiality illegal... It is ominous that the Protestant/Unionist community has in general welcomed the ban whilst the Catholic/Nationalist community has condemned it. It looks as though the ban will provoke rather than heal (Quoted in Savage 2015:264).

The ban amounted to farce when broadcasters, opposing Thatcher's 'ham-fisted attempts to control the narrative', circumvented the restrictions by using actors to voice-over the words of

individuals representing banned organisations, with actors Stephen Rea and Ian McElhinney providing the voices for Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness respectively, for example (Savage 2015:264). Thatcher was dispatched by her Conservative colleagues forcing her resignation in November 1990 as Kitsonian counter-insurgency receded in favour of a political solution. Her replacement, John Major, privately conceded that the IRA could not be defeated militarily (McGrath 2021) and as such momentum was built around a potential peace process. In December 1993, the *Joint Declaration* (Downing Street Declaration, DSD) the British government asserted that it had 'no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland' (DSD para.4) raising 'Unionist political anxiety' further. For Billig, the DSD was the British government 'conveying the massage that Ulster was not integral to Britain. Its inhabitants were identified as part of 'the people of Ireland', as compared with 'the people of Britain'' (Billig 1995:76).

Amidst an unfolding peace process, Minister for Arts, Culture and Gaeltacht, Michael D. Higgins lifted the Section 31 ban in January 1994 in keeping with Taoiseach Albert Reynold's desire to 'encourage Sinn Féin in from the political cold.' Initially opposed by the British government, they followed suit that September, after the first IRA ceasefire in August 1994 (Devenport 2022). The peace process for James McAuley created a state of 'confusion and schism' within Ulster unionism as they regarded its 'social consequences… with some alarm', perceiving 'events as a direct challenge to their culture and identity and at an extreme to the very existence of Northern Ireland' (McAuley 2003:60.).

Existential Unionist angst was compounded by the GFA, signed in April 1998, in recognising for the first time in the history of NI/NoI the legitimacy of the Irish identity and the provision for constitutional change via a unity referendum. In return for supporting the agreement, Nationalists recognised the legitimacy of NI/NoI as a constitutional construct while gaining full participation in the structures of governance. The embryonic peace process was fraught with numerous challenges entering a cyclical stop-start pattern. A period of sustained stability ensued after the signing of the St Andrews Agreement (SAA). The end of the IRA campaign announced in July 2005 was transformative in providing 'the basis for a political settlement' (SAA para.1) to which 'both governments' were 'fully committed.' The SAA reaffirmed 'consent for constitutional change, commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means' and 'stable inclusive partnership government.' It required political parties 'to be wholeheartedly and publicly committed, in good faith and in a spirit of genuine partnership, to the full operation of stable power-sharing' (SAA para.3), allowing the DUP to enter the power sharing arrangements, leading to a decade of functioning political institutions. Internal and external events were to compromise the durability of the assembly, not least Brexit.

2.6 Brexit: the fruit of empire

The reasons for the Brexit result are many and complex with no definitive consensus on why Brexit happened. Indeed, academia failed to even predict the phenomenon which could, as Brian Salter suggests, be as a result of a 'normative commitment to the EU' (Salter 2018: 481). There is a wide belief that Brexit was driven by English nationalism, which according to Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson in, *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire* (2020), has its deepest roots embedded firmly in the ashes of the British Empire' (Dorling and Tomlinson 2020:42). Issues of national identity that shaped British politics were critical to how Brexit was framed, particularly the singularly English identity (Dorling and Tomlinson 2020:51).

Classism inherent within British society instilled in the progeny of the elite, through the public school system, the 'ideal of selfless imperial service, a sense of racial superiority and imperial chauvinism.' The 'lower classes' were thus 'encouraged to believe in their economic political social and racial superiority to the rest of the subjects of empire' (Dorling and Tomlinson 2020:72). With 'the Empire's black and brown subjects' viewed 'as natural inferiors' (Dorling and Tomlinson 2020:71) the Irish had been equally caricatured as simian-like violent drunkards (Curtis 1984). The 'menace' of 'charming wide-grinning picaninnies' (Dorling and Tomlinson 2020:209), resonating with the 'smiling countenance of contentment' of the 'wood-kerne', brought with it the 'nightmare of reverse colonization, of the Empire striking back' (O'Toole 2018:92). The 'xenophobia and hostility that is such an obvious part' of British heritage is expressed as 'national patriotic superiority' which according to Dorling and Tomlinson, unites 'all British classes.' A corollary of the 'patriotic, defensive, glory-addicted version' of Britishness is that it is 'in a highly fragile place' in that it 'cannot withstand being problematized or critiqued' (Hirsch 2018). Nadine El-Enany summarises:

> The terms on which the EU referendum debate took place are symptomatic of a Britain struggling to conceive of its place in the world post-Empire. Present in the discourse of some of those arguing for a Leave vote was a tendency to romanticise the days of the British Empire, a time when Britannia ruled the waves and was defined by her racial and cultural superiority. Brexit is not only an expression of nostalgia for empire, it is also the fruit of empire (El-Enany 2017).

Nostalgia of empire is a recurring theme for Fintan O'Toole in, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (2018). The longing for a 'lost golden age' (O'Toole 2018:19) fuels the perception of Britain as 'the greatest colonial power in modern history as itself a colony' (O'Toole 2018:74). Dorling and Tomlinson argue that Britain joined the European Economic Community (EEC), forerunner to the EU, because 'the British Empire had fallen apart' as former colonies achieved independence. 'No one had explained to the British that Britain had

become rich by exploiting the land and labour of colonised countries.' When 'what was in effect tribute from so many colonies' that had been 'trapped in the empire' halted, 'Britain began to get into serious economic difficulty' (Dorling and Tomlinson 2020:41). EEC membership provided a viable means of mitigation, but for O'Toole 'joining was framed not as an act of collective will, but as a collective surrender of will' (O'Toole 2018:12). The older generation, a significant demographic in supporting Brexit, were 'schooled to feel superior to British; 'colonials', other Europeans and all foreigners' (Dorling and Tomlinson 2020:56). Indeed, Britain is the only UN member state to contain the word 'Great' in the formal title of the state (Dorling and Tomlinson 2020:304). As a consequence, 'taking back control' was simultaneously 'a reconstruction of empire' and 'an anti-imperial liberation movement' (O'Toole 2018:80), the offending empire in this instance being the EU:

> Britain's drastic manoeuvre away from the EU is intricately connected to its imperial history, one that it has long refused to confront and acknowledge for the brutal legacy that it is. Britain's unaddressed colonial past haunted the recent EU referendum and prophesied its outcome (El-Enany 2017).

Dorling and Tomlinson contend that Britain's leaders are 'descended from some of the most effective despots the world has ever known', as a consequence they 'know how to pull the wool over people's eyes, lie and hold on to power for as long as they can' (Dorling and Tomlinson 2020:280). A 'nostalgia for a time when life was easier, and Britain could simply get rich by killing people of colour and stealing their stuff', for Adam Ramsay was:

> made possible by lies: the lies many of us were told about what our great-grandparents were up to in India, the lies we told ourselves when we decided not to look too closely, the lies we told the peoples we subjugated: Britain is a country built so firmly on deceit, dishonesty and backstabbing that the symbol on our national flag is not a double-cross, but a triple (Ramsay 2017).

Ramsay's assertions of deceit are exemplified by how the UK itself came into being. The word 'union' implies a voluntary and congenial coming together for mutual benefit, as in the European Union, for example. Indeed, it's voluntary nature is underpinned by an option to leave, should a member state wish it, a facility the UK does not have, apart from in the GFA. As Tom Devine (2012) points out, 'the promise of favours, sinecures, pension, offices and straightforward cash bribes' directly led the Scottish parliament voting itself out of existence in January 1707, ratifying the Act of Union (Devine, 2012:12). Similarly, less than a century later the now 'British', whose power base remained in London, approved the use of 'illegal methods' for the dissolution of the Irish parliament in Dublin in 1800, according to Patrick Geoghegan in, *An act of power & corruption'? The Union debate* (2018). Such was the 'magnitude of the

corrupt dealings' that a major cover-up was initiated, the relevant files remaining hidden for over two hundred years (Geoghegan 2018:128).

Notions of 'national superiority – un-shackled from the EU' creating a much more prosperous society have been proven fantastical. Brexiteers, according to Dorling and Tomlinson have hastened 'the final whimper of the old ideal of the British Empire... Now they have called their own bluff' (Dorling and Tomlinson 202:280). For O'Toole, 'Brexit is imperial England's *last* stand' (O'Toole 2018:73) and 'may be the last stage of imperialism – having appropriated everything else from its colonies, the dead empire appropriates the pain of those it has oppressed' (O'Toole 2018:21). In the absence of empire, therefore, what is it that is keeping the UK together?

> Britain is undergoing a full-blown identity crisis. It is a 'hollowed-out country, 'ill at ease with itself,' 'deeply provincial,' engaged in a 'controlled suicide,' say puzzled experts. And these are Britain's friends... The 19th-century myth of Britain as the 'workshop of the world,' a doughty Protestant nation surrounded by Catholics with an empire on which the sun never set, confronted a post-World War II reality, when a lot of these tales stopped being true... Confused and divided, Britain no longer has an agreed-upon national narrative... 'Everywhere I go... people are asking "What's wrong with your country?"' (*New York Times, 4 November 2017*, quoted in Dorling and Tomlinson 2020:286).

Conclusion

Colonialism offers a paradigm through which to makes sense of Anglo-Irish historiography that explains the dichotomisation of identity and associated narratives which remains the most ingrained cleft in northern society. For Miller, utilising a settler-colonialist conceptualisation is advantageous in 'that it requires that we analyse colonial/sectarian relations as well as class relations in explaining the conflict' (Miller 1998:7). Labelling community division as a simplistic binary founded on religio-national prejudice decontextualizes and de-historicises complex and multi-layered issues. For Desmond Bell 'sectarianism continues to be treated, within the policy discourses of the state, as a structure of personal prejudice and not as the result of an unresolved, post-colonial situation' (Bell 1991:89). The fomented division of the 'Irish by conquest and the Irish by origin' (Thierry, 1825:437) provides a reductionist argument that frames the conflict as sectarian distracting from the central catalyst for the enduring cleavage, the tripartite fateful triangle.

Miller points out 'that identities are formed and continually alter in relation to material circumstances and, crucially, interests' (Miller 1998:13). At the apex of the 'fateful triangle' sits Britain, annexing Ireland at the start of the eighteenth-century into their constitutional

community to meet specific interests at that time. Comfort with the continuance of the colonial structure within the British empire was aggravated by the prospect of a Nationalist majority controlling the country, necessitating further constitutional change to safeguard Tory and Unionist interests. Partition satisfied Westminster needs in addressing the 'Irish question' while unionism re-inscribed colonial attitudes in their mode of governance. Sharpening the colonial divide into a distinct Catholic/Nationalist, Protestant/Unionist dyad, Partition was instrumental in shaping the narratives of contemporary Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism. Codified within the apparatus of the northern polity, post-partition, was the assumption that a Protestant/Unionist majority would remain in perpetuity on the basis of inequality.

Fifty years of Unionist domination, leading to thirty years of civil conflict, was brought to an end by Westminster, who once again enforced unilateral constitutional change, through Direct Rule in 1972. Identity narratives formed by partition were acuminated further in a seemingly intractable battle, which began to diffuse by the 1990s, leading to the Good Friday Agreement. The GFA, a 'political configuration' to manage a divided society with 'loyalties to the British and Irish states' and their respective 'national communities', was praised as a 'balanced settlement' that treated 'different communities… with equality and justice' (Todd 2007:565). The GFA nullified inequality legislatively, if not actually, while perpetual Unionist majoritarian-ism has been conceded. The social consequences of equality run contrary to the colonial rationale of maintaining privilege or the sharing of any real power which has framed the Unionist narrative in terms of erosion of culture and identity. Juxtaposed with a nationalism growing in confidence exponentially, unionism has struggled to come to terms with a peace process they perceive as a loss and an existential threat to 'the very existence of Northern Ireland.'

Brexit presented an opportunistic means for political unionism to re-partition Ireland. The GFA, had led to a process of de-militairsation with the removal of security infrastructure, allowing seamless cross-border travel for the first since partition. Attempts to re-blockade the border to mitigate against the empirical threat posed by GFA for political unionism, threatened to derail the entire peace process. Of the five main political parties, only the DUP supported Brexit. A *Stormont nostalgia*, harking back to a Unionist 'golden age', linked the hard-line brand of unionism with English nationalism, who would, ironically, consider NI/NoI as a colony of the EU[9]. Viewed as a direct assault on the GFA and the peace process more generally, the DUP approach created a progressive-regressive dichotomy within local politics, as the EU and the Irish government brought compatibility with the GFA to the heart of Brexit negotiations.

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[9] See, https://tuv.org.uk/jim-allister-kc-mp-makes-maiden-speech-in-the-commons/ (accessed 25 September 2024).

British government partiality towards the dominant political Unionist position directly imperilled the principle of 'parity of esteem' bringing into question NI/NoI's constitutional position amongst Nationalists and others. Fundamental questions of democracy, constitutional preference and identity came to the fore. A clear majority of the electorate of NI/NoI had supported remaining in the EU by 56% to 44% (BBC News 2016). In an attempt to re-fortify their impregnable Pale, the DUP aligned with the Vote Leave campaigners, the European Research Group (ERG), to agitate for the hardest Brexit. For unionism Brexit was a calling of 'their own bluff' as Britain left the EU but the UK did not.

As a further act of constitutional change, NI/NoI was removed from the EU minus a mandate to do so. Viable alternatives were now being openly considered. Separating hegemonic powers and the discussion 'provoked by its realisation' becomes 'a product of the struggle between civil society and political society in a specific period' (Gramsci 1971:245), as reunification was debated in the mainstream. Irish nationalism, in its broadest sense, began to converge on the national question, as Unionists appear to be the victims of their own referendum success as they once again fracture. Discussion of constitutional change has proceeded apace, strengthened by comparative north/south analyses, guaranteed re-entry into the EU alongside the declining social standards of the UK.

Traditional identities have remained strongly linked to political and constitutional preferences until now. The intertwined nature of the historical and cultural identities, perceptions of power and a privileged access to resources, or the absence of such, have maintained the contemporary relevance of historic divides and identities, despite various challenges over time. National identities have fed off and reflected these political divisions and have done so in a manner than has to date proven resilient. Pro-union communities have accepted and promoted a national narrative justifying their position treating Nationalist counter challenges as illegitimate. Nationalist remonstrations have deep roots in their historic experience of exclusion and their colonial narrative of interpretation. While the civil rights protests and armed conflict displaced the Unionist regime, the overarching structure remained intact. Within this, the GFA created a status quo, acceptable to many, allowing for peaceful political and constitutional change, a seemingly distant proposition. Brexit disrupted conformity by threatening a hard border and peace itself while exposing a primary division on Europe which largely, but not fully, reflected the underlying dominant identities. Even moderate Nationalists content with the status quo saw Brexit as a disaster and a threat. The small but growing minority of people who self-identified as neither Nationalist or Unionist, largely shared Nationalist views on Brexit and the EU, and were resistant to being pulled back into a pan-Unionist movement built around a hard Brexit (Connolly and Doyle 2019).

It is in this context that this dissertation will explore the extent of disruption or continuity in the links between identity and opinions on political change, in the aftermath of Brexit. Are material and political interests at such a level that maintenance of the status quo is broadly preferred, or are those interests now moving beyond traditional identity parameters to consider constitutional change as not only valid but desirable? Is the case for constitutional change now strengthened? Opinion polls and election results can give some insight to these potential changes, but in a post-conflict society they may be only partially visible through such techniques. Analysis of political elites may also privilege their efforts to protect their political bases. Within an evolving public discourse between civil and political society identity narratives can shift in 'a dynamic and interactive process' (Todd 2007:570) and the extent to which they may have begun to do so, may be identified at an earlier stage by engaging people in a discussion around those master narratives, which have dominated 'ways of thinking'. It is on this basis that the core research questions of this dissertation will be examined by exploring the identity narratives of those from a Nationalist and Unionist civil society perspective (and others), to discuss the extent, if any, to which they have begun to alter in a post Brexit context, and if there is a sense of change what are the elements of that change? The next chapter will discuss the methodological challenges of doing this.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

To develop an understanding of how members of civil society are approaching the renewed public discussion regarding a united Ireland, this research sought to enquire into sensitive and complex political questions without triggering an overly defensive reaction. This study does not claim to be representative of the entirety of Nationalist or Unionist opinion on the subject of identity narratives amidst constitutional change but rather submits specific insights from within those communities that may illuminate broader debate. Unsurprisingly, the majority of the Nationalist and Unionist participants did not deviate far from their expected positions but what did emerge was some of the more nuanced contingencies within those viewpoints. A process of identity narrative analysis allows a researcher to reach beyond the perhaps expected responses that reflect the primary ideological and community divide.

Researching and analysing identity narratives articulated by civil society actors is a research objective requiring sensitivity. Going beyond immediate answers that might be captured by a survey or short interview, this research seeks to gather the more nuanced measure of feeling and reasoning. This is particularly challenging in a post-conflict setting where deeply entrenched and contested narratives can retain acrimony. For example, during their *Survey Focus Groups* study Todd et al (2023) found that while some expressed the desire to move beyond traditional community binaries others acknowledged that 'we're still quite Orange and Green aren't we' or that 'these groups haven't gone away on both sides' (Todd et al 2023:136). Moreover, 'unnegotiable' identities are something attributable 'to others… rather than to themselves' (Todd et al 2023:137). Todd et al also found that 'participants did not reify identity but rather took a decidedly flexible, negotiable stance towards it – theirs was 'identity as perspective', not 'identity politics'' (Todd et al 2023:137). As such 'identity is more complex and negotiable' than perceived reified positons imply.

3.1 Utilising the master narrative framework

As an area of empirical examination McLean and Syed offer a model for the study of identity using a *master narrative framework*. By advancing this model they deduce that 1) culture and the individual can be aligned 'on the same metric of narrative', 2) it allows for the investigation of the 'processes of negotiating personal and cultural narratives' intrinsic in societal structures, and 3) the 'internalization of those structures in personal identities' to be investigated (McLean and Syed 2015:318). While their framework focuses on identity of the individual, it contains applicability beyond the singular that can encompass the collective. Situated in a subjective 'endless web' of 'societal, historical, and temporal factors, all of which interact with one

another' narrative research provides an 'organizational metaphor' of *contextualism* in which such phenomena take form (McLean and Syed 2015:322), particularly within communities with a strong sense of collective identity.

The pervasive master narrative in NI/NoI has been that of the pro-British, pro-partition perspective, indivisible from the structures of the state, absorbing political parties and entire communities. Counterpoised by an Irish Nationalist narrative aspiring for reunification, both are historically contextualised within a colonial/imperial paradigm of privilege and oppression, domination and marginalisation, propagating conflicting narratives. McLean and Syed's 'integrative framework for conceptualizing the nature of the relation' and how individuals and communities 'negotiate' with society as 'they construct their identities' is encompassed within their narrative approach (McLean and Syed 2015:335). Clear utility exists for elements of this framework to be adopted in relation to this study, forming a sound basis of the methodological approach to fieldwork. Concepts used to structure the framework offer a means to explore beyond public rhetoric the underlying dynamics extant in northern society and how they may impact a process of constitutional change.

Because of the definite weight given to 'the subjective interpretation of experiences as the ultimate data point' McLean and Syed recommend 'two readings' of communal accounts. The first, that establishes the 'construction' of the narrative from the perspective of the teller, and secondly, in conjunction with the account of the teller viz-á-viz 'the structural factors and objective facts' (McLean and Syed 2015:35). A 'two readings' approach will therefore be adopted to interpret interview data. While this study is qualitative in nature, the subjectivity of interpretations does not diminish their validity in that they are real for the lived experience of those in question. By contrasting subjective interpretations with objective facts one is able to identify themes, rather than to corroborate or disprove claims of one type or another, that reveal the substance of the narrative which is not only 'a product', but 'also a process of reconstruction and interpretation' reflective of 'the specific cultural and historical space' (McLean and Syed 2015:36).

McLean and Syed offer several means of identifying the presence of a master narrative which can include firstly, recognising 'particular life theme(s), style(s), or event(s)'. Secondly, analysing the narratives of those resisting the master narrative from without and within, and finally 'analysing the narratives of those who hold the power in the relevant context' who invest 'the most in sustaining the master narrative'. In sum, a 'bottom-up approach' should be conducted in conjunction with a 'historical-cultural analysis' to discern the 'origin and function' of the master narrative (McLean and Syed 2015:39). There is a wealth of sources from which to conduct such a historical analysis in support of the interview material.

Master narratives by their nature are dominant and persistent. They can become observable by resisting societal and structural change through enduring attitudinal inflexibility. As such, it could be legitimately argued that the presence of a master narrative can inhibit such change and the emergence of viable alternatives. McLean and Syed identify five specific areas that reveal the presence of a master narrative. The first of which is power. If those in positions of power adhere to a master narrative then it will remain stubbornly impervious to change as they 'control much of the space for narrative production (e.g., media), as well as the structures' that maintain those same realities (McLean and Syed, 2015:41). Second, is history. The longevity of a narrative creates a more normative perception of it, becoming structurally 'rooted' and 'stable'. While Catholics and Protestants, Unionists and Nationalists can trace a historical lineage going back several hundred years, depending on the preferred designation one employs, can one hundred years since partition be considered temporally long in historical terms? Moreover, while the Unionist populous may have considered the northern polity stable, it certainly ceased to be so post-1969 for the entire population, an instability that remains politically evident today. Third, the difficulty of challenging the master narrative, in this instance in an intra-community setting. Notable figures from within the Protestant/Unionist community and their willingness to discuss and debate Irish reunification at the very least, and the subsequent reaction from within the Loyalist/Unionist community, provides contemporary examples of this. Fourth is 'the reality of facts' that can have either an augmenting or detracting impact on the master narrative. Finally, when the master narrative fits more than one narrative type as identified by McLean and Syed, that is biographical, structural and episodic, they become 'more meaningful to the larger culture' and potentially more intractable (McLean and Syed 2015:43).

The integrative framework proposed by McLean and Syed, therefore, provides a route map for contextualising identity through a functionalist lens within a deeper historical, political system. By identifying dominant and alternative narrative themes from within specific community settings and placing them within a wider societal structure allows this inquiry to approach a well-trodden area of academic inquiry from an unaccustomed perspective using the narrative framework. Identity, as a fundamental component to communal politics in NI/NoI recognised within the GFA, will be a crucial factor in navigating any constitutional future.

3.1.1 Civil society

In defining civil society Haddenius and Uggla (1996) contend that it is '(a) a certain area of society which is (b) dominated by interaction of a certain kind', inhabiting the 'public space between the state and the individual citizen (or household)' (Haddenius and Uggla 1996:1621). This is an accurate description of most of the participants in this study, yet there

are a few that are, or have been employed by the state, although engaging with this research in an individual capacity. Through their experience they have worked closely with civil society networks as both pubic representatives and as conduits for those same networks through membership on various fora. Civil society, for the purposes of this research is therefore broader than the Haddenius and Uggla definition. Indeed, as they argue, 'when we speak of civil society, it is to groups arranged in social networks of a reasonably fixed and routinized character that we refer.' Community forums and partnerships represent such networks with a fixity characterised by routine through the frequency of engagement in which public bodies can be represented. With their strong emphasis that civil society exists 'outside the realm of the state, and on a free and independent basis' they equally acknowledge that 'is a multifaceted phenomenon' that includes 'social networks associated therewith - of a highly varied sort' (Haddenius and Uggla 1996:1621). As such, it is the 'multifaceted' nature of this phenomenon situated locally which this investigation seeks to enter into. Separate from the body politic and government, 'an active civil society is a necessary condition for the development of a democratic system of governance.' In the context of constitutional change, these 'networks of cooperation' are particularly important, providing a bridge between the public and political actors. As Haddenius and Uggla argue:

> only the free practice of democracy found in the civil sphere can promote the development of the democratic popular culture that makes "rule by the people" a feasible option (Haddenius and Uggla 1996:1628).

Civil society provides 'knowledge of local needs' through partnership working, particularly in the community and voluntary sector (CVS) which benefits in 'working with civil servants… local government… business and trades union sectors' (Williams et al 2000:58). Moreover, meeting community need extends beyond the socio-economic, as civil society in NI/NoI has been oftentimes 'outsourced' with 'a multiplicity' of 'community empowerment, peacebuilding and reconciliation' roles (Rice et al 2021:1157). Indeed, civil society was extremely 'engaged and participated' in a 'highly politically representative negotiation process' leading to GFA and emerging in the subsequent 'referendum as a crucial campaigner for the "yes" vote', fundamentally transforming 'the decades-long conflict between the Nationalist and Unionist communities' (Amaral 2021:370). The Women's Coalition, for example, 'a political party created from civil society groups' played a 'vital role in popularizing the "yes" vote' (Amaral 2021:73) leading to the signing of GFA and the establishment of the representative assembly at Stormont, into which they were elected. Continuing to address the 'democratic deficit' (Birrell & Williamson 2001:217) by filling ''gaps left by government', civil society actors have developed networks 'across ethnic and religious divides, local government and statutory arenas' (O'Regan, 2001:235) in a post-conflict society that remains polarised. As Williams et

al (2001) argue, this role has been 'germane to the task' of 'establishing a basis for trust between neighbours who have been deeply divided by history and by ethnicity' (Williams et al 2000:62).

Trust for Rice et al (2021) is 'foundational to civil society in its role as a lubricant for interpersonal cooperation and social order' which may be 'demonstrated through attitudes, beliefs and behaviours' (Rice et al 2021:1154). It is the building of trust by 'Civil Society Organization (CSO) peacebuilders' with a range of stakeholders that is 'often a fundamental part of their mission' (Rice et al 2021:1154). More specifically, civil society's role in referendums through mobilisation and campaigning, such as the GFA 'yes' campaign, highlights the importance of civil society inclusion 'in the political processes preceding a referendum' by aiding perceptions of balance and legitimacy (Amaral 2021:71). Durham (2009) found that civil society played a crucial role during 'referendums on international treaties' through information sharing and the facilitation of local debate (Durham 2009: 177–97). Proximity to the public allows civil society actors to play a bi-directional bridging role 'between negotiations and communities', communicating views from bottom-up and top-down. As Joana Amaral explains:

> Including civil society can guarantee that the interests of the wider society, not just the elite, are considered in the process, and this generates greater elite accountability and grassroots ownership of the agreement (Amaral 2021:71).

Any future constitutional change will require the inclusion of informed civil society networks. As 'referendums… have increased civil society's political relevance, granting it an opportunity to have a greater impact on political decision-making' (Amaral 2021:72), how well civil society mobilises at opposite ends of this debate will be a significant factor in determining outcome. As such, civil society retains a crucial role in the democratic and constitutional process as a viaduct for information dissemination, discourse and debate.

3.2 Data collection

Two main research methods were employed to collect data. Firstly, the theoretical approach proposed by McLean and Syed selected for this investigation provides scope to examine issues such as identity, power, history and politics consolidated within a singular framework. Narrative, being intricately connected with identity, accommodates exploration beyond rhetoric, imparting aspects of the identities under study that may be axiomatic, yet unsayable, or undisclosed and revelatory, for example.

Secondly, the data, upon which this research is based, was collected through the use of a semi-structured in-depth interview approach. While a fixed set of questions was compiled and

distributed to the participants in advance of the interviews the script was not rigidly adhered to. Adopting an idiographic interview-based approach was chosen to facilitate 'rich descriptions of a few instances of a certain phenomenon'(della Porta and Keating 2008:198) from within the 'sample universe'. Defining the parameters as broadly, but not exclusively, Nationalist-Unionist permitted a 'measure of sample homogeneity'. Additionally, given that the subject under discussion could be considered 'sensitive' (Renzetti and Lee 1993) there existed a possibility of evoking particular feelings or responses, requiring a cognisant approach to this on the part of the interviewer. Each interview, therefore, had its individual dynamic that facilitated the addressing of key questions while also allowing interviewees space to offer valuable data they themselves viewed worthy to share.

Civil society, community organisations, and individuals were selected to deliberately circumvent party political structures, whose public positions viz-a-viz constitutional change are well documented, in order to "generate data which give an authentic insight into ['ordinary'] people's experiences" (Silverman 1993:91). It is also worth noting that the context in which the interviews took place was politically fluid, providing an ever-evolving backdrop against which to interpret data.

Aiming to achieve circa forty interviews, split evenly along Nationalist-Unionist lines, was to enable a sample large enough that it could produce possible trends as well as revealing significant inter and intra group distinctions, while being small enough to be manageable within the given time restrictions. While this study went beyond the upper range for an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) strategy for a single study as espoused by Robinson (2014), the author viewed the selected sample size to be sufficient, according to Robinson paraphrasing Robinson and Smith (2010), for interviewees to retain their 'defined identity, rather than being subsumed into an anonymous part of a larger whole' (Robinson 2014:29). Moreover, the epistemological approach using the selected sample size here may provide a 'sweet spot' between Small-N and Large-N samples with enough depth and range to disclose hermeneutic or theoretical observations while also enabling 'theory-testing or construct-problematising' (Robinson 2014:29). Interviewees will elucidate 'experience-structure links' in that they are '"cases", or instances of states, rather than (just) individuals who are bearers of certain designated properties (or "variables")' (Crouch and McKenzie 2006:493). The deliberate medium-sample size selection offers opportunity for 'careful history-taking, cross-case comparisons, intuitive judgments and reference to extant theoretical knowledge', that would be challenging with Large-N samples (Crouch and McKenzie 2006:493).

Indeed, Crouch and McKenzie contend that 'research objectives which need to be mindful of sample size are exploratory, concept-generating studies for which it is not only reasonable to

have a relatively small number of respondents, but may even be positively advantageous' (Crouch and McKenzie 2006:491). While circa forty participants cannot be considered small, it enables sufficient exploration and scope for comparative analysis. As a tool, identity narratives can expose underlying political and class variations that can 'facilitate and enhance the dialectic inherent in the search for depth of meaning – and for appropriate ways of formulating it' (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006:494). A slight trade-off in depth exists in this instance as per Crouch and McKenzie's approach directed towards 'relatively small number of respondents'. However, it is not sufficiently impacted to inhibit depth of inquiry or too broad to render data general.

From a methodological perspective interview-based research can have questionable validity on account of its 'snapshot character', absence of longitudinal data (Jensen and Rodgers 2001:237–239) or if the investigation seeks to illuminate 'issues for which change and development over a (longer) period of time are crucial aspects' (Diefenbach 2008:883). The latter issue being an important consideration in this case. Admittedly, this study relies on data gleaned within a specific timeframe, and therefore does not claim to have any longitudinal aspirations, although the subject of constitutional change will have significant temporal length. Constraints render any longitudinal study beyond the scope of this investigation.

The social reality of the participants and the social world in which these views were shared, while exhibiting 'snapshot' characteristics retain validity in that they are made 'by and made of people who see, perceive, and interpret things' (Diefenbach 2008:883). Susceptibility to internal and external influences are a shared 'epistemological position' of both interviewer and interviewee in that "consciousness is neither passive nor purely or irresponsibly active; rather, it is reactive in the sense that it reacts creatively to the possibilities of the context" (Levy 1981:19). Cognisance of objectivity and impartiality was critical to ensuring the authenticity of the study. Divergence from these principles risked eliciting concern on the part of the interviewee and possibly causing responses to be skewed accordingly. Perceived subjective bias or having 'skin in the game' on the part of the researcher was a conceivable impediment to the overall validity and reliability of the data. Indeed, given the nature of the research it is probable that such assumptions were made prior to interview, an issue that is insurmountable to the interviewer investigating such a subject. Dealing with the subject in as an objective and impartial manner possible was the only remedy available to the researcher seeking the subjective and partial views of the interviewee.

Within this sphere arises the issue of truthfulness and reliability of information shared by the participant. As Diefenbach contends, 'the internal validity of interview data can be assessed concerning how well the statements made by interviewees about their perceptions and

opinions (second reality) are mirrored in the presentation of the findings. In contrast, there is no possibility to assess the internal validity of interview data concerning the real world (first reality)' (Diefenbach 2008:884). Whether data is truthful or accurate is for the researcher to establish using the 'two readings method'. Although this study is designed neither to prove or disprove participant assertions, or persuade or dissuade, whether information is deemed to be untruthful or inaccurate is itself valid data in respect to identity narrative. In some instance it must be expected that adherence to accepted group narrative will occur. As such, the process can be realised as 'a social interaction rather than a simple tool for collection of "data"' (Alvesson 2003:169). As Alvesson points out, 'socially accepted' replies may be given by interviewees based on their perception of what the interviewer 'wants to hear' or expects. By concealing authentic thoughts and feelings on a given issue participants become 'politically conscious actors' (Alvesson 2003:170). While 'trustworthiness' is a fundamental aspect of the investigation in order to attain 'credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability'(Cho and Trent 2006:321), it could be argued that in a politically charged context all participants are 'politically conscious actors' of one type or another.

According to Deifenbach if 'tactical answering' emerges it should not be readily dismissed as it is in itself 'an important data' and 'evidence of the dominant ideology/mainstream thinking', an integral indicator of the socio-political dynamics of the research topic (Deifenbach 2008:882). Against the impossibility of knowing the internal motivations of an interviewee, critically assessing data becomes a vital aspect of the study. Adopting a process of triangulation (Meijer et al. 2002:146), that is, cross-referencing interviewee assertions with supplementary sources, such as relevant literature, official statistics etc., enables the achievement of maximum validity and reliability of the research while producing a more rigorous representation of reality (Mathison 1989). Triangulation, by extension, 'can enhance the credibility of a research account by providing an additional way of generating evidence in support of key claims' (Seale 1999:61).

Richardson (1997) outlines a notion of validity that 'combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multi-dimensionalities, and angles of approach' (Richardson, 1997:92) which rejects any one-size-fits-all epistemology that anticipates all known and unknown variables. Scheurich (1996), advances a 'catalytic validity' representing 'the degree to which the research empowers and emancipates the research subjects' (Scheurich 1996:4), which ultimately this inquiry has sought to do. Devoid of any all-encompassing method to appraise validity in all scenarios an interpretive approach is requisite on the part of the researcher, what Maxwell (1992) termed 'interpretive validity', the enucleation of 'the unique, idiosyncratic meanings and perspectives constructed by individuals, groups, or both who live/act in a particular context' (Cho and Trent, 2006: 328).

As such, an amalgamative transactional approach alongside an interpretive method was utilised. While the sample size cannot claim, nor does it attempt, to represent the views of one community or other in its entirety, it can present 'structured data that can be crossed referenced both within and across groups' (Crouch and McKenzie 2006:488) thereby linking the 'individual to the structural level'(Crouch and McKenzie 2006:490).

3.3 In-depth interviews

The aim of the study was focused 'on understanding interviewee experiences' (Berner-Rodoreda et al 2018:291) to unearth the doxastic positions of the participants, and how in, some cases, they were arrived at. As an exercise in qualitative research the process sought 'to capture attitudes and lived experiences of interviewees while unearthing or generating knowledge' (Berner-Rodoreda et al 2018:291). A 'detached objectivity' so as not to 'contaminate' or 'distort' data through subjective interventions on the part of the interviewer before or during the interview (Seidman, 1998:69-81) augmented the adopted approach. Yet the process was asymmetrical in that the interviewer leads and guides the process as a necessity in contrast to a symmetrical dynamic that could stimulate discussion or debate inconsistent with project aims.

Primarily, the purpose of the interview was to expedite usable information from the participant consistent with the subject being researched. Drawing 'out from interviewees what they would be reluctant to tell most people' (Berner-Rodoreda et al 2018:297) is an indication of good interviewing skills. 'Phenomenological reduction' or 'bracketing' present in phenomenological interviews seek to annul the personal subjectivity of the interviewer 'in order not to impose this understanding on the data' (Chan, Fung and Chien 2013:1), while the feminist method permits the interviewee to 'express themselves and their feelings freely' with active participation of the interviewer in the process (Berner-Rodoreda et al 2018:294). Attentive listening enables the capture of 'depth, nuance, and clarity regarding the interviewee's experience by expressing interest, feigning ignorance, and asking similar questions repeatedly' (Spradley, 1979:67-69). Based on the 'respondent's distinct social location offers [the interviewer] unique insight into a particular social phenomenon' (Curato 2012:572) that would be otherwise inaccessible.

Selecting a semi-structured approach aided comfortability with the interviewer-interviewee dynamic and the process generally. Information disclosure was at the discretion of the interviewee providing a degree of 'control over the interaction' (Corbin & Morse, 2003:340) to the participant. That said, it was for the researcher to shape data analysis and presentation of findings (Stacey 1988:23).

3.4 Research Methodology

The theoretical structure outlined above has provided the methodology that will be prevalent throughout the study. This section will examine how the data was collected.

Fieldwork commenced after receiving ethical approval from the DCU Research Ethics Committee who had considered my research application via a formal process. Once approval was formally granted the process of participant recruitment commenced.

Consent was initially gained through contact with the prospective interviewee, either by phone or email, whereby an arrangement was reached that the researcher would forward the interview questions in advance for consideration. It was at this point that the prospective interviewee would agree to participate or not. On agreeing to participate on a voluntary basis, the researcher then forwarded to the participant a *Plain Language Statement* and an *Informed Consent Form* in line with university ethics policies.

A number of the interviewees requested anonymity which was of course respected, where names were deliberately omitted from the final document. All physical storage devices and hardcopy notes were stored securely with references omitting full names where appropriate. All interview recordings and transcripts were stored on the DCU Google Drive in compliance with DCU GDPR policies.

From the outset it is worth pointing out that greater Belfast was the geographic area chosen for this study for several reason. Firstly, Belfast in terms of demographics, as per the 2021 census is something of a microcosm of NI/NoI generally with a slight increase of the Catholic population and decline in the Protestant population. Secondly, the national identity of the citizens is reflective of the fluidity of such designations that do not sit neatly on top of religious categorisations. Finally, given the history of Belfast and being more often than not at the epicentre of political events, it provides fertile ground for the capturing of identity narratives. Broadly reflective of the wider demographic trends of NI/NoI in relation to a Nationalist/Unionist breakdown, the experience of the city during periods of constitutional change, for example, Partition and Direct Rule, enables the researcher to study how major constitutional shifts have, and continue to, impact on identity within a more focused geographic area. A target sample size of 40 offered enough depth and scope for a diversity of political actors within the broad Nationalist/Unionist designations including differing age profiles, gender and class, while offering a reflective snapshot of what could be considered consistent viewpoints applicable across NI/NoI.

1. Participant recruitment: There were several aspects to this phase.

i)   Defining the sample universe: The sample universe was people involved at a significant level in civil society, excluding elected representatives or political party officials. This made available to the research a group who were active in the middle-layer of society and sufficiently engaged to be able to reflect and articulate viewpoints at the heart of the thesis. As such, they are well informed in their respective fields although this thesis does not seek to generalise their views to the whole of society. They are a group of research-interest in their own right.

ii)   Sample size: A Medium-*N* sample size was selected to provide enough depth and range for comparative purposes. The target for participant recruitment was circa 40, to be split evenly between community designations. This was the largest manageable sample given time and resource constraints. Within this group, the primary criteria for setting a broadly representative participant group (Robinson 2014:26) was the broad community background of Nationalist or Unionist. Recruitment also sought to provide gender and age variations in order to expand insights.

iii)   Identifying participants: This process was commenced adopting a 'snowball sampling' method of recruitment (Robinson 2014:37), that it is through recommendations from the previous interviewee. The initial participants were identified by the interviewer through personal contacts. Indeed, given the sensitivities around the subject, recommendations were essential, particularly when contrasted with what amounted to 'cold-calling' by the interviewer to specific organisations that produced zero responses.

iv)   Geographical spread: With a strong community infrastructure it was decided that the geographic 'sample universe' would be clustered in and around, but not restricted to, the greater Belfast area. It was not essential for respondents to be Belfast natives but simply to reside and/or work there to ameliorate the research   process   (Robinson   2014:32).

2. Secondary data: Adopting a 'two-readings' approach required the use of supplementary data sources including relevant literature and journal articles along with relevant newspaper articles and opinion pieces. Where necessary, these data will be reinforced by official statistical, demographic and psephological data.

3. Timeline for data collection: The bulk of the interviews took place within the period of Autumn 2022 to early Summer 2023. Particularly relevant during this period were issues such as the Northern Ireland Protocol (NIP), the Stormont assembly collapse, the cost of living crisis and the 2021 census.

4. Outcomes: Initially it was decided that an even 50/50 split would be the logical structure for the sample. The target number was 40 participants. The actual number was 35. The was split between 15 Nationalists, 14 Unionists and a small cohort of 6, referred to here as 'others' who did not neatly fall into the Nationalist-Unionist camps. This latter group emerged as an unintended consequence of seeking interviewees through the snowball effect. Surprisingly the percentage breakdown of each of these groupings is broadly consistent with northern society's breakdown along similar lines. Not all interviewees were represented in the final draft.

There was a deliberate attempt on the part of the researcher to recruit both male and female participants with varying ages and class backgrounds. This is reflected in the findings, particularly issues of class which come through strongly. Age of the participants was not asked but there are several examples that demonstrate a broad age range, and therefore provide a deeper temporal space to explore. There were also a small number of young people interviewed to provide post-peace process perspectives. It is safe to say that the bulk of the participants were middle aged. The vast majority of the interviewees were face-to-face, four were by Zoom and one was a written response to the forwarded questions.

On the whole the interviewees were very forthcoming in their interactions and while addressing the same issues had a multitude of responses. Inevitably, there were cross-overs but they remained distinctly unique in how they were framed. There were a very small number that gave the impression of 'towing the party line' to several of the questions. However, that did not in any way diminish their overall contributions. For the participants that were met by the researcher for the first time there was a sense of guardedness from the interviewees. This was to be expected in discussing what could be emotive issues with a complete stranger. It was the role of the researcher therefore to create a relaxed interaction. In general, this was achieved, but there were a few instances which could be deemed to not have reached this objective. This was not related to perceived differences in community background but probably more to do with a sense of nervousness on the part of the researcher. Of course, there were a number of the interviewees known to the researcher and that enhanced the process.

Due to the limitations on the part of the researcher in terms of available contacts the sample was not evenly divided along community designations, gender or age. Relevant Unionist

participants were difficult to recruit, particularly any who supported Brexit as attempts to achieve this were unsuccessful. While reasons cannot be known it may be reflective of an issue that emerged in the research, that of Loyalist withdrawal from cross-community work post-Brexit and Unionist lack of engagement in the constitutional debate. Given the spelling of my name and the nature of the research, judgement calls could have been speedily made in this regard. Indeed, this as of itself could be considered data. Participants of an overtly Loyalist disposition where open and genuine in their responses and extremely generous with their time, demonstrating that unionism or nationalism cannot be regarded as monolithic designations, and much more complex and nuanced. There was also a small cohort from within the Nationalist grouping who were recipients of honours from the queen. This was again done deliberately as on the face of it, having received such an award could be an indication of their desire to maintain the constitutional status quo. These awards are not attributed to anyone in writing save to say that they did exist within the Nationalist grouping for the reader's information.

There was also the issue of maintaining confidentiality. A number of the contributors requested this which therefore had to be respected. As such, when writing a number of interviewees will remain nameless. This will be reflected when quoting from interviews through the use of terms such as 'interviewee', 'contributor', 'participant', and so on.

Attempts at 'cold-calling' a number of organisations were made which resulted in zero replies which highlighted the importance of the snow-balling method when dealing with such a sensitive topic, particularly in a post-conflict society.

The researcher also sought to get views from each part of Belfast to provide a holistic narrative view both from a communal and class perspective. This was largely successful in that all four main parts of Belfast are represented, that is north, south, east and west Belfast, but the class element was not as evenly spread. The majority of participants were from a working-class background but there was also evidence of upward social mobility although those that moved from a working-class to middle-class designation retained a working-class perspective in their outlook by-and-large. There were a number of middle-class participants also. Again, this is reflected in the investigation.

In terms of analysing the data the interview recordings were transcribed to ease the process. This was a labour-intensive part of the project and took a significant amount of time to transcribe 35 interviews which averaged at 60 minutes some of which were longer and a few slightly shorter. Having the interviews in Word format made corrections easier. A hard copy of the interview also made it easier to take physical notes, which for this researcher, was of immense benefit.

While the interviews were semi-structured each contained consistent topics. Firstly, each participant was asked to give some background on themselves, their current work, interests and so on. This was not only to ease the discussion but also to invite some aspects of communal narrative yet to be revealed. Each interviewee was also asked their views on the Good Friday Agreement and Brexit. Following from that they were asked their views on constitutional change and finally what their ideal constitutional future might look like. These questions were central to ascertaining their perceived communal narrative and contextualising it within the debate on potential constitutional change. Additionally, it would highlight where convergences may exist, as well as differences.

This approach was used in the thesis to allow the research to tease out some key interpretations:

1. How does a dominant national identity interact with, determine or draw from constitutional preference?
2. How does the research subjects' expression of their constitutional inclinations, community background draw on other forms of reasoning and discourse?
3. Is the flexibility/rigidity of discussion on constitutional choice influenced by class background?

Aiming to establish whether grounds exist beyond binary identity-related restrictions of Nationalist/Unionist when discussing constitutional change, this investigation seeks to ascertain legitimate concerns and aspirations while simultaneously 'taking the heat' out of such discussions. While the thrust of the research is centred primarily on the self-defined political identities of the two main communities in the north, a secondary consideration of class was introduced to draw out inter-relationships between social conditions, constitutional preference and perceived rigidity/flexibility. Adding a class dimension through bottom-up perspectives permits the 'national question' to be 'parked' momentarily allowing for increased depth to illuminate hopes and impressions surrounding a future unity referendum. The hypothesis submitted here is that constitutional preference is not as rigid as commonly accepted but may be subject to re-evaluation dependent on wider conditions and circumstances.

Conclusion

McLean and Syed's narrative framework provides both a theoretical framework and an investigative methodology with which to interrogate the raw data of interviews while enabling it to be contextualised within a broader, and deeper, socio-political history. Trading quantitative

generalities for qualitative depth enabled the process to capture subjective nuances behind the public politic of established national identities and associated narratives. The sample chosen was reflective of this. Indeed, according to Yardley, rigour 'depends partly on the adequacy of the sample—not in terms of size but in terms of its ability to supply all the information needed for comprehensive analysis' (2000:221).

While adequate information was provided to enable a comprehensive analysis of data, the process of interpretation was at the discretion of the researcher, who's responsibility it was to ensure rigour. Within this area arises the issue or replicability. Although the same interview script and interview process is repeatable, the interviews took place within an un-replicable temporal space with specific political dynamics. It is therefore, difficult to conclude how this specific process could yield the same results at an unspecified future point within an entirely different context. Indeed, a change such as a different researcher, for example, could elicit divergent responses based on the effect of interviewer-interviewee exchanges from the original study. As Eden and Huxham (1996:80) articulate, "[b]y its very nature, action research does not lend itself to repeatable experimentation; each intervention will be different from the past."

The exploratory character of this investigation sets out to circumvent party political positions in an attempt to provide a more authentic picture of 'reality' and its 'reconstruction', specifically in the context of increasing public discourse on constitutional change. That is not to say that party political positions, or influence, could be banished entirely. Yet, engagement in this process was in itself instructive of a willingness to discuss issues that, for some, may have been regarded previously as 'out of bounds'. For Diefenbach this allows 'discussion about values, interests, and objectives that shape current social practice and possible future developments' (Diefenbach 2008:890). In this respect the process was affirmative.

Chapter 4. Nationalist perspectives

Introduction

Irish nationalism in its broadest sense could be described as an aspiration towards self-determination and the re-constitution of the national territory of the island of Ireland. Contemporarily, divergence emerges in consideration of the means, pace and timing of such reorientation. Nonetheless, it remains the primary 'political principle, that the political and the national unit should be congruent'. Incongruence, therefore, is perceived as a 'violation' of this 'principle' (Gellner 1983:1), and a foundational component of the Nationalist master narrative. Tracing a political lineage from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Irish nationalism developed within a context of imperial domination and oppression, building on a much deeper history of colonialism and conquest. Strategy and tactics differed at various moments particularly in relation to the use of violence but also on whether complete severance from Britain or remaining under the imperial umbrella was more favourable. A Nationalist spectrum evolved that placed physical force Republicanism at one end and what was termed 'constitutional' nationalism, a byword for non-violence, at the other. With an underlay of radical and conservative politics, as well as differing class interests, Irish nationalism, like most political movements, was broad and fractious. United in the mission to bring congruency to the 'political and the national unit', religion also played a comprehensive role in the Nationalist narrative historically, as Catholicism and nationalism became synonymous with each other. Although not entirely accurate, particularly with those from a more radical Republican position, Catholicism nonetheless brought a degree of cohesion to the Nationalist community, particularly in the north.

This chapter concentrates on the Nationalist perspective utilising a 'bottom-up' approach to enhance the 'historical-cultural analysis.' How individuals and communities negotiated with society in the construction of their identity, will be established. By achieving an understanding of interviewee lived experiences the 'origin and function' of the Nationalist narrative will be illuminated. The first section, is context setting, under the heading, *Interpretations and the lived experience: From partition to conflict*, that introduces most of the contributors, and where main narrative themes emerge. This part has the sub-sections, *Labels and divisions,* then *Defensive planning,* followed by, *Standing together*. The next section is, *Changing narratives? GFA and Brexit*, with the sub-section entitled, *Brexit.* This chapter will end with a brief conclusion.

4.1 Interpretations and the lived experience: From partition to conflict

Growing up in working-class 'West Belfast' and leaving 'school in 1969' to train 'as an aircraft fitter… [at] RAF Aldergrove', one contributor frames partition as a critical reference point in

understanding the contemporary. What took place in Ireland 'was determined by party politics in England. It had nothing to do actually with what was going on in Ireland.' What resulted was a polity specifically designed to ensure a Unionist majority in perpetuity copper-fastened by advantage and domination. He states:

> Protestants sometimes talk about maintaining their way of life… a privileged position for the Protestant religion… the only history of this state, which was set up as a Protestant state for a Protestant people supported that belief.

He cites 'the Special Powers Act' the RUC 'and the Special Constabulary' to reinforce his argument, what O'Leary describes as 'the ramparts' of the Unionist polity. Constitutional preference and national affiliation entwined with religion became lines of demarcation creating a dyad of the dominant and dominated. Crucially, he emphasises the exclusivity of the Protestant/Unionist 'state' as being one that wilfully supressed public representations of Irish nationalism. He self-identifies as 'Irish Catholic' when completing the census, viewing 'the term Roman Catholic as… demeaning':

> Roman Catholics, papists… they [the Protestant community] fear Roman Catholicism because… [they] are loyal to the Pope and consequently can't be loyal to the state.

Forms of domination, such as, religion, race and gender, are according to Ciaran Cronin, 'insidious' as they become internalised as 'repressive schemes of interpretation of self and world, often in an unconscious manner and by dominant and dominated agents alike (Cronin 1996:61). Acquiescing to 'repressive schemes' bolsters their continuance as they are unconsciously accepted as a *fait accompli* by all concerned. It is in the initial questioning of such dominance that an alternative narrative is constructed, aiding understanding of 'identity development in context' (McLean and Syed 2015:320). Once a realisation of circumstance occurs it is difficult to regress to a pre-recognition state. Two communities developed estranged in close proximity encapsulating the repressive schemes of interpretation at opposite ends of the continuum, accepting their relative position within the structure between the period of partition to 1969. Segregation was such that the interviewee admits that 'I only met Protestants when I went into the workplace.'

A topic that remains pertinent to him is the stage of 'the formation of the state', as it was during this period that his 'grandfather was murdered by the Detective Superintendent Nixon squad on Arnon Street on April 1921.' The interviewee goes on to state that 'just like today, there has been a lot of collusion between Loyalist paramilitaries and politicians.' His grandfather, Bernard McKenna, had served in the Royal Navy during WW I and is named in GB Kenna's *Belfast Pogrom* (Kenna 2018:169). With a keen interest in Nixon particularly, for obvious

reasons, the interviewee has carried out his own research at the Public Records Office (PRONI) where Nixon's private diaries are available. He recalls an insert in one of the diaries:

> If you see a Catholic coming at you and your suspicious of them at all, shoot them. Don't ask questions. No Protestant is going to be prosecuted… under my watch.

A narrative of hostility towards the Nationalist community from 'the formation of the state' emerges. Overt animosity was expressed not only in fatal violence but in more 'normalised' interactions. The interviewee recalls an early childhood experience of living in, what he terms a 'police state':

> if you were playing football in the street the cop would take your ball and puncture it… literally, I remember riding the bike on the footpath, and the policeman taking my name, this is a bike with stabilisers, and bringing me up to my mother… it was an oppression… You walked too close to a police man you got smacked in the head. That's the state that you were living in.

Lives were negotiated within the state in both a biographical and structural sense (McLean and Syed 2015:328), in which the internalisation of societal structures meant an absorption of those conditions without an outlet for public expression. In contrast, 'you went down south on holidays you wore a tricolour pin. You think you're great because your wee tricolour pin was still banned in Northern Ireland.' Public representations of the Nationalist position when expressed were met with violence. He recalls the 1964 riots in west Belfast which he believes were 'a crossroads':

> after that… you had the reformation of the UVF… three innocent Catholics killed prior to 1969… that was an attempt to subjugate the Nationalist and Catholic population through fear by once again killing innocent Catholics.

He continues;

> That's the thing… that bothers me... it's always perceived by the protestant community, that the violence was caused by the Catholic community.

The Nationalist narrative points directly to attacks on their community starting as early as 1966. Escalating political tensions coincided with the civil rights campaign through the latter end of the 1960s. Michael McCann challenges the narrative that the conflict began as a consequence of the 1966 Easter Rising commemoration in Belfast, documenting specifically the role played by John Dunlop McKeague, 'a disciple of Paisley' (McCann 2019:20). With close connections with RUC Special Branch and British military intelligence (McCann 2019:272), he had orchestrated events since April 1969. McCann contends that a:

false narrative, constructed to excuse the Stormont regime and characterise the Troubles as a Republican plot, has instead dominated the discourse… This convenient fable ignores the fact that institutionalised sectarianism reigned at every level of government and state in the six counties of Northern Ireland at the time (McCann 2019:272).

An official British government investigation into the events of August 1969 found that out of 28,616 Catholic households in Belfast in 1969, 1,505 were displaced compared to 315 Protestant households out of 88,379 (Scarman 1972:248). Scarman also goes on to say that the report excluded 'very substantial estimates for temporary displacement since these were liable to "Catholic bias" (Scarman 1972:249). A lack of retrospective accountability for these events is indicative of the presence of a dominant narrative that characterises 'the Troubles as a Republican plot' absolving the Unionist state of wrongdoing or culpability. Boal (1978) contends that the beginning of conflict was the biggest forced population shift in Europe since World War II. He estimates that between 1969 and 1976 between 35,000 and 65,000 were 'forced to move within and out of Belfast' (Boal 1978:58-77).

The interviewee refines his analysis by arguing that the violent response of the Unionist government to events in 1964 was 'also a fear reaction' to potential Nationalist/Unionist working class solidarity. Their underlying message was that:

> there's no place for Nationalists, and no place for socialist politics either. And nobody's going to… cement unity between the Catholic working-class and the Protestant working-class because we need to keep it divided… [it] spooked the state.

What Edwards refers to as 'the principle of *divide et impera*' (Edwards 2023:55) is a point echoed by the Short Strand Community Forum (SSCF) who cite sectarianism as a tool 'to divide working-class people…we've more in common as working-class communities… than we have that divide us… the religion aspect, it's used to create that division.'

Frank Brennan, Huggie McComb and Bernie McConnell are from SSCF situated in the heart of Short Strand, a small Nationalist working-class enclave in the overwhelmingly Unionist east Belfast. With a history that goes back to the nineteenth century, a feeling of longevity and pride exists among the residents, interspersed with a narrative of attack and resistance. Huggie explains that these circumstances have a consolidating quality that 'brings people together… we are 3,000 people and there are 60,000 Protestants surrounding us and the only way out of here is over the bridge, so we've always had that siege mentality.' A narrative contextualised by siege and defence created connection out of necessity. A strong sense of community enhanced through the work SSCF is augmented by a cohesion created around the traditional pillars of northern Nationalist identity, party politics and church. With 'only one main

political party which is Sinn Féin, we've only one Catholic Church… the one community organisation – everybody works together.' In contrast he describes 'other areas of east Belfast' being 'so sporadic' with 40 different churches.' Lack of cohesion based on inter-religious fragmentation is a descriptor assigned to the 'other' community.

The area being 'under attack constantly' either by 'state forces' or 'armed militia of Protestants' is a general consensus within the group. Coupled with the legacy of violence on the community is a narrative of discrimination and social deprivation. Huggie points to the issue of unemployment being 'intergenerational'. He admits that although it 'is still the case today… it's not as prevalent as what it was previously.' Contextualised historically, the large employers based in the locality, 'Sirocco, Harland and Wolff, the Shipyard, the Rope Works' simply 'refused to employ' Catholics, which became 'endemic' as a consequence of partition. As 'an absolute catastrophe for both sides of the island' its reverberations continue to the present. Partition was seminal for the construction of contemporary Nationalist and Unionist identity themes and their function within the power structure of the new jurisdiction of NI/NoI. A regime founded on discrimination and sectarianism excluded Nationalists from the apparatus of the state, barring them from participation in policy-making in any meaningful way. Yet, Bernie adds:

> in saying all that, it done us good… people weren't employed so they went into education… there's a better ethos for education here. Even in terms of community development we were always ten years ahead… because there was no other road to go down.

An interviewee originally from the lower Ormeau area, attests to the 'drive for education' contextualised within a social environment of poverty causally linked to discrimination. It 'would have been felt very, very keenly by my parents in the opportunities that were not afforded to them… you listened to that a lot… my father was forced out of his job.' Because of the legacy of 'institutional discrimination' jobs were guaranteed for the Unionist population. She points out that 'if you were in the shipyard then your son went into the shipyard', with the corollary of a lack of focus on educational attainment. 'I think what's really sad is you know that emphasis in education and achievement really wasn't embedded' in the Unionist community 'because they didn't need to.' In essence, the Unionist population, particularly the working-class, became a victim of their own success, relying on the perceived permanency of their economic position. Without such safeguards the Nationalist population were forced to become self-reliant, identifying education as the means to become more so. Citing the importance of having had 'access to free school education', being 'from a Catholic background it was drummed into us that education was the way to go' referencing the Butler Act 1944 as key.

An 'ethos for education' appears to be bearing fruit for Nationalist communities. As Frank explains, 'I've five kids, four girls and a boy and they all went to grammar school... My daughter is a doctor and my friends have sons who are solicitors', proudly proclaiming that many in the area, despite the levels of deprivation, have successfully progressed into third level education and beyond. Subsequently, according to Frank, 'certain Unionist MPs, politicians' have complained that 'Catholics are too well educated and are getting these jobs!'

Baroness Kate Hoey stated that there 'are very justified concerns that many professional vocations have become dominated by those of a Nationalist persuasion' (UVPS 2022:5). Her stance was supported by Edward Cooke who highlighting 'the politicisation of academia to the disadvantage of those from a Unionist background' (Cooke 2022). Education, embraced by the Bationalist community had also come to the attention of Unionists like Nixon, who saw the Jesuits as 'the biggest threat to this state' because '[they] are educating young Catholic men' who are 'finding their way into professions, in the civil service' according to one interviewee. As a connecting thread from partition to the present Nationalists embracing education is framed as a direct threat to the Unionist master narrative. The contributor essentially corroborates Nixon's analysis in this regard by citing the emergence of the civil rights campaign as a direct consequence of legislative changes to education implemented by the British government post-World War II. The 'transfer test allowing Catholics to find their way to university and universal free education… that is where probably the threat to the state really emanates from.' Embracing an 'ethos of education' allowed the Nationalist narrative to be changed from within, substituting the themes of demoralisation and powerlessness to affirmativeness and assertiveness, intersecting at a particular global historical moment with an irreversibility. An inference of a zero-sum conception of progress is apparent as education has provided a means for upward mobility for the Nationalist community and a re-calibration of the once dominant life theme of depravation to accomplishment. Education has been a vital component in the construction of the Nationalist narrative that has provided dignity and meaning to that community. While some Nationalists attempted to alter the system from within, others believed 'the master's tools' would 'never dismantle the master's house' (Lorder 1984), embracing a path of resistance, both peaceful and physical, under a theme of liberation.

Thirty years of conflict was to have an indelible impact on northern society, particularly on vulnerable Nationalist communities like Short Strand that became branded as 'the most dangerous place in Belfast to live in.' As Frank points out, as 'a teenager' he 'didn't know who the Prime Minister of England was. I hadn't a clue. But after 1969 when the barricades started going up, we got politically aware very, very quickly.' Placing radicalisation within the *zeitgeist* of the 1960s that sought fundamental political change in various parts of the world, McComb explains that the televised images of 'Cuba, Guevera and Castro… the student riots in Paris…

put ideas in your head.' According to retired civil servant Pat Murphy, 'prior to that [the civil rights campaign] you would have maybe acquiesced to what was going on.' Admittedly, Pat does not recall feeling discriminated in employment or as being a 'second-class citizen' but goes on to say that 'the civil rights brought to your attention some of the differences here... the resistance of the government to change… that I suppose highlighted… the need for change.'

Pat's comment on not feeling directly discriminated against are an outlier in this sample yet equally accepts that there were 'differences.' Indeed, another interviewee recalls 'watching the band [OO] march' as a child, 'like we knew something was up.' Unable to articulate the incongruity of the situation there is an unspoken acknowledgement that there existed a level of discomfiture that was 'acquiesced' with rather than challenged. An irony of 'constructing an alternative narrative means recognition, and perhaps even validation, of the master narrative' (McLean and Syed 2015: 325) in which many Nationalists accepted their position within the structure.

The advent of television redefined how news was relayed and absorbed, and was a crucial component in the undermining of the Unionist state, as Nationalists became increasingly vociferous in opposition to their depressed conditions. From the SSCF contribution there is a feeling of not only being an observer of global radicalism but an active participant in it. [You] 'were living through this' not realizing 'the amount of politics you were picking up… and that started shaping people's views and their ideology going forward.' The alternative Nationalist narrative challenged Unionist hegemony, clashing on the fundamentals of liberal western democracy, such as 'one man, one vote.' Violent state repression of the campaign for equal treatment led to thirty years of violent civil conflict, and an anxiety-filled lived experience as Frank explains:

> the fear you had inside you. You're walking out of the club, on your own, and there's the Brits… they were harassing you, the peelers were harassing you, the Loyalists were coming in and killing people... We were all under siege and I think it made the community more solid.

1969 as a seminal moment in the awakening of political consciousness is a sentiment echoed by north Belfast interface worker and former Republican prisoner, Rab McCullough:

> Up until then I probably wasn't in any way politically aware… in 69 when we sort of got over the very first riots on the Falls in about 66 67, stirred a bit of interest because it was exciting, and things were going on and it sort of woke something.

1969 is a key episode in the Nationalist biography with a specific sequencing. Unarticulated repressed feelings that are nonetheless present became manifest through civil disobedience akin to the release of a pressure valve of fifty years of demoralisation. For Rab, 1969 'changed things… it was almost like a doomsday scenario, 'a lot of the family all went away. My Da wanted me to go as well and I refused… and we stayed.' Rab was jailed at the age of 17 spending 12 years in prison, being released at the age of 29, and 'much more politicised, much more aware of what was going on.' August 1969 is the 'official' beginning of 'The Troubles' with the 14th of that month being the date the British government under Harold Wilson sent 'British troops… to Ulster… thus beginning what almost no one foresaw would become the longest-lasting military operation in British history' (Andrew 2009:604). Operation Banner beginning in 1969 did not officially end until 2007 (Sander 2012:109).

Claire Hackett, a community worker with Falls Community Council, is from 'rural Tyrone.' She admits to not remembering a time when she 'didn't know about partition', as 'time went on' she learnt 'more and more about what partition meant and how it was done… [and] the effects of it.' Such effects were a culmination of 'historical events' leading to conflict 'and the injustice of that.' Escaping the oppressive pre-conflict ambience of the north meant for many Nationalists journeying southward, an experience Claire also attests to during her family holidays:

> we always went to the south… there was some kind of feeling of… I can't describe it other than some feeling of letting down your guard, relaxing some way or just some feeling that this was a freer space.

'Injustice' permeating from partition at a social, economic and political level motivated Claire to become 'more politically involved' during her time at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) from 1978. With a curiosity for politics and history, she felt she was 'was living politics and history in a particular way' becoming 'involved in the women's movement… in marches for our political status.' Institutionalised animus towards identities outside of accepted orthodoxy, including, for Claire, restrictions on sexual identity, were embedded in the fabric of northern society that permitted no diffusion of this social order. As McLean and Syed submit, 'personal narratives are intertwined with the balance of master narratives and potential alternatives' (McLean and Syed 2015:324) as Claire illustrates the multi-levels of identity that were supressed by the Unionist master narrative dominated by a British, male, Protestant, heterosexual perspective. The 1970s provided the backdrop of civil and political unrest and the impetus for her to get 'politically, with a small 'p', active in her community.'

As Claire was beginning her academic career, Moya Hinds, a community worker from north Belfast was completing hers. North Belfast, she contends is 'different from all the other areas

in Belfast in that it's a patchwork... of Catholic, Protestant.' Overcrowding in Nationalist areas together with poor quality housing required expansion beyond traditional communal areas. With 'Unionist areas… contracting' and 'New Lodge… overflowing', an opportunity presented itself that would have allowed the overspill to move 'across to Duncairn Gardens' (on the periphery of Loyalist Tigers Bay) to utilise vacated houses. Rather than filling the available housing stock to address the overcrowding in the New Lodge 'the State in their wisdom decided that they would build the North City Industrial Estate as a means of creating a divide.'

Moya's introduction to community work involved 'advice' and 'housing work', as well as organising campaigns, particularly against the building of the Westlink 'which divided communities', and other issues. 'We did a lot of community action, we had a lot of involvement from local people. We had a very active centre committee… people volunteered.' Grass-roots community activism created the anomaly of being 'the best of times… the worst of times':

> people were losing their lives… there was real oppression… I remember one 8th of August doing a community festival and people were just up enjoying themselves and of course the Brits arrived and started shooting plastic bullets around… that anger the next day were you would go down and make a complaint... But there was no redress.

As an aside Moya discloses that she was hit by a plastic bullet. Discriminatory practices went beyond the security forces, as Moya recounts her efforts to get the Conway Mill, on the Falls Road, refurbished for community use, which was met by resistance from the state. 'You were constantly having to fight to get what… other groups were [who] considered a safe pair of hands' had got. Particular groups being 'a safe pair of hands' is corroborated by another participant who stated that circa 1978 'the local parish priest… Dean Montague, had been approached by government' stating that 'the Northern Ireland Office worked through the church because they had established community links and… community infrastructures.' In contrast community projects, like Conway Mill were rejected for funding by the state, and in the Conway Mill example, publicly vilified. Parts of the 'social system' on which the conflict was waged by the British government was in the community sector through the allocation of essential investment. As Mike Tomlinson points out:

> In the 1980s, it became increasingly obvious that if community development and training resources had to go into working-class areas, government policy was to channel them through the most conservative elements within those communities, namely through the church and the rapidly growing SDLP-voting Catholic middle-class (Tomlinson 1998:98).

Undeterred Moya, and others, persevered to establish Conway Mill as a thriving community space by 'gradually being able to turn people's minds around.' A high degree of self-reliance and perseverance enabled 'Conway Mill [to be] one of the first projects that were able to obtain multi agency funding', according to Moya, despite the 'political vetting' by the NIO, a project that continues to develop as a vibrant and viable community enterprise.

Dónal McKinney is Director of the Upper Springfield Development Trust. Unsurprisingly the conflict was to be a recurring theme in the narrative of most of the Nationalist interviewees along with 'the untold trauma':

> it's part of our DNA… We were witness to so many things. And it was about the equality struggle, the economic struggle… I saw horrendous things, we were definitely second class citizens.

According to this account the Nationalist conflict narrative contains biographic, structural and episodic characteristics. Fitting more than one master narrative type determines the intractability, importance in 'individual lives' and the depth of meaning for the wider community (McLean and Syed 2015:342).

Through his work Dónal engages with the civil service which he argues is middle-class dominant that utilises a top-down approach in their interactions with working-class communities. He believes this has 'failed to be a part of the narrative now, they forget about class.' Jim Dunbar works for the Education authority (EA) with a tenure in the public service of several decades. He describes political attitudes within public bodies:

> if I think back to my 20s and 30s, on more than one occasion where… people who were that bit older than me would have said 'you lot', and I'm not saying… it was blatantly sectarian, but there was a sense of slightly being put in your place a wee bit and a few people saying you shouldn't be voting for them and by them it was meant Sinn Féin.

For Jim such a working environment induced a form of self-censorship. Expressions of Irishness or discussion on the constitutional question were not an option, 'it would have been too hard, so very often the only option was to stay silent.' He continues, 'you look back and question maybe we should have just been saying well I am Irish… certainly… in the public service they were discussions you just wouldn't have.' Raising such opinions, according to Jim, would have raised perceptions of the speaker being 'some sort of extreme Republican… therefore the jump is that you were supporting the IRA. I mean that seems harsh to say that, but I think that would have been the perception out there at the time.'

From a working-class background, he grew up during the era of the 'Hunger Strikes and bonfires', an annual event in the Nationalist community at that time. Entering secondary education at a local grammar school he believes was 'really important', going beyond purely educational purposes. 'School definitely was a haven of a kind.' For him it was 'an eye opener' as there was a 'different level of aspiration' that showed that there was 'another world outside this estate' that countered the reality of being 'kind of locked in', in both a physical and psychological sense:

> the school itself was very geared to getting working-class Catholic boys into university. It was almost like the career you got didn't really matter as long as you were pushed onto university, and it was a real hot-house in terms of drilling people around that.

Going on to third level education, he attended QUB in the late 1980s, he explains the environment he encountered while there. 'Queens very much felt a bit like this is either becoming or when I was there, was like a Catholic stronghold.' This was also the perception of a 'small cohort of very active Protestant… fellas and girls.' According to Jim 'they were always… protesting against something that was a perceived slight, and [that] they were being disadvantaged.' For Jim it felt like 'they were the enclave… like the situation was almost reversed and they were in the minority.' By embracing an education ethos Nationalists have reversed the trend of northern society within local universities at student level at least. Structurally this was challenged by Taylor (1988) who described 'universities in the North' reflective of 'particular balances of power and privilege', were 'sectarianism' was a 'serious issue', and where QUB was 'dominated by Protestants' (Miller 1998:26).

4.1.1 Labels and divisions

Manus Maguire, originally from Strabane, reflects how his great grandfather 'had no difficulty getting jobs until partition and then he had to leave.' He states that there 'wasn't the same level of discrimination' up until that point 'then all that changed and he had to go' working in Glasgow for 'years'. Now working in the working-class Cliftonville area of north Belfast, he recalls growing up during the 70s and 80s, 'by the time you were in your teens you were being stopped all the time and if you used terms like Derry or… certain terms basically you were in the search bay.' On coming to Belfast his experience, in this regard, did not improve:

> I remember standing there and there were groups of wee lads getting waved through and I'm going, 'why the fuck are we getting stopped'… because you were perceived as being a Taig or a Fenian or a Republican.

On recollecting an innocuous incident at his mother's home sometime in the early nineties, he describes how a visit from his nephew, who 'was covered head to toe in Celtic gear' was an indication of changing circumstances, 'there's absolutely no way that you could have walked from his estate to where we lived… without being arrested or harassed by at least one police or army patrol.'

Policing is a consistent negative feature in the Nationalist narrative. In 2024 the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB) published their *5 Year Human Rights Review*. In relation to stop and search incidents the report states that 'the chances of being stopped are higher if you are an Irish Traveller, from an ethnic minority or a Catholic' (NIPB 2024:54). In 2013 the NIPB raised concerns that stop and search powers were 'being used disproportionately against people from a Catholic/Nationalist/Republican background' (NIPB 2024:91). Referencing an investigation by The Detail in 2021 which found between 'the beginning of 2016 and end of 2020' that 'almost twice the number of Catholics as Protestants were arrested and charged by PSNI' (Winters 2021), the 2024 report situates its findings comparatively with the 2021 census figures. Demonstrating that 42.3% of the population of the north self-defines as Catholic and 37.4% of the population as 'other' Christian denominations (PBNI 2024:114), the bulk of which would define as Protestant. The report gives evidential weight to accusations of disproportionality. What is worthy of note is that the experiences Manus alludes to above of being harassed took place pre-GFA. Interactions with the police for Catholics demonstrate a structural bias that fuels a narrative of discrimination (McLean and Syed 2015:224) where the Unionist master narrative remains deeply embedded. Twenty-five years after the agreement heralding a supposed new beginning to policing, evidence indicates that while Nationalists may 'no longer [be] being discriminated against' in terms of employment, the freedom to political expression and so on, 'at the end of the day they are still', Manus said.

Discriminatory stereotypes have also been normalised for entertainment purposes in the mainstream media according to Manus that feed 'into a very negative… middle-class mind-set', evidenced during the 2012 flag protests with:

> people slagging off poor people from Unionist areas because… they couldn't say flags properly and that's all about education attainment… its ok up to a point as a bit of a joke, but it actually wears a wee bit thin because people in these areas are always getting slagged off, but they are also slagged off by middle-class people. It's all very very funny when you are sitting in your nice, warm house with your big turkey dinner in south Belfast, slagging off people in areas like north or west Belfast.

Challenging labels given externally, has been a foundational component of the Nationalist narrative, for one interviewee. A response to labelling west Belfast as 'a terrorist community'

led to the formation of *Féile an Phobail*, coming about in the aftermath of the 'two soldiers killed at Casement.' A 'massive kind of media and political onslaught' against the community ensued is how the interviewee interprets events, after one of the darkest chapters of the conflict, 'I remember it as clear as anything... this was about us being under attack.' It was during this period in which Féile was conceived, 'it was essentially about fighting back against the negative.' Bonfire commemorations marking the beginning of internment on the 8th of August were often marred by riots as Moya attests. Now, by-and-large, rejected by the Nationalist community, save for a few dissident Republican strongholds, preferred constructive expressions are represented by festivals such as Féile which seek to 'celebrate the positive side of the community' (Féile 2024) through the construction of a positive, alternative narrative (McLean and Syed 2015:320). For the interviewee this demonstrates that 'you know… this is not a bad place.'

4.1.2 Defensive planning

Fionntan Hargey, Director of the Market Development Association, concurs that entire areas have been vilified. He argues that the 'criminalisation of communities like the Market' was 'rooted in the conflict and 'supremacist history' but one which has 'continued on.' The Market area is a 'a large Nationalist community in the city centre' and he suspects that the Nationalist make-up of the area came into being because 'it was land reclaimed from the river, swamp land that no one else wanted to live on.' Close proximity to the gasworks, chemical works and pollution-related issues would have added to that feeling of undesirability for habitation where a Nationalist community subsequently grew, taking on the 'low-skilled, dirty, polluting jobs' available locally. For Fionntan, this made the Market 'a wee bit unique in Belfast being in a working-class Republican area that had work.'

He describes how urban development has adversely effected inner city communities like the Market creating myriad 'interlinked issues' that exacerbate lower living standards. Issues included the 'suburbanisation… inner city ring-roads… Belfast urban motorway that destroyed' several local communities. By the time this broad urban project had reached the Market it had done 'a lot of damage' creating, as well as physical, 'economic interfaces' in the city centre that 'nobody wants to talk about… all exacerbated by the outbreak of the conflict':

> the Market was largely wiped off the map and rebuilt from scratch. But it was rebuilt with what was euphemistically called defensive planning which was a security agenda… the shape of the area and the design that was largely motivated to contain the community.

Defensive planning similarly impacted on areas such as Short Strand and Nationalist west Belfast. 'Control [of] the security situation' has left a conflict aftereffect on the cityscape that

remains unaddressed, prolonging the inability for 'integration to occur'. As Laura McAtackney states:

> Due to the Troubles, the city was changed in structural ways through planning policies that responded to the threat and realization of violence over an extended period by altering its layout and the ability of (some) people to move around the city. Primarily, planning has focused on controlling CNR[10] communities (McAtackney 2024).

McAtackney goes on to point out that urban working-class communities, more generally, classified as 'inheritors of sectarianism and bigotry' (O'Neill 288:177) were essentially:

> blamed for the cyclical violence that mostly afflicted their communities, and they were punished through ever more-oppressive housing arrangements instead of addressing the structural and systemic failures that maintained divisions and facilitated violence (McAtackney 2024).

Arguably, the 'structural and systemic' factors that McAtackney mentions are not 'failures' but rather successes in that they achieved their aim of reproducing a particular 'social order' and its desired narrative (Hammack 2008:231). As Fionntan succinctly puts it, 'basically victimising people and then blaming them for the situation you put them in' intensified by 'the trauma from the conflict itself.' What resulted was the 'systemic destruction of inner-city working-class communities', a policy-driven 'abandonment of mixed-identity housing estates' and an 'overreliance on creating and maintaining single identity areas' (McAtackney 2024). Moreover, the slum-clearance that provided the space for the Belfast Urban Motorway, built between the '1960s and 1980s', considered working-class communities, such as the Market, as 'expendable' in order to grant greater vehicular access to the city centre for the middle-classes (O'Neill 2018:179-81). What emerged was what David Coyles refers to as 'hidden barriers' (Coyles 2017:1054), manifest in the building of roads, industrial estates and the 'benign everyday architecture of cul-de-sac housing, dead-end roads, and landscaping' (McAtackney 2024). For Fionntan the outcome of such hidden barriers was 'redeveloping the area but redeveloping it for future decay.'

Urban design in this fashion, with its underlying security imperative, created intra- as well as intercommunity divisions. Concealed under a seemingly 'benign' façade means 'their on-going and largely hidden nature' perpetuates 'Troubles-era dynamics' in 'contemporary post-conflict' Belfast (Coyles 2017:1070). Condensing communities within confined geographies on the basis of stereotype to legitimate military and social policy leads to the internalisation of

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[10] CNR is short hand for Catholic Nationalist Republican. Similarly, PUL is used to describe the Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist community.

imposed narratives and further marginalisation. Heightened feelings of threat from without, as the Short Strand siege mentality illustrates concentrate feelings of territoriality reinforced by common religion, and mono-cultural representations. The 'commitment to the neighbourhood' therefore becomes 'very fierce and passionate indeed' (Dawson 1982:32). Physically cutting-off communities was part of a much wider gamut of counter-insurgency measures, whose 'battle', for Robin Evelegh;

> runs across every level and every activity of society. Thus the conflict must be seen by the Government in terms of co-ordinating the whole social system (Evelegh 1978:52).

Divis, a working-class area of high deprivation in the Falls area of west Belfast, was cut-off from the city centre by the Westlink, sits on an interface divided from the Unionist working-class Shankill area by a number of industrial estates and a euphemistically named 'peace wall', or what Youth Worker at St. Peter's Immaculata Youth Centre, Stephen Hughes, refers to as 'segregation walls', used to 'control the security situation' as per a confidential security memo:

> they emphasise the separation of West Belfast from the remainder of the city. Fixtures such as the Westlink and more particularly the barriers that can be drawn to secure all the main access roads to West Belfast to prevent car bombs or other trouble also tend to increase this separation… thus making it more difficult for integration to occur (CAIN 1990).

Separation emphasising marginalisation is part of the 'system of mechanisms' that help ensure the 'reproduction of the established order' (Bourdieu 1977:190), which in turn exacerbates the deep community trauma and poverty that are prevalent in the area and 'the single biggest issue in the community.' And so the system perpetuates. As Stephen adds:

> Divis has been through a lot… during the conflict. We had the biggest mass movement of people when the houses were burned, whenever the barricades went up we had a huge amount of death and hurt and pain inflicted on this community.

4.1.3 Standing together

A sense of 'standing together' was evident for another contributor amidst the time of the 1981 Hunger Strike where ten Republican prisoners died in protest for political status. For him the impact on the community was 'huge', not just because of the strike itself but:

> because all of the stuff that was going on all around it… a strange ironic way that the strength that came from that in terms of uniting… people, having that common sort of purpose is interesting.

Martin Connolly, a history teacher, recalls 'the saturated streets of British soldiers, heavily militarised police… the huge army barracks… militarised police stations, the watch towers on the border.' Describing an occupation rather than a peace-keeping mission, the militarisation of particularly Nationalist working-class areas had a consolidating effect on the community. It was amidst this battle for legitimacy that many within the Nationalist community found common purpose that:

> brought a sense of coming together, comradery… some degree of community cohesion… ironically, since I suppose the relative end of conflict, you lose some of that.

Gerard Rice, is Director of Services, at the Shaftsbury Centre, in south Belfast's working-class lower Ormeau area. Gerard's connection to the lower Ormeau area goes back to 1966 when the perceived 'Unionist area... suddenly became vacant' because of the building of 'new houses' with 'all mod cons' on Belfast's outskirts, with Catholic families left behind. Slum clearance and sectarian violence created an 'abundance of empty homes.' The area 'quickly changed nearly overnight' and became regarded 'as a stolen area from Unionists and then you were labelled as a hard core Republican area.' Collective communal classification as Republican becomes apparent and held-up as a legitimating factor for attacks. On the lower Ormeau's experience of the conflict, he states that with 'an adult population of about just under 1200 and we had about 55, 57 people killed and many hundreds of people injured down the years.' In such a small geographical area the impact on the community was severe. For Gerard this pointed to one glaring reality:

> the ease with which these things are being done, the manner in which they are being done, the wall we face in trying to address them, there has to be a level of collusion, people are obviously complicit in what is happening.

While the term collusion remains legally undefined and contested, what one can understand from its usage is that it represents a level of assistance and/or direction given by security forces to paramilitary organisations, particularly Loyalists. Indeed, as David Ervine stated, 'why wouldn't Loyalists collude with the security forces. We were all on the same side' (Edwards 2017:198). In discussing the atrocity most associated with the lower Ormeau area, the Sean Graham's massacre, he maintains collusion was apparent' from start to finish in planning and execution.' He continues, 'back then, people quite literally laughed at us and said, 'sure you would say that' and 'you blame everybody else for your problems' and all that but, it has been proved right.' Their fight for justice has been a unifying factor in the lower

Ormeau area. Evidence and disclosure of collusion is a direct challenge to the dominant narrative of the polity and one which was readily dismissed as Gerard points out. Numerous inquiries have taken place regarding collusion, including:

> the Stalker Report, Stevens Inquiry (three), Cory report, Cassell Report, Barron Report and the O'Loan report, in addition to the UN's Curamaswamy Report and inquiries by Amnesty International and the ECHR (Anderson 2022:286).

A paradox of conflict exists that contained, along with privations of conflict and occupation, the positive attributes of 'cohesion' and meaning for communities in resistance to the British/Unionist master narrative. Identity development in context was initially defined, contemporarily by partition and the associated disempowerment and discrimination by the Unionist regime. Stereotyping of the Nationalist community as the enemy within bolstered the Unionist narrative which emphasised Nationalist inferiority within the structure. A biographical history of fifty years of demoralisation led to a sequencing of events in the 1960s that gave expression to the latent alternative Nationalist narrative that challenged the inequality of the social system. Violent repression bookended Unionist domination yet Nationalist and particularly Republican communities continued to be vilified long after direct rule. So too did employment discrimination prompting Irish-American lobbyists to produce the MacBride Principles in 1984, a code of conduct for investors seeking to do business in NI/NoI (McNamara 2009). Necessary self-reliance fostered coherence amidst conflict. The realisation that a militarised response to a political problem was counterproductive, facilitated the emergence of a peace process leading to de-miltarization, a crucial component in recalibrating political and societal structures, allowing the full participation of Nationalists in the process of governance for the first time since partition. With such elemental transformation comes an evolving narrative.

4.2 Changing narratives? GFA to Brexit

The '1994 ceasefires' for west Belfast interface worker, Seamus Corr was the most positive event for him, followed by the 'signing of the Good Friday Agreement.' He believes 'the Nationalist community is far stronger for the position that it finds itself in through the democratic and political process. I see a community that is confident and thriving on how it sees itself.' Seamus attributes growing confidence in the Nationalist community directly with the peace process and inclusion in the political structures. From Seamus' perspective growing Nationalist confidence is reflected by the 'opposite on the Loyalist and Unionist side.' He believes 'there is a genuine concern for that community, where they see their futures in this country':

Republicans should be reaching out and engaging with the Loyalist-Unionist community. And I speak as a Republican… basically, if we're serious about a united Ireland… Is it a united Ireland for Nationalists and Catholics? For me, it should be a united Ireland welcoming and supporting our Loyalist and Unionist neighbours… that's the only way we are ever going to resolve our differences in relation to the constitutional question.

Seamus' contribution is demonstrable of a Republican position that seeks to advance the constitutional debate beyond their traditional constituency. An acknowledgement that it cannot be achieved otherwise offers a 'counter-hegemonic' (Miller 1998:21) alternative that seeks to transcend colonial and partitionist division in favour of joint enterprise. For one interviewee, disgruntlement from within the Unionist community emerges as a consequence of Nationalist participation in the political process with greater long-term efficacy. She states that 'what has really upset people is that you know we've played fair' with the inference, 'they' haven't. She continues:

We've gone along with… all the changes that were required in terms of… succession of first ministers from one particular community. And now when really Michelle O'Neill should be first minister we've got all this carry on about the Protocol and I just think it's totally disingenuous.

The DUP suspension was perceived by the Nationalist community as a tactic to avoid the appointment of a SF First Minister. Additionally, in July 2024 a report by the Assembly Committee on Standards and Privileges, based on an investigation by the Commissioner for Standards found that five DUP ministers, including First Minister Paul Givan (14.v), breached the Ministerial Code of Conduct by refusing to attend North-South Ministerial Council meetings (Committee on Standards and Privileges 2024), key components of GFA to Nationalists. Adding to Nationalist perceptions of disingenuousness was the DUP conduct during Brexit negotiations which were regarded as a direct assault on GFA aimed at re-introducing a hard border in Ireland. This view built on the historical conduct of the DUP while in office such as the abuse of the petition of concern, along with the numerous financial scandals including Red Sky and RHI, and the party's handling of the Líofa programme[11], the latter two directly leading to the SF Stormont walkout in 2017.

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[11] Líofa, a means-tested bursary scheme to allow students to attend Irish language Gaeltacht summer college 'irrespective of tradition and background' was introduced by SF Minister for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), Caral Ní Chuilín, during her tenure between 2011 and 2016. DCAL functions transferred to the Department for Communities (DfC). DfC DUP Minister, Paul Givan, reviewed Líofa. Contrary to advice from department officials Givan cancelled the £50,000 scheme on the 23rd September 2016. In correspondence with the boards of the Gaeltacht colleges, he cited 'efficiency savings' and ending his message with 'happy

Notwithstanding the general consensus from within the Nationalist perspective that the GFA was crucial in ending political violence in the north, more or less, it is not without its shortcomings. One such failing, as the interviewee above explains, was that the GFA 'wasn't just brought about by one community… now it seems while both communities agreed to it one has never stood up for it':

> I think that it could have delivered more if Unionist politicians had stood up for it… they've actively opposed it. If they had believed in it and implemented it in the ways it was agreed to… it would have delivered much more. But I mean how good is peace?

Dónal also recounts how there was a 'great sense of enthusiasm' around the GFA, 'this sense that this was new, this is different' on returning to Belfast having spent some time living in London, views echoed by Claire who remembers 'being hugely excited and engaged' with the peace process. 'I remember the excitement I felt in the mid-90s about the Peace Process, about the Hume-Adams process', says Claire. However, this enthusiasm was to be somewhat tempered for her by Sinn Féin's dismissal from the peace negotiations as she recalls how 'angry' she felt. Lobbying for 'Sinn Féin to take the broadest… most left wing feminist view' became secondary to arguing 'to get them back at the table.' She remembers 'realising how those radical transformational demands could just by the whim of the British Government [be] reduced.' Sinn Féin were expelled from peace talks in February 1998 as a result of the killing of two men that same month, Robert Campbell and 'leading Loyalist' Robert Dougan (CAIN), which an RUC assessment attributed to the IRA. Despite such setbacks GFA was secured in April 1998.

Reading the document and attending debates on the GFA left Claire feeling 'the most conflicted I have ever felt' regarding the changes that were required to Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution, although she admits that 'it hasn't troubled me a great deal since'. She explains:

> what was actually being offered in return was three strands and of these three strands the one I was most fearful of was [the] Northern Ireland assembly because of the experience of Stormont. So I just felt like is this forcing partition in some way.

The three stands referenced by Claire concern the interrelations within NI/NoI, between north and south and between Britain and Ireland. The historical resonances did not end there for Claire, as the debates were akin, for her, to 'the kind of debates they were having around the Treaty.' What she refers to as a 'historical arc' left her questioning whether she would be like

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Christmas and happy new year'. See, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-38594609 (accessed 3 September 2023). The scheme was promptly reinstated due to negative adverse reaction.

'a pro-Treaty person… voting for partition.' Because Nationalists welcomed the GFA it is worth noting that it was also problematic. Some within the SDLP leadership had attempted to dissuade John Hume from pursuing peace talks with Gerry Adams, the Republican movement splintered somewhat because of the specific reasons Claire mentions, and SF endorsement of policing required a distinct process within a process, and so on.

After much reflection Claire took the decision to vote Yes for the agreement, despite what Martin sees as an irony that the GFA, 'arguably' was the 'only ever vote that was taken to cement partition.' He qualifies this acceptance by saying 'Nationalists basically said, ok well, we'll accept this for the time being as a process', a process that held out the promise of peace and eventual constitutional change. Claire's recollections of the time conjoin with the present. Claire's eventual acceptance of the GFA was due 'to the huge amount of groundwork' carried out 'by Republicans in particular' through facilitating 'meetings' and debates. In conversations with 'some Unionists' she asserts that this is something that 'didn't happen… in Unionist circles.'

Approaching three decades of sustained peace, Dónal rather pessimistically believes that all that positive energy from the initial phase of the GFA has 'fallen flat on its face.' He asks, 'have things got better, has the equality issue moved on? Yes, it has, but we're still a long, long, way off, and the implementation hasn't happened.' This lack of implementation is what Harvey and Smith (2018) refer to as a 'formalisation failure', that leaves 'major principles of the peace process to be fought out in the political arena, with familiar and predictable outcomes' (Harvey and Smith 2018:31). For Dónal:

> the systems are good but they're stymied by virtual vetoes... the elephant in the room for the people of this community is the DUP's stranglehold on vetoes… and the failure to move on these things.

The Petition of Concern (PoC) was a safeguard mechanism to ensure cross-community decision making (GFA, Safeguards 5 (d) ii) and can be triggered by 30 MLAs from one or a number of parties. An investigation by *The Detail* found that the mechanism was abused overwhelmingly by the DUP with 84% of the vetoes relating to just 14 pieces of proposed legislation between 2011 and 2016. Out of the 115 times it was used during that period, 86 times were by the DUP (Smyth 2016). Given that it was designed to halt discrimination of one community over another rather than for party political purposes, its misuse included issues such as the repeated blocking of same-sex marriage proposals, for example. As Alex Schultz explains, it was 'not so much the frequency of use but the kind of use that is the problem' (Smyth 2016). For Pat, 'the problem now is that you still have political parties who have their own agendas' leading to an apparent endless loop of formalisation failure. For Fionntan, the

remedy is straightforward. 'If it hasn't been delivered just don't sit and complain about it and say it was a waste of time or it's failed. Why has it not been delivered, who's holding it up and put the spotlight on them.'

For its all its apparent shortcomings the GFA is widely recognised as bringing an end to political violence, although not without criticism from within the Nationalist community, particularly working-class areas that have seen 'no peace dividend'. As Seamus argues, 'families are simply not better off.' McComb adds to this view:

> It hasn't delivered for working-class areas… What's the peace dividend coming out of the Good Friday Agreement for local areas? I don't see any – or, if there is something it is very, very limited.

This is a view shared by Manus who believes that the Cliftonville area of north Belfast 'is economically a lot worse off than what it was' prior to the GFA 'so there has been no peace dividend…no capital development in this area for 20 years.' Fionntan believes that 'a lot of people have done very well out of the agreement' but adds that 'it's the areas that didn't suffer during the conflict.' A class dimension emerges through this analysis were wealth has been funnelled toward more affluent areas rather than 'places that need it most', such as the redevelopment of Newforge Lane private health club, 'primarily servicing RUC' members receiving a '£7m grant':

> where' the peace dividend for that?... a lot of the members there no doubt involved in collusion, a lot of nasty stuff over the years, shoot-to-kill, or whatever else, and they're the ones getting the benefits.

In 2021 it was announced that New Forge Lane would receive '€5.8m of funding from the EU's PEACE IV Programme', to be match-funded by the 'Department for Communities in Northern Ireland, the Department of Rural and Community Development in Ireland' with an additional '£1m of funding from Sport Northern Ireland' (Hamilton Architects 2021). Newforge is also 'home to the Royal Ulster Constabulary Athletic Association Limited incorporating the Police Service of Northern Ireland'[12].

One of the unfulfilled promises of the GFA for him was that 'state violence' and 'the support for state violence' would end. One of the key tenets of GFA for Gerard was, 'the right to live free from sectarian harassment', Human Rights, (1) (GFA 1998), qualifying his doubts by asking:

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[12] See, newforge.com/about (accessed 25 September 2024).

> How can an Orange Parade go through the Ormeau Road without thousands… of armed personnel pushing it through and it not be an affront to a community like this? Where did the Good Friday Agreement sit with any of that?

His assessment from where much of this toxicity emanates is explicit:

> I don't care what anybody says, the Orange Order is akin to the Ku Klux Klan. They foster sectarianism within the state. They go to the core of a lot of things that are wrong.

He adds, 'the only good thing I think is… they are way behind the times. Kids, people have moved on, things are moving on.' The 'absence of violence', brought about by GFA 'providing a framework for peace' for Gerard, has created the conditions that have allowed this 'moving on.' Yet communal conflict persists, 'just look at the Irish language, everything is still just divide, divide, divide', but he insists, 'things will never go back to the way they were' even though 'here in this community we lost people.'

This agenda to divide, as outlined by Gerard, highlights 'the other failure in the Good Friday Agreement which was the failure to actively reconcile… the history of the past.' On this Edward Said is instructive, in that 'appeals to the past' inform 'interpretations of the present':

> What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps. This problem animates all sorts of discussions – about influence, about blame and judgement, about present actualities, and future priorities (Said 1994:1).

The GFA provided a framework in which 'present actualities, and future priorities' could be resolved peacefully. The extent delivery has met expectations is debatable, where the 'past' is not really 'past', and as a consequence the intersection between particular communities and power structures remain fractious (McLean and Syed 2015:320), suggesting a continuity with a pre-GFA social order with distinct class divergences. It was however seminal in the Nationalist narrative by officially recognising Irishness within NI/NoI as a legitimate identity for the first time. As axiomatic as this may seem in the present, it was contrary to established norms. As Jim points out, the GFA 'allows people to be more openly, sort of, not worried about saying' what their national identity is. Arguably more important for Nationalists was that GFA 'held out the possibility for constitutional change' according to Claire and flexibility to achieve 'future priorities.'

Initial Nationalist difficulties with the GFA have been compounded in the present with the failure of the oft discussed peace-dividend to materialise, particularly in working-class areas.

Support for GFA was contingent, in part, to the actualisation of such a return. While disaffection clearly exists with the agreement's ability to deliver increased prosperity, the alternative to withdrawing support offers an altogether extremely unappealing vista for Nationalists. A saving grace of the GFA is that Nationalist parties play a full role in the political process with the 2022 assembly elections seeing Sinn Féin returned as the largest party, leading to Michelle O'Neill becoming the first Nationalist First Minister since the GFA was signed. Despite political representation, the inability of the assembly to deliver a tangible peace dividend to communities most in need is evident. Existent disillusionment with political structures were further intensified through the subordinate status of NI/NoI within the Westminster system highlighted by Brexit.

4.2.1 Brexit: DUP advancing reunification?

Voting to remain in the EU, the NI/NoI electorate, were nonetheless taken out through the sheer numerical strength of English votes, adding to an already extant Nationalist narrative of unfair treatment, although in this instance it was not an exclusively Nationalist grievance. As Martin contends, 'Brexit has been a disaster, it has been a nightmare for Unionists and Nationalists alike' as '56% of the population here said no and yet we're out of Europe, so the democracy thing, there's a deficit.' For Jim, Brexit 'exposed so many things' about the 'UK government' and what he refers to as 'the English mentality around this part of the world' that led to the 'realisation that they absolutely, and [I] probably should have known this all along, they do not give a fig about this place.'

Disinterest in the intricacies of NI/NoI by Westminster, for Christopher McCrudden, has 'long been a truism'. Often diminished to 'a mere sideshow' is a commonly held opinion he considers 'to be overly generous.' (McCrudden 2017:12). Coupled with a resurgent 'variant of English nationalism' with a 'nostalgia for empire' (McEvoy et al 2020:614) Westminster apathy builds on an already innate 'British disregard for the Irish peace process' (McEvoy et al 2020:616).

For Moya:

> the Brexit vote was the English saying we want to be great again and… go back to the great days of the empire. I think it's the same problem with the Unionists here. They don't like to play fair. They don't like to play nice. They don't like sharing… They still have this notion of what's mine is mine and I am holding it.

Connecting the Unionist mentality of not playing fair and the adage of 'what we have we hold' with English Nationalist 'empire nostalgia' (O'Toole 2016) provides a perspective connecting particular readings of the past with the present. For Stephen, Brexit 'will go down in history as one of the worst mistakes that that the Unionist politicians and the Conservatives have made.'

Superlatives from Nationalist opinion on Brexit included 'unmitigated disaster', 'huge damage', et cetera, reflecting a pervasive dissatisfaction with its impact 'particularly for the north' but also 'for England, Scotland and Wales too', as one contributor put it. Another interviewee framed it as an existential threat to the UK. 'Brexit is a disaster for the Union…You've got Scotland wants to go out. I think Wales is getting there.' Added to the instability around Brexit is a level of confusion among the populous as expressed by Bernie, stating succinctly, 'I'd say if you went out into that street and asked the first ten people, 'what's the protocol, 'what's Brexit about', they would say 'I don't know mate'.'

Lack of understanding is not restricted to the public as, according to Brian Salter, not only did British academics fail to understand or predict Brexit, they did so because they were so wedded to EU hegemony that the counter-hegemonic nature of Brexit was not even countenanced. As a consequence of 'their normative commitment to the EU… they may also have inadvertently fuelled the power of its [Brexit] cultural dynamic' (Salter 2018:481). While this dynamic may have increased English isolationism, in NI/NoI it has produced demonstrable indicators such as an increase in Irish passport applications. Stephen concludes that 'identity is not that important when you would take an Irish passport to reap the benefits.'

According to the 2021 Census figures the number of British passport holders has declined since 2011, although still the majority passport. In contrast Irish passports in the north have increased from 375,800 in 2011 to 614,300 in 2021 (NISRA 2022:4). 2022 set a record for exceeding one million passport applications in a year for the first time. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs 'the number of first-time passport applications from Northern Ireland and Great Britain was 100,000 out of over 1.15 million total applications' (DFA 2022). Jim explains this shift. '15 years ago my wife would have had a British passport and I wouldn't have thought' nothing of it, 'it was a bit cheaper.' When speaking to his family now on the topic 'it's like absolutely not… when your passport comes up for renewal, please get an Irish one.' Another interviewee elaborates further:

> look at the number of people now who have Irish Passports… I think that the opportunity to join… the EU is a huge pull for people like myself… [It would be] interesting to hear thoughts on what moderate Unionists think about it. But who wants to stay in a union where Brexit is a way of life? I mean, why would they want to stay?

She continues:

> if they [Unionists] would just look at it in the round it's doing more for us than not… the huge amount of damage that was done by Brexit that we didn't vote for -we didn't want, most of us still don't want, has wreaked havoc... It's [caused] huge damage, huge.

Remonstrating with Unionists regarding the advantages of EU membership in contrast with the 'havoc' of Brexit is an axiomatic, common-sense viewpoint for many Nationalists who cannot grasp the affection for Brexit beyond a notion of regressive jingoism. Describing it as 'a monumental self-inflicted disaster' Jim questions the mind-set of the DUP 'in terms of where they think this place is going.' As the largest Unionist party, the DUP campaigned for Vote Leave, and in that respect they were successful. However, there is a sense from the Nationalist contributors that this was something of a pyrrhic victory. For Stephen 'it has taught the Nationalist community a lesson':

> the DUP don't really care… not just to the Nationalist people but to the people in their own communities… they would throw their own people under a bus just to retain that 100% link with their Britishness… But the problem is they're depending on the Tories to back their agenda and the Tories aren't gonna sacrifice anybody… they'll only look after themselves and the DUP, like everybody else, will go to the wall.

Certainly, their period of maximum influence with the British government post-2017 British GE resulting in a hung parliament and the DUP propping up Theresa May's government through their confidence and supply deal, did little to enamour them with the Nationalist community. Moreover, Westminster insouciance toward NI/NoI during Brexit negotiations brought the 'side show' centre stage. Holding the balance of power, DUP MPs closely aligned with the ERG, scuppering any attempts by Theresa May to broker a deal that would honour the Brexit referendum result while maintaining an open border in Ireland. Taking place within the period of SF's Stormont collapse in January 2017, a British government and a DUP unshackled from Assembly Executive checks revealed a hubristic DUP who sought 'nothing more than the reassertion of the British identity of Northern Ireland guaranteed by distancing the UK from the EU…. their willingness to jeopardise everything for a hard Brexit' to secure 'their Unionist identity' was on full display. Indeed, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson admitted being 'able to live with himself' in the event of 40,000 job losses as a result of a no-deal Brexit following an assessment by the Department of the Economy (BBC News 2019c). Eventually supporting Boris Johnson, the DUP were instrumental in bringing about their own worst case scenario, a border down the Irish sea, cutting them off regulatorily from 'the rest of the UK'. Ironically, May's deal, irreconcilable to Unionist sensibilities, offered much more in terms of alignment with Britain than Johnson's. As an interviewee put it:

> It's very difficult to get inside the head of the DUP because when you meet them individually… there's lots of great people, very family people, you know very passionate concerns about making lives better for their own community. And then you

get this almost schism of… supporting Brexit when most of us didn't… has created a huge difficulty for them now in terms of their credibility.

Jim believes that there is 'huge potential in Northern Ireland… around economic issues' but a major stumbling block in achieving this is the DUP attitude. If 'the DUP weren't as sort of short sighted and were more open minded, you could turn this place into an economic gold mine.' Economic sustainability would lead to less people 'looking down to Dublin to say, well there's where our solution is.' But he acknowledges that 'on the basis of what's happened… you wouldn't have any confidence that they will do it.' He continues:

> rather than leaving it to chance that somehow the DUP will come to their senses and make this place better for everybody, to me it's just full on now… it's probably the influence you have on your family because I'm having those conversations now… it's not just trying to influence them to think but influence them to have those conversations when they are out in social circles, to start talking about it.

The 'it' Jim refers to is constitutional change. Being once ambivalent on the constitutional question Jim is now unambiguously in the pro-reunification camp giving an insight into the journey some soft Nationalists have undergone. Such opinions are only heightened when, as Martin puts it, 'when you look at Belfast or Derry and even across the border and into the republic, how prosperity has kicked in there since the post-Good Friday period, it's been amazing.' In response, unionism broadly has adopted a 'head in the sand politics' viz-a-viz reunification, according to Seamus due to being 'led by the DUP'. He continues:

> it only makes our job easier in attainment of a unified Ireland… absolutely joy to my eyes to be honest with you… I think Brexit has made the Nationalist or Republican narrative of unifying this country… has sort of tripled the volume of that argument.

Schadenfreude notwithstanding, Brexit and particularly the DUP positioning and conduct has hardened Nationalist opinion and revived reunification in a palpable manner. The 'little England mentality' for Gerard has sharpened the debate and the need for debate' that, as yet, unionism has refused to participate in. He is of the opinion that the trajectory is toward a unity referendum within the next decade. If this indeed transpires then regardless of ideological opposition or disinterest from Unionists, and others, it will require inevitable engagement at some point. As one Unionist commentator said, 'the border poll debate is on the table and it's not going away' (Kane 2024). A participant adds:

> I would have thought myself there would always be a united Ireland it was just a matter of time. I think what's happened with Brexit is that it's really fast forwarded that process… But it's a democracy isn't it?

Another interviewee is of the opinion that 'Brexit is damaging the UK economy' where, in contrast 'the south' is 'benefiting' from membership of the EU. Additionally, he, describes 'Westminster, [as] a visceral type of parliament… where the parliamentary processes in the UK aren't working'. What he describes as visceral is evidenced by him through 'Sunak boasting about taking money away from deprived areas to put it into wealthier areas'[13]. For Jim, this is indicative of the 'Tory mind-set':

> I think society just needs to be a wee bit more equitable… there just seems to be too much have and have nots at the minute and driven by that kind of mind-set from London that I just cannot get. The politics that I would be more interested in are not the politics of religion here so much, although it's sort of does align a wee bit because the DUP have attached themselves to all that.

Brexit has created a major episodic (McLean and Syed 2015:332) event in the Nationalist narrative that that has led to a significant deconstruction of the status quo coupled with a heightened confidence in the face of an increasingly fragmented unionism. Reunification in this respect offers a remedial solution of reconstruction and narrative re-alignment. Moreover, the conduct of political unionism, particularly the DUP, have fuelled the aphoristic rationalisations for reunification with an energised motivation. The Nationalist narrative is being rewritten, while recognising its historical biographical nature, to being future-focused on the impending next constitutional chapter.

Conclusion

Partition has left an indelible imprint on Nationalist consciousness that retains relevance. How it was brought about and maintained retains a powerful position within the Nationalist biography. Within the post-partition era identity themes of injustice and oppression solidified. The onset of conflict was a turning point for the Nationalist community awakening a communal political consciousness, as fifty years of resentment to humiliation found expression. Events such as the Civil Rights movement, Bloody Sunday and the Hunger Strike' played a significant role in shaping the episodic nature of the Nationalist biography. Deriving meaning from resisting the dominant narrative, thirty years of a military and political response overwhelmingly directed towards the Nationalist-Republican community, created something of a paradox.

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[13] Video footage emerged that recorded British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak saying, 'We inherited a bunch of formulas from Labour that shoved all the funding into deprived urban areas and that needed to be undone. I started the work of undoing that' (Syal 2022).

In spite of the privations associated with military occupation, that included killings, harassment, defensive planning and so on, a community cohesion developed that promoted self-reliance in a 'best of time and the worst of times' scenario. An 'education ethos' has been a fundamental component of the Nationalist narrative since partition and is a connecting thread from that period to this, that has allowed Nationalists to re-define their own narrative. Between the period of 1969 to 1998 the Nationalist chronicle had shifted from a negative, pre-1969 narrative of disempowerment toward one of positivity, self-reliance and confidence that challenges labels given to it from external sources. Through this evolution there has been a failure to actively reconcile the past with the present, while issues of class remain very much to the fore.

Several factors within the Nationalist narrative have synthesized at this moment of constitutional fluidity which have been further compounded by Westminster's *modus operandi*. Feelings of unfair treatment amidst an on-going civil conflict dissipated with the GFA but did not entirely disappear as Unionists stood accused of 'not playing fair' by a number of the interviewees, as themes of fairness and unfairness remain prevalent. Along with a bad-faith partner, Brexit 'imposed' by England against the democratic wishes of the electorate of NI/NoI has highlighted the democratic deficit that denies real political power and self-determination. Government minus mandate has left many within the Nationalist community seeking a constitutional alternative that is democratic, reflective of the values of the people of NI/NoI and that is a reversal of partition. Brexit has hardened the Irish identity in NI/NoI as Nationalist opinion coalesces on the desire for constitutional change.

5 Nationalist identity narratives and constitutional flux

Introduction

The GFA represented a paradigm shift for inter-relations in Ireland and between the islands of Britain and Ireland. A major keystone for Nationalist approval for the GFA was the promise of constitutional change as well as the Irish identity being officially recognised as legitimate. This chapter will examine how a process of reconstruction and interpretation has evolved in the post-GFA space for Nationalists, reflective of the specific cultural and historical period and how the structural factors revealed by Brexit have impacted on these interpretations. This chapter will contain several main sections beginning with *A Nationalist win and Unionist fear*, followed by *Debating reunification* containing the sub-sections, *Evasion through good relations*, followed by *Flexibility and rigidity* and then the section *Constitutional future.* The conclusion will contain a summary of the Nationalist positions of both chapters four and five.

5.1 A Nationalist win and Unionist fear

Parity of esteem was crucial for Nationalist endorsement of the GFA, which harks back to a historical period of structural discrimination, a component they believe has failed to be recognised in the public square. Issues of import for Nationalists face continued resistance from Unionists, particularly the Irish language. As Moya contends;

> anything that they eventually concede is long fought for, perfect example is the Irish Language Act… promised way way back. What harm does an Irish Language Act do to the Unionist population? Absolutely nothing, but they just refuse to concede anything without a fight.

Resistance to enhancing the development of Irish is a unifying issue for political unionism. In January 2021 Belfast City Council (BCC) reduced the threshold for the erection of dual language street signs to aid visibility of Irish in line with international legal norms. Despite English being present on the signage Unionists regularly refer to 'Irish language' signs. The Belfast Newsletter described the BCC policy as 'extremist' (Lowry 2023). In September 2024 Translink opened their new *Grand Central Station* transport hub, without any dual-language signage, despite a motion from BCC supporting their inclusion. Described by one commentator as a 'deeply political act' (Collins 2024a), the durability of the dominant narrative whereby some public bodies can act with a partisan political agenda remains. Hostility toward the language is indicative of a colonial attitude that seeks to 'extinguish memories' of native

culture, an ever present reminder that history did not begin with the arrival of the colonists. Rigidity of the Unionist narrative not only wants to be in the UK, it wishes to reflect their mono-cultural, mono-lingual version of it. Within the post-Brexit landscape issues of identity have become more prominent for some:

> if anything it makes me feel more strongly Irish because… through that feeling of being Irish… I still have some association with the European Union…It has strengthened my identity. Largely because I think even it brings me in line… [through] association with the European Union.

Brexit has also impacted on co-operation. As Martin points out 'some have just, basically drawn back or pulled back from the community engagement… largely as a result of Brexit', a point noted by a number of the participants. Dónal noticed a significant reduction in cross-community projects beginning 'about six years ago', his interview taking place in 2022, stating that 'the cross-community work we used to do, has definitely reduced by a good ninety percent. There's not the interaction'. Rab in describing an interaction with one cross-community colleague who explained that 'the more you come towards me to talk about things the more I am backing.' He continues:

> we do meetings every Monday morning… and the thing that came up, they [Loyalists] must have been told, don't get engaged in the Republican narrative because that's the words they started using, Republican narrative, 'here's the Republican narrative.' Where did that come from?... somewhere along the line [they've been told]… avoid the Republican narrative, don't get sucked into it.

The 'Republican narrative' is contextualised within a space that highlights post-Brexit difficulties while advancing reunification as a common-sense, viable alternative. The tactic of refusing to engage on particular matters demonstrates frailty in the Unionist position and insufficient counter-argumentation from a Nationalist perspective, correlating with a rise in confidence for the latter community and increased momentum toward reunification. As one participant put it, 'a border poll tomorrow… I certainly wouldn't be afraid of it.' She continues:

> part of me thinks that's been thrown up as a bogeyman by Unionists to say how can we do business with these people… Now to be absolutely fair to Nationalist politicians… they have always been clear about what the end game is. There's no surprise there… they've been incremental about it.

The same interviewee believes that the term 'border poll' raises 'so many connotations about one community losing something and another community gaining' whereas being 'part of the European Community again with Ireland' provides a much softer landing, concluding that 'a

united Ireland has more benefits for the Unionist community than they actually realise.' As an aspiration, reunification was generally regarded positively, and almost all agreed that detailed preparation was an unnegotiable pre-requisite in order to avoid the mistakes of Brexit which is regarded as negative. Brexit has damaged the rigidity and compulsory nature of the dominant Unionist narrative allowing for the expression of the alternative Nationalist narrative to be increasingly expressed in public discourse. Given the historic nature 'of the state' this is significant.

However, some interviewees expressed reticence towards reunification, as Bernie comments, 'I'm not saying I don't want a united Ireland but I don't sit comfortably with it either.' While she self-identifies as Irish and 'would love to be living in an all-Ireland' she has very clear reservations. She explains that her sister who lives in the Republic has to 'pay for everything'. She had to 'buy all the books' for her children's education, 'they pay for hospitals, everything.' Hospitals in the Republic have no charges for 'public inpatient care or day service care' or for referrals from GPs for the outpatients or emergency departments[14], while waiting lists are twice as long in NI/NoI as they are in the Republic (McClements 2023). Additionally, the free school book scheme introduced by the Republic's government in 2023 was extended up to Leaving Certificate in 2024 (Lynott 2024). Bernie adds:

> I don't like change… I'm comfortable knowing what way our health system works, warts and all… what way our welfare system works… but… the fear of the change for the worse rather than the better.

Bernie, in many respects, is 'saying the unsayable' from a Nationalist perspective. Supporting reunification is assumed based on the Nationalist designation, yet, there are clearly those, like Bernie, who are unenthusiastic about the prospect. Such discursive positioning, while appearing contrary to the Nationalist master narrative, could 'serve to strengthen or shift' (McLean and Syed 2015:339) reunification discourse in order to assuage the recognisable apprehensions of some aspirational Nationalists. Fear of the unknown is an understandable response to what would be unchartered constitutional territory requiring a significant redesign of the health systems, et cetera, to achieve rationalisation. Other concerns also emerged.

Stephen raised apprehensions regarding the impact the campaign for reunification was having on the broad Unionist community. He is of the opinion that 'there's an understanding and a belief that we are heading towards a united Ireland' from within that community citing issues such as demographic change. 'All of that is all taking us towards a united Ireland' producing a

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[14] See, https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/acute-hospitals-division/patient-care/hospital-charges/#:~:text=There%20are%20no%20hospital%20charges,care%20or%20day%20service%20care (accessed 3 March 2023).

'fear' for the 'pro-British tradition' who frame 'the Belfast Agreement as a win for 'them-uns'', particularly in Loyalist areas, according to Stephen. While he views GFA as a 'win-win situation' he believes Loyalists are 'doubting if it was worth it because they still see themselves as losing in the long term but losing without the violence.' This 'tension point' is exacerbated by:

> this pro-united Ireland agenda that's pushing and pushing… because they see the demographic change and they know that a united Ireland's coming and that frustrates me because it's a lack of empathy for our pro-British neighbours… if we push too hard it could lead to a backlash of some sort that's not worth a death.

A Loyalist backlash is a fear among some of the interviewees but a minority view. Nationalist perspectives on Unionist concerns are not restricted to a possible violent backlash. As Dónal points out there is a latent desire for reunification from within that community also that requires 'outreach':

> I have friends from the Loyalist, Unionist side… they want a united Ireland, they have their Irish passports, but there is that wee bit, woah, are we going to be looked after here, are you going to get your own back here after a hundred years type thing.

Dónal suggests that there is a deviation from the compulsory nature of the Unionist master narrative from within the Unionist community which is also reflected by McKay (2021), who indicates a sense of marginalisation from her interviewees. An anxiety based on an underlying acknowledgment of Unionist mistreatment of Nationalists instils a revenge-fear. Because of alignment with a narrative that facilitated such treatment a trepidation of collective punishment exists, a sentiment shared by several of the contributors across all groupings. As Moya puts it, 'there's always going to be people frightened of it… that natural fear that as they did to us, we will do to them.' Another interviewee concurs with the notion of Unionist fear towards reunification:

> It's very tangible. They believe that if they lose out, they're going to be treated the same way Catholics were treated as a consequence of the formation of the state… they fear that their traditions of marching… their identity as British… their economic opportunities, which were previously given to them, I suppose on a plate…would be taken away from them.

Rab takes a more cynical approach stating, there is a 'huge fear factor and they play on it.' Consideration of Unionist opinion is a factor in the calculus for most of the interviewees. Unionist fears of retribution are founded on a history of domination toward Nationalists. Certainly the language emanating from within this sample regarding constitutional change

offers a conciliatory tone that may do little to assuage such deep seated insecurities. As Stephen contends, Brexit and the issue of the Northern Ireland Protocol (NIP) have been 'challenging [for our] pro-British neighbours' because it's another 'small step towards a united Ireland', stating:

> You combine the protocol with the demographic change… the more attractive European Union economically, yeah you can understand why the PUL community are scared at the moment… but they are gonna have to get used to it because it's coming.

Based on demographic and political shifts a unity referendum is regarded as the democratic corollary of all these factors combined, and viewed as inevitable by many. Yet, with unparalleled discretion at the disposal of the British Secretary of State to call a unity referendum or not, in the absence of clearly defined criteria, the prospect remains purely in the gift of the British government. Moreover, no southern government has yet to take any steps necessary for advancing the process, which again, will be conceivably dependent on political expediency. The utility of maintaining the status quo emphasises 'how groups in' in society 'should understand themselves' (McLean and Syed 2015:326) and it is the recalibration of this 'understanding' that Nationalists wish to achieve through self-determination.

Stephen contextualizes his opinion within the 'bigger economic forces at play' beyond 'local politics' such as the EU and 'globalisation' which he believes will be the primary drivers of reunification. Despite macro-economics, demographic change, an evolving political landscape and the mainstreaming of reunification discourse, political unionism continues to present to Nationalists the impression of a 'head in the sand' approach to politics that is begrudging and retrograde. Supporting Brexit, attempting the re-introduction of a hard border, disregarding 'almost half of the electorate… feeding a crocodile[15], not letting Stormont sit and thus denying a Nationalist First Minister' all feed into a perception of disrespect that fuels Nationalist counter-motivations (McGuinness 2023). Essentially, Unionists have, and are, proving themselves incapable of making NI/NoI for the good of everyone, according to this perspective, viewing NI/NoI strictly as their preserve. As Claire submits:

> if I was a Unionist, I would have thought to myself… there has been failure here because to think, look let's stay in the UK and create a good Northern Ireland that people are going to want to be part of and stay in the UK… has that been achieved? I don't think you could say that.

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[15] In response to a journalist's question regarding some magnanimity from the DUP toward the implementation of an Irish Language Act, DUP leader, Arlene Forster, replied, 'Are you serious… we will never accede to an Irish Language Act… If you feed a crocodile, it will keep coming back for more' (Gordon 2017).

She continues;

> it is astonishing to me… because I can see that Unionists… had every incentive to make [GFA] work, to make… Northern Ireland work… and say this is now a changed place… So they may never have won over people like me, but they could have won over very many more people to accept Northern Ireland than where they have got to right now.

Interestingly, this is a historical argument levelled against the pre-1969 Stormont regime, that had Unionists offered a more participatory position in society for Nationalists that the conflict may have been avoided entirely, a lesson that appears, as per this viewpoint, lost on political unionism currently. As a consequence, the GFA has 'under-performed' according to Pat, 'in terms of community reconciliation.' GFA is certainly portrayed as a loss for unionism by anti-agreement forces, in that it 'struck directly at the very nexus of the colonial apparatus' contemporarily, that of 'political control' (MacDonald 1986:51) which, utilising a settler-colonial paradigm, is why equality is resisted by elements of unionism. But Claire contends there were also uncomfortable compromises 'Nationalists had to swallow' despite GFA presented as… a win situation for Nationalists':

> I suppose that's true in the sense of if Unionists were asked to give up a parliament in which they had complete domination and a security force… almost completely a Protestant… they had to give up very blatant discrimination… I think there were Unionists themselves that wanted to give up those things who knew those things weren't right.

For Nationalists, political Unionist bad faith was displayed during and since Brexit as they were perceived to be participating in a direct assault against the GFA, which the DUP never supported. Ironically, DUP spokespeople regularly cited protection of the GFA during the Northern Ireland Protocol (NIP) negotiations as reason for resisting the latter. Proclaiming to represent 'the people of Northern Ireland', who had rejected Brexit, disaffected large sections of the community, including some Unionists. As Claire explains:

> I can understand the frustration. I also have many conversations with liberal Unionists and so I do feel they feel immensely frustrated. In fact, if you were to ask any one group of people here who was most frustrated by Brexit, I would say that it's liberal Unionists.

Pat elaborates, 'I do suspect that some of them do see the winds have changed, in that, over time, their view is not going to be necessarily the dominant view.' This particular comment suggests that constitutional flux is transactionally interdependent on the interchange of

alternative and dominant narrative positions, with an added shift in power relations. While at civil society level the dynamics may be shifting, at a structural level the Unionist narrative remains deeply entrenched, reflected daily particularly by the media through hegemonic syntax or mono-cultural symbolism expressed through the annual ubiquitous poppy wearing by television presenters, for example. Alongside criticism of unionism sits an acknowledgement of their political difficulties. As Moya submits, 'time and time again the Unionist example is that if they put their head above the parapet its cut off' leading to reluctance 'to show a little bit of humanity, or a little bit of give and take' lest they be seen as 'weak' or to 'have betrayed their people.' Recognising and accepting the changing winds is a critical component of 'political leadership' which Claire believes people 'respond to', something she thinks is lacking within unionism. An 'utter lack of leadership' combined with an absence of 'consideration of the Nationalist community' has Stephen concluding that 'Unionist leadership is fucking atrocious'. He explains:

> the DUP has probably done more for a united Ireland in the last four years than the fucking Shinners have done in ten… what they have done is turned middle of the road Nationalists into united Irelanders.

Stephen is of the opinion that discussion of constitutional change when carried out by 'politicos' is 'much more threatening, in which case all we are doing is antagonising Unionists' and Loyalists. Organisations like Ireland's Future, for him, provide a less impendent space for 'argument' or 'debate'. For Moya, this returns to the issue of leadership demonstrating:

> its ok to disagree… its ok just to even talk about it… nobody is going to say they are in talks about a united Ireland or about what is possible and yet if you don't have those talks, there's always going to be people frightened of it.

Indeed, is the point on lack of political discussion on possible constitutional change designed to ensure the Unionist electorate remains ignorant of potential ramifications and thus in fear? Several participants allude to what could be described as a discussion anxiety, particularly within the Loyalist community. In dialogue with Loyalist colleagues regarding debating reunification Seamus states that 'their feedback… was why would they take part in a conversation that is literally designed to terminate their very existence':

> they're politically aware the minute you trigger the process of a unity referendum then it's a process that concludes only in one way. So, whether it's successful or not the first time, there's another trigger mechanism within it that triggers it again a number of years after that … so, I think they see the process as clear as that for them.

In GFA, *Schedule 1, Section 3,* stipulates that a border poll cannot be held 'earlier than seven years after the holding of a previous poll' which is at a minimum seven-year gap.

Existentially jeopardized by debate on reunification, the probability of a violent backlash, particularly from with loyalism whose continued existence looms over post-GFA society, is raised. Several examples support this thesis. Working-class Loyalist Joel Keys was threatened in November 2021 when he pronounced publicly his willingness to discuss a 'new Ireland.' Police contacted him to say that he was under threat and that 'firearms could not be ruled out' (O'Carroll 2021). Colin Harvey, QUB, at the Scholars at Risk conference in Belfast February 2024 outlined the sustained campaign against him for his work and advocacy for Irish unity (Belluigi 2024). This included 'offensive and abusive commentary' and lobbying from Unionist politicians, including Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, to his employer. Indeed, QUB faced criticism by not robustly defending its staff in line with Harvey's intimidation (Irish Legal News 2022). These events took place within the context of Unionist resistance to the NIP and the withdrawal of support for the GFA by Loyalist paramilitaries as announced by their umbrella body, the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC) (BBC 2021). As Claire argues, 'we do live with that threat. So, for me that's a big thing that we have to grapple with. How do we make this constitutional conversation a safe one?' For Stephen:

> People are already having those conversations… my worry is that anybody who takes part in those will get threatened. They'll get bullied, intimidated… the paramilitaries will step into that void and undermine the whole process and I don't think it's anything we can control as such but it stifles open, honest, transparent debate.

Claire's remedy to this predicament is 'being as transparent as we can be, by having the biggest amount of conversations that we can have'. In spite of potential threats, Seamus believes the constitutional question 'is not going away… until it's either resolved or it's at least debated.' From this perspective the constitutional status quo remains unsettled which leads people like Claire to conclude that 'there should be a border poll because it's provided for in the Good Friday Agreement' with the caveat that 'you can't force people' into constitutional change, it must be democratically endorsed. In this regard, the big question for unionism is will they accept a democratic mandate that supports reunification? Certainly, this offers a challenge to Nationalists who seek to engage Unionists and make the case for unity, while alleviating fears of a Nationalist-led pogrom. Additionally, ''conscious opposition' does not preclude 'negotiation' (McLean and Syed 2015:322-325) of a reconstitution of societal structures. As one interviewee contends:

> There's nothing wrong with good debate. There's nothing wrong with people disagreeing, having different points of view. I mean sometimes that gets us to a better

place but I think you know the unwillingness of people to recognise the democratic mandate is very worrying for me.

5.2 Debating reunification

The GFA unambiguously contains the mechanism for a unity referendum by which democratic constitutional change can take place. For Claire this was an 'enormous concession' for accepting the 'status quo'. Crucially for her, 'constitutional change was [recognised officially] as legitimate.' Taken in the context of Brexit, the pro-Remain vote has brought the debate for constitutional change 'forward'. The 'big thing is not having the border poll… straight away but having the conversation about the border poll', she adds. As a unique opportunity 'very few countries' get, it is an 'enormous' undertaking which requires 'the maximum amount of debate' with 'the maximum amount of research underpinning it so that people can make the most informed choice that they can.' She continues:

> I will listen to Unionist arguments about why I should actually vote no, why I should vote to stay in the UK. Of course I will engage in conversation… I really want them to be making that case… I feel more sympathy for the liberal Unionists because they want to be making a case about the health service… liberal values and all that. I think it's more difficult to make that case now than it's ever been.

Lack of cross-community engagement on this issue is problematic, as Huggie argues:

> trying to get people from a Unionist perspective to try and engage, even if they have different views from me, that's fine, but let's hear what your view is. Let's discuss the pros and cons of uniting or, in their case, staying within the Union. But let's have the conversation and don't go through the same mess that Brexit created.

Nationalist willingness to discuss the merits of both reunification and retaining the status quo run contrary to how the dominant narrative is maintained. The inability 'to hold two stories' simultaneously requires that one is discounted entirely lest it endanger the other. As such, unionism cannot consider reunification without significant reconstruction of their own identity narrative. For Rab this discussion 'isn't just about a united Ireland', but rather the fundamentals of the status quo:

> If you have alternatives or you can… convince me that my future's best served with a connection with England, then let me know what it is… How are you gonna accommodate Republicans within whatever system you have?

Brexit, for Nationalists, has highlighted the foundational deficiencies with the UK and its fragility. Moreover, how Republicans are to be accommodated within the status quo remains

an outstanding consideration for Unionists to articulate. Within a master narrative framework, dominant narratives 'derive their strength' by constraining and confining interpretive alternatives (McLean and Syed 2015:336) suggesting that any deliberations in accommodating a Republican alternative position would in fact be a fundamental weakening of the societal structures from which the dominant narrative was simultaneously a producer and a product. Rab also puts an onus on Nationalists and Republicans to convince Unionists of the merits of their position:

> How do we accommodate prods?... I've heard many a time people… going, 'aye… we'll get rid of the flag and get a new flag' or… 'let's change the national anthem, we'll do something else.' You try and bring that into a room with other Republicans or other people from the Free State … have that conversation and going, 'piss off, we are changing nothing.' So, we don't even know what it is we have to offer yet in terms of accommodating the other community.

At the time of writing what is offered in a reunification scenario remains opaque in that high-level planning is yet to commence. At present, the basis of the reunification argument centres around the delivery of basic democratic principles to achieve self-determination as means to fully re-join the EU. Much planning and negotiation will be required for post-reunification rationalisation. Given the precedent of the pre-GFA Nationalist-Republican consultative process to open intra-community debate, it is highly likely that such a course of action will be replicated to clarify what is deliverable from a Nationalist position. Inherent weaknesses raised in Rab's analysis identify the difficulties of achieving change on issues such as anthems and flags without the requisite consultation. Indeed, the lack of any adequate vision of what a united Ireland could look like, leaves reunification open to the charge of utopianism. While the Irish government has been reluctant to engage in any preparatory work in this regard, the cross-party *Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement* (JCIGFA) recommended, in July 2024, that 'preparation for a united Ireland to begin immediately' (JCIGFA 2024). Academia has filled the governmental void to date carrying out a wide range of research connected with the issue of reunification, such as the ARINS[16] project and ESRI[17] for example. Nonetheless, while evidence-based research is building, reunification, by and large, remains esoteric, aside from the broader aspirational objectives. As Dónal reflects:

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[16] Analysing and Researching Ireland North and South, see https://www.ria.ie/research-programmes/arins/ (accessed 4 January 2023).
[17] Economic and Social Research Institute, see https://www.esri.ie/ (accessed 4 January 2023).

I even say to my Sinn Féin colleagues, what is this new united Ireland we're going for, because I don't know what it's about, and no one can tell me… so it's a bit perverse… you spend your whole life saying you want a united Ireland but you're not quite sure what a united Ireland looks like.

He continues;

And that's what's the failure with Brexit… we had Brexit, and then it was, oh shit, what do we do now. And that could be the failure of a border poll that you could fail to prepare what's coming and that's my fear… many friends of mine are so middle-class… they're all worried about their taxes and the health service... There definitely has to be a plan.

Planning for unity based on the 'disaster' of Brexit, has provided a universal template on how not to conduct a referendum, a consistent feature of this Nationalist sample. Brexit, aided by indifference to the local mandate, was compounded by an 'incredibly selfish' and 'small minded' British government according to Claire:

how unaware they seemed to be of our history and the necessity to look after the peace process and to pay attention to it. Even the scorn that they seem to have for the south of Ireland… just the arrogance of the way we have been seeing the British government behave, has really alienated people, it has alienated me and I can see it in other people.

Increased alienation from Westminster since Brexit, contrasts with the period 'before Brexit' where Claire believes 'more people [were] happy with that status quo' than not. As one contributor put it, Brexit 'has brought the all island dimension back on the table'. He states:

whether you're economically in any position to influence what essentially goes beyond Westminster is debatable… the ability of our assembly… to respond to many of the challenges that Brexit has thrown up, I think they're very limited… that's the downside, and then it naturally points you toward what other alternative arrangements can you make across this island.

The same interviewee raises a vital component of the reunification debate, 'it's not just a simple question of how the northerners react to a border poll. It's how does the south react to it, is the south ready for that kind of conversation and challenge?' Uncertainty as to how reunification will be received in the Republic was raised by a number of the participants. As another mentions, absent of 'any fears at all about a border poll… I'd have more fears about the southern ones because they mightn't want us.' Polling in the south has been consistently favourable towards unity (Leahy 2022), suggesting a latent desire for reunification. In NI/NoI

polling fluctuates depending on circumstances, the sample and the method. Undoubtedly, context will be different in a pre-reunification space leaving much work for the Republic's government to do in preparation. The establishment narrative in the south is based on a partitionist construction of the island. Divergence is apparent between civil society and the political class, with the latter viewing reunification in terms of party political advantage traditionally viewed as the preserve of SF. Despite both mainstream political centre-right parties claiming Republican credentials, a change of those party political positions in order to officially advocate for unity would be required. Presently, the topic appears very much associated with boosting SF's electoral standing and as a consequence remains an objective of the Left in the Dáil only. Hesitance from the southern establishment however does not diminish the Nationalist inclination towards reunification. As Pat divulges, 'it [reunification] is something I aspire to, but… given my age, it's not something I expect to see... I do believe that in due course, there will be a sort of Irish unity', but adds the caveat:

> my view is… 50% plus one is… not a very good… sign for a constitutional change… history has taught us here where you had… a Unionist majority… It doesn't account for very much unless you can… show a minority that they had some place… they have some value, they have some respect… [that] their own identity can be sort of recognised and respected… rather than just 50% plus one... I would say… you're talking 60% plus... a good proportion of the minority.

Again the supposedly 'unsayable' is uttered. This a contentious issue, particularly from a Nationalist perspective, and represents and alternative viewpoint that accedes greater value to Unionist votes. This suggestion is not without precedent. As early as July 1998, only three months after the signing of the GFA, David Trimble, leader of the UUP was debating in the House of Commons that the threshold should be raised to 60% rather than the simple majority as stated in GFA. Additionally, Ian Paisley and Peter Robinson, who would all go on to become First Ministers in the Stormont Assembly, were also advocating in the same debate the need for a 'weighted majority' or cross-community parallel consent (Hansard 1998). Former Taoisigh (Humphreys 2009:91), including Leo Varadkar, cautioned that 50%+1 may not suffice. Former Deputy First Minister Seamus Mallon, deputy leader of the SDLP, and key architect of GFA also went on to espouse a weighted majority, like Robinson in 1998, in the form of 'parallel consent' (Harvey and Bassett 2019:15). Ironically, parallel consent is framed in anti-majoritarian language by many who once enjoyed the benefits of majoritarianism. Regardless of how any future referendum is counted Pat does not 'fear it, I mean I would probably vote for unity in a border poll.' He continues:

even those who are opposed to it, probably… have never looked at it in any great depth either… you get whipped up by Jim Allister and people who… will be opposed to it regardless, even if it has no impact on anybody's day-to-day activities.

This contribution illuminates, again, how the dominant narrative is maintained, that is, by uncritical engagement with it. The psychological toll (McLean and Syed 2015:336) for this adherence is a reflexive rejection absent of contemplation that compounds existing fears and insecurities. One contributor believes there should be 'regular' unity referendums':

we should have had one long before now. … If we had had earlier border poll which had rejected the border it's showing that democracy works.

Likewise, the status quo cannot be maintained without democratic endorsement from a Nationalist perspective, and should therefore be tested. For Claire:

The informed choice bit of it, we are deeply in need of that. And one of the things we need for example is for the conditions to be spelt out in a very transparent way because it is a bit frightening that it is in the gift of the secretary of state.

In 2018 victim's campaigner Raymond McCord went to court to compel the British Secretary of State to clarify criteria for triggering a unity referendum. Sir Paul Girvan dismissed the challenge being 'wholly unpersuaded… that the secretary of state is to be bound by a policy detailing the way in which that flexible and politically sensitive power is bound to be exercised.'[18] This decision went to appeal also resulting in dismissal by the court who reaffirmed the 'need for flexibility rather than consistency' when assessing 'extremely complex political considerations.'[19] 'The discretion to direct the holding of a border poll is unqualified' and therefore does not 'specify any matter which should be taken into account or any matter that should be left out of account'[20], concluding that 'the constitutional value of flexibility requires to be maintained and that it would not be maintained by the publication of a policy as to the *present views.*'[21] Commenting on the ruling Colin Murray believes it 'calls into question the willingness of the courts to deal with issues around the interpretation of fundamental aspects of the GFA' as no legal avenue is available 'under the agreement, or under the Northern Ireland Act by which the UK Government can be pressurised' to publish criteria for a unity referendum (Murray 2020). Lack of judicial protection for the GFA ensures that the SoS, acting at the behest of the British government, has unparalleled discretion to trigger the mechanism for self-determination. Further compounded by the standard of SoS sent to NI/NoI

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[18] [2018] NIQB 106
[19] *Raymond McCord's Application: Border Poll* [2020] NICA 23.
[20] ibid para 68.
[21] ibid para 100.

and 'the way they don't seem to understand here' opens the potential that 'they could do things out of stupidity or mischievousness', according to Claire. For another contributor the British government have 'now moved to some point where you know, if they could get rid of it [NI/NoI], they probably would.' He states:

> there's a danger in trying to convince Unionists, for example, that you have a never ending conversations, that actually goes nowhere…I think a lot of it will be the influence of the British Government in particular, in saying to them, 'look, we've tried our best but you need to cut your deal'… when you say cut a deal, well, what is it Unionists really want? Have you talked to Unionists on the Shankill Road or you talk to Unionists in lower Newtownards Road? They want a better life… a better job… better house, they want what most Catholics, Nationalists want.

Nationalist perspectives that Unionist concerns are taken into account are very much evident from this sample. Accommodating Unionists for some contains the inherent risk of entering a perpetual dialogue to deliberately obfuscate reunification, he adds, 'there's something about setting timescales…[to] focus minds.' Such considerations are framed by this contributor within a broader rights framework, and in this regard he asks, 'can I guarantee rights without guaranteeing bigotry?' From some of the commentary, elements of sectarianism are contained within what is broadly described as 'Protestant-Unionist culture.' This includes issues such as parading and bonfires, many of which are extremely insulting to Nationalists, and perceived to be deliberately so, such as the burning of the Irish tricolour or marches through Nationalist areas. As Gerard alluded to above, is this upholding the right to of 'freedom from sectarian harassment' as enshrined within GFA? In a reunification scenario such issues will inevitably require addressing. As the contributor continues:

> you have to look at cultural diversity, not in a narrow kind of sectarian context, but in the context of… history…And what rights are with responsibilities. I think that's kind of an important one because you know, rights doesn't give you a free pass to bigotry, racism or any other form of ism.

5.2.1 Evasion through good relations

'Responsibilities' are an issue of great importance when connected with the displays of 'group identity', which, for Todd, cannot act as 'a moral trump-card or political veto-right' (Todd 2021:56). In this context, intrinsic group identity characteristics can become embroiled in 'culture wars' which by their nature appeal to the 'heart' rather than the 'head', inevitably leading to the necessity for maintaining 'good relations'. Yet good relations as a concept has proven problematic for a number of the participants. As Rab submits, 'everything is centred

around trying to fit into a result, you know the end result is all they want, they are not looking at why is this not happening, why is this not working.' He explains:

> There's a lot of superficial-ness to it… [it] is trying to fit a square peg into a round hole, 'why can youse not be good Northern Irelanders'… everything is geared towards [making] Northern Ireland work… there's nobody saying 'listen this doesn't work… what can we do to change the narratives that we have'?... when you look at what's coming up from the 26 counties, there's this sort of element of poor loyalism or unionism and we need to in some ways… to pander to what their needs are.

Rab believes that a good relations industry has developed, detached from the realties in local communities that promotes the notion that if people 'get into a room together and we will crochet something or we will have a cup of coffee and we will be buddies sure that's it all over.' He is exasperated by such an approach that assumes making friendships will resolve the conflict which he argues simply 'doesn't work'. 'If we are not dealing with the problems' as well as 'commonalities' then it is an exercise in futility, from his point of view.

For Fionntan, good relations inhibits the addressing of some of society's historic structural disparities, stating, 'you can't tackle inequality, especially if it's as long term, and systemic as the ones we're dealing with a good relations approach' as 'it needs to be 50-50'. In an asymmetrical society addressing issues on a 50-50 basis is, ultimately a continuance of the disparities under the guise of addressing them. Indeed, under Section 75 equality legislation good relations is subordinate to equality, placed in sections 2 and 1 respectively[22]. Despite this, the *Committee for the Administration of Justice* (CAJ) argued that good relations, in their report, *Unequal Relations*, has been used to undermine equality (CAJ 2013a). Without proper resourcing to deal with historic and structural issues of inequality in areas like The Market, Fionntan believes that 'good relations bollocks' becomes a distraction. He states:

> it's a wee trip away for a group of kids and then they all go back home and there's no long term thing that'll unite them the way dealing with inequality will or proper employment programme or proper education programme. I think that element of it, has sort of, been frustrated from dealing with inequalities and more focused on the good relations narrative.

Amiable terminology makes good relations a concept difficult to argue against but from a Nationalist viewpoint, it has been used to evade rather than address fundamental issues of a divided society. As Bell (1991) intimates, community division, particularly sectarianism, is discussed within official 'discourses of the state' not as a consequence of structural inequities

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[22] See, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/section/75

but of 'personal prejudice' putting the onus on communities to resolve societal division. Absent of state acknowledgement of their role in creating and maintaining such divisions, inhibiting communal agency to address 'societal constraints' via diversionary good relations activities maintains the status quo from a master narrative perspective (McLean and Syed 2015:336). Framed within a good relations paradigm, the reunification process could provide Unionists with a de facto 'political veto-right.' A counter-weight to a good relations framework is addressing, and discussing, in an open and transparent manner the structural inequalities, historic division and so on, within a time-bound process. As one interviewee put it, if 'we can't talk about that, because it's a conflict then we're never going to move forward.'

5.2.2 Flexibility and rigidity

Breaking down communal division through cross-community work, in Rab's experience, has been difficult because people living in 'ordinary prod areas', as he puts it, 'don't want to be involved in forums' Loyalist paramilitary representatives are on. He questions 'the validity of why we are giving a leg up and space to people' who 'are not valued that much in their own community.' He argues:

> The majority of people who I have met from the Loyalist community, who are UDA or from a UVF background struggle to engage people. People don't come to them, they don't engage with them.

Unrepresentative community gatekeepers create a barrier within broader civil society. In seeking to resolve this conundrum Rab asks, 'how do we begin to create that dialogue where we explore those notions of what are all the impediments and what are all the positive things that can happen', which he believes is 'missing at the moment.' In favouring reunification, Nationalists naturally, seek to widen the debate as broadly as possible in order to strengthen the process and the eventual desired outcome. There is a willingness represented by this sample to engage with all shades of unionism not only to advance reunification but also to challenge themselves. A realisation that effective and genuine dialogue will require no small amount of self-examination within the Nationalist community, and indeed within the Unionist community, is evident. Perceived absence of articulation or debate within the latter community that 'challenges people about what they think' leaves a void filled by 'MPs from Westminster who are deciding their fate.' The same interviewee cites the 'West Belfast Festival' as a demonstration of community empowerment that challenges negative typecasts through the annual programme of inclusive debate and discussion. She continues:

> I remember Internment, you know bloody bonfires, bin lids, buses being burnt all the time. An awful lot of damage we inflicted on ourselves, but how we have moved through all that has been incredible. You know a cultural celebration that still has

very live debates on politics and history. And there's very few equivalents in the Unionist community. But maybe that's because they've too many churches.

'Too many churches' suggests a fragmentation within the Unionist community in contrast to a unifying presence of a singular church that has enabled a cohesion on which the success of Féile has benefitted. She comments, 'you hardly see any of that in the Unionist communities. There's no common effort.' Over a decade of Tory austerity has brought to the fore 'the whole notion of social mobility' being 'turned on its head' for the interviewee:

> my children are the first generation that will be worse off than their parents… that's not a good thing. If you want to talk in terms of… prosperity and growth and economic development that's a downward tangent.

A negative trajectory in prosperity strengthens the reunification case for the contributor, stating:

> that knocks away all those discussions that, oh we'll be worse off in a united Ireland and we'll miss the NHS… But actually when you look at education and health and certainly lots of benefits, income support, benefits for older people, people in the south of Ireland are actually better off.

Of course, better standards of living are a vital part of the reunification argument, but for the Nationalist participants it is deeper issues if identity, fairness, democracy that interlace to improve society. Juxtaposed against a post-Brexit Britain that is perceived as regressive and uncaring, another participant put it, 'for me reunification isn't just about …taking away the British control, it's about the type of society that you want.' This comment hints at a process of societal co-design that essentially invites the writing of a new narrative. Nationalism views reunification as a unique opportunity, not only for constitutional change, but as a peace project and a blank sheet to configure society anew in an enlarging manner. As another interviewee explains:

> I've always seen myself as Irish but you know we all have lots of identities. You know feminist, socialist those sorts of things… we're also Europeans and I think once you've had a taste of that and what it feels to be like a part of a bigger community and all the benefits that come from it and cooperation that comes from it, why should you want your world retracted again?

Brexit is very much associated with a retraction which had clear elements of xenophobia overlaid with a resurgent English nationalism. As Stephen contends, 'your little Englander perspective on the world has started all this.' Carrying through past Brexit, Britain's lurch to the right was exemplified by the British government's Rwanda policy and the 'stop the boats'

campaign. For the previous speaker this is a major push factor framed within local historical circumstances:

> you've only got to look at what's happening with asylum seekers now to realise that for many years we exported our own people everywhere so it's very important that we provide safe haven, sanctuary for people… nations can only be great if they protect minorities… that's what the Good Friday Agreement was based on because it was the absence of human rights and civil rights that actually got us into that bloody mess.

As the central pillar of the peace process, GFA encapsulates for Nationalists the fundamental motifs of identity, equality, and self-determination. Brexit, for Claire was 'contrary to the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement'. She explains:

> I can't express to you how outraged I was. Then what I observed from people around me… for people with whom national identity wasn't as strong, it became stronger… young people who might have identified themselves as Northern Irish… suddenly felt that they had an aspect of their identity taken away… European identity or Ireland in a European context or even Ireland and UK in a European context. Something they felt could be fluid was being forced into being more fixed.

Brexit perceived as restrictive, forced a narrowing of identities, according to this assessment. With a 'very strong correlation between a sense of English identity and voting Leave' (O'Toole 2018:191), an insular Brexit Britain created alienation from those with a broader worldview. National identity which 'has always been important' for Claire was more fluid for young people born circa or after GFA having a vastly different context from which to form their thoughts and opinions. Anecdotally, the transition from an identity founded in conflict has evolved into something else. Dónal provides one such example:

> we have family do's, and we start singing Republican songs and Nationalist songs, and all our kids are like, 'what are you's doing' (laughter), and seriously we're like, what are you talking about, this is very important, 'that's nonsense for god's sake'. And I'm amazed at that, and I go, but that's our history, and they go, 'no that's your history, it's not my history.'

Dónal's example offers an intriguing glimpse into how narratives have shifted so significantly in a relatively short period of time which would provide fertile ground for future research. How Brexit has impacted identity of young people is less clear but if a hardening has taken place, as Claire suggests, then the case for reunification is strengthened given the demographic trends of a slowly increasing Catholic population. What O'Leary, refers to as 'the shifting of the demographic tectonic plate' (O'Leary 2022:14) is already taking place submitting that those

'aged between 0 and 18 in 2011… will have joined the electorate as adults' by 2030 (O'Leary 2022:1). While no guarantee of supporting constitutional change, the demographic tide is unquestionably receding for the Protestant-Unionist community as the Catholic-Nationalist tide comes in. According to McLean and Syed, 'narrative by definition, implies, subjectivity, malleability and flexibility' that construes both the person and the structure as dynamic (McLean and Syed 2015:322). As a causal stimulus constitutional change can therefore illicit adaptations of expansion or retraction. Rigidity or flexibility of the agent based on subjective relations to the master narrative will determine either a positive or negative impact to change. While Brexit has had a negative impact, achieving constitutional change democratically via GFA was viewed positively, attracting widespread support from the Nationalist community. Indeed, Claire makes clear that this is 'one of the reasons that I did vote' for it. She adds:

> I've always had an awareness of that provision… you could see that when you're talking about the census results… I think Brexit has definitely brought it closer. There's a couple of different reasons for that… about people feeling that a constitutional change had already been happening without consent, and that's the Brexit one… and that had forced… identity [into] becoming a harder and less flexible thing.

Brexit was both an accelerant for constitutional change and a dynamic for forced rigidity. She also takes exception with how 'British government… used their power', posing a direct risk to a fragile peace process. As Rab explains the precarious nature of northern politics, if issues such as 'Drumcree'[23] or 'the Protocol' arise 'then bang, everybody's split again and relationships are back to where they were before.' That wider events have the capacity to derail the entire political process is very real and omnipresent. Since Brexit there is an impression within the Nationalist community, that the British government facilitated instability particularly around Brexit negotiations, driven by a xenophobic, isolationist, English nativism. This view is magnified by 'the fact that the north voted to remain and that vote was ignored' according to Moya. She continues:

> I think in a sense we saw the bigger picture… because I can be Irish and European… I think that helped to crystalize… for some people here in saying I'd rather be recognised as being European than being brought back into the British psyche per say… I think it has enabled the discussion for constitutional change… in a less 'them and us' situation… because it's not just about Catholic, Protestant or Nationalist Unionist, it is about the policies of expansion and retraction.

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[23] In July 1995 the RUC prevented the OO from walking through the nationalist Garvaghy Road area of Portadown leading to significant violence. For further reading see CAIN.

Rab exemplifies the Nationalist position:

> We are now closer to the goal, I believe in some way, because the conversations we are having today, are conversations that would never have happened 10 years ago and talk of a united Ireland was kept in the cupboard like a bogey man and no one would engage it. They are out there. They are open… attitudes are changing.

A flexibility to changing circumstance for Nationalists counterpoised by Unionist absence in the debate around constitutional change reinforces the notion that 'Nationalists and Republicans will buy and large vote yes, Unionists will buy and large vote no because that's the identity', says Claire. As Rab acknowledges, 'it has to be that unionism has to feel valued in some way.' Identity and constitutional preference are inextricably linked as per this analysis. Additionally, Rab states;

> I don't know too many Loyalists that I have ever met, nor do I know too many Republicans that I have ever met who have ever changed fundamentally what their political beliefs are. The only people who are there for change I believe… is that middle ground.

5.3 Constitutional future

'That middle ground' according to Stephen incorporates along with the non-aligned 'other', the 'middle road rationalist and middle road Unionist', illustrating a broader spectrum of centre ground beyond the two dominant blocs, suggesting lighter shades of Orange and Green, and more nuance. For him, this constituency 'would rather have the economic benefits' associated with EU membership which will 'change things much quicker than prod v taig.' For him, the primary driver will be 'economics.' With the correct conditions created economically, reunification 'will happen naturally.' He prefaces this opinion with a reflection that would be an accepted position within the Nationalist community, reinforcing the logic of reunification:

> we are false, we are not a real country as such. We are a negotiated settlement to a part of an island that was segregated, so it's a natural process that when demographic change happens that it'll return to where it rightfully belongs.

Pseudo-solidity of the status quo is tempered by the constitutional reality of living 'in the UK', as Pat points out. He does not accept that 'where I live really on a day-to-day basis [in] anyway diminishes my identity.' Indeed, Stephen states that Brexit or 'the Protocol doesn't change my identity'. He insists that national identity 'is form birth' and place:

> it's not even a political opinion… it's a conversation I would have with Protestant Unionist and Loyalist friends… this whole idea about being British. British is not an

identity. It's a partnership between four parts of a couple of islands… your identity, whether you like it or not is where you are born.

Martin contributes to this aspect of the debate by stating:

> I don't feel the need I have to say I'm this or I'm that, I just am who I am, born here, raised here, speak with an Irish accent, born on the island of Ireland, and that's the end of it… as far as the Nationalist side is concerned, yes, I think they do, largely uphold the Nationalist identity or the Irish identity.

He also acknowledges the current constitutional position, elucidating that 'the British government still have one hundred percent sovereignty over this part of Ireland'. This unappealing fact for Claire, was ultimately an 'acceptance of partition', and a necessary component of the GFA *quid pro quo*, which crucially held out the promise of self-determination. Yet, it was fraught with the danger for her that 'the Northern Ireland Assembly' could be a 'Stormont mark two.' As another contributor comments, 'the assembly is only an assembly, it is not a parliament'. Westminster parentalism and the infantilization of the UK's constituent parts highlights the impotence of NI/NoI to chart its own course. As Rab asserts:

> you are [or] never will be free from outside influence but at least if we had the ability to begin to set our own policies and set who we are… unencumbered from some of the stuff we are currently bogged down in… I think it [reunification] creates that opportunity, whether we take it or not.

He continues;

> At the end of the day, it could end up like any other thing. We could get into this united Ireland, and it becomes something that I don't want and maybe quite a lot of people don't want... But given what we have, I can't see a better alternative.

On the status quo Martin adds, 'I'm not sure how long that can last with the situation as it is now where you have forty percent of the population voting Unionist and forty percent voting Nationalist and twenty percent other.' Within this cohort future constitutional arrangements, and indeed the process, is framed positively and inclusively, resulting as Rab contends, that, 'even… the DUP could be a mainstay of government in an all-Ireland scenario.' It must include, for Claire:

> people born Catholic brought up Nationalist right, born Protestant brought up Unionist right… new citizens… people who have never thought about politics and don't have a strong constitutional identity at all… [and] people that are going to be swayed by the arguments.

As such the type of society envisaged through reunification within this sample generally encompass themes of compassion and inclusivity, as articulated by Stephen:

> It's definitely not a capitalist society… it's a caring compassionate, democratic system of government without the elitist or elitism, it's something that pushes back on this neo-liberal, exploitative greedy society we are in at the moment.

Left-leaning and liberal impulses were prevalent through-out the interviews that align the values of a future 'compassionate' society with the general ethos of Nationalist identity in contrast to perceptions of an English-centric dispassionate mentality that is filtered down through British government policies. As one contributor affirms:

> a lot of this is about class and people ignore that… And while we've all been entrenched in this sort of political discussion they're moving money everywhere. They're moving production everywhere. They're making poor people poorer. They're not looking after communities and maybe that's what capitalism does.

Indeed, another participant argues:

> the truth is the type of society that England has is about the money. If there's a lesson to learn there, for ourselves, that if it's all about capitalism and making money, then does it matter what flag you put on it?

For Fionntan 'any future Ireland' is about devolving 'democratic influence as locally and as broadly as possible'. He elaborates:

> it's not to repeal the union but the conquest, that whole culture that came with plantation, the private ownership of land, the class structure and all that came in with it… Decolonising, how people think, decolonising how the whole society operates.

He explains:

> one person doesn't have the fucking right to dictate the future for a whole group of people, a whole community of people, just because they happen to have a bit of paper that they own the land… that's… been the core thing in Irish history. It just dropped fucking down into a land war… it's still that battle over land, who owns it… you're pushing towards democratising all aspects of life in this society, particularly in the economy.

Democratisation is a means of empowerment delivered through self-determination. As an interviewee asks, 'have we really laid the ground work [for reunification] or have we just spent twenty-five torturous years arguing about all the things that we didn't agree on'?

Unintentionally, this question reinforces the argument for constitutional change in that it illustrates some of the disillusionment that GFA, or lack of delivery, has failed to meet expectations. Whether the ground work has been adequately laid for reunification can only really be answered after the result of a unity referendum that will reveal whether preparations and arguments have been sufficient to persuade the majority of voters. Arguments for and against reunification will no doubt be persuasive. For Huggie, the threshold for constitutional preference is determined by, 'maybe it's a cliché, but I would look at it as the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people within the island.' In spite of some disappointment with GFA, Claire asks, did it 'create the conditions for a transition to something else? I think we're probably living through that.'

Conclusion

Maintaining a Unionist majority with a Nationalist minority was the raison d'etre of the northern polity. How that was implemented and maintained is of course the topic of numerous studies. In analysing the commentary above, it is clear that within the Nationalist narrative there are distinct overtures of discrimination felt by many of the interviewees of being '2nd class', discriminated in housing and in jobs contextualised temporally since partition. Moreover, within this context distinct narrations of 'oppression' and violence against the Nationalist community by the state and/or Loyalists emerge. Partition, of course, has a deeper history beyond the early twentieth century with its genesis in the Home Rule campaign of the mid-1880s. What is significant for this study is that it endures as a starting point for several of the interviewees and remains the connecting thread aiding sense-making of events since that era to the present. Strong class correlations, internalised themes of discrimination and inequality situated many of the interviewee subjective interpretations within an oppressive state structure. In this context it is unsurprising that the existence of NI/NoI itself remains an expression of a master narrative from which many were alienated. To counter structural inequality an ethos of educational attainment embedded enabling upward social mobility. Replete with memories of struggle and oppression, the Nationalist narrative continues to be shaped contemporarily with historic resonance.

This embodied history dovetails with the beginning of conflict, were identities narrowed. Intertwined with episodic narrations of violence created, an alternative Nationalist perspective oppositional to the official state narrative seeking recognition of their position and change. GFA, in this regard was seminal. The agreement is a fundamental acknowledgement of societal disparities that existed in NI/NoI from its inception up until that point. A sense of communal dignity was achieved which validated the alternative Nationalist narrative from which confidence has grown exponentially. Despite a lack of peace dividend GFA is still held

in high regard, particularly as it holds out the promise for constitutional change and a reunification dividend. In spite of its narrative of oppression Nationalists offer a conciliatory tone to the community who primarily benefitted from that oppressive structure.

From a Nationalist perspective Brexit reinforced biographical notions of marginalisation and domination. Yet, contrary to the historic exemplar where, post-partition, the Nationalist community became subdued and demoralised, Brexit has energised and revived a desire for reunification within a community growing in confidence. Built on decades of self-reliance, raised morale is augmented by political advancement and demographic change, and demonstrated by an openness to debate and discuss constitutional change with their ideological opponents.

Realisation that reunification cannot be achieved by Nationalists alone was widely apparent and that any post-reunification society cannot be exclusionary. Indubitable preference towards reunification is unsurprising yet it is not envisioned as a singularly Nationalist project. Flexibility as to how new constitutional arrangements could be structured were openly expressed. Based on the values of inclusion and fairness reunification is a malleable objective consistent with the Nationalist biography. Brexit, therefore, has challenged the normative perceptions of the permanency of the status quo, enervating its stability. It is within this atmosphere of constitutional flux that Irish reunification, espoused by Nationalists, has begun to mature.

6. Unionist perspectives

Introduction

Ulster unionism at its most basic desires the continuance of 'the Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland', a broad brush stroke that conceals a multitude of nuanced variations. The 'imagined community' of modern day Ulster unionism consists of numerous 'forms of unionism and loyalism that run like tributaries into a fast-flowing river of British national identity' (Edwards 2023:xix). Strongly overlapping with Protestantism, it is built on the foundation of the loyal Irish and Ulster plantation with a definite hierarchical structure and class distinctions. It is a heterogeneous bloc with privilege bestowed through Westminster patronage. Ideologically, it is an amalgam of conservative and liberal, rural and urban elements that have traditionally coalesced around the constitutional question.

To investigate the nuances of unionism relative to constitutional change and how that narrative evolves, this chapter, like those previously, seeks to 'unearth the doxastic positions' of the interviewees in order to capture their 'attitudes and lived experiences' to ascertain 'current' and possible 'future developments'. To do this, this chapter has three main sections. The first, is context setting introducing most of the contributors under the heading, *Interpretations and the lived experience*, with a number of sub-sections beginning with *Loyalism,* followed by, *Hierarchy and monarchy*. The next section is *Changing narratives? GFA and Brexit* with the sub-section, *Brexit* with the chapter ending with a brief conclusion.

6.1 Interpretations and the lived experience

John Dunlop is a retired church minister whose 'primary identity' is Presbyterian. His view of history has a colonial as well as a transatlantic dimension as he discusses his forebear's participation in the American War of Independence who fled Ireland and 'were not of the landlord class.' Discrimination was not as 'intense as the discrimination against Catholics', adding, 'if Catholics were third class citizens, Presbyterians were second class.' Born in 1939, 'not that long after partition' in Newry, his description reflects an image of a frontier town with a prorated population who 'didn't interact very much', stressing that the fissure was not 'in the same vicious way' as it was in Belfast. Physical estrangement within a diminished geography, Newry, divided internally, was also cut off from its natural hinterland by perceived hostility. To 'go over the border… you got the impression that … It was a foreign country… [that was] kind of hostile to our existence as a Unionist community.' Partition was 'a defensive mechanism' for Unionists against 'a very conservative Catholicism' with a 'powerful influence' over 'culture and the state.' Ideological incongruence and religious doctrinal difference created two

absolutist incompatible jurisdictions. Claiming 'to be British and Irish after partition in the south' was an 'absurdity' barring:

> double-belonging… You had to make up your mind… if you were British you had to suppress your British identity… keep your mouth shut, just fit in, or leave, one or the other.

Paraphrasing from his book¸ *A Precarious Belonging* (1995) he maintains that the 'precarious nature of our belonging in Ireland' was that 'we… belonged and we kind of half belonged.' As a result 'if you start coming under pressure then you start getting defensive.' Defensiveness emanating from 'cultural' and 'quasi-political pressure' ultimately affects thinking, behaviour and one's sense of identity. He remarks:

> I often say the IRA knocked all the Irish-ness out of me because it looked like… [their] campaign was largely aimed at [my] community… If it was very Irish, then it raises the question... where does somebody like me fit into the island… [as] in Fermanagh or someplace where Protestants were being killed all over the place.

Adopting a circumspect view, John admits to 'positives and negatives in identity' of the Protestant-Unionist community. Highlighting the negative from the Protestant perspective is the 'bit' of being 'not Catholic, so anti-Catholic', the reverse is equally applicable 'in the other side' who are 'not Protestant' and 'partly… not British.' He adds, 'after partition both parts of Ireland… became excluding and exclusive, that neither of them in fact, looked after their minority people in any very positive way.'

Michael Briggs, works for the East Belfast Community Development Agency based in the lower Newtownards Road area. His mother worked in a mill, part of a generation of industrial workers who prioritised employment over education, 'there wasn't this push even from school… and it hasn't improved much.' Leaving school and going 'to work in the shipyard or Shorts or Sirocco works', was common. He recalls in a career class of around thirty pupils the teacher distributing 'applications for the training centre in the shipyard', with ten remonstrating:

> 'I don't want to go and work in the shipyard, I want to do something different' and the teacher was like 'well this is all I have for you'… you go to a working-class school in east Belfast, you leave that… school and you go to the shipyard.

Stifled ambitions created reliance on industries whose strength was founded on access to British imperial markets. Opportunities, unavailable to Nationalists, forced that community to develop a self-reliance not replicated by working-class Unionists. Michael explains:

Catholic communities, were already struggling… being discriminated against in the… big industries, the only way people were getting a job was [through] education… very early on Catholic communities were about education, education, education and that wasn't happening in Protestant communities.

Unanticipated industrial decline and loss of guaranteed employment was based on a perception of imperial benevolence and unlimited abundance to be shared with the most loyal subjects. The unwritten colonial compact becomes considerably undermined when the government cannot fulfil their obligation of ensuring the 'good life.' In spite of its collapse, the industrial heritage of east Belfast is imprinted in the social fabric of the area retaining a strong community spirit. As Michael explains, 'people love living here' admitting 'there's nothing unique to east Belfast' despite local perceptions, having the same problems that exist 'throughout the UK, Ireland', and 'parts of Europe… the basic issues... how do people put food on the table, how do they keep their house warm.' For him, east Belfast being 'majority Protestant' is 'still living in an era of Protestants don't think they need to ask for anything, it'll come to them.' The continuation of an attitude that the necessities of life will somehow be bequeathed upon them is indicative of the compulsory nature of a master narrative that allows 'one to live… life uncritically' (McLean 2015:327) regardless of the 'reality of facts.' To critique is to threaten the solidity of the foundational narrative, and risk-laden. Underscoring the social disparities of the area he states that:

East Belfast at one time when it was 577 wards in Northern Ireland, east Belfast had the number 1 ward and the number 577 ward so it was the best place to live but it was the worst place to live.

A community biography shaped by industry and impacted by 'the Troubles' exacerbated a disconnect 'from almost the rest of Northern Ireland' by 'the Lagan.' Isolation has been worsened by the 'complex layout' of road network, which he refers to as 'the shatter zone' that has 'created division between east Belfast and the rest of Belfast.'

One participant, a trade Unionist and community worker, describes his own political development, growing up 'within the Unionist community' and being involved in 'socialist-type micro groups'. He asserts that 'if unionism had've been, not just that singular thing, in a normal set of circumstances… I would have developed as part of that Unionist community.' He remembers growing up in north Belfast 'and Paisley coming into the estate, people were fucking feral, I mean it was obvious these people were being manipulated.'

Raising the issue of partition, he sees it, not only as a physical act to divide the island, but crucially, in terms of the consequences of the 'political arrangements which were put in place after.' Viewing themselves as part of the 'Tory establishment', the 'hoi polloi, bourgeois… big

house Unionists' were 'basically outmanoeuvred by the British' into accepting partition in the interests of the 'British state.' With 'both communities in a sense trapped in the north… nobody got what they wanted.'

Embracing a bespoke version of Home Rule with a perpetual majority and 'permanent minority… there was simply no political development beyond policing the Mickies... that was their singular job to do.' Finding themselves 'on the wrong side of a border' they were 'seen as the enemy within.' A Unionist parliament 'semi-detached' from Britain, was reinforced by the 'convention at Westminster [that], up until the 1960s [when] everything went ape-shit, was not even to talk about this place.' A dearth of political development beyond 'policing the Mickies' created a reluctance to have a 'proper political body' despite 'other social and economic issues' being 'still live' because:

> the more political it becomes the more likelihood you're verged from the Unionist thing… what [Stormont] it did was duplicate major pieces of legislation… passed at Westminster... Even though there might have been 'ideologically I don't like that, but if I wanna stay in step.'

Compulsory and rigid, the Unionist master narrative constrained political development beyond that 'singular thing', stymieing 'internal opposition. This is crucial, Aaron Edwards argues, 'to understanding the character the state took in its formative years' (Edwards 2023:32). As a consequence, the 'false settlement' of partition 'utterly debilitated unionism.' To deconstruct it, the participant hypothetically adds, 'imagine nationalism doesn't exist':

> What's your politics? Well, 'not that…we don't want to live in an all-Ireland state'... Well, then what?... What are you then?... and again you've got 1000 different voices saying 1000 different things... the only coherence within unionism… is [saying] 'not that'.

In this regard, unionism is an *anti*-ideology in that it is 'a negative expression', in contrast to 'the Nationalist community [who] were clear in their own mind' in rejecting the state in which 'to some degree the discriminatory practises… actually… allowed them… to develop their own almost way of being', according to the interviewee. Understandably, Unionist and Nationalist 'civil society' evolved 'entirely different'. He continues, the 'Catholic-Nationalist community had, whether it liked it or not, to become self-reliant... There's nobody else going to fucking help it.' The inference being the opposite for the Unionist community, who became dependent on the state. In a surprising admission, he adds:

> Notwithstanding… Unionist supremacy… although there was a lot of things being done to the Nationalist community, all sorts of awful things, the weird outcome… [was that]

the Unionist community were more damaged by it even though they were the power holders, which is… a weird… contradiction.

Adherence to a master narrative instils an understanding of other 'groups in societies' and 'themselves'. The 'all pervasive and deeply embedded… antipathy to imagined traits of Irish Catholic nationalism' emanated from a desire not to 'crush Catholics' but 'rather to keep them in their place' (quoted in Edwards 2023:55), a colonial characteristic that bases settler privilege on maintaining the inferiority of the native. (Mac Donald 1985). Through 'shared history, goals, values' Unionists developed expectations of their 'life course' (McLean and Syed 2015:326) based on this system. Assumptions have not kept pace with reality because of uncritical alignment with the master narrative. As a long-term consequence, John believes that 'the Nationalist/Republican communities are far more advanced' because of 'coherence' around 'the Catholic community' with 'one church and… two main political parties.' The interviewee's opinion of political unionism, and deficiency on 'the Protestant side', is illustrated through his cross-community work in the 1980s:

> a lot of the relationships we would have had… with other organisations, curiously enough, even though we were sitting in the middle of this Loyalist housing estate, were all mainly with Nationalist groups because there was nobody else to talk to.

He states that 'within political unionism, they fucking hated it… they went out of their way to make sure it didn't happen', questioning their authenticity:

> unionism, here in the northeast isn't really British… it doesn't want to be British from a political point of view… political unionism wants the Brits to pay them to be Prods, and that's about the [height] of it.

Another 'contradiction' of 'political unionism and its constituency' is that it is 'almost a client based approach.' He has experienced this clientelism in action when he and his family were being ejected from their home 'through slum clearance.' His parents approached:

> Unionist politicians about being rehoused... They weren't on the electoral register, so they didn't fucking count... So the Unionists went fuck off. It was actually… Gerry Fitt who got our family rehoused.

This transactional association is a product of the lack of 'a healthy relationship between the political element and wider civil society', that misses an 'organic link through human relationship.' Because of this, 'the people have never had proper politics' but instead have 'a bogeyman… called Irish nationalism' around which an identity forms in opposition. He continues, 'I don't think it's that… strange that people then on the one hand they've got 'not that', in reference to unionism views on nationalism, 'but there's not really anything behind 'not

that'.' Inherent vacuousness within unionism made it 'more or less impossible' for the 'Unionist working-class… to have a proper political expression.' An alternative, non-sectarian politics espoused by the 'Northern Ireland Labour Party' inevitably 'crashed on the rocks that an awful lot of left alternatives have done subsequently, and that was on the border.'

Sam White, former Loyalist prisoner and community worker 'joined the UDA at a very young age.' As McLean and Syed explain, the master narrative 'can exist at multiple levels and therefore another location for deviation – the sub-group level – can tell us more about various social categories within a culture' (McLean and Syed 2015:330). Having served time in H-blocks, White recounts how his father was 'a politician for the Northern Ireland Labour Party.' Reflecting a non-sectarian labour tradition within the Unionist community, he shares that 'the majority of my friends were Catholic when I was a kid… religion was never an issue.' Labour politics offered a non-binary option to the electorate with varied success since partition, obliterated with the onset of conflict magnifying community polarisation. Surrounded by 'one's own' provided fertile ground for the emphasising of fears and shibboleths about the 'other'. As Sam argues 'the whole segregation thing wasn't the people, it was the security forces [who] had implemented that at the very beginning.' For White, civil conflict brought with it its own divisionary dynamic as Loyalist paramilitaries were deemed 'protectors for our community', as former Catholic friends became 'our enemies'. Eventually succumbing to this view, he and a majority of his friends joined Loyalist paramilitary groups. Being, 'a protector of my community…was all we lived for.'

Paramilitarism brought status, congruent with the 'interests of those in power' (Hammack 2008). On his first prison term, he recalls becoming 'more entrenched in the Troubles' through study of 'history':

> reading up on who we were… how Northern Ireland belongs to the Protestants more than Catholics … being brainwashed… and you were buying into it big time, and you felt great because of it.

A specific reading of the past situated within a context of civil conflict is 'subsumed under the construct of autobiographical reasoning' (McLean and Syed 2015:321) providing personal meaning in alignment with the master narrative. Imprisoned in the H-blocks during the blanket protest by Republican prisoners, he recalls:

> when Bobby Sands had died... I remember that night so well… you could have heard a pin dropping … there was no cheering, no ridiculing… nothing. We had a wee radio and we got the news... I'm not saying we had respect for him but, to a degree, there was a lot of respect for that.

An episodic recollection contrary to Unionist orthodoxy provides a very human account from an unlikely source to an event that would have wider implications. While on a 'mixed wing' of both Loyalist and Republican prisoners, White recalls the comradery, and getting 'on like a house on fire' leading him to ask very fundamental questions of himself and his organisation, 'why is this happening, why are we still killing each other'? He acknowledges that his thinking evolved from 'a more militarised perspective to a more peaceful… progressive looking' perspective. Transitioning from hawk to 'dove' saw him marginalised by some and losing 'a lot of friends' but gaining 'friends on a cross-community basis.' Here White represents the reconstruction of an alternative narrative from within loyalism. He shares that he also stood as a DUP local government election candidate, admitting that it was, 'probably the first time an ex-prisoner, an ex-combatant, a working-class person had ever stood for the DUP.' His experience, however, was not a positive one:

> I got bamboozled… they didn't want me there. Certain ones did, but the majority of them didn't. And that's what Protestant, working-class communities are faced with. It's a class issue… [they] are the same as Nationalist-Republican working-class communities… But the issue within loyalism, within Unionist communities – we can't go against the system because we want to be part of it.

This succinctly explains the predicament for working-class Unionist communities where loyalty to the polity takes precedence. Alignment with the master narrative inhibits agency to alter the structure and therefore perpetuates it. As McLean and Syed point out, agency has been 'primarily conceptualized… as a tension between internal beliefs about control and external constraint' (McLean and Syed 2015:335). They argue that, 'to take the power of master narratives seriously means one has to see how master narratives inherently limit' agency (McLean and Syed 2015:336). Moreover, Claire Mitchell, in her research, found that 'many Loyalist former combatants…found it easier to talk to their former Republican enemies than to transcend class divisions within unionism itself' (Mitchell 2008:8), reinforcing the hierarchical Unionist structure.

Glen Pollock is from 'a working-class… Loyalist estate', in Antrim 'very much brought up as Protestant, Loyalist, hate the Catholics', ingrained as an 'us and them' attitude. Many of Glen's relatives and friends were 'in Loyalist orange lodges' and bands, and as a 'youngster' without 'much choice' told 'to go out and march behind' them. So, I done that.' He had 'relatives in the police', with a cousin 'killed by the IRA.' Surrounded by Protestant thinking was identity-shaping, associating 'Catholics with the IRA' because they were 'causing all the bombings and shootings… you naturally grow a dislike and hatred towards… the IRA because… they were terrorists.' Growing up, in conflict, of 'barricades' and searches, 'it really affects you. Every

time you walk past a parked car you're thinking is this car going to blow up and stuff like that.' Although 'far from the killing fields in north Belfast' there was still tension, admitting to not being allowed out 'after dark' engendered resentment 'towards the IRA and people that support them.' Admissions of hatred towards the Nationalist community which were instilled in him from a young age, is a viewpoint rarely acknowledged. Animosity towards the IRA and their supporters is understandable, building on the early inculcation of hatred toward the 'other', indicative of a Loyalist habitus, where history and social conditions intersect.

His 'father… was a prison officer, and the Loyalists forced us out of our house… so I have a loathing of them as well.' As a consequence of being forced out, his family moved 'into a more private development… after that, I had enough of Northern Ireland.' He applied to join the RAF when he was 17, enlisted 'for nine years' and living in London, despite his Loyalist bona fides of 'serving queen and country' he was unable to totally escape his roots. He was:

> in a pub [in London], the time the IRA were bombing… and a guy heard my Irish accent and he came up and glassed me … and said, 'you Irish fucker'… if you knew the kind of background where I was from.

Dawn Purvis, describes herself as a 'Loyalist working-class woman' joining the PUP in 1994. Her 'home was blown up by an IRA bomb' with 'the Troubles' impacting her 'more than [she] knew'. Incidents such as 'Bloody Friday… shootings, barricades, being taken out of the house in the middle of the night because there's a bomb', became normative. The significance of this did not surface until adulthood and 'married with two young children… I thought 'this is awful', and I don't want my kids to grow up to experience what I experienced.' Conflict and class converge as recurring themes raised by a number of the interviewees. Along with her working-class upbringing she continues to 'live in a working-class area.' Loyalism for her 'is always working-class… probably because of where I come from' but finds difficulty in defining loyalism:

> you ask a hundred Loyalists 'What is a Loyalist?' you get a hundred different answers. For me… I'm basically a Unionist but my class plays a big part in that so for me loyalism is about working-class unionism, not big house unionism.

She argues that ''big house unionism'… the political class were separated' from and 'neglected working-class areas', not doing 'a lot for working-class Loyalist people and probably still don't.' She supports her view by submitting:

> you never seen an MP until… election time. They'd come round on the back of a flatbed truck… give the band a few pound and go round the streets so that 'here they

are, here's the loyal man that walks with the Orange Order, that represents your community at Westminster' and all the rest of it. A load of nonsense!

White explains further 'the ethos of being led up the garden path' recalling mainstream Unionist parties coming 'round with their loud hailers' neglecting social issues preferring 'the green and orange… politics.'

On being asked to join the PUP (Progressive Unionist Party), Dawn's initial reaction was 'clear off or my mum will kill me!' because of the party's association with the UVF. However, Dawn was enticed by their policies on 'women's rights… the Abortion Act… education… and academic selection' which she viewed contrary to mainstream Unionist rhetoric. The opening of 'the first political party office from any political party' attracted public interest, arguing that such actions by the PUP and UDP 'shamed' the 'bigger Unionist parties' into 'opening offices in their local areas', allowing constituent access, something of a novelty for working-class Unionist communities. She explains the situation with former long-standing MP for the area, Martin Smyth, UUP, stating 'we never saw him… nobody knew where [his office] was', later discovering that 'it was on the Cregagh Road, which most people in south Belfast would class as east …You couldn't get further away from the people that vote for you.' Regardless, 'these people expected to be elected every year'. She assesses the interrelation:

> as a community we were very hard done by… we had been trailed by the nose… wheeled out when it suited Unionist politicians. And the paramilitaries… were also used… when it suited them.

This is a blunt admission, but also provides an underlying acceptance that this is was the 'done thing.' As a marginalised sub-group within unionism, loyalism represents a variation of the master narrative internalised 'that does not fit their experiences, resulting in feelings of relative inadequacy' (McLean and Syed 2015:330). Now in the descendant, the UUP have been eclipsed by the DUP as the lead party of unionism whose electoral strategy is quite straightforward. At the 'heart of it' for Dawn, is 'the politics of fear… if you vote for anybody else but the DUP you're gonna let them Shinners in.' Essential to this approach is that SF are depicted as 'the big bogeyman.' Inclusion rather than exclusion in the political process is favoured which she believes is hindered by fear of 'the other'.' Aware of the differences between unionism and nationalism she also noted 'the differences within unionism.' Recounting the time her house was blown up, intra-Unionist distinctions were apparent, 'nothing was starker than… when Paisley came into the street the day after the bomb and… the residents… chased him out.' 'Getting more involved with the community' was a natural consequence of the exploitation and neglect she perceived emanating from the political class and:

seeing with my own eyes and recognising the poverty that we lived in… as a community we had to start doing things for ourselves so I really started throwing myself into the community and started organising.

Activism at a grassroots level was necessary for Dawn in order for essential services to be provided for her community. As a distractive stratagem 'the politics of fear' allows issues of poverty and class to be subverted whereby her community vote for parties who support policies contrary to their own material well-being. She submits:

When I look at Unionist politicians particularly… those in the DUP who vote at Westminster against pay rises for nurses, vote for cuts in welfare benefits… I just… feel sick to my stomach that people are voting the way they do.

Dawn illustrates how master narratives 'gain strength', that is, 'from top-down positions of power and bottom-up passive support'. It is this specific dynamic that ultimately creates, changes and sustains culture (McLean and Syed 2015:335).

Sam Becton, a PhD history student based in Belfast, describes himself as a 'cultural Unionist', working for, a 'peace building organisation in East Donegal.' Having studied 'the impact of partition' he speculates that had Unionists accepted 'Home Rule… Ireland [may] have been in the United Kingdom for longer' and avoided the 'war of independence.' He believes 'Ireland was a greater loss to the UK than… India or Africa'. He describes the UK contemporarily as 'a person who had just had his leg amputated but still claiming he still has all four limbs but the left leg is a stump now. That is basically what we've become.'

Notably, Becton gave a submission to the *Public Consultation on the Constitutional Future of the Island of Ireland* in September 2022, focusing on the 'former Unionist Associations' that became 'Protestant Associations' established in 'Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan' after partition, having independent elected representatives 'up until the 1990s'. This antecedent suggests that:

if there was a united Ireland, how Protestants could react in a similar way… Unionist politics, Unionist interests, could become Protestant politics or interests just as they had become in the border counties.

As Becton states, it's 'three to four generations since partition… they've developed their own identity… I think a lot has changed. Similarly, John recalls conversations with Presbyterians from the Republic:

[asking] young people, are you Irish or British? 'Oh, we are Irish'… what about your parents… 'well they would be a bit more British.' What about your grandparents? 'They

were a British family living in the south, they just shut up about it.' So… it takes about three generations for the Irish to wash the Britishness out of you.

As a 'proud Unionist' Becton's unionism is about 'unity':

> that's the whole point of the United Kingdom. I don't call myself English… I call myself British because it includes all the United Kingdom, the Welsh, the Scottish, the Northern Irish, everyone.

As Robert McCartney articulates:

> the true and essential Union is not an exclusive union of Loyalists or Protestants, but a union between peoples who believe in liberal democracy and civil and religious liberty for all in the fullest sense of a pluralist society (McCartney, 1985: 25-6, cited in Todd, 1987:13)

The Stormont regime was the antithesis of an inclusive union of 'peoples' by McCartney's definition. In recognition of the limitations of maintaining the status quo purely on Protestant votes, Peter Robinson, in 2012, urged Unionists to 'reach out to all' (BBC News NI 2012) and in 2014 for the DUP to 'seek out converts to unionism' (BBC News NI 2014a). Evangelical unionism has, to date, failed to materialise, remaining dominated by a mono-cultural representation of NI/NoI that cannot abet Irish symbolism in the public realm.

6.1.1 Loyalism

Exclusivity promulgated a 'them and us' mentality but 'the point of unionism is that they are us', according to Becton. Short-term considerations nullified long-term advancement. Without 'the Troubles' he believes there may have still been 'a Protestant majority' although 'slight, given demographics.' Blaming 'Loyalists' as 'Unionist's biggest enemy' he describes loyalism as 'a poison', viewing it as defensive and exclusionary. Without such thinking 'the Troubles' could have been avoided altogether. Protestant privilege was the premise upon which NI/NoI was founded and maintained by 'big house' Unionists, with Loyalists playing a supporting role, adherents to the 'them and us' structure. Nationalists were characterised as the 'them' to be excluded from the outset. Exclusionary conceptions, particularly in relation to the Unionist-Nationalist dyad from Becton's perspective, do long-term damage to the Unionist cause. Evidently, a one dimensional assessment of more complex interrelations can place loyalism in a convenient position as scapegoat to cover such political pretensions, although that is not to say that loyalism is not a contributing factor. However, apportioning much of the blame on the failures of an inclusive unionism to develop on loyalism, provides an astringent reminder of the heterogeneous nature of unionism.

Clearly differentiations exist within the Unionist community as John emphasises that his family were 'Unionists but not Loyalists', a difference upon which 'the broad Protestant community is split.' For one participant, 'loyalism really has been the shock troops of unionism as opposed to being a thing in itself.' He submits:

> serious is not the right word because when it comes to… the capacity to actually make sure there's plenty of body bags… you've got to take something like that seriously. But I have never taken the politics of loyalism seriously.

He qualifies this by stating, 'loyalism has essentially failed to develop a politics for itself. And what politics it did develop… have been rejected by their own community' who 'punish Loyalist paramilitarism at the ballot box.' He attributes this to loyalism being 'encouraged not to think… by the Unionist establishment', expected to make 'life difficult' for Nationalists, and 'used as leverage against whatever British government was in power. I believe that's how political unionism has essentially… short changed loyalism.' Citing David Irvine and Billy Hutchinson as 'more the exception than the rule' in developing a Loyalist politics, the question 'loyalism needs to ask itself', he proposes is 'why do our own people… not vote for us'?

In a symbiotic relationship, Russell Watton, the PUP's only remaining elected representative, explains that 'mainstream unionism was inextricably bound up with the growth of Loyalist paramilitarism' (McKay 2021:21) whereby Loyalists could be used by political unionism while retaining enough distance to ensure plausible deniability, although some Unionists overtly affirmed their paramilitaristic inclinations, such as the DUP leadership, through the forming of Ulster Resistance in 1986 (News Letter 2016).

Dawn believes that the Unionist political class are 'one step apart from Loyalist working-class communities.' Because of this they 'don't understand the issues' although 'they certainly represent them when it comes to the Union and… [and] beating the other side up the hardest which… some within loyalism like to see.' Yet, loyalism retains an alternative narrative within the Unionist master narrative, which 'at minimum' (McLean and Syed 2015:320) differs along a class orientation. A dynamic exists in which loyalism recognises its own manipulation by political unionism, highlighting a lack of agency. One participant rubbished the Nationalist assessment of Unionist 'false-consciousness' as 'bollocks'. McLean and Syed argue that the 'potential for agency to manifest is strongly shaped by the opportunity structure', which according to the above accounts, is greatly restricted for Loyalists. Constrained by the master narrative, what is mis-conceptualised as false-consciousness could be more accurately characterised as 'false agency' (McLean and Syed 2015:336). Un-critical alignment with the master narrative provides a perception of agentic capacity within these confines. Yet, adherence is precisely why loyalism has self-imposed constraints limiting their ability to alter

the structure that is simultaneously the basis of their identity and a source of their discontentment. 'Narratives imposed on sub-groups', as loyalism could be defined within unionism, are therefore 'a prime location to examine issues of agency' (McLean and Syed 2015:340).

Constraints of master narrative alignment are exhibited by an inability to alter social conditions which are subsumed by affective notions of 'the Union' and 'beating the other side up the hardest'. Neglect from the political class is ultimately consensual. Its recognition has nonetheless left loyalism failing to produce a sustainable working-class alternative. The UDP have been entirely obliterated electorally and the PUP left with only one councillor. Political loyalism is something of a failed experiment despite early promise. Continued linkages with armed criminal organisations reduce their appeal for the electorate as the politics of fear dominate. As such, 'there's no confidence within working class-communities', according to White, 'it's fear'. Fear of what is not specified, but drawing inference from the commentary above one could extrapolate that it is fear of 'the other' in the shape of the Republican 'bogeyman'. White speaks of an 'emerging underclass' which he defines as a 'working-class where nobody works.' An uneducated, poverty-stricken population are much more malleable to manipulation where 'people haven't got the money… to worry about… politics… It's about survival.' The harsh realities of poverty are heightened in communities under paramilitary control and further compounded by a neglectful political class who exploit working-class paranoia for electoral gain, according to the above accounts. As one participant put it, 'on the Unionist side the working-classes were just seen as fodder', a historical pattern that seemingly continues. Maintaining traditional voting patterns has led to a non-thinking reflex whereby going against existing norms could be perceived as 'disloyal'. With loyalty 'at a premium' within the Unionist community divergence is risk-laden inhibiting individual agency to act in their own interests such as voting for parties supporting pay rises for nurses, for example. Loyalism is consistent with the definition of a marginalised sub-group within the master narrative framework that internalizes the master narrative yet 'it does not fit their experiences, resulting in feelings of relative inadequacy' (McLean and Syed 2015:330) that are compounded by their position within the Unionist structure they bolster.

6.1.2 Hierarchy and monarchy

There is comfort, however, with sticking with the tried-and-tested. As John points out, the Unionist community is 'hierarchical… the culture is hierarchical', from which a deference emerges, allowing communities to be 'trailed by the nose.' A paternalistic approach to politics infantalizes those on the bottom rung of a hierarchical structure producing self-perpetuating 'feelings of relative inadequacy' that reproduce the master narrative. For Dawn the dearth of

'good salesmen or women within unionism and loyalism' means 'it's about telling a community to get up off its knees and stop looking down at its boots.' However, this was not always the case. 'David Ervine painted a vision of what a society could look like for everybody' that 'people were willing to buy into that for a period of time… sadly that time ended' with the resultant 'mismanagement of unionism… [being] atrocious really.'

One interviewee identifies as a former church going Presbyterian, 'Northern Irish' and 'if pushed into a corner… Unionist', states that she 'will always be more cautious of people' that voice 'extreme views… and that doesn't mean from one side, I mean both sides'. She does not define 'extreme views' but positions herself very much 'in the middle'. Biographically 'the Troubles' have admittedly influenced her 'thought processes' and 'behaviours.' As such, she feels like 'we have a unique culture and set of beliefs in Northern Ireland that doesn't exist anywhere else.' The prevailing orthodoxy of modern-day unionism is wedded to a hierarchical structure, traceable to the colonial era. Distinct characteristics of deference, classism and paternalism are deeply embedded in the Unionist psyche, where the monarchy, titled peers or perceived 'betters' retain authority. As this participant commented regarding the monarchy, 'it played a massive part of my life from the moment I was born… I didn't recognise it played such a big part until Prince Philip and the Queen died':

> it's important not because the fact that she was Queen but it's the values that she… upheld like integrity and helping people... I have been in the reserves, I have been in the Girls Brigade… all of those were aimed at serving Queen and country.

Such an example of 'being selfless' and 'serving something bigger than one self' inspired the interviewee to become a doctor. In her opinion society is becoming more individualistic and 'self-absorbed' and the spirit of the 'wartime era where people pulled together… is slipping a little bit.' She is a firm supporter of retaining the monarchy as:

> it's a big part of our culture… it's important we have something like that, because what else do we represent… It just seems we would lose our identity… our uniqueness as a society… they do shine a light on the problems within society.

She sees their 'selfless acts' as inspiring in what she believes is a difficult role:

> some people will berate them and say they shouldn't exist, but I don't understand why you would really want to get rid of them… I think that we have more problems in the world than our monarchy.

Gareth Wright is a community work for Ardcarn Resident's Association in outer east Belfast, an area with 'a lot of food poverty' and 'mental health' issues which he describes as having a 'real kind of Loyalist type feel.' He qualifies this by stating that 'it's not as of kind of fore fronted

now as it was, it's more kind of settled.' The 'Queen's Platinum Jubilee' for her '70 years of service' took place in 2022 (royal.uk), and was catalytic as he had 'never seen an event where people have been so connected'. For Gareth, the monarchy is a source of community cohesion, 'especially [for] the Protestant community' but also implies it could be so for the Catholic/Nationalist community also. As Gavin Esler points out, 'for centuries the glue that held the United Kingdom together was a mixture of three powerful elements - Protestantism, empire and war' (Esler 2021:5), one could conceivably add monarchy to that list. Gareth believes the monarchy can 'bring people together… not just people who identify themselves as Protestants or Unionists.' In contrast he describes 'the Westminster government at present' being 'in its own chaos', describing it as a 'pantomime' where:

> Downing St was a bit like an Air B&B there for a while … if there's dysfunction at senior level there's gonna be dysfunction at the bottom... [they should] begin to look at the issues of Northern Ireland… fixing the problems is not seen as a huge priority

This suggests a level of realization of the inadequacies of the Westminster system. Adhering the Unionist master narrative of remaining within the UK means accepting this structure that limits agency to alter it. However, this does not diminish the desire to remain in the Union. The death of Queen Elizabeth represented the end of an era. Whether the existing monarchy can attract the same devotion will remain to be seen. Monarchy sits atop the Unionist hierarchy and is the pinnacle of the class system. For Republicans, in the broadest sense of the word, adherence to such a system is anathema and an admittance of one's inferior status within this structure. For many Unionists the monarchy is a source of strength and pride. Becton almost forlornly states, 'even though the queen who just recently passed, God rest her soul, was the last head of the Empire, she has gone so there's nothing remains of the empire really.'

6.2 Changing narratives? GFA to Brexit

John recounts being involved in 'confidential conversations' with 'Sinn Féin in Clonard Monastery with Gerry Reynolds and Alex Reid' where the embryonic peace process was facilitated and greatly advanced by the IRA ceasefire of 1994. This led James Molyneaux, leader of the UUP, to believe that a 'prolonged IRA ceasefire could be the most destabilising thing to happen to unionism since partition' (McCartney 2013), adding, 'in a rare slip' that 'this is the worst that has ever happened to us' (Derry Journal 2014).

Despite initial dejection, John explains growing 'up in that general ambience... of unionism, its elements of not being Catholic… of not being Irish' was dissipated post-GFA, getting 'a sense' that 'part of your Irish identity should be affirmed.' One of the benefits of the GFA for him was that north-south travel became easier and in turn 'relationships between people in the north…

and south were building up.' This led to a recognition of 'an Irish element' within the 'Unionist-British' identity:

> the underlying issue in identity has to do with what sometimes is called 'opposition identity.' Opposition identity being the way in which you define yourself in terms of who you are not.

This is at the crux of the master narrative concept and which has been a foundational component of the biographies of the Nationalist, Unionist communities and an attitudinal heirloom from colonial times. John suggests a flexibility and expansion has embedded because of the space provided by GFA. Dawn takes a less sanguine view of GFA. Accepting 'it's delivered something… it hasn't delivered… the end of segregation. It didn't deliver a peace plan.' She argues that in the mediate aftermath of GFA a plan to 'build peace' should have been developed in unison.

> You have to lance the boil… people are still living with the past…You have to tackle that… [and] the things that divide us. You have to come up with a plan and we failed to do that.

Lancing the boil would involve an introspective analysis of the settler-colonial structure created and maintained since the plantation that would bring to light issues of usurpation and legitimacy. Indeed, the exclusivity of unionism is a continuance of 'colonial privilege' that would be exercised with equality and assimilation, and is therefore resisted. The 'boom and bust' cyclical nature of Stormont are a symptom of the incapacity to reconcile this issue. Because 'working-class Loyalist communities' have instinctually viewed GFA as more beneficial to SF it has 'haemorrhaged support' leaving Loyalists 'afraid to admit' they supported it:

> even those who did will say 'I'm really sorry I did.' Why? 'Because we got nothing from it'. And I'd say well, what did you not get? Or they'll say 'they got everything.' And I'd say 'Well, what have they got that you didn't get?' and they can't answer it.

Zero-sum perceptions are evident from Dawn. Colin Irwin (2007) found that in October 1999 49% of Protestants 'would still vote for the agreement' dropping to 36% by February 2003. The same study found that in February 1999 89% of Protestants wanted the agreement to work, plummeting by a third to 60% by February 2003 (Irwin 2007:72). During the same period, according to James McAuley, the DUP 'continued to draw directly on ideological fears concerning the dilution of Unionist identity; political fears surrounding betrayal by Britain; and moral fears about political concessions to terrorism' (McAuley 2007:334). Negative perceptions that existed within the Unionist community toward GFA were based on difficulty

with 'the "parity of esteem" of national symbols demanded by Nationalists' according to Jennifer Todd. For Unionists this seems, 'to be radically inappropriate. Because their concept of order and authority assumes a continuity with the past, the peace process… cannot easily be accepted.' Incompatibility with the Unionist narrative and 'assumptions implicit in the identities' of their political opponents incorporated in the structures of governance has 'created ongoing political crises' (Todd, 2005: 449-50).

Borrowing from Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', Todd 'argues that identity carries with it a set of social conventions and practices that invariably conflict with those who have an opposing identity', as any alteration of the social order is inevitably viewed as threatening (White 2007:128). As Loyalist David Adams points out he 'can't remember a time when unionism did not have an "enemy" to obsess over' (Adams 2024). Any balancing of the asymmetry inevitably leads to perceptions of loss, restricted by the rigidity of the master narrative founded on the notion of keeping Nationalists 'in their place.' Any movement in this regard creates a reflexive dissonance. As Dawn exasperates:

> It was a political agreement designed to solve a conflict. And the conflict was about inequality. It was about discrimination… but for loyalism, and for some within unionism, they see equality and human rights as a gain for nationalism, they don't see it as a gain for society as a whole… I mean the clue's in the title, 'human' rights.

In this regard, the universality of human rights is something to be resisted. Moreover, this gives an indication of the extent of inequality the Unionist community benefitted from, conditioning an exceptionalism that has deeply penetrated the Unionist habitus. White claims that 'there's no confidence within working class [Loyalist] communities' stating that 'it's not accepted' that the GFA has delivered for working-class Loyalist communities, as such it 'needs to be relooked at.' He concurs with Dawn in that, with the GFA, 'there was no real reconciliation process, it was only about stopping the violence' which he describes as 'just a big stopping machine.' The additional implications were not explained to his community, who 'just went along because of the leadership':

> women, would say to me 'we were dragged screaming and shouting into this'… they didn't really understand it, the impact… [it] was really going to have… Ok, the booklet was handed out… but nobody really read it.

White's comments are instructive, highlighting a viewpoint that desires peace but suggests rejection of any notion of improvement for Nationalists which they deem to be at their expense. In contrast to the extensive community consultation carried out by SF, unionism appears not to have replicated the process, with the electorate rather depending on the 'wisdom' of their

political representatives. As a result, there is a rejection of a peace deal that required reciprocity because of a lack of intra-Unionist engagement.

Twenty-five years after the signing of GFA Dawn asks 'are we flogging a dead horse? Have we given it our best shot? I don't think we have. Can we revive it or is it time to look for another alternative?' Significant questions have been asked regarding the efficacy of the governance arrangements GFA produced. Becton likens the peace process compromise between unionism and nationalism as like 'a carnivore and a vegan coming together' for dinner. Diametrically opposed 'in terms of everything. Not just… the national divide.' This does not diminish the need for compromise. For one interviewee:

> the difficulty for unionism is that the Nationalist community, getting its place in the sun… which isn't about it being treated preferentially, [but] being treated equally… Has been perceived… within large waves of unionism as 'we got beat.'

He adds:

> you'll forever hear within Unionist circles 'like them fucking Nationalists... they know how things work... and they've got superior propaganda', blah blah and all of that sort of thing.

When a system of governance has been invented to propagate the dominance of one community over another it is consequential that when this imbalance is altered that a negative perception will emerge from the dominant group, correlating with an increasingly uncertain Loyalist-Unionist position. He continues, 'one of the fundamental things that was done wrong in terms of after the Belfast Agreement was treating both communities as they were the same', putting this in the context of community capacity which was lacking within Loyalist areas:

> the estate I grew up in, the boys had their clubs… and then they went and killed people from the other community… when I got involved in community stuff… in the 1980s... neither political unionism nor what calls itself loyalism was active in any way, shape or form at a community level.

According to John, 'the community capacity in Loyalist areas is seriously deficient compared to the community capacity in Catholic communities.' While the contributor believes that 'the Belfast Agreement was a necessary evil', he remains uncomfortable in that it:

> institutionalised sectarianism… in particular with this petition of concern business… because the only people who can have any Petition of Concern is someone who, well, 'I'm definitely a Nationalist, I'm definitely a Unionist.'

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According to the *Committee for the Administration of Justice* (CAJ), the PoC 'became a political veto exercisable without recourse to objective criteria.' They noted that use of the PoC has declined since NDNA but that 'alternative veto mechanisms' have been deployed to achieve the 'same mischief'. One they refer to as the 'St Andrew's veto' relates to the changes to the GFA contained in SAA that require full Executive agreement for 'controversial' or 'significant' decisions. Additional changes meant that 'three ministers could require an Executive vote to be taken on a 'cross community' basis (in which 'Other' Ministers have no vote)' (CAJ 2021:para.8). The other veto relates to the process of placing items on the executive's agenda. 'Under paragraph 2.11 of the NI Ministerial Code the inclusion of ministerial proposals on the agenda for the NI Executive must be agreed by both the First and deputy First Minister' providing either with a blocking mechanism (CAJ 2021:para.14). Inevitably this has led to implementation failure of much of the GFA. Part of the rationale for this, according to Dawn, is the retention of political power for 'parties born from conflict, like the DUP' who she believes need 'the conflict to continue' to keep people fearful for 'electoral gains. It's not popular for Sinn Féin and it's not popular for the DUP. The conflict needs to continue at some level.' While the Nationalist community are largely supportive of the GFA, Unionists appear discontented based on a win-lose perception. As Michael contends:

> Protestant communities… have not seen much benefit and I don't really know what that benefit was supposed to be… I don't know if it was written large for Catholic communities… but there's the loose suggestion that it was different. I know loads of people who say now that if the Good Friday Agreement came along tomorrow they would vote no.

The GFA has illuminated the lack of '*actual* agency' Loyalist communities have 'to address societal constraints' (McLean and Syed 2015:336) they perceive to be imposed by the peace process to their disadvantage, instilling, ironically, a victim narrative, where 'they' get 'everything' and 'we' get 'nothing.' Incapable of moving beyond the parameters of their master narrative many Loyalists and Unionists are left with a sense of loss, confusion and threat at the balancing of society. To a large degree GFA has delivered an end of violence yet there has been no tangible 'peace dividend' particularly for working-class areas, which Nationalists also concur with. It is reasonable to assume that the absence of material improvement coupled with amplified calls for a unity referendum would increase disillusionment with the agreement particularly if the Unionist community perceive that 'they were beat'. However, not every one of the interviewees shares these feelings of despondency with the GFA. One interview adds:

> culture and behaviour doesn't change overnight, that takes generations… I feel like it has been a success in many ways and probably one way I would measure that success

would be from the perspective of two schools in my hometown… there was a Protestant and Catholic secondary school right beside each other and a Protestant wouldn't need to walk past that school on their own otherwise there would have been trouble and now those schools are being amalgamated. That's massive progress.

While admitting to not having read the agreement, which many people have not, Gareth states that 'in my eyes it was a good thing' in that it 'delivered what it said it would, peace… whatever kind of way you would say peace is or peace looks like… compared to what it was, it's a lot better now.' In a similar tone, John recounts a past conversation, he describes as 'an odd experience':

I met this guy who said to me we are worse off than we ever were… some years after [the GFA]. I said where in the name of goodness are you living, what do you mean you are worse off. There is no violence, killings have stopped.

On considering whether, in his opinion the GFA delivered he responds, 'what was it supposed to deliver?' What it provided was a 'framework' for 'people to work… to the maximum advantage.' It became 'like the pork barrel stuff, one for you and one for me' which failed deliver, in his opinion, 'a coherent sense of being Northern Irish… a modification of being British and a modification of being Irish.' Dawn believes there has been a collective failure at societal and political level, emphasising the latter. As 'political leaders we have not done enough in terms of peace and reconciliation,' adding, 'we've built about six inches of peace but you could hit it with a hammer and go straight through it.' Commenting on the impact of the GFA one interviewee states that from its inception NI/NoI has 'been ruled from outside in a semi-detached way', in this regard the GFA is as good as it gets. Highlighting the end of 'second-class citizenship' for Nationalists, he adds:

if you're a democrat or if you just believe in social justice… even if you did describe yourself as… a full blown Unionist, I would find it very difficult not to say that that's a damn good thing… even though you might be uncomfortable with some of the political outcomes of that.

These 'political outcomes' appear to be what sections of unionism have difficulty with. On returning home in the years before the GFA, Pollock 'did notice things were beginning to change for the better.' With his children brought up after the GFA he comments on societal change, stating 'they would quite happily mix with Protestants and Catholics', adding, 'we do live in a reasonably peaceful society and if hadn't have been for the GFA what would we have? He continues:

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25 years later, I would say the politicians failed us… in principle it's a good idea… and I would say yes its brought peace but I would say working together, our politics, it's not really working at the minute.

John believes in 'evolutionary' not 'revolutionary' change, letting 'things develop and see where they go but if you start pressing things too hard you are liable to build up opposition to it… where you stop making progress':

now Brexit comes in, and what Brexit does in my opinion is to throw a hand grenade into the middle of these three sets of relationships inside the north, between north-south… east-west... all of those issues are now fraught with post-Brexit problems and… in many ways, in more a more difficult situation than we were in before Brexit.

6.2.1 Brexit

Brexit has created considerable difficulties for Unionists because it was a British and not a UK exit, as O'Leary accurately points out. By supporting Brexit, unionism enabled a diminution of the UK construct, with little remorse from Westminster, who essentially judged Unionists as part of the people of Ireland (Billig 1995). Malleable and flexible, the British master narrative was redefined for a domestic electorate. Ulster Unionists were expendable in order to 'get Brexit done' and remain 'in a highly fragile place' where they 'cannot withstand being problematized or critiqued' (Hirsch 2018) or acknowledge their miscalculations. Dawn firmly believes that 'Brexit was an unmitigated disaster for unionism… [and] for peace on this island', placing the blame on 'the Tory party' and the 'DUP' through Westminster 'patronage'. 'I don't think I, or many others, will ever forgive the Tory party for what they have done… to this place… to the country.' DUP leader Arlene Foster had initially supported Brexit that gave NI/NoI dual market access to both the UK and EU, eventually u-turning:

For them to now argue that this wasn't the way they wanted it to work out, for goodness sake, Brexit was pin the tail on the donkey… The DUP knew fine rightly… they were hoping that the border would go back to where it was… They wanted a strong fortress built again because up until that point quite frankly the border had become irrelevant… Cross-border relations were good.

As one contributor bluntly put it, 'when they [DUP] came out... on the side of Brexit, I really believe them fools thought that that meant a hard border.' Brexit, in this regard was a re-retreat behind the 'impregnable Pale' which did not materialise. As White contends, many 'voted to come away without realising the impact it would have … you could have read it.' He believes Brexit was 'one of the worst things that could ever have happened to Northern Ireland', a barrier to peace that 'went over people's heads, people didn't care about it' suggesting that

Brexit was a political rather than civil society consideration. Another contributor points out that 'there shouldn't be any problem' that trading relationships within the same state which is logical, but adds, 'it comes back to that contradiction that they [Unionists] see themselves as part of the UK when it fucking suits them and when it doesn't suit them, they're not part of the UK.' Brexit in this regard was exploited for political expediency by political unionism.

The Northern Ireland Protocol (NIP) emerged during Brexit negotiations that attempted to uphold the integrity of the GFA while delivering on EU exit commitments. For John, it was 'a consequence of Brexit [and] an attempt to solve a problem.' Protocol negotiations were to have significant adverse effects on unionism, and 'another disaster' for Dawn:

> it has diluted the constitutional position of Northern Ireland within the Union. Binmen[24] have jumped on the bandwagon and effectively it's the tail wagging the dog within unionism now… they're using language I heard in the 70's, the government sold us out … this is a slippery slope … this is a stepping stone.' And I'm going, catch yourself on, what about the principle of consent?

John describes Brexit and the protocol as 'a rallying point to bring diverse groups together in opposition to something.' Such was the depth of feeling on the protocol issue within unionism that White believed society was 'on a knife edge' because of it. As Michael adds, the protocol 'began to represent something else and that something else is the turf.' This is a term that Michael uses on several occasions denoting a territoriality to the protocol issue that is founded on control of the land, an extremely colonial mode of thinking., Michael paraphrases a conversation with un-named persons:

> 'if there's an election in December I'll be voting for the DUP'… well what's changed your mind, 'when they went into the election they said they wouldn't go into the Assembly unless the protocol was scrapped and they've stuck to their guns… 'I admire that… so… I will go out and vote for them.'

Adding:

> I don't think people fully understand what the protocol means and I think that, dare I say it, has unionism powered it down to the lowest common denominator as your country is gonna disappear? Sometimes I think that unionism has done that and there's other times I think they have tried not… I'm just never really sure.

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[24] This is a pejorative reference to Jaime Bryson who gave an anti-protocol speech while standing on a wheelie bin.

Political unionism exploiting the fears of their electorate was raised several times by contributors, heightening confusion and insecurity. One interviewee who did not want to be attributed to the following comment stated:

> I hate to hear myself say this. I think it [NIP] should be scrapped… because the DUP aren't gonna go sit in the Assembly without it being scrapped, modifying it isn't gonna put them in… if a modification comes along and they do go in… I think the DUP's finished.

In the intervening period the DUP did return to Stormont with the NIP still in place, losing three seats in 2024 GE, including party leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson and Ian Paisley Jr. Michael believes 'the DUP have stuck to their guns' and therefore deserving of 'support.' He reflects that the protocol is linked 'with major economic forces... that are bigger than local politics' and therefore impervious to pressure to sectional pressures. The Assembly election took place in May 2022 returning SF as the biggest party which entitled them to the position of FM. Shortly after the election the DUP shifted policy to enable their return to Stormont with the NIP still in place. Michael argues that 'Brexit and the protocol' are 'all about the turf now' connected with the GFA which was:

> the start of losing the turf... I think the thing about the Good Friday Agreement is that it took the guns off the street, stopped people being killed… that's a good thing... But in terms of the rest of it... I don't think it has done much.

In this regard, the GFA is linked to losing politically and territorially, a dispossession linked with Nationalist gains. This discursive position framed as endangering stability represents a shifting master narrative from one of strength to vulnerability (McLean and Syed 2015:339). On this, Andrew White concludes:

> Unionists must accept, however reluctantly, that the foundationalism of traditional unionism that was already on the wane when the Anglo-Irish-Agreement was signed, has been ended for good with the signing of the Belfast Agreement in April 1998 (White 2007:131)

Another interviewee takes a less ominous view stating that while it may be a problem for small businesses in terms of 'supply' the associated violence and agitation he describes as 'minor irritants.' He believes that the 'protocol' is 'more than likely to lead the political development away from Britain.' In 'day-to-day conversations' he hasn't heard anyone 'up in arms' about it. This suggests that hostility towards the protocol is not widespread but rather concentrated within specific constituencies, particularly loyalism. The protocol issue was an economic trade issue portrayed by Unionists as a lessening of their Britishness. The ordinary man and woman

in the street had little knowledge or interest into its intricacies as it did not affect in any great degree, their day-to-day living. Unionist grievance was based more on principle than actual impact. With 'the LCC in the press', he adds, while they could 'be disruptive' they don't have 'much capacity beyond that.'

The LCC was established in 2015, facilitated by Jonathan Powell, former advisor to Tony Blair, representing 'the three main Loyalist paramilitary groups – the UVF, the UDA, and the Red Hand Commando' to 'tackle criminality, educational under-achievement and "Loyalist disenfranchisement" in politics' and bring them 'in from the cold' (Fitzmaurice 2015). They were vocal in their opposition to the Protocol and several other issues since, including Irish medium education in east Belfast. Despite representing illegal organisations, and withdrawing support from the GFA in 2021 (BBC News NI 2021) militant loyalism is normalised by a media who in contrast have given dissident Republicans pariah status. This has been evident from the beginning of the conflict, and indicative of a master narrative. Indeed, the UDA was not proscribed until 1992 (CAIN). Militant loyalism is therefore condoned, if not promoted, because of its alignment with the master narrative and the leverage it provides within the political structure. Moreover, 'the longer' this message is repeated 'the more normative it seems', thus ensuring the reproduction of a 'stable structure' and legitimation. 'Chief Brexit negotiator', Liz Truss, for example met with the OO and 'Loyalist community representatives', a synonym on occasion for Loyalist paramilitaries, in 2022 while snubbing 'three of Stormont's mains parties' (Manley 2022).

Threat to identity is often raised from within loyalism and unionism regarding any measures they deem to be diluting their position within the UK. Polity-centric identity, founded at partition, guaranteed Unionist privilege which may help explain the strong attachment to an unalterable status quo. If Unionist opposition to constitutional change is a fear of the loss of privilege whereby their position in society will be on an equal footing to everyone else, then as MacDonald argues, the settler colonial rationale demands that 'superiority be maintained even at the cost of instability.' For Memmi, the 'true reason' the 'colonialist' does not seek 'to remake the colonized in his own image' is because it 'would destroy the principle of his privileges' and 'he cannot allow such an equation' (Memmi 2016:113). Superiority based on not turning 'natives to settlers', for MacDonald, maintains deliberate differentiation 'not because they impede the extension of settler culture' but rather that they 'threaten settler hegemony' (MacDonald 1986:20). Brexit therefore was an inadvertent unleashing of a counter-hegemonic threat.

For Pollock, Brexit has been a 'friggin (sic) disaster' and 'just bad news.' He remarks that 'Brexit's brought up… a lot more divisions in the Loyalist community', adding, 'I see where

they're coming from, if your identity is under threat then people start kicking off.' A border down the Irish sea, he believes 'is seen as us being further isolated from the United Kingdom.' As a result, 'quite rightly Sinn Féin are saying… we should have a border poll now, you're better off in the EU.' Leaning more towards Alliance as 'as a more centrist party', Pollock rejects 'the DUP because of their support for Brexit. That was the final thing for me. Never will vote for them.' He views the 'DUP as dated, they haven't moved on' because of their views on 'gay marriage and equality'. His views on SF are intriguing, as someone coming from a staunchly Loyalist background:

> I would consider voting for Sinn Féin if they wouldn't keep on, it annoys Unionists and Loyalists… commemorating IRA parades and things. I can see why they do it because they represent that community... my brother… lives in Scotland and he [said]… if you sit down and you take away Sinn Féin's name and you put their policies alongside the DUP's, Sinn Féin would be far more attractive in their policies.

Glen 'says the unsayable' when countenancing support for SF. His aversion to supporting SF, although with having 'attractive' policies is 'just their historical link with the IRA that probably puts a lot of people from the Protestant community off.'

SF links with the IRA are well documented and their attendance at commemoration events for dead volunteers raises the ire of many Unionists and those of a more centrist disposition. While SF have attempted to create a new image by putting people forward without 'political baggage' they remain attached to a physical force, Republican tradition as part of their DNA. Would it possible for them to distance themselves from such a past without alienating their support base? Electorally at least it does not appear a major issue for Nationalists as SF continue to grow in support. Centrist voters appear to quietly disregard such considerations when voting tactically in marginal constituencies also. A beneficiary of such tactical voting, John Finucane, who disposed of DUP stalwart, Nigel Dodds in north Belfast in the 2019 GE, was called a 'hypocrite' for attending a 'South Armagh Volunteers commemoration'. Finucane stated:

> There is nothing to celebrate in conflict… to commemorate those we have loved and lost is a right which everyone… here today, is entitled to, and we do so with dignity and with pride (BBC NEWS NI 2023).

Commemoration is a key battle ground for narrative domination, where 'our' violence was acceptable and 'their' violence was not, what scholar Noam Chomsky refers to as 'minimal moral integrity'[25]. Are Republicans, therefore, entitled to honour 'their' dead? While Republican

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[25] https://chomsky.info/20020227/ (accessed 3 December 2023)

commemorations are separate from constitutional change they may present a focal point for opponents by linking reunification solely with Republicanism, underlining the importance of multi-party support for reunification.

Pollock was supportive of the NIP and the Windsor Framework in that 'it solves a lot of problems' which he believes forced 'the DUP into a corner.' He believes it was used as an 'excuse' to prevent a SF First Minister 'that probably pisses the DUP off.' He also raises the issue of Scottish independence:

> I support Scotland having a referendum… it would probably scare the Unionists... if Scotland's going, there's a good chance that we could go… if you stand back and think about it, you're quite happy for Scotland to have a referendum, when it comes to here it's 'not at the minute'.

Unequivocal support for Scottish independence does provide an interesting contradistinction for debate as some self-defined Unionists support Scottish self-determination while rejecting it locally. His main fear around constitutional change is 'the threat of violence.' Sammy Douglas believes 'fear a united Ireland' in which people would 'probably live quite peacefully', is centred on the process of 'becoming a united Ireland' rather than its actuality (McKay 2021:161). A quote from Stoic philosopher Seneca is apt here, in that 'we suffer more in imagination than we do in reality.' Pollock argues that while Loyalists have the potential for violence they have little capacity to effect political developments particularly at an inter-governmental level, expressing an assessment of false agency.

Michael voted Remain, based on safety in union 'because of the potential of war' while benefitting 'greatly from being part of a country that's in' the EU. Evolving from a post-war European peace project, the EU advanced closer economic cooperation to reduce the likelihood of inter-state conflict. Placing EU membership into the context of regional peace and stability was a novel contribution not raised by any of the other interviewees, yet Michael does not connect membership with maintaining peace locally. He adds:

> I heard someone actually saying… they never really seen themselves as having to stand up and fight for their country but they are willing to do it now… 'Brexit, the threat from the protocol has brought it to me that this is about the turf.'

Fighting to defend the 'turf' is weighted with colonial connotations and fear of a verso-colonisation. Michael adds, 'what has come to the fore for people is Brexit… people are seeing it as the last Bastille type-thing for unionism', suggesting that an acceptance of the loss of Unionist 'foundationalism' is yet to embed. Whether Brexit is the 'last Bastille' for unionism is difficult to say categorically but Michael's comment draws upon, once more, the language of

militarism and defence, offering a glimpse into the psychological state of elements within unionism. The GFA, signed in April 1998, was a result of several years of peace negotiations approached reluctantly and cautiously by political unionism. Perceived to be 'designed to undermine Unionist' identity and culture, 'the peace process' was seen as a precursor to moves towards a united Ireland' which conflated 'the aggressive championing' of aspects of 'culture' with 'defence of the union' (White 2007:130). As a consequence, 'the more Unionists assert their cultural rights, the more estranged they become from those with whom they have entered into a contractual arrangement, namely the British' (Porter 1998:121). A maelstrom of constitutional uncertainty and a reflexive re-assertion of cultural domination has created a state of 'confusion and schism', apparent from the fledgling peace process, with unionism becoming:

> increasingly fragmented. Moreover, many Unionists now regard the social consequences of the contemporary period with some alarm. They perceive recent events as a direct challenge to their culture and identity and at an extreme to the very existence of Northern Ireland (McAuley 2003:60).

This was as true at the signing of the GFA and more so since Brexit. Cast adrift by their dispassionate government, Unionist insecurity was reinforced as Westminster did not fight 'with equal tenacity' to retain NI/NoI as they did with Scotland. 'Ceded' to the EU, the 'special pain' produced by Brexit is viewed through the prism of a 'loss of territory which is situated within the imagined homeland' (Billig 1995:75-76) that has been compromised constitutionally. Unionism is undergoing something of an Eriksonian 'identity crisis' in that the master narrative they have invested in is no longer in alignment with reality. Discarded by Britain who left the EU with NI/NoI left behind exposes a fragility through the unrequited nature of the relationship.

Conclusion

The communal accounts above situate the 'process of reconstruction and interpretation' within 'specific cultural and historical' moments. Partition was foundational for the modern-day Unionist narrative, yet was significantly challenged, requiring reconstruction from the onset of conflict. Direct rule, as a unilateral act of constitutional change brought an end to Unionist rule as they reinterpreted their position within the UK against the backdrop of civil unrest, both of which featuring prominently in the source material. AIA was precedent-setting in terms weakening the rigidity of the Unionist dominant position. This trajectory continued with the DSD and the GFA, all framed as a loss. British and not UK exit from the EU and the protocol were contemporary iterations of the AIA precedent that underlined unionisms expendability and hence their insecure position within the Union. The resultant defensiveness has many Unionists struggling to come to terms with the post-GFA dispensation that views Nationalists

on an equal standing because of their rigid adherence to the Unionist master narrative. Apparent from the above contributions, too, is that unionism is not monolithic and that variance exists within a pro-Union, British disposition, who nonetheless reject political unionism, dominated by the DUP and a regressive hard-right, socially conservative chauvinism. The cultural, economic and ideological intersect but remain distinct phenomena in their own right illuminating unionism's heterogeneousness. How Unionists negotiate the time ahead in the context of constitutional flux will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 7. Unionist identity narratives and constitutional flux

Introduction

In the *Quarterly Monitoring Report, Public attitudes and identity' in Nations and Regions: The Dynamics of Devolution* (2002), Lizanne Dowds found that 'only 41 per cent of Unionists supported power-sharing with the SDLP and a majority (58 per cent) said they supported power-sharing with *neither* SF *nor* the SDLP (Dowds 2002:19). Based on this research McAuley concludes that it 'is clear that many Unionists are at best disillusioned with the outcomes of the GFA' and as such 'Unionist opinion on any future political arrangements' are also 'highly divided' (McAuley 2003:65-66). This chapter will investigate what the current views of Unionist participants in this research tells us about how 'any future political arrangements' concerning constitutional change might be received by civil society Unionists under three main sections. The first section entitled, *On a unity referendum,* with sub-sections, *Constitutionally persuadable?*, followed by, *Durability of the master narrative.* The next section is, *National identity.* The third section will be *Constitutional Future* with the chapter ending with summarising remarks for chapters six and seven.

7.1 On a unity referendum

A unity referendum would be a catalytic moment for constitutional change and opposition towards it from within this pro-union cohort is unsurprising. John believes, 'it is far too early to even try to have a border poll' and 'would be a very divisive exercise.' Michael states, 'we don't need a border poll. Why do we need to have it'? On being persuaded to support reunification he raises the issue of pension guarantees and 'a national health' equal to 'the under pressure National Health Service we have'. He adds:

> if there was some guarantee that we weren't gonna lose out because we are Protestants that somebody somewhere wouldn't see it as an opportunity to historically get back at us.

The notion of Nationalists getting 'back at us', represents a fear of the colony 'striking back' (O'Toole 2018:92) whereby roles will be reversed and the once dominant will become the dominated, accompanied with all the indignities and discrimination associated with the colonial project and latterly, the Unionist regime post-partition. This recurring theme coupled with the ever-present fear of British government betrayal that pushes Unionists towards reunification, was exemplified by the Tory government under Boris Johnson. As White points out, 'Johnson done what he wanted to do and that's the biggest disaster… the protocol … more or less moved [NI/NoI] towards… a united Ireland.' By supporting Brexit Unionists essentially 'called

their own bluff' (Dorling and Tomlinson 202:280) which, in White's opinion, left the door open for British government perfidy to advance reunification:

> what's really going on here? That was the start of it and that's what made people wonder where we're going… It's not about Britain leaving the EU... it's about getting rid of Northern Ireland.

Upholding their pledge to facilitate a unity referendum will be read as the British attempting to get 'rid of Northern Ireland' by Unionists. White argues that Brexit is 'a backdoor' to a 'united Ireland.' Such an announcement would have a seismic effect on the Unionist psyche, proof positive of treacherous intent that will shake the foundations of their identity, whereby 'historical development' triggers an individual and communal 'identity crisis' (Erikson 1968:23). The unilateral top-down approach adopted by the British government regarding Brexit has created a historical intersection in which the transactionality of Unionist identity (Onnie Rogers 2018) within the UK is disorientated, increasingly uncertain of 'who we are' and importantly 'who we will become.' Despite political Unionist positioning, White believes 'the majority of people don't want a hard border, who would want [that] again? Not a chance of it.' One contributor who self-identifies as 'Northern Irish' admits to have 'voted Remain.' She unambiguously states, 'I am not Irish' and categorically does not identify with Ireland:

> I don't feel like they would identify with us… they don't want us… equally, I don't know that mainland UK wants us either, so therefore, if no one wants us … we should be on our own.

Perceptions of unwanted-ness by the UK, rather than the Republic, creates a dissonance that is difficult to acknowledge, 'symptomatic' of a unionism 'struggling to conceive… its place in the world' post-GFA and post-Brexit (El-Enany 2017). While the viability of an independent NI/NoI is questionable, reunification is rejected absolutely by this contributor, who states, 'no, I don't want that' as such a prospect would impact her 'core identity':

> It [would] probably make me question who I am, and what do I stand for and who do I have an allegiance to because since being a kid, I have essentially served Queen and country. Who would I be then? What would be my purpose? Who would I be serving? I don't know what that answer would be… [it] would disrupt my identity a lot.

For this interviewee, respect 'of our individual identity' is at the nub of the debate which would be threatened by reunification and hence harden her stance. As McLean and Syed point out, using a narrative approach allows 'individuals to communicate their life concerns and experiences in their own words' highlighting the subjectivity of context (McLean and Syed

2015:337). The very real, unprocessed manner in which the renunciation of reunification is explained in this regard highlights the possible disruption of the intersection between the personal and the historical (Onnie Rodgers 2018) and the fundamental connection with the constitutional status, that is, with polity, and identity. Any change in this regard would be an alteration to this nexus which are both dependent on the other. Interestingly, having lived in Scotland, this participant believes that Scotland should be independent, stating, 'I think they should be their own separate entity… they are very unique compared to England… same with Wales.' She believes that 'people are selfish' and would support reunification if they would 'get more money'. 'As a doctor' she would be 'materially better off if we reunited…because the pay is significantly better… it would be great like I would get a lot more.' In light of her own confirmation regarding the material benefits of reunification she submits that 'it wouldn't be enough at the moment.' Amidst evolving discourse, she still does not feel 'like it will ever happen to be honest with you.' From this, the reunification debate could be classified into two main categories, material circumstances, which would include things like wages, pensions, and so on, and affective identity-related issues. With the latter in the ascendant persuasion of the merits of reunification would be improbable, as Gareth, who also does not want a unity referendum, articulates:

> It's not so much my views, it's my heart… I've grown up in Northern Ireland, I identify myself as British/Northern Irish… my heart is within the Union. I believe… Northern Ireland is best placed within the United Kingdom

Gareth eloquently reflects the emotional attachment some people have with the UK. In this respect it is based on feeling and familiarity which is as, if not more, powerful, than a reasoned assessment. Perceptions of reunification would cause a fundamental tremor to this reality amidst existing 'chaos' and 'challenges'. A unity referendum would be 'the last thing people want' he maintains. In the event of a referendum supporting unity, he adds, 'I'd go over and live with my aunt and uncle' in England. He explains:

> It wouldn't be a case of we are in an all-Ireland now… I'm outta here, but it would definitely be the case of, I suppose, what it would look like and how Unionists, kind of Protestants would be accepted in that way of life.

This suggests an underlying fear that reunification and 'that way of life' would pose a threat to the Unionist community, something he would be willing to campaign against, but adds, 'you would have to kind of make that decision when it came.' On stating that he would 'definitely be a Remainer', when asked if automatic re-entry into the EU would persuade him to vote for reunification, his reply was a categorical 'no.' In this instance, a desire to be part of the EU is inferior to constitutional preference, with the latter having prominence. The internalisation of

the Unionist master narrative aligns with Gareth's personal identity narrative from which both meaning (McLean and Syed 2015:325) and feelings of safety merge.

As a Unionist… Becton would also 'vote No for a united Ireland' based on a binary choice between two unions, 'the union of one Ireland or the union of the people of these isles' because 'there's so many stories and so many connections… it's hard to separate that', adding, 'as Unionists we need to be united … we need a united bloc.' Unionism historically has coalesced as a cross-class alliance at times of perceived threat to particular 'constitutional reform'. The 'fixity' of the basic ideology emerging from the obligation of defending interests aligned with the resistance to change reveals the 'peculiarity of class relations... normal in settler societies'. In place of 'class conflict, intra-class solidarity is the norm and this is reinforced by frequent appeals to unity' (Clayton 1998:51). Additionally, 'Ireland' would be the connecting link with the European Union, so in this regard Becton is correct in referencing 'two unions', but which goes beyond the 'these isles.' His preferred option would be 'a federal United Kingdom.' But 'if a united Ireland had to come, and I hope it didn't… I just hope it would be in a federal united Ireland' an option discussed by O'Leary (2022:165-171). As a mitigation for constitutional flux, a federal UK, while not countenanced by Becton, was nonetheless investigated by Harold Wilson's Labour government in 1969, through the Kilbrandon Commission. The report captures the essence of the UK constitutional system, which concluded that because of the:

> overwhelming political importance and wealth of England... A United Kingdom federation of the four countries... [is] not a realistic proposition (*Royal Commission,* op. cit., para.531, p.159 quoted in Nairn 1981:63).

The constitutional status quo is therefore the only viable option for many Unionists but this is not without criticism from within this cohort.

7.1.1 Constitutionally persuadable?

In March 2024, Unionist commentator Sarah Creighton wrote an opinion piece which included in the title 'the economic case for the union lies in tatters' (Creighton 2024) while former British prime minister Gordon Brown lamented in the *Financial Times,* he 'didn't think we [UK] could go as far backwards as we've gone' (Mance 2023). Dawn adds to a sense of impending doom as she envisages 'disintegration' for the future of the UK 'precipitated' by a Brexit driven by English nationalism:

> you've Scottish nationalism… You've Wales wanting more autonomy. You've a growing number of people in Northern Ireland who really bought into and invested in the devolution experiment because they really wanted this place to work, and I'm

talking Unionists… but are so disillusioned by unionism and the DUP in particular that they're going, you know anything would be better than this now.

As Dawn describes, alignment with the master narrative is no longer absolute because of its structural outworking demonstrated by Brexit. In the context of disillusionment with post-Brexit realities Dawn was asked whether this would amount to her support for constitutional change and as a means to return to the EU:

> Not on its own because I don't see any genuine desire from nationalism to make Northern Ireland work so therefore, why would they have any desire to see unification work except if it's in their own interests? And that excludes me, so not on its own, no.

Dawn does not clarify how nationalism does not have a desire to 'make Northern Ireland work' but her conviction on this matter is strong. The inference here is that a functioning Assembly, which would demonstrate nationalism's commitment to making the institutions work must proceed reunification. Dawn frames reunification as a singularly Nationalist project which by extension is exclusionary of non-Nationalists, adding, 'seeing devolution work… would certainly give me hope that any future change in the constitutional position would be nothing to be frightened of.' Again, the language of fear emerges. Despite this she welcomes the opportunity to hold a unity referendum and 'would call one tomorrow':

> But the wider community it's *'no, no, no'*. And again, it's that fear… because 'they' want it, 'we don't', that attitude. Whereas I'm of the opinion, just have it. Get it over and done with... We can't reconcile ourselves in six counties, how are going to reconcile ourselves with another twenty-six… They just don't want a border poll because they see it as Sinn Féin pushing for one.

Dawn is no advocate of reunification but neither does she explicitly reject it outright, adding 'the first referendum was that Northern Ireland should stay until people voted otherwise. If people vote otherwise, then so be it.' Reunification is attached to SF, and therefore something to be rejected in a zero-sum perspective, particularly in communities where Dawn does not 'see much hope', Unionist working-class communities. As White explains:

> Brexit has caused a lot of issues over here… People in working-class communities are saying that Britain doesn't really want us. And neither they do, a blind man could see that. The first opportunity to offload Northern Ireland, they would embrace that.

Such interpretations are indicative of working-class Loyalist communities feeling caught between the indifference of their mother parliament and a resurgent nationalism leaving them with few options. Within a political environment that appears increasingly destabilising, both politically and psychologically, he admits that he knows, similarly to Dawn, that:

some representatives within unionism are just so much peeved off by what is going on that they are willing to see what a shared island would look like… the majority of people that I know are the 'Don't Knows', [they want to know] what it [reunification] would look like… they need more of an understanding… but there's no conversations around the constitutional question for that to happen.

This is a significant contribution from a self-identified Loyalist regarding potential reunification. At the time of the interview this may have appeared unprecedented but several significant developments have taken place since. In September 2022, Kyle Paisley, son of Ian Paisley, gave a submission to the Oireachtas Consultation Committee on the Constitutional Future of the Island of Ireland. In September 2023, founding member of the DUP, Wallace Thompson, gave in an interview in which he stated that a 'new Ireland' was 'inevitable' (McBride 2023). In June 2024 Davy Adams, a former member of the Ulster Political Research Group (UPRG), associated with the UDA, spoke at the Ireland's Future conference in Belfast. White concludes that reunification:

is not going to be Unionist because we're not going to be in the union… As far as people are concerned within unionism it's about a united Ireland, Socialist Republic under Sinn Féin.

While unionism will cease to be, in terms of political affiliation nationalism will also discontinue as the goal of congruency between the political and national unit will have been achieved. This clears a way for the emergence of a new politics based on policy rather than being dominated by the national question with a drafting of a new master narrative at national level. As a grandfather, White considers constitutional change in terms of the benefits for future generations, asking, 'what does a shared island look like? Why can we not have the conversations? Let's talk about it.' He adds a group of 'ex-combatants and ex-prisoners' from east Belfast went south:

and all of us agreed that we should be having more conversations around it [reunification]. But… there is always something that happens politically that segregates the two communities again… a curve ball and it goes back to where we were… and we're having to start over again, that's Northern Ireland politics, basically it's shit… there is too much bigotry and hatred… the hard-core who are still calling the shots on both sides. And that's the problem that we have.

Interestingly, White admits to being an 'out and out socialist' from a labour tradition and indicates a cautiousness concentrated on Sinn Féin, the reasons soon becoming clear.

the fear factor within ex-prisoners and ex-combatants, we're going to be persecuted… And that's not the way it's going to be, that's nonsense. But that's how people think… that Protestants will be persecuted.

A willingness to discuss constitutional change is expressed from those seemingly stridently against it. As White attests, political engagement when met with wider political events, leads to groups drawing 'away from…each other', derailing dialogue. Indeed, it is possible that such events are designed to have this exact effect and thwart political development. He asks, why do people still want to remain part of Britain...? Because of the fear of the TDs and Coveneys and what they say.' Simon Coveney[26] came to represent a meddlesome and aggressive Republic for Loyalists (Newsletter 2021) more intent on 'sabre rattling' than meaningful dialogue around a 'shared island':

the constitutional question will have to change in the Republic as much as it's going to have to change up here to suit Protestants. Where's the cultural space?… what's it going to look like?... Nobody is doing that within the Republic of Ireland, [on or] off the radar… Where does the Unionist representation work within the new constitution… what's 11th and 12th July going to look like, Orange culture and all the rest of it?

Undoubted reservations exist within White's thinking but he also a demonstrates a willingness to, at the very least, engage in discussion of what constitutional change could and should look like, on or 'off the radar.' Fear of the 'other' requires little assistance to surface. Persecution anxiety, particularly from Republicans and belligerent TD's like Coveney is tangible, and as a consequence 'needs to come from a higher authority.' He continues:

Mary Lou is always going to be seen as Sinn Féin… an enemy of loyalism no matter what she says… But if it came from somewhere else, someone else… But can you imagine if it came from a joint Sinn Féin and DUP representative? If they stood on a stage together and said this is what we should be talking about, that would send out the message more than what Mary Lou would send out on her own.

A singularly 'Republican narrative', as Rab referred to it, has a withdrawal effect on Loyalists that could be assuaged by a joint Nationalist-Unionist initiative, an intriguing contribution. No political Unionist representative appears willing or able, to date, to take what would be a bold and an unprecedented step. As the 'art of the impossible' post-SAA political arrangements demonstrate that the seemingly intractable can come together. An existential fear of

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[26] Simon Coveney was the Fine Gael Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade from 2017 – 2022 with NI/NoI coming under his remit.

Republican strategy carries significant weight but if the Unionist experience post-partition in the Free State is demonstrable of a potential post-reunification dispensation, then those fears are not supported by precedent. However, alleviating such fears is a formidable task for those who would seek to persuade Unionist ex-combatants to support reunification.

Evidence indicates that Protestant Unionists caught within the Free State post-partition fared extremely well. Indeed, established shibboleths are being challenged organically as White points out, 'you've people changing religion down round Dublin, leaving the Catholic Church and moving into a more… Protestant belief, Baptist Churches, really confusing.' The 2022 census in the Republic shows a decline in Catholicism and a growth in those of 'no religion' and growth in some smaller Protestant denominations. The 2021 census in NI/NoI was also a major milestone for societal change showing more Catholics than Protestants for the first time. For Dawn, 'I think people saw it as inevitable and something that's coming and something that people need to recognise and to get to grips with', adding to an already complex potential pre-unity referendum dynamic. In this regard White believes that:

> discussions around a border poll [should be left] for another four or five years before they even start talking about… it could be a totally different outlook. Young people are going to choose where they are going to be and where this country is going to be, it's not up to me.

On a unity referendum, Michael is of the opinion:

> You know half a bit of me would say if there's gonna be a border poll fair enough. We have to be democratic about it… we gotta take what the outcome is. You know for those people including myself that voted yes for the Good Friday Agreement… you knew it was there then.

Part of his willingness to embrace a unity referendum is predicated on the probable negative result in his opinion, particularly for SF 'who would get the shock of their life':

> I actually had a conversation with… two Catholics… it just came up when I was having lunch with them and both of them said to me, 'you know I'm a Catholic what annoys me is that Sinn Féin automatically assume that because I'm a Catholic I'm gonna vote for them or because I'm a Catholic and there's a border poll tomorrow on the insistence of Sinn Féin that I'm gonna vote for a united Ireland. I've got news for Sinn Féin we both see ourselves as economic Unionists.' I'd never heard that term before until they said it.

This interaction raises several issues of note. Firstly, reunification is again perceived as a SF project. This is a logical assumption given that that party has it as its primary political objective.

Secondly, constitutional preference cannot be assumed based on communal background. As broad brush strokes they are generally accurate but those 'fringe' Nationalists or Unionists, along with non-constitutionally aligned 'others' will be critical in determining future direction. In the case of an 'economic Unionist' persuasion or dissuasion will be determined by a clear economic case for either options. Michael continues, recounting his conversation with his Catholic friends who state:

> 'where am I getting the money to pay for health insurance if we are suddenly living in the Republic… Where am I getting the money to go to my GP and pay £97 for a consultation… does that mean now that I give up my caravan or I give up my holiday to Majorca... It probably does. Do I wanna do that? No. So if there's a border poll tomorrow, I wanna go to Majorca on my holidays. I'll be voting no.'

Notwithstanding the assumption in interviews such as this one that 'everyone' in the south pays for GP visits, in fact, all those below average income, along with all children under eight and people over seventy, regardless of income can visit a GP for free. Other services may also be free including 'maternity and infant care services'. With no set fee, typical GP costs range from between €45 - €65[27]. More generally, living standards are higher in the Republic than in the north (Gosling 2023). Undoubtedly there is divergence in the respective medical systems on the island with the perception in the north that health care free at the point of need is the superior model. However, this does not take account of the increased privatisation of the NHS and the extensive waiting lists for routine operations which ultimately drives many to go private out of necessity anyway. Moreover, a study carried out in 2024 ranked the health care systems of the Republic at 23 and the UK at 34 out of 104 countries[28]. How caravans and Majorca holidays would be affected by full EU absorption is not made clear, but ultimately this contribution makes a sound case for ensuring accurate evidence-based information particularly for comparator analysis. Such data will be crucial in persuading economic Unionists from all backgrounds. Michael raises questions as to how a unity referendum has become conflated with Brexit and the NIP:

> the Border Poll has become a bit of a red flag… linked to the Brexit thing and I'm thinking to myself 'yeah what's this got to do with Brexit actually? What's it got to do with the protocol'?… for me the two things are completely separate.

Michael is correct to state that there has been a conflation between a unity referendum and Brexit and they are separate but both have impacted on the other. Brexit has been the catalyst

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[27] See, https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/health/health-services/gp-and-hospital-services/gps-and-private-patients/ (accessed 10 September 2024), (accessed 10 September 2024).
[28] See, https://www.internationalinsurance.com/health/systems/ (accessed 10 September 2024).

for a revived campaign for reunification since 2016 and continues to impact, as discussed in previous chapters. The current flux has created constitutional ambiguity for many within the Unionist community. For one contributor, unionism's 'problem is existential from the point of view that it doesn't know what it is.' This dissonance is reflected by Sammy Douglas, interviewed by Susan McKay, who stated, 'I grew up a Loyalist. I feel loyal… I'm not sure what I am loyal to or what the thing is that keeps us together' (McKay 2021:159). As an interviewee adds, 'I'm not sure if [Unionists] know what being British is themselves. For him serving 'king and country' converges with a dearth of knowledge as to how the 'British state actually work[s].' Amidst constitutional incertitude he contends that:

> the Unionist middle-class, provided… their… lifestyles aren't affected in any way, I think they'd be quite happy to go along with a united Ireland... If you've got significant element of the middle-classes on side with you, you're probably in business.

Now within such a middle-class designation Pollock asserts that he could be persuaded to support a unity referendum stating, 'I would be open to it because you know they're more progressively thinking... And I'm sure there are a lot of Protestants that are completely disillusioned with people like the DUP', admitting he voted Alliance 'last time' and 'wouldn't say 'no not a chance.' He believes the DUP 'are stuck in their 1970s thinking' together with 'more progressive politics' in the Republic would lead him to consider 'a united Ireland':

> I still think that it wouldn't happen… a lot of people, Catholic and Protestants, work in the civil service… and the NHS. I'm thinking if I'm going to vote for a united Ireland I could lose my job.

He adds, he 'wouldn't be the only person that put their personal circumstances ahead of any ideology' but questions his willingness 'to sacrifice my job, because my job would go' come reunification. With his wife working in the NHS they could be 'potentially worse-off.' Again this an understandable position to take. Why would anyone wish to support constitutional change if it was to make them poorer? Equally, why would anyone wish to maintain the status quo if it is doing the same? Pollock would consider reunification because of the Republic's progressive politics and full EU membership, which he is 'a big supporter of.'

> it's a difficult one to call… I feel totally comfortable down there. I don't feel alienated at all… for me it's a very modern society. When I was growing up the roadworks were terrible but they got all the European money. So from Belfast down to Galway and the motorways… I can't see any difference at all.

Self-identifying as:

a moderate Unionist who could be swayed to join a united Ireland if a threat of violence didn't come… the Loyalists could kick off. I wouldn't be prepared to sacrifice that to bring back violence again.

The potential for 'a terrorist struggle' to emerge is something he finds 'really scary' evidenced by 'the force that came out… over the simple fact of flying a flag' in 2012. What Renan called 'the cult of the flag' (Billig 1995:39), for Billig 'is always a reminding, a re-presenting and, thus, a constricting of the imagination' (Billig 1995:103), and therefore a reassertion of the master narrative. As a possible adverse reaction it cannot be discounted. A violent Loyalist backlash is a considerable argument to make regarding any reunification process. By the same token, does this mean that society cannot have the desired change because of violent threats from a particular section of the community? This is where policing arrangements are key. If such a situation should arise then the PSNI must be robust in reassuring the public that the democratic process cannot and will not be derailed, demonstrable in both word and deed. Post-GFA attempts to persuade Loyalists to disband through significant funding to particular groups has been resolutely unsuccessful while political unionism pays lip service to their disbandment. Where dissident Republicans appear to have been effectively nullified by intelligence organisations, Loyalist paramilitarism remains a live issue that political unionism, PSNI and the British government have failed to deal with. Indeed, a LucidTalk poll in November 2024 revealed that 8 in 10 Unionists support DUP ministers meeting the LCC (Breen 2024). Loyalist paramilitarism therefore continues to have a functional utility in the structure, evidenced by its continued existence, that can be used to accentuate disruption, when required, in order to propagate the existing order (MacDonald 1986:20-21).

The Unionist 'traditional narrative' and Brexit-related developments have been a catalyst for a 'paradox of negotiation processes'. While wishing to maintain the union they have been exposed to unreciprocated loyalty from the British government that has upended their 'traditional life-course.' Feelings of security within the union have been replaced with confusion and uncertainty. A re-negotiation 'between master, alternative, and personal narratives' is occurring in which 'the process of structural-individual relations' (McLean and Syed 2015:331) impacting on wider community relations, are being contemplated that could include constitutional realignment. Underlying issues of fear of retribution and exclusion, together with material well-being, outline a challenge for pro-reunification advocates. Mollifying fear-based concerns arguably provide a much more difficult hurdle to overcome as the weight of history and deep-seated emotions will require significant attention. What is evident however, is the willingness by most of the Unionist cohort at civil society level to discuss reunification at the very least.

7.1.2 Durability of the master narrative

Within a period of constitutional flux brought about by Brexit organic change has been noticeably taking place for one interviewee:

> there's been a loosening… and these are really small things. When I was growing up… people going to Donegal for their holidays was not a thing, and I mean when I say not a thing, it wouldn't even have been thought of as being a thing.

This is an example of the restrictive nature of master narrative alignment. He equates these 'small things' with 'holding Irish passports' or people from a Unionist background crossing the border for entertainment or holidays and 'being more adventurous.' He comments, 'when I was a wee lad there's no fucking way, you wouldn't have been allowed' to carry an Irish passport 'whereas people seem to be quite relaxed about that now.' Despite this, he outlines the challenge for 'nationalism-Republicanism':

> Unionists will stay Unionists... it's pointless sort of going… let's have a hug at home competition and these people will suddenly… be singing the Soldier's Song... They're going to stay as they are.

This raises an important point as the 'have a hug at home' is consistent with counter argumentation to the conciliatory rhetoric from the pro-united Ireland camp that is perceived to be persuading Unionists not to be Unionists. Acceptance rather than seeking to impress on Unionists that their thinking is based on delusion serves only to antagonise. Nationalism, in this regard, in order to advance reunification, must as a minimal starting point accept, at face value, the Unionist position. How two competing nationalisms can reach constitutional consensus is the primary question which in a reunification scenario will involve significant re-negotiation of the two. Nationalism, he argues, has:

> a coherence… what [it] is saying is these are abnormal arrangements, here's our recipe for normalising those arrangements because in an all-Ireland state everybody's going to have a say in electing the government.

This is an option unavailable to the NI/NoI electorate in the current dispensation because 'the government of the state is whoever forms a majority at Westminster not Stormont.' Irish nationalism states, 'We don't fucking wanna elect the British government'… That's fair enough but they weren't even given the choice anyway… all the power lies at the centre.' He submits:

> the biggest right you'll ever exercise as a citizen… is the right the cast the ballot for who is going to fucking govern you, end of story... but if you don't have an actual avenue in actually electing a government, then in a sense you're in an ice age.

This, for him, is a unifying bond, 'the one thing that every Unionist, Nationalist has in common' and 'that's a massive thing, regardless of anybody's identity.' As a fundamental fact of the status quo, is retaining existing constitutional arrangements to wilfully accept a significant democratic deficit? This participant believes that most people have 'social democratic instincts, regardless of describing themselves as Unionists or Nationalists.' Undoubtedly, there exists within northern politics a progressive-hard-line dichotomy, and increasingly political unionism has become affiliated with the latter, particularly the DUP as the lead party of unionism. Dropping -8.5% (BBC News 2024) in their vote share in 2024 GE, the fractures within unionism have become 'more pronounced in the wake of Brexit' (Rice 2024). In their 2019 *University of Liverpool NI General Election Survey 2019* Peter Shirlow and Jon Tonge found that Unionist parties were unable to attract pro-union voters in the manner SF and SDLP attract pro-unity voters, surmising that this 'may be due to the pro-union non-voters holding more progressive social views' (Shirlow and Tonge 2019:12). Becton points out that, being a Unionist, he would vote 'Nationalists in certain constituencies':

> while Sinn Féin has good social policies… [that] many Unionists support, there's only one big difference between SDLP and Sinn Féin, in my opinion, [Westminster] representation.

Representation in parliament is divergent from representation in government, as a previous contributor raised, highlighting an anomaly that challenges democratic credibility. To maintain this status quo 'Unionists need Catholic votes' which he believes is starting, citing a UUP councillor from 'west Belfast who's Catholic[29].'

> I welcome this… I don't care about the whole Protestant-Catholic divide. I think it's ridiculous but… I can understand the Unionist-Nationalist divide... look at Scotland. They don't care about religion yet they care about the constitutional issue … if Unionists want to see a future they need to get rid of this religious divide and quick.

Stephen McCarthy is an outlier in this regard, but it does point to a fluidity that allows a reconstruction of personal identity narratives beyond traditional parameters. Religion has been the demarcation line for competing nationalisms since colonial times that has encumbered unionism to make the jump to attract Catholics in any significant manner because it is counter to the colonial rationale that rejects assimilation that destroys the principle of privilege (Memmi 2016). This helps explain why Unionists of a socially progressive disposition are increasingly

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[29] Stephen McCarthy became the first unionist representative 'from a working-class nationalist' background when he was co-opted on to Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough council, in 2017, describing himself politically as 'left-of-centre' (Breen 2017).

rejecting political unionism in its current guise. As a consequence of the status quo, which one participant describes as 'this fucking Toy land, which can only breed sectarianism':

> I can go, 'God and Ulster and see them fucking Fenians, are bastards, I want every one of them dead', and all that. But when it comes down to it then, hang on, your kids, what sort of school are they going to? What sort of house you gonna live in?... even though that might be a heartfelt belief of yours, maybe there's other things that I need to be looking at here.

Coexistence in the absence of assimilation carries a silo mentality that can accentuate sectarianism and insular thinking. For him, unionism:

> knows what it isn't… is its opposition to a united Ireland… but it doesn't really want to talk… but when you... ask well what is it then? That's whenever… you'll find 57 Heinz varieties of answers.

Becton believes that:

> Some… Unionist politicians are Unionists in name alone… there's so many different factions… Because extremes sometimes have the advantage of scaring the opposition sometimes or rallying to groups… can create counter effects that have severe consequences. We could easily have had peaceful Unionist-Nationalist divides like we see in Scotland.

Unionism as a negative expression was exemplified in the 1985 'Ulster says No' campaign against the AIA. This was tacitly acknowledged by Doug Beattie as he sought to create a 'positive' unionism as UUP party leader (Gordon and Black 2021). Brexit has had a fracturing impact on political unionism evidenced by the 2024 British general election where four different shades of unionism now sit in the House of Commons, where Unionist representation was once dominated by the DUP. Is there an identity crisis within the Unionist community exacerbated by Brexit where traditional opinions are being fundamentally reassessed? As Dawn expresses, in areas with 'some of the worst outcomes', these are exacerbated by 'a political party that props up an education system that perpetuates' hopelessness. She has consequently embraced the Nationalist ethos of 'get educated, get educated, get educated,' that has been omitted from the working-class Unionist chronicle to date. For politicians of all hues there is a body of work to be done regarding meaningful participation of working-class Unionists in the political process, regardless of constitutional position. Educational attainment is a significant factor yet all mainstream Unionist parties consistently support the retention of academic selection, although this is not a uniquely Unionist phenomenon with several Catholic grammar schools retaining academic selection for admission purposes also. Research by

Ulster University's UNESCO Centre, *Transforming Education* project found 'little evidence that social mobility is increased by academic selection', that is through the transfer test, and that for many children the transition from primary to post-primary education can be 'traumatic'. For those children that 'do not sit the test, which is around 50% of pupils, or who 'fail' it, can find such a change even more challenging'(Roulston and Milliken 2021:5). Further research found that 'these effects can endure into adulthood with attitudes to education, even by those in their 60s, are influenced by whether they 'passed' or 'failed' that 'examination half a century before'(Furlong and Lunt 2020:54). The lack of educational and social mobility therefore is self-perpetuating creating intergenerational rejection of, due to the failure by, the education system, adding to low confidence of entire communities. Dawn identifies a causal relationship between low educational attainment and political preference. The rejection of a working-class politics from within the Loyalist community has left mainstream Unionist parties as the only option for many. By consistently supporting academic selection political unionism contributes to an anti-intellectualism within working-class communities whose 'narrative path is relatively passive' and 'unconscious' (McLean and Syed 2015:337) devoid of critique of their circumstances. In a self-perpetuating cycle the social status quo is maintained, keeping an uneducated community much more malleable to the politics of emotion rather than reason. White submits:

> Working-class [Loyalist] communities don't have a say. We don't have that outlet, the social aspects within a normal society. It's Green and Orange politics. I know people in this community that would spend their last £5 buying a flag than putting a loaf of bread in the cupboard.

White captures succinctly the point of the 'politics of emotion', whereby one supports emotive positions, actions, causes, and so on, that personally chime at an instinctual level, contrary to one's material interests. Importantly he also illustrates that the status quo is not working for many of those who wish to maintain it, where reality and beliefs do not converge, posing a significant challenge to the durability of the Unionist master narrative.

7.2 National identity

On national identity, John poses the straight-foreword question, 'am I Irish? Am I included in the definition of being Irish or not… would I be looked upon as, being you don't belong here.' What it means to be 'Irish' is open to an array of interpretations but the premise of John's remark is whether Unionists would be made to feel welcome in a future reunification scenario. Quoting John Hume, he adds, 'it's not a question of uniting territory, you have to unite people' which is reflected in the changes to articles 2 and 3 of Bunreacht na hÉireann. John paraphrasing from his book, believes 'Irish Presbyterians need to… have a more positive

attitude to things…Irish rather than having a negative attitude.' A more 'positive attitude' is not restricted to issues of identity. As White comments:

> Irish language belongs as much to me as it does to you or anybody else. Linda Ervine… does a brilliant job… and she comes at it from a Unionist perspective, Presbyterianism and the Irish language… how the penny doesn't drop… that needs to be addressed.

He adds that he himself is learning Irish and his son now teaches it with Ervine. Learning the language was 'taboo' within unionism 'but it's happening.' As 'Ulster or Northern Ireland unionism' became 'primarily polity-centred rather than people-centred', Irish and Irish-ness was jettisoned contrasting with the memories of the likes of Richard Rutledge Kane, fluent Irish speaker and Grand Master of the OO in Belfast (Hartley 2006:42). Perspectives towards issues like the Irish language are, however, changing within unionism. Yet there remains well-documented hostility to it, as in the Naíscoil na Seolta example which White attributes to elements with a 'far-right mind-set', and subsequently Bunscoil na Seolta, which face continued, co-ordinated opposition (Kula 2024b). Such animosity from political and civil society unionism leads many Nationalists to conclude that it boils down to mere hatred of Irish and Irish-ness, reflected by Tom Collins who claims 'unionism would rather see Northern Ireland fail than show 'dignity and respect' for other traditions:'

> the ghost of 'wouldn't have a Catholic about the place' still haunts these six counties. You can see it flitting about the swanky new Grand Central Station in its rejection of our native language; you can hear its howl of derision greeting the public inquiry into the murder of Pat Finucane; and you can feel its deathly presence when it comes to anything which signals respect for Irish culture and traditions (Collins 2024a).

'Irish culture and traditions' are counter-hegemonic and viewed as 'explicitly antagonistic' (McLean and Syed 2015:320) to many Unionists and therefore something to be resisted. The Grand Central Station example points to how deep this narrative is embedded when a public company, Translink, can take the unilateral decision not to erect bi-lingual signage despite a Belfast City Council motion in April 2024 in support of such a move, as well as endorsement from the infrastructure minister (Simpson 2024). In a public consultation by Belfast City Council regarding dual-language signage in a new leisure centre, for example, a member of the public stated that 'we will burn it to the ground before an Irish sign goes up' (Young 2024). A contrasting view comes from John who maintains that living 'in peace with a majority of the Irish population who are Nationalist Catholic Republican or whatever… is an enriching experience' which he welcomes. After the GFA:

people began to relax a bit. The frontiers became less hard… people could cross over a bit more easily and… be a bit more positive about the other community… the question comes back to the other question I mean do people from your community look on me as Irish? Am I included or not?

This is an important contribution which challenges the Nationalist master narrative in its ability to accept those from the 'other' community. Communal division post-partition was further sharpened by conflict. The GFA provided, a framework, as John states in which such inter-relations could be addressed. In September 2024 the Presbyterian church announced that it would hold a monthly service on the Falls Road, in *An Cultúrlann MacAdam/Ó'Fiaich*, a former Presbyterian church and now the hub of the Irish language community in west Belfast (Tunney 2024). A once unthinkable occurrence, demonstrating a very practical willingness by the Nationalist community to welcome and include those form other traditions. The GFA did bring about a lowering of the frontiers particularly with young people, as Gareth points out some of his close social circle are from the Nationalist community, and with that comes a cross-fertilisation of views, cultures and so on. How a person's identity can diminish another's goes to the heart of the issue for unionism, which as John states, 'gets underneath the skin of it.' How do expressions of Irish-ness diminish a sense of Britishness for many in the Unionist community? John contends that 'the Irish element in Unionist identity is a fragile kind of thing'. Self-identifying as 'Northern Irish' is to accept an element of that denied Irishness. Indeed, Ian Paisley stated that 'you cannot be an Ulsterman without being an Irishman' (Cochrane 1997:58). John continues:

there's a sense in which me and my community – are we Irish? Well, we are partly Irish. Am I looked upon as being Irish? I am not too sure whether I am or not... Irish is a part of my identity, in a broad sense of being Irish, and I would want that... It's just a pity... the attitudes we had in the 60s were not allowed to develop and were not blown apart by the Troubles.

Another participant classes himself as coming 'from the British-Irish community, and you've got the Irish-Irish community.' 'British-Northern Irish' is how Gareth self-identifies although he rejects the Irish tag completely. Pollock sees himself as British, and explains:

people say to me… you're brought up on the island of Ireland, you're Irish. I agree, I was brought up on the island of Ireland but I was brought up very much in the British identity, went to British schools played British sports so… culturally I would see myself as British… But after the Good Friday Agreement me and all my family and my friends,

have all got Irish passports now. So, I haven't got a British passport anymore, I've got an Irish passport.

While passports and identity are separate issues they also overlap. While convenience and benefits offer an attractive option Pollock demonstrates that it is possible to retain his British identity while carrying an Irish passport, feeling that they are mutually exclusive. Significantly, there is a definite trend from some in the Unionist community toward softening their identity when it comes to international travel and to embracing aspects of their Irishness that may have once been inconceivable. Is this a harbinger for constitutional re-alignment?

7.3 Constitutional Future

Michael is of the opinion that 'Northern Ireland hasn't worked since it's had an Assembly' qualifying this by stating that 'the Assembly needs to work... I don't think Northern Ireland has a future without the Assembly. It's not gonna work with direct rule… because direct rule ministers will just lose interest.' British disinterest is not a recent occurrence and remains actualisable through the constitutional status quo. Dawn's ideal constitutional future, 'as a Unionist:

> would be Northern Ireland's place within a United Kingdom but a Northern Ireland at peace with itself and delivering… [on] all of the issues that we know are there, right, front and centre.

Sam White takes a more philosophical view of the future as he reflects on his friendships with Nationalists and believes the 'biggest majority of people now want to move on and no way do they want to go back to the bad old days' but acknowledges that 'you have the people who you'll never change their minds. There's always going to be sectarian bigots – that's on both sides.' What White refers to as 'barstool generals' are the 'very small minority' that continue to stoke division, unable to escape the trauma of 'the Troubles' that 'sits on their shoulders and they can't get rid of it.' For his community, post-GFA:

> The political issues… became non-existent… It became very much about turf and issues around drugs and the whole political thing was left to politicians and working-class people didn't want to engage with politics at all.

Leaving the 'political thing' to politicians reproduces communal passivity and unconscious alignment with the master narrative, placing significant power in the hands of political actors to define that narrative. Yet several of the contributors have described an organic 'coming together', particularly, but not exclusively, amongst young people. Taking the GFA generation as being born from 1998 onward then that process is underway in the here and now with

community divisions being of decreasing importance as attested to by Nationalist, Unionist and other interviewees.

Pollock admits to having Protestant and Catholic friends with upward mobility removing him 'from a lot of that bigotry and hatred' that is concentrated in working-class estates. He believes if 'he still lived in there' he would have that same 'bigotry and hatred' which is then 'passed onto the children.' Sectarianism is grounded in the 'deepest interests' of the Protestant working-class, according to MacDonald (1986) precisely because of the colonial system that instilled it. This fact is neglected where bigotry is structured as 'personal prejudice' rather than a symptom of an 'unresolved, post-colonial situation' (Bell 1991). Pollock describes habitus and which is very much an illustration of nurture over nature. That he now feels himself surrounded by 'people… more moderate in their thinking' attests to the powerful influence one's environment and associations can have. In thinking about his 'children's future' he would like to see increased integration between 'communities, Protestant and Catholic' and is an advocate of integrated education which should be normalised:

> a lot of these kids are still growing up with the bitterness and hatred that's been passed on from their parents… if they go to school from that early age they're thinking hold on a minute… you're calling them a Fenian bastard but actually he's a nice guy… integrated education would be the big thing for me.

Integrated education is often forwarded as a panacea for northern society's ills, and reasonably introducing children to the 'other' on a daily basis is viewed as breaking down existing barriers. Integration suggests a level of mixing while maintaining a level of difference whereas assimilation means an absorption. By maintaining a two-communities narrative rather than Nationalist or Unionist 'areas' becoming a thing of the past then such distinctions will continue. This is also maintained in the design of GFA which is based on a dyadic view of northern society. Pollock does not believe the:

> Irish government don't want us, nor do the British government want us… we're a pain in the backside… I don't think it's particularly there for both sides… you don't really hear the British government pushing too hard for Irish unity… You hear Sinn Féin shouting about it all the time but you don't hear the Irish government shouting too much for it.

The Republic's government established the Shared Island Initiative with a significant budget but its critics argue that this is actually designed to avoid reunification. No government in the Republic is yet to fully commit to the project but significantly Leo Varadkar appears as the most notable political figure, as former Taoiseach, to advocate for reunification having attended Ireland's Future events both in Dublin and Belfast, in 2022 and 2024 respectively,

the former as a government minister. He has also taken his advocacy to an international standing having attended an event at Notre Dame University where he called on political parties to make 'reunification an objective, not just an aspiration' (Ui Neill 2024). According to some of the interviewees, SF calling for a referendum creates resistance to it, but the emergence of a centre-right party calling for the same could persuade those unpersuaded by Republicans, with Varadkar appearing to be creating such a space. Whether those of the centre-right in the Republic move on to that space remains to be seen, but an opportunity exists for the establishment parties to endorse reunification as an official party political objective and drive it forward with the additional effect of 'stealing' SF's 'clothes' politically speaking. He adds:

> I'm still from a working-class background but I'm out of that ghetto… it's a working-class war… people who are lower class will suffer the same economic deprivation… they feel poverty and shitty housing… they're very similar. It's just there… they've been brought up of thinking [differently].

Catholics living in Protestant estates controlled by Loyalist paramilitaries 'would be put out and intimidated' in contrast to being 'out in the private developments' where 'there's none of that.' He argues that 'us against them' attitude leaves entire communities 'stuck in that downward spiral of being controlled by paramilitaries.' Pollock is an example of someone who rejected the dominant narrative of his community and on leaving has, by his own admission, become more tolerant of the 'other', with friends from across the community. While Gareth stated that there are Catholics living in the Ardcarn estate, for example, they would be a small minority. Reinforcement of a militaristic, mono-cultural view of the world in the built environment cannot but emphasise an 'us against them' view, thus fortifying the 'siege mentality'. Gareth maintains that 'divided communities are not good communities.'

John Dunlop's views on the assimilation of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland are as equally attributable to the Unionist community more generally who are, 'set among the people of Ireland' and need 'to come to terms in a positive way with all that… whatever the political arrangements':

> As long as we fail to do this, we live in a confused world feeling only partly at home, amongst a people with whom we have not yet made peace, while at the same time having no other place to go which would be more congenial. Or do we suspect that here we have no abiding city and that the Plantation will yet be reversed and we will, however reluctantly, return to the place whence we came… and Ireland shall know us no more?

> If we are intending to stay, let us do so in peace, seeking necessary space for ourselves and giving the necessary space to others, who do not like being pushed around anymore than we do (Dunlop 1995:144).

Conclusion

Etched into the Unionist biography is a history spanning from the colonial era, interspersed with the episodic events of partition, that had their dominant narrative embedded in the structure of society. Fitting more than one narrative 'type', McLean and Syed point out, that this may 'make them more intractable, more important in shaping individual lives, and more meaningful to the larger culture' (McLean and Syed 2015:342). Alignment with this master narrative bequeathed upon Unionists 'the privilege of being good and right, allowing one to live his or her life uncritically' (McLean and Syed 2015:327). Undoubtedly, they were the prime beneficiaries of partition but there was a cost. Privilege and poverty are a paradoxical element of the Unionist reality as the condition of working-class Unionist communities remains a significant omission in the broader Unionist narrative as it fundamentally threatens the notion of privilege. Ulster unionism has been traditionally anti-assimilationist. As a consequence, the broader Unionist community, and particularly the working-class, have experienced an arrested development from Westminster paternalism and uncritical narrative alignment leaving many questioning who they are.

Behind the defensive line of the 'new and impregnable Pale' a militaristic lexicon founded on the psychological states of 'siege' and 'defence' provided a common thread to the Unionist narrative, that allows the politics of fear to remain relevant. In the context of constitutional change fear once again emerges in relation to the potential of Nationalist and Republican retribution in a reunification scenario. Moreover, a 'them and us' attitude prevails for many Unionists who view the Republic, as distinctly different, with no sense of connection. Attachment to the polity, as a foundational aspect of identity, along with an emotional detachment from the south gives credence to the assumption that a referendum would indeed by divisive. However, the erosion of such foundationalism since GFA has allowed some Unionists to explore aspects of their own identity submerged by conflict and some are, at the very least, willing to countenance constitutional change based on a process of inclusive dialogue and clarification. The old Unionist adage of 'what we have we hold' is no longer as absolute, allowing a recalibration of the Unionist identity narrative somewhat. Yet such pretensions remain outliers at present.

While there are certainly those, quoted above, that oppose reunification categorically, constitutional preference may not be as rigid as commonly assumed and subject to re-evaluation dependent on wider conditions. Moreover, underlying political and class variations

within unionism expose a dialectic (Crouch and McKenzie 2006) that is subsumed under dominant political Unionist positioning. Progressive viewpoints within the broader Unionist family have tentatively begun a process of renegotiation of personal and cultural narratives. The internalization of societal structures, particularly in the light of Brexit, has led to a moderation of previously stringent positions for some.

Prevailing Unionist orthodoxy determines constitutional change as an existential threat to the polity and thus, their position within it. For McAuley:

> it is the DUP understanding of unionism, articulated through long inherited discourses making reference to core identifiers such as 'Britishness', 'Protestantism', 'tradition', 'anti-unification' [that predominate]… These key discourses… enable both representation and recognition on the part of the subject who position themselves accordingly… [because] certain memories… seem to us to express what are central to our collective identity. Those memories, once brought to the fore, reinforce that form of identity (McAuley 2003:70)

Yet it is precisely the DUP domination of Unionist discourse that repels many ideological Unionists from political unionism. McAuley argues that there is a 'struggle to reconstruct unionism' that oscillates between 'a more pluralist identity, or one proclaiming its traditional form' creating a 'dislocation'. It is here that ''meaning' becomes ambiguous… as differing forces compete through new discursive constructs':

> This 'de-centring' of the structure occurs through a variety of social processes that call into question the legitimacy of the existent hegemonic bloc. This sets in motion social forces of both destruction and creation (McAuley 2003:69).

A process of reconstruction that allows the creation of 'new identities… that are deemed not to satisfy core criteria of unionism are destined to remain at the fringes of political life' (McAuley 2003:69). It is in this reconstructionist space that the topic of reunification sits, remaining peripheral and oppositional to 'what unionism means to most people.' However, adherence to the 'singular' Unionist narrative is softening. Intra-Unionist class disparities are apparent as aspects of Irish identity are also being increasingly explored. Moreover, some of the above contributions suggest an inquisitiveness towards future constitutional change based on disillusionment with the status quo.

The framing of reunification as a SF-Republican project creates a palpable fear of retribution, a *Nationalist revenge* to 'get their own back.' Along with a revenge-fear, being a 'polity-centred' identity, Ulster unionism would face significant subjective disruption as the basis of their identity would be removed. Essentially, the 'old boundaries' for the Unionist community are

eroding, along with a 'loss of certainty' and a blurred 'sense of place' within the UK. Unsure of the British government's long-term plans, the metaphorical 'hand grenade' thrown by Brexit has created an 'ontological insecurity' (Billig 1995:136). According to Billig:

> The dispossessed and insecure cannot bear this nomadic condition of homelessness: for them there is no rapture in ambiguity. They are driven to seek secure identities, often regressing to an earlier stage of development (Billig 1995:136).

On the supposed precipice of a unity referendum, calls for constitutional change amplify Unionist feelings of ambiguity, of neither being fully 'in' or 'out', exacerbated by Britain's but not the UK's exit from the EU. An ontological insecurity is an understandable response to the British government's view that NI/NoI is expendable in their pursuit to safeguard their own interests. In 2007 Andrew White wrote of 'the constitutional status of Northern Ireland' being 'precarious' as it was 'dependent as it is on the numerical superiority of Unionists. Therefore, any rise in the Nationalist population increases Unionist insecurity' (White 2007:129). If White is correct, then 'Unionist insecurity; has been heightened by the demographic shifts expressed in the 2021 census, the political shift in 2022 Assembly election and the revived campaign for a unity referendum since Brexit. Based on White's assertion, a 'performative reinforcement' of the Unionist 'identity' is to be anticipated, 'regressing to an earlier stage of development' (White 2007:129). Indeed, this could be already 'manifested' through the sustained campaign of hostility towards an Irish language or the on-going campaign of intimidation against East Belfast GAA. Feargal Cochrane argues, given the history of betrayal by several British governments of Unionists since partition to the present day, that they 'might be better off trusting the Irish government over their constitutional future' (Cochrane 2021). This may seem a step too far for many Unionists, but the 'unthinkable' may yet become 'politically viable.'

Chapter 8. Other perspectives

Introduction

This investigation did not deliberately set out to seek the opinions of the constitutionally non-aligned. Participants were selected using the blunt designations of Nationalist and Unionist, based on limited knowledge of the participants on the part of the researcher. Consequently, this third group emerged from the interview process organically. As a data point this cohort is significant and as such it is worthy of inclusion to demonstrate shifting identity narratives. This chapter will follow the same structure as the previous chapters, beginning the section, *Interpretations and the lived experience*, followed by, *Changing narratives? GFA and Brexit,* with the subsection, *Brexit* and ending with a brief conclusion.

8.1 Interpretations and the lived experience

Born in the 1960s during what he terms as 'the civil uprising', Glenn Bradley could be described as having impeccable Unionist credentials. Growing up in the Woodvale area of the Shankill, Bradley was a former British soldier, the nephew of Hughie Smith, former leader of the PUP, and was himself a party officer in the UUP involved in the GFA negotiations, progressing into the business sector after his time in politics:

> I grew up immersed in that British, Protestant cultural tradition but my family never ever denied my Irish-ness… we were very much the loyal Irish… the Irish component of the United Kingdom made up of English, Scots, Welsh and ourselves.

He explains, 'I'm Irish… but culturally British, traditionally British.' Growing up in close proximity to the 'west Belfast peace line' in 'a two up two down terrace with an outside yard toilet, no running hot water,' he states that he 'never participated once in an act of discrimination or prejudice.' With the commencement of conflict, he recalls that 'every single day… largely Republican armed action [was] being inflicted on my community.' The resultant 'fear, that being careful, was just simply how we lived each day.' His fear was vindicated when in 1972 he was injured in a 'no warning IRA car bomb.' Violence became an omnipresent backdrop which was to directly affect Bradley in a more profound way. Returning from school 'on the day of Bobby Sands death':

> Republicans had formed a gauntlet at Ardoyne and they petrol bombed the bus. It was the usual taunts… 'burn ya hun bastard's'... That for me was a catalytic moment. I got off that bus that day swearing I was gonna hit back. I tried to join the UVF, but my uncle… made sure that I couldn't… he had better ideas for me.

As his uncle and 'later' his 'mentor', Hughie's intervention steered Bradley towards joining the British army in 1984 'with enough hate to kill the world.' Outside the 'goldfish bowl, and 'the incestuous-ness of NI' his world view 'started changing' within a military career of circa ten years 'in Northern Ireland' and 'in other theatres':

> there was no catalytic moment it was just a slow process of learning… it was in the army that I learned about the United Irishmen. I hadn't been taught that in school… about Che Guevara… about the IRA's actual history… it was in the army that I started becoming politicised beyond just Northern Ireland.

Absence of the inhibition of the master narrative, Bradley internationalised his perspective, adopting an objectivity free from the 'stifling' restrictions of the Unionist master narrative. From an area of high deprivation and conflict-related killings he believes the suffering was not felt equally by everyone:

> If you put a compass point there [from where he lived] and take the radius of the compass out nine and a half and then draw a circle, 48% of the casualties in the conflict happened in that circle, that 4 or 5 square miles… while everybody may have been inconvenienced because of the conflict, some people did suffer more.

Three decades of conflict left over thirty-five hundred dead. Of the 3532 killings recorded between 14 July 1969 and 31 December 2001, 1522 were Catholic and 1288 were Protestant, the remaining 722 were classified as 'not from Northern Ireland, killed in Northern Ireland'. The highest rate of killings per geographical area were west Belfast with 623 deaths, next was north Belfast with 577 (CAIN). Over a third of all 'Troubles' related deaths occurred in the city. Moreover, there existed a clear class differential. For example, Cherryvalley, an affluent part of east Belfast, recorded zero conflict related deaths within the reporting period, uniquely for Belfast. In contrast the greatest rates of conflict related killings in Belfast were in areas of high social deprivation with Shankill 78.58 deaths followed by Falls with 76.03 deaths per 1000 population. Outside of Belfast the highest death rates were in Derry, Omagh, Limavady and south Armagh. Fermanagh ranked the lowest out of the 14 areas analysed (omitting Europe) with 112 killings (CAIN). Bradley concludes that a 'class-struggle' was evident that remains largely unexamined. Similarly, he believes that the 'Loyalist working-class have been utterly used and abused' by what he refers to as 'the fur coat brigade of unionism' from before partition:

> Post-partition we are now in a situation where individuals within that community... who are pound shop Messiahs… the Paisleys of old, are leading the working-class Loyalist people up a cul-de-sac and offering them no alternative.

One interviewee, a self-employed IT entrepreneur, describes himself as coming from a 'very middle-class PUL background' whose parents were 'both teachers'. On account of their long holidays he spent 'six weeks' per year 'travelling around Ireland', adding that 'there really hasn't been anywhere in Ireland that I haven't been.' He remembers 'the poverty' and 'barefooted children in very remote parts of Kerry.' In his adult life, he recalls on one fishing trip parking his 'smart BMW' outside a pub and on coming out finding 'two or three people standing looking at it. They had never seen a BMW or a Mercedes… Ireland was very much the poor part of the Island at that stage.' Describing himself as British, his identity is a 'hybridity' based on interNationalist conceptions. To explain his British-ness he brings forth the notion of the 'British diaspora' 'not understood or appreciated' in contrast with the Irish diaspora. He states that 'the British diaspora which was borne out of conquest' which 'his ancestors would have been involved in… my shame over that is… part of my Britishness.' His Britishness is:

> best summed up by the values of the Commonwealth of Nations not the British Commonwealth of Nations… its common use of language… system of law… system of democracy… shared history… I'm not a monarchist but I'm not anti-royal.

Working remotely with people from India, he contends that they also 'identify as British' in certain 'aspects of their lives' such as the 'railways' and 'system of government.' He adds, 'the British… did the same to India that they did to Ireland. They partitioned it… there is nothing to be proud of in terms of what they did there.' Shashi Tharoor describes:

> the horrors of the partition when East and West Pakistan were hacked off the stooped shoulders of India by the departing British… The creation and perpetuation of Hindu-Muslim antagonism was the most significant accomplishment of British imperial policy: the colonial project of "divide et impera" (divide and rule)… its greatest failure must be the shambles of that original Brexit – cutting and running from the land they had claimed to rule for its betterment, leaving behind a million dead, 17 million displaced, billions of rupees of property destroyed, and the flames of communal hatred blazing hotly across the ravaged land. There is no greater indictment of the failures of British rule in India than the tragic manner of its ending.

As a consequence, 'the British made sure a united India would not be possible' (Tharoor 2017). Moreover, on the issue of railways as a reflection of Britishness, Tharoor writes:

> the Indian Railway system is often pointed to by apologists for Empire as one of the ways in which British colonialism benefited the subcontinent, ignoring the obvious fact that many countries also built railways without having to go to the trouble and expense of being colonized to do so.

Tharoor concludes that, 'the Indian railway was a big colonial scam' (Tharoor 2016:177).

Notions of a 'hybrid' interNationalist Britishness are very much rooted in empire which the participant acknowledges, including 'the shame of slavery and the slave trade' and 'over the colonial aspect of it', focusing on far-off colonies. He continues, 'I can't divorce myself from that but its, nevertheless, something that binds me in common with my relatives who are living in Canada and Australia'. Colonialism and imperialism do not diminish his Britishness, despite the 'shame' of a history that was beyond his control. In contrast, he adds, 'in terms of Irish identity, there's… stuff that maybe hasn't shown Irishness in the best light… I mean the obvious one is … the Troubles and the Provo campaign.' He comments:

> on one part I can recognise the courage, the sacrifice that people involved in that campaign made in terms of their lives… it's one thing, and I am thinking perhaps in particular of the Hunger Strikes… sacrificing your life but when you choose to sacrifice somebody else's life in pursuit of your aims, that's a very different thing.

Kathy Wolff is Project Manager of the Community Relations Forum, and also an army widow, having spent some time living abroad. She recalls the '74 Workers Strike' and as 'one of our jobs' whilst in secondary school having 'to sellotape the windows in case bombs went off and the glass came in.' Being searched by soldiers or RUC 'was normal to us', much to the bemusement of her grandchildren.' She identifies as 'Northern Irish' and accepts that she is 'part British' and 'part Irish':

> whilst I would say I'm British… [going] on holiday you never would have said 'I'm British', you would have said you're Irish… [abroad] people wouldn't have identified you as being British, you were just Irish. A lot of the time it was easier just to say you were Irish and I personally don't have a problem with it.

Claiming to be British or Northern Irish, whilst overseas presents difficulties to those same people, suggesting that it is a domestic disposition that does not travel well. Kathy shares that here grandfather was 'an orange man':

> There was never any sectarianism… [He] would have said if stuff needed to be done, your neighbour would have come out and done it because you would have returned that favour at a later date… you were Catholic and you were Protestant, there was no deal about it because he said we weren't like yous(sic) up in Belfast.

Even within the broader Unionist community Belfast is regarded as having a particularly sharpened sectarian edge. An editorial by the *Belfast Media Group* compared 'the more celebratory and restrained tone of the Donegal and Enniskillen (OO) parades' to the 'the shrill' and 'raucous… Belfast Twelfth' (Belfast Media Group 2022). OO member and blogger,

'Choyaa', explores the 'rural Orangeism as good vs Belfast Orangeism as bad' perception, and argues that without reform 'to meet the needs of both its members and society at large, then it is finished.' For its negative image, he concludes that in 'reality… it has nobody to blame but itself' (Choyaa 2022). Adherents to a system built on the symbolic violence of domination 'is not likely to be invisible' to those with an alternative narrative. As such, incongruent impressions bring 'discomfort… when the individual and the structure do not align' bringing 'the master narrative into relief' (McLean and Syed 2015:327).

Kathy's work brings her in contact with a wide range of political actors, including ex-combatants. At one particular event at Stormont she recounts a conversation she had with her father who was also in attendance:

> he says 'Kate, I'm not saying what you do is wrong but I'm just sitting here, from somebody whose family never had somebody who did as much as a day in prison... how friendly you are with all those and how you've slotted in and yet your background wouldn't be anything to do with that.'

This exchange suggests a moralistic stance on the part of the father that expresses a view that 'all those' are not to be engaged with. It could also represent a generational shift, within Kathy's family at least, that embraces inclusive engagement in order to advance and cement peace that rejects a divisive politics. Her work has also brought her to into conflict with an un-named 'legal organisation', because their request to 'use the hall was deemed inappropriate, resulting in her being 'threatened' and intimidated:

> we were burned out here in 2010… when the hall was rebuilt, … they wanted to march down and have a church service and we said no... The only church services that would be held in this hall are ones that are on a cross-community basis…I started getting… phone calls and hanging up… breathing and hanging up. And then at a public meeting, 'this hall has been torched once, it could be torched again', and other comments.

She recounts attending a meeting:

> one of the men from the organisation… stood up and said 'we were denied our right to worship at the Barron Hall'… I said, 'we're not a church, you walked past four churches to come here'… And then somebody said… I shouldn't be working with murderers and being proud of it… I've been through worse in my life. Even when the place was burned down I had to keep looking at the positive… quite a few times we were graffitied(sic) and I sort of thought we must be doing something right to annoy somebody enough that they need to do that.

Quintin Oliver 'was born in east Belfast… in a Protestant house, in a Protestant area… my father was in a Protestant job and I went to a Protestant school.' He describes himself, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, as a 'Protestant atheist', a nod to the identity metrics used in NI/NoI to ascertain one's background. Reflecting a trend within the Protestant-Unionist community, Quintin left NI/NoI to attend university in Scotland during the 1970s. On being asked whether national identity is important, he replies, 'of course. I think it is for people generally and for conflict societies in particular, because it is your mummy's milk and your granny's stories that you will hear about it', succinctly describing habitus, and how narratives become embodied in personal identity. Ironically, he describes himself 'as Protestant' despite his parents both being atheists, yet he 'accept[s] the tag':

> Because in our context it's a political description it's not a religious description. Conflict of course isn't about religion, it's about power and status and identity and that's why identity is important.

Born 'British' he was 'given the British passport' by his parents, sending 'it back in 1982 over the Falklands War' and holding 'an Irish passport since 1982.' He describes his decision to take an Irish passport as 'partly a push factor from Britain', objecting 'to the imperialism of the Falklands war.' He describes himself as having a 'dual identity.' He believes 'people are both for practical, logistical passport reasons rather than for any sort of strong affiliation reasons':

> I'm very comfortable about my Irish-ness. I'm uncomfortable about my Britishness. Because of the imperial background… I turned down a British honour because I couldn't accept an honour from the Queen… I am anti-monarchy. I am Republican… [with] a large R … an anti-monarchist Republicanism but it doesn't necessarily transfer into Irish Republicanism.

Britain's imperial legacy has been a prominent feature of the contributions up until this point. Indeed, Kathy lived in Hong Kong for a spell having married a British soldier. From its genesis 'British' has been an imperial identity, intertwined with 'Protestantism and war' (Esler 2021), around which a 'collective chronicle' has been manufactured where 'facts… may contradict or constrain' the British identity 'story' (McLean and Syed 2015:337). Critical alignment therefore, allows for alternative interpretations and reconstruction to occur, as illustrated by Quintin. He continues, 'I would never describe myself as British other than in a legal constitutional De Souza sense.'

Emma De Souza, in 2015 applied for a residence card for her husband who was a US citizen, using her Irish passport in the application. The British Home Office rejected the application requesting she 'renounce her British citizenship and pay a fee to apply as an Irish citizen.' De Souza challenged this decision under the dual-identity provisions in GFA, having never been

a British citizen. An immigration tribunal, in 2019, upheld a previous court ruling which supported De Souza's position which was challenged by the Home Office (McCormack 2020). This case, specifically, demonstrated to Quintin that 'we were all… technically British when we are born here, but by political decision, we can choose to be Irish or British.' His partner 'holds a British passport' and they both decided, when the time came, that their children could chose the nationality of their passports:

> we said, ok your mummy's British and this is her identity and belief... I'm Irish, what passport do you think you would like and one of them ran upstairs and got a satellite map of his wall and came down said, 'well we are on this island, mummy has joined us on this island therefore we are going to be Irish aren't we' and they both have Irish passports.

He is also comfortable with his 'Northern Ireland status', not:

> in a sort of middle-ground, can't-make-up-my-mind way, [but]in a sense of place… it's my heritage of all different sorts… I don't any longer live in a Protestant area. I sent my kids to an integrated school. I deliberately and consciously work across the city.

Quintin's deviation from the Unionist master narrative, traditionally aligned with Protestantism which he accepts as a political characterisation, 'is what makes a master narrative most visible' (McLean and Syed 2015:328). As a consequence, he has taken deliberate steps to live his life consistent with the conclusions of his 'personal negotiation' (McLean and Syed 2015:327).

Claire Mitchell is a writer and activist, a Protestant, growing up in 'charismatic renewal movement'. She views herself as 'very Irish... always had an Irish passport' with 'strong political views in that way' having 'went to Dublin to do my PhD in UCD.' As a lover of 'local history… born in Newtownards', where she currently resides, she has looked into the heritage of her area:

> a third of the Protestant[s]… here have always been radical hallions. The United Irish rebellion was massive here… The Famine was a big deal here... There's a third of people voted Labour when the Labour Party were big. I think it's exactly the same today.

The United Irish Rebellion, an alliance of Catholics and radical Protestants, whose leadership in Ulster was 'heavily Presbyterian', sought 'the Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number… Real Independence to Ireland, and Republicanism its particular purpose' (quoted in O'Leary 2020:207). Moreover, both the 1798 Rebellion and *An Górta Mór* have been largely written out of the official narrative of NI/NoI, particularly of that of the Unionist community. The non-sectarian politics of NILP, as discussed by Edwards (2023), was to flounder on the rocks of

civil conflict. Influenced by the wealth of local radicalism, she viewed herself and her husband as 'great cultural pioneers' in sending their 'kids to a Catholic school' only to be amazed to find 'it's full of Prods.' She adds, 'my family are quite radical, but you know my extended family are normal Unionists' but 'their barriers are definitely falling.' She admits to 'feeling like an oddball in the context of being a Protestant who feels so Irish with very liberation, left-wing politics and living in these quite red, white and blue areas':

> Feeling, man, I am the odd one out, feeling like you have to keep your head down... not speak up too loudly... I was getting really fed up with that and I suppose that's a dynamic that was brewing away in the background.

Claire's position is very much a reversal of the British in the south after partition of 'keep your mouth shut, just fit in, or leave.' Her weariness combined with her love of local history and 'trying to keep the kids off screens' led her to start 'poking about' with her friend and taking:

> little trips to United Irish sites… [it] became really emotional and moving to me quite quickly. I was realising that within a two-mile radius of my house … All these radical Protestants had existed for hundreds of years in exactly these areas that I was feeling such a stranger in and I knew that I wasn't alone.

A growing momentum from within her social circle assured her that others felt as she did leading Claire to write, *The Ghost Limb: Alternative Protestants and the Spirit of 1798.* Her 'ghost limb' is a consequence of imperial Britain's 'amputation' of Ireland leaving a 'stump' under which radical Protestantism could not find expression. Her hope was that the book be viewed as 'kind… to the Orange Order' while 'bringing in some Loyalist conversations and voices as well as Republicans and former IRA people':

> That's the conversations I wanted to have… the ghost limb is the Irish part of you… the feeling that you have to hide… that's nagging away at you like a gnawing absence… after writing it, that ghost limb feeling is dealt with. I don't really feel like that anymore.

If the ghost limb for Claire, based on 'Spirit of 1798', is the amputation of a core part of her Irish identity then broad nationalism has an incomplete Irishness through its distancing from radical Protestantism. She wanted 'to push this further and see… how far it is this' radicalism goes. For me 1798 was just… on my doorstep and the way that I found myself into it':

> it wasn't really a big book of Prods for unity… It was just about Prods being not Unionists, Loyalists and having a different politics… Unionists can be anti-sectarian, but something that was… about liberation, about Irishness, about island, equality… the package of stuff you wouldn't associate with Unionist politics.

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As a cathartic, anxiety-easing experience, it helped Claire 'give less of a shit' as 'year on year it just feels more urgent to say something' about reunification. The book gave her 'a road in' to circumvent 'the barrier between Protestants and this conversation', as increasingly people are 'making eye contact and having the small conversations.' She adds, some 'think I'm a nutter' alongside 'loads of Loyalist trolls, but mostly the 'reaction to the book has been lovely':

> mostly Protestants going 'oooh' in relief, 'I'm not alone'…[with Catholics stating] 'oh my god there's Protestants like you, you exist'… or relating to stories mostly about class or Irish-ness… as a result of partition. I found that very moving.

A 'better language' was particularly important to Claire during her writing, which was about:

> treating people as equals and Loyalists, for example not as dumb, white trash, idiots you know the kind of Neanderthals… not assuming that every member of the Orange Order is a sectarian bigot and having an open mind to the goodness in all those traditions and the variety within them… it's about having a generous spirit to those with really different politics.

Claire's alternative narrative resists (McLean and Syed 2015:320) the rigidity and compulsory nature of the master narrative founded on Protestantism and unionism. She demonstrates an openness to discuss political and constitutional affairs in a respectful manner that affords dignity to those of a different viewpoint. Owen Jones, in *Chavs* (2012), for example, argues that the 'noble tradition of a respectable and diligent working class was over' (Jones 2012:ix) and replaced by a demonised caricature to be socially distanced from (Jones 2012:xii). Loyalism has been similarly caricatured both from within unionism and without. For Jones, the root of such demonization 'is the legacy of a very British class war', a class war embraced by Ulster unionism. This intensified by the coming to power of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 'and her assault on the pillars of working class Britain'. Being stripped of power the working-class were 'no longer seen as a proud identity… increasingly sneered at, belittled and scapegoated' (Jones 2012:10). Jones states that class had long been a 'forbidden word within the political establishment' (Jones 2012:8), an observation equally attributable to NI/NoI, where class has been buried under a binary contested politics.

Jayne Simms began her 'career as a primary school teacher in east Belfast' progressing to board positions in 2004 with a focus on 'school's community relations programmes' designed 'to ensure that schools from different backgrounds could come together to share learning.' Her current role with the EA is concentrated 'around shared education, looking at shared campuses, looking at shared learning in and between schools', with prioritising on 'engaging young people':

there's a lot to think about in terms of how we would educate our young people and to equip them really with the skills that they need to remain… in Northern Ireland rather than sending them across to Europe, America, the wider world.

Self-identifying as 'Northern Irish' in the first instance, she adds:

> I see myself as European… someone who is very committed to Belfast as a capital city and for change and for empowering young people.   I definitely don't see myself in a very Unionist capacity or a very Nationalist capacity but certainly someone who is open for change.

Residing in the 'Lagan Valley, DUP stronghold', formerly, she has noticed in her role 'as a poll clerk' that 'it's not young people' coming out to vote, 'it's the 45 plus.' She asks, 'why are we not shouting from the rooftops about young people's participation in politics?   Why are we not encouraging them to make it clear that every vote counts?' Another participant describes herself as 'Northern Irish' and 'a ceasefire baby', born 'when the Shankill bombing[30] happened.' Also with a strong interest in education, she is a 'massive advocate for integrated education.' Having attended 'an integrated school' herself, she believes that 'history was taught in a real balanced way, because they had to think about how do we teach history here':

> our modules for GCSE and A-level were around Northern Ireland and… [its] history... At home, I was educated around that. So, I am in a privileged position where I would know, not everything, but I would know a bit about it, whereas I know young people that went to local schools in east Belfast and their history was about English history… it wasn't about Northern Ireland… sometimes I wonder why do schools do that?

The education curriculum is a vital component of hegemonic narrative reproduction which determines what is taught and how, and crucially what is omitted. The problematisation of education goes beyond the curriculum for this interviewee as she maintains that divisions still exist for young people, despite their willingness to travel across the city more than they might have done previously, because of the segregated 'schooling system':

> There's still young people who I had met when I was doing youth work who were twenty, twenty-one, who still had never met someone from a Catholic, Nationalist background… they weren't sectarian they weren't bitter… they just had never met

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[30] In October the IRA killed 10 people, including one of its own members when a bomb, targeting the UDA who met in the floor above the fish shop, exploded prematurely (CAIN).

anybody… through their everyday life… because they went to school in east Belfast … their house, their family, everything was in east Belfast.

This illustrates how physical estrangement can create mono-cultural, single-identity communities. However, she believes that 'that is changing which I think is good, but I think then there needs to be… the education and the history and the learning in place to allow that to happen as well.' Issues around 'drugs, alcohol, mental health… anxiety disorders' are widespread, made worse by lack of accessible counselling services, founded on a negative pattern of educational underachievement. She observes:

I think that history of the shipyard and that history of your uncle, your granda or your dad, got you a job there that has been passed down from generation to generation… there are a lot more people I would say are going into trades because that's historically been what their family done… historically PL communities haven't went to university.

Again, this is a synopsis of the working-class Unionist condition that has been corroborated by both Nationalist and Unionist accounts above that highlight working-class Unionist dependence on the state at the expense of self-reliance. This contributor, herself, went on to third level education.' I had a great experience… it really challenged my thinking.' She asks, 'how do we increase people from disadvantaged areas and working-class areas coming to university? It all comes down to finances.' Financial barriers are worsened by lack of confidence in young people who, 'feel like they're not capable when they are and think that it's so far out of reach, when it's not. It is a lot more accessible than people think':

if you're maybe the first person from your family to go to university then you are going to think, well why has no one went and what is the stigma here, if you are the first person on your street.

Lack of confidence appears to by transgenerational characteristic within working-class Unionist communities according to the above accounts that is underpinned by educational underachievement. Having attended QUB, she was asked on her experience regarding Queen's as a 'cold-house' for Unionists. Friends of hers that studied history or politics 'did find that':

I don't know maybe if it's because things were said or… they felt intimidated, there is a lot of GAA tops… I know in my class I was a minority… a majority of my class came from a Catholic-Nationalist background or… Protestant, English… it wasn't Northern Irish Protestants.

With no specific instances of actual intimidation beyond feeling intimidated this may be explained through a Gramscian lens, as a challenge to assumed Unionist hegemony. There is no personal instance that the interviewee shares in which physical or verbal threats were received, adding:

> I was fine, but… I wonder was it because they were in a minority that they then felt there was issues around Queen's rather than anything actually ever being said or done.

Queen's is illustrative of a reversal of mono-lingual, mono-cultural orthodoxy, where perceived Nationalist apparel deviates from accepted normalcy and thereby viewed as threatening, whether actualised or not. In 2020 a petition circulated accusing QUB of becoming 'a 'cold house' for those from the Protestant and Unionist community', and was publicly supported by Ruth Dudley-Edwards (Dudley Edwards 2020). It gained little traction with only 3,413 signatories[31]. It is worth noting that this issue emerged during the time of Unionist difficulties with the NIP and the Colin Harvey intimidation. In 2018/19 there were only 4 informal complaints made, 11 in 2019/2020 and 14 in 2021/2022, jumping to 54 in 2022/23. Of the year 2022/23 informal complaints, '21 were sectarian in nature, 14 racist, eight religious, four focused on disability, one involved trans hate crime and six were unspecified.' 5 'sectarian hate complaints were investigated in 2019/20', 1 'racist hate incident in 2020/21' and 2 'racist hate incidents in 2022/23' The nature of the sectarian complaints, and against whom, was not specified (Hargan 2024).

The participant believes national identity 'is important for [the people of east Belfast] and rightly so… it's a sense of pride, it's a sense of community, it's a sense of culture' that provides 'guidance on how to be a 'good' member' of that community through alignment with a shared story (McLean and Syed 2015:320). She submits that she has 'explored' her 'national identity and questioned it', concluding that she was born in 'Northern Ireland and I feel Northern Irish':

> when I look at the Northern Irish culture when I look at the people, that's who I feel most… when I go to England then it's not really my culture, and I know its English rather than British… I would always identify as Northern Irish… a lot of the time you hear national identity, British or Irish, but actually what about Northern Irish.

In the 2011 census 379,267 classed themselves as 'Northern Irish only', in 2021 that figure had dropped slightly to 376,444. In 2011 'British and Northern Irish' was at 111,748 rising to 151,327. 'Irish and Northern Irish' in 2011 was at 19,132 rising to 33,581 in 2021. Such trends

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[31] See, https://www.change.org/p/queen-s-university-belfast-end-the-sectarianism-towards-protestants-and-unionist-students-at-qub (accessed 10 October 2024).

continuing suggests that 'Northern Irish' as a singular identity will decline and become a dual-identity combining with the more established identities of British and Irish, particularly the former. Conflict was to have a determining impact on identity in NI/NoI. Over 50% of Protestants self-identified as Irish or Ulster in 1968 (Rose 1971), by 1978 Protestants very strongly identified as British by almost 70% (Moxon-Browne 1983). If it has taken three generations to 'wash out' the Britishness from Protestants in the south post-partition then removing the Irish-ness happened remarkably quickly, between 1968 and 1978. What data now suggests is a reversion towards pre-conflict identity trends. In contemporary NI/NoI, the conflict-induced identity binary is modifying, particularly amongst the once singularly self-identified British, who were predominantly from the Unionist community. She argues that many young people now self-identify as 'Northern Irish' which would be closely associated with the preceding 'Ulster' identity:

> because… they weren't born in the Troubles … they didn't experience British soldiers, they didn't experience the IRA then, they're identifying themselves to what we are now, which to me is Northern Irish.

For another contributor 'Dual identity almost makes you think of … two separate identities', which he challenges:

> Hybrid means… a total mix, and it is who I am, you know I absolutely cherish and value my Britishness, as I do my Irishness.... Neither one eclipses or diminishes the other and I genuinely feel that my life is the richer because I have embraced both… I would suggest that hybridity, even the most extreme Republican has some… Britishness within their identity. They speak… the language of England.

'At the other extreme' the interviewee adds, there is 'the Jim Allister's… of this world would be pushed if in a rational conversation to deny aspects of their identity that is Irish.' Indeed, Nelson McCausland states, 'I don't have any sense of an Irish identity. No, I never seen that. But then, that's how we were brought up' (Tonge et al 2014:118). Self-identifying as British he asserts is 'much greater thing than Englishness'. His Britishness is that which I share in common with my relatives in Australia, in Canada, … it's that tie':

> I think a lot of people from my side of the community identify that they are Unionists thinking that means Britishness. Well in theory I am a Unionist. I love the idea of the European Union so in that sense I am Unionist, unionism or saying you are a Unionist is a political construct rather than an identity thing.

8.2 Changing narratives? Good Friday Agreement to Brexit

The GFA was several years in the making, a culmination of effort by an array of international and domestic actors. Part of the 'pull' for Quintin to return to his 'home place' was that NI/NoI needed 'educated people with non-sectarian, anti-sectarian attitudes and skills to do something to help the peace process along.' He was interviewed in Belfast for his job at the *Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action* (NICVA) on the day of the Brighton bomb 'which intensified the, 'are you mad to go back' comments he received. He recalls 'the Enniskillen bomb' and the 'Casement Park corporals thing', both of which were carried out by the IRA, and which he describes as 'significant.' Quintin intended to take an active role in the campaign in support of GFA but was barred by his employer, NICVA, from doing so. He subsequently resigned. His recollects that:

> Unionists were edgy about even sitting with John Hume, and that Hume-Trimble handshake executed by Bono in May in the last week of the referendum, was the first public handshake they'd ever made.

As part of the Yes campaign to support the agreement David Trimble and John Hume publicly shook hands reported 'to have given the 'Yes' campaign a much needed boost. Until then the two party leaders had not campaigned together' (CAIN). Moreover, the GFA was not negotiated face-to-face but rather through 'shuttle diplomacy' whereby updates would be sent by parties between rooms. Quintin adds, 'can you imagine looking back Trimble and Hume, the SDLP and the UUP had never publicly said yeah ok we respect you up until that moment':

> the ideal was a joint political campaign, but Unionists wouldn't do it. It was too risky … Sinn Féin wouldn't do it because they hadn't yet made a decision… they fudged it on Good Friday itself and abstained… they held an Ard Fhéis later that did signify support.

In April 1998, after agreement was reached, Sinn Féin stated 'they needed a "period of consultation" with their membership before they could sign the Good Friday Agreement', convening two Ard Fheiseanna, one that month and the other in May. Rescinding abstentionism allowed their full support for the agreement, 'a historical move which ended 77 years of refusing to participate in institutions of government in Northern Ireland' (CAIN). Quintin believes that 'the goals of the agreement have not been achieved', although 'bits of it have' with:

> probably more progress than people realise… of course we would have wanted to see more progress in 25 years. But we have stopped the worst of the violence... We have a form of power sharing however imperfect. We have a form of acknowledging unionism and nationalism and their rights to argue peacefully for their aspirations. We

have a form of north/south collaboration which no other two countries in the world have in such a structured way.

Quintin agrees with Bill Clinton, that the GFA 'was an act of genius… it shouldn't be written off.' Jayne argues that the 25th anniversary of GFA 'highlighted the deep seated desire not to go back to the past'. 'As they get older [her children] certainly have an understanding of how challenged Northern Ireland is. And given my work, how divided we still remain.' Yet despite its shortcomings the GFA 'in many ways, yes absolutely delivered'. Quintin states that 'there is no peace agreement in the world that has worked totally successfully', arguing that 'there are certain givens that society has banked' that 'we don't recognise' such as 'successes in workforce discrimination… but of course we don't have peace. We don't have reconciliation yet.' Reconciliation, while having an instinctual understanding of what that would look like remains a nebulous and an ill-defined concept. Quintin believes 'a failure' of the GFA 'and the peace process' is that it does not 'allow genuine power-sharing and identity sharing'.

> I believe that unionism has failed to undertake the promised hand of friendship and to recommend nationalism as a legitimate ideology... I think nationalism-Republicanism has done much of the same and has become a sort of a caricature of itself in terms of the push for its legitimate and treasured united Ireland but in a way that isn't currently designed… Ireland's Future and its other spin-off movements are the right thing to do.

Ireland's Future have led a campaign for reunification that has attracted participants from across the political spectrum, domestically and internationally, as well as across civil society. Politically, there has been 'a lot of the knee jerk from unionism and from Republicanism' which reinforces the importance of groups like Ireland's Future in advancing unity. As Quintin explains, 'if you say there was no alternative to armed struggle, we'll say yousuns(sic) have to apologise and denounce that… and vice versa', leading to a political quagmire. In an interview for the BBC's *Redlines Podcast* in 2022, Michelle O'Neill, stated that 'I think at the time there was no alternative' to the IRA campaign, much to the chagrin of political opponents, particularly Unionists. While many Nationalists and Republicans would agree with O'Neill's statement, for Unionists, and others, the IRA's 'armed struggle' is unjustifiable. In contrast, the UN in 1982 updated the 'Right of Peoples to self-determination' to reaffirm:

> the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples for independence, territorial integrity, national unity and liberation from colonial and foreign domination and foreign occupation by all available means, including armed struggle (UNGA 37/43 1982).

Justification and counter-recrimination are based on a morality that believes that ''immoral action' is the sort of thing ''*we'* won't do' (Billig 1995:162). *Jus in bello* was not rigorously maintained by any of the armed protagonists resulting in a society with a deep, unresolved

trauma, where 'our' violence was acceptable but 'theirs' was not. Quintin illustrates this using the analogy of the Spanish Civil War:

> [no one] is alive who was there now barring a handful and yet that transgenerational trauma has passed through and it still sparks peoples heart beat about something they have only heard about.

Another interviewee talks of the transgenerational trauma in families caused by the conflict, how different families cope with it, and how young people with no experience of it remain affected:

> there are families that feel they maybe haven't got justice and so are maybe still seeking that and that goes down the generations… there are some young people that now are still affected by the Troubles even though they were never born when the Troubles happened.

In spite of such challenges to the GFA Quintin believes it:

> has been triumphantly successful but it needs repair. It needs refinement. It needs updating. The difficulty is a total renegotiation would be mega and the risk is… that it unravels or becomes un-renegotiable and therefore you are stuck with a broken wheel… It needs better intervention from the Irish and the British.

The weaknesses of the GFA to deliver the anticipated change reflects 'our politics where you vote for him to keep him out', according to Kathy. Her friend described Ian Paisley 'as the pat you on the head and say you don't need to know what's in it because I'm here, I'll do it', illustrative of the hierarchical Unionist social order. She elaborates:

> I sat listening to the documentary… Walking with Dinosaurs, it's about the Women's Coalition… hearing talk about women getting back into the kitchen, mooing and grunting like pigs whenever the women came in. And yet… if it hadn't been for the women bringing you assholes back in to talks, you wouldn't have had it… but for Mo Mowlam we wouldn't have had it either because she was the right person at that right time… take the wig off, put the feet up on the table and say it as it is. I don't know if any other ones could have done that.

Despite reservations on the delivery of GFA she believes that 'what we've got now is a hell of a lot better than what we had' with people voting:

> purely [for] one thing, peace… to try and make a new life for the next generation. I always knew we would have trauma… but you had to have hope and seventy odd

percent of the public voted because they wanted hope and they didn't have that. I kind of think if things changed nowadays that they would get that seventy percent [support]… I believe for a lot of people the release of prisoners, on both sides, was… very hard.

Kathy's comments chime with Unionist dissatisfaction with the agreement currently. Additionally, the terms of GFA both 'Governments… put in place mechanisms to provide for an accelerated programme for the release of prisoners' (GFA, Prisoners 1.) resulting in more than 400 prisoners being released in two years (Rowan 2023). Many of those imprisoned were jailed for killings and other violent actions, and understandably many victims and their families found this difficult to accept. Kathy's role involved her working with many of those same prisoners. She believes, that the GFA has not 'fully delivered', adding 'if we can't get this right now, how are we going to get a whole Ireland right', comments similar to those made by Dawn.

From Claire's perspective, 'what happened with the Agreement is there was there was this promise of a gift of its gonna be better… I'm not sure it's any better and that's led to a lot of disaffection', adding, 'I think it's been so hard to kind of embed and pitching the peace because there's fuck all in it for a lot of people.' To illustrate her viewpoint, Claire shares that she worked on an academic project called *the Limits of Legitimacy*[32] in the mid-2000s:

> I'm gutted, I don't think it has succeeded. I think it soon became about doling out the cash without checks and balances to Loyalist organisations. I think that part of it was leadership. It really relied on incredibly charismatic intellectual, creative, brilliant thinkers who had had personal epiphanies and who were absolutely dedicated... I think that that leadership was persuasive and they had the people then... certainly when that wave of deaths, David Ervine, Billy Mitchell, Plum Smith, I think that had a profound affect.

In the absence of figures such as Ervine, and others, loyalism has been devoid of any cohesive vision. Arguably, they are in a period of regression as the LCC 2021 statement would suggest, to a pre-GFA and possible pre-1994 ceasefire mode of thinking. Claire continues:

> there was such a moment wasn't there, Dawn Purvis, Sophie Long... They were fucking brilliant. They were feminists. They were socialists and they all got booted out… and those regressive elements took over.

She adds:

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[32] For further reading see Mitchell (2008).

as a progressive political movement that moment has passed… there are still people of that generation and those inspired are quietly doing the work but… they don't really seem to be visible.

While momentarily successful, loyalism's political vision was not robust enough to withstand the pressures from larger Unionist parties and now appears to lack any future goal. As counter-revolutionary organisations political aspiration revolved around maintaining the status quo and ensuring nationalism did not advance, their favoured method to do this was killing Nationalist civilians. Singular notions of a constitutional present and future based on a negative summation of prevention rather than creation required little in the way of long-term strategy. While undoubtedly there were those within loyalism capable of political strategizing these organisations became wedded to criminality whose membership has little appetite for political development. Continually rejected at the ballot box the Loyalist community at grass-roots level repudiate the compatibility of crime and politics.

For Bradley the GFA 'levelled the playing field.' He acknowledges that 'it didn't take the gun completely out of Ireland' but as a 'consequence 'it meant that everybody had to be politically astute, and everybody had to start playing the political game.' In terms of national identity, he highlights the provisions that mean 'we… can be British or Irish citizens or both and we take that for granted now.' For him, the lack of delivery on issues like a Bill of Rights (BoR) which would resolve 'a lot of the problems that this region faces', means the GFA 'has never been completely enacted':

> if we think of our LBGQT rights, we think of licensing laws being out of kilter, we think of women's reproductive rights… all of that would have been resolved within our own delivered Bill of Rights.

Delivery deficiency was manifest at societal level during the 2012 flag protest period for Bradley, bringing him into contact with 'a certain young man and a group of his acolytes' who were 'putting the union flag upside down on a lamppost outside my offices.' As a former soldier he was astonished to see that 'about 2/3 of the flags that they had put were upside down.' On remonstrating with them he got:

> two shocks. The first one was they didn't know there was a right and wrong way to fly the union flag which horrified me as someone who would have been patriotic… growing up in that Protestant-Unionist tradition. And then the second thing was they… threatened to shoot me.

That the *Flags and Emblems Act* (1954) (FEA), which codified the pre-eminence of the Union flag over all others, was not repealed until 1987 with *The Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order*

1987 indicates the longevity of the normative nature of mono-national public symbolism in NI/NoI post-partition. So ingrained became this mode of thinking that even as late as 2012 a compromise deal to restrict the flying of the Union flag over Belfast City Hall, in line with British norms, democratically endorsed by the elected members, was met with revulsion from the broader Unionist community, even amongst progressive Unionists such as Julie-Anne Corr-Johnston who admitted to being 'annoyed about the flag' (Edwards 2023:251). Significant rioting ensued, beginning in the Loyalist Lower Newtownards Road area of east Belfast, with the weekly protests passing Short Strand, inevitably leading to attacks on that community. In a court case taken by a Short Strand resident the PSNI were accused of facilitating illegal parades through the area. In 2017 the Court of Appeal upheld the complaint concluding that the 'PSNI misconstrued their legal powers to stop parades passing through or adjacent to the Short Strand area', essentially that they had facilitated an illegal parade ([2017] UKSC 7:28). Expectant domination of the symbolic space was reinforced legislatively by FEA becoming ingrained in the Unionist psyche. For Billig, 'the national flag today performs a symbolic function', being a 'condensation symbol' and 'a focus for sentiment about society'' (Billig 1995:39). Such 'focus' is a forceful imposition of a singular identity narrative that is a symbol of dominance and power. Moreover, the fact that individuals felt confident, and had the ability, to deliver such a threat post-GFA is representative of its delivery failure. Bradley resolved to 'not letting these ganches be the voice of me', spurring him to begin his own peace-building initiative, reaching out:

> to people in journalism that I knew, the likes of Eamonn Mallon, Barney Rowan, [and] old acquaintances... on the Republican side. On the Loyalist side, I reached out to groups like EPIC.

This action would lead to events where he would:

> represent the State, as a veteran for Peace… there'd then be a Provo, there'd be a Loyalist, and we would do talks of our life experience... we were doing things like the anti-sectarian charter, the new gates on Workman Avenue[33], all very positive constructive stuff.

Participation in direct peace-building actions reinforced Bradley's 'doubts of what the UK actually was but never really doing anything about.' Returning home 'in 1994, getting involved in local politics it becoming the usual Orange and Green and going none of this is eff-ing improving life for people, and then just Brexit.'

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[33] Workman Avenue is an interface wall the separates the unionist Shankill area from the nationalist Springfield Road. This gate is locked on a nightly basis.

8.2.1 Brexit

Brexit was 'the crossing of the Rubicon' for Bradley, proving:

> beyond any further shadow of a doubt that the United Kingdom was not four small nations, all equal… we were being taken out by the sheer scale of numbers of the English vote.

This of course is an outworking of the conclusions of the Kilrandon that concluded that 'England could hardly be scaled down in such a way as to enable it to be out-voted by Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland' *Royal Commission,* op. cit., para.531, p.159 quoted in Nairn 1981:63). A 'union of equals' is an important part of the Unionist narrative yet is discounted by Westminster as not being 'a realistic proposition' by the Kilbrandon Commission. Additionally, CAJ (2021) found that veto mechanisms to subvert 'British rights' were used by the DUP to block issues such as abortion services for women, equal marriage and the implementation of indigenous language strategies implemented in Britain. While some Unionists argued that it was a 'United Kingdom vote' for Bradley 'Brexit was a draw:'

> Two nations didn't want to go, two nations did, and it should have been rerun but it just tore apart any notion in my mind that this was a union of equals… I was already aghast at the equality that was being denied in the sense of British rights that were being subverted here by the DUP.

Kathy states that she was 'burned by Brexit. I voted to stay. I thought we were better off in the EU.' She adds, 'what peed me off was that you weren't being given correct information so how could you make an informed decision? They got it so wrong.' Another interviewee adds:

> When Brexit happened I was just absolutely floored, couldn't believe it... it affected my mental health… It was just a crazy event… that's when 'the journey' was like… rocket fuel in the tank… made me feel angry, feelings of despair, disbelief, angst… yeah, that's how it made me feel.

As McLean and Syed point out, deviation can present a challenge and 'can be seen with the stress experienced' (McLean and Syed 2015:329) during re-assessment of structural narratives. Such personal reflections (McLean and Syed 2015:338) challenge the fundamentals of identity narratives that can be inevitably stress-inducing when one begins to question the authenticity of previously inviolable beliefs. For Quintin the impact of Brexit, 'plus the push factors of London chaos… English nationalism', provided enough of a 'shift', along with the 'pull factors from Ireland… no longer the monotheitic, monolithic, mono-cultural society' with EU membership, provided enough impetus to reassess the status quo. He adds, however, the 'shift in the poll has been teensy.' Political turmoil in Downing Street certainly

fuelled the debate further, which settled since Labour's 2024 GE victory. Is the 'Brexit moment' therefore lost for pro-unity advocates? Perhaps, but other, unforeseen events, could equally impact the reunification debate as the unanticipated Brexit result did, whose consequences continue to unfold. Full EU membership remains an attractive option for many Nationalists, Unionists and others in contrast to a UK that has adopted Brexit. One interviewee believes that 'Northern Ireland benefitted greatly from being in the EU' financially and through 'peace building activities' and 'I think sometimes we forget that.' In light of Brexit her concern is that 'Westminster wont step in the gap' citing 'ESF coming to an end' by way of example. The European Social Fund (ESF) 2014 to 2020 ended post-Brexit with the remaining programmes that went beyond this deadline ending on 31st December 2023 (GOV.UK 2023). The British government replaced ESF with the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) up to the end of the financial year of 24/25 (GOV.UK 2022). At the time of writing it is unclear what will replace the UKSPF. She comments:

> Northern Ireland's public sector is huge and its far bigger than the private sector. The majority of people work within the public sector so if funding isn't going to come from places other than Westminster what do we do? Westminster will have to step in and I'm not convinced that they're going to.

Again, despite these honestly expressed beliefs, in 2022 the public sector accounted for only '27% of jobs in NI' compared to '18% in the UK as a whole' (Northern Ireland Executive 2023) and not a majority. She adds, 'I voted to Remain… I was working on an ESF programme funded by the EU… I felt like if I was saying Leave, I was doing myself out of a job.' She states, 'I know people personally who voted Leave', adding 'if you were to speak to people on the street now… it would be completely different.' While many Unionists, particularly the working-class, are unhappy with GFA, support for Brexit is also on the wane, suggesting a dissatisfaction with constitutional arrangements broadly. Even as early as 2018 support for remaining in the EU in NI/NoI jumped sharply from 56% from the referendum to 69% within two years (UK in a Changing Europe 2018). In 2023 Phinnemore et al, found that 70% of respondents thought Brexit mitigation measures were necessary and 59% thought that Brexit was not 'a good thing' for the UK (Phinnemore et al 2023:1). Both studies provide a range in which support for Brexit is decreasing below 2016 levels. Additionally, John Doyle submits that 'broad consensus' exists that views 'Northern Ireland's economy' as 'very weak', predating 'the modern conflict.' The expected 'economic growth' post-GFA, has, he contends, 'been very modest', adding the 'public sector remains a very significant part of the economy and levels of poverty are among the highest of all UK regions' (Doyle 2021:317). Brexit, for Claire, did not just change things in the UK, she believes 'something globally shifted in 2016' where:

the far right movement… manifested itself in lots of different countries in different ways… the issues that we have to sort out going forward in east Belfast or in west Belfast or in Laois or in Liverpool are the same… really what we are gonna be talking about is which state, when we talk about the border poll, is going to be administrating… the same stuff, which can do it better.

She contends that, 'Brexit was a dynamic' that 'thrust' the 'constitutional question… onto the main stage.' The Brexit result, for Quintin, he 'predicted… would be cataclysmic on north-south relations and east-west relations', adding, 'it is cataclysmic at every level and it has cost. It has caused Loyalist unrest on the streets, it has caused violence.' Loyalists orchestrated a low-level campaign of violence in particular parts of greater Belfast during the NIP process. Quintin adds:

Complex societies do not solve their problems easily and in our case the Protocol, amazingly when you think about it, it's a trade deal, it's about business and trade but it has been made into a societal and a political totem pole successfully on both sides.

Commenting on the protocol one interviewee argued that unionism didn't have 'the wit to see it protects the union for another 25 or 50 years if it were implemented.' As a retired business man Bradley has in-depth knowledge on supply chains concurs that the NIP 'protects' NI/NoI:

from the worst negative aspects of Brexit… We could be in a much worse off position than what we are over a couple of sausages[34] coming across the shuck from Britain to here.

He adds, 'it's not for pound shop Messiahs[35] here to be involved in. It's not even for local parties to be involved in.' The NIP 'protects Northern Ireland from the worst negative excesses of hard Brexit, a hard Brexit that, may I add, didn't need to be chosen.' Overall, the impact of Brexit on Bradley was catalytic, fuelling his 'niggling inquisitiveness':

I was already aghast at the difference between Britain and Northern Ireland but I was always happy to put up with it for the good… but there was just one of those moments when I went no, no more. So I started studying and looking at what Irish unity would actually entail.

Alignment with the Unionist master narrative has been significantly undermined by Brexit and all the associated issues including NI/NoI's place within the UK. Many in this cohort reject the rigidity of the social order, replaced by an identity-flexibility that rejects the dominance of the

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[34] The EU ban on chilled meats being exported from Britain to NI/NoI was dubbed the 'sausage wars' by the media. See, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-58840823.

[35] Again, this is a reference to loyalist activist Jaime Bryson.

binary designation in place of a personal renegotiation reflecting a 'hybridity' that incorporates elements of the two as mutually inclusive.

Conclusion

Most of the interviewees above, defining as neither Unionist nor Nationalist, come from a Protestant-Unionist background, and while comfortable with that heritage they reject a political unionism that is perceived as regressive and not in keeping with their social values. They present an alternative narrative that challenges the dominant Nationalist and Unionist dyad. All but one, are open to considering reunification since Brexit that not only created a political cleavage but has also exposed the inequities of the status quo, demonstrating that a 'process of reconstruction and interpretation' has taken place that contextualises themselves within a 'specific cultural and historical space' (McLean and Syed 2015:36). Reunification as a means of fully returning to the EU is desirable in this regard. The one interviewee that did not consider reunification, strongly identified as 'Northern Irish' rejected both British and Irish identities, with a firm affiliation with 'Northern Irish culture' with working-class roots. This suggests, in this group at least, that class could be a factor when considering reunification. Moreover, living in a middle-class community provides a safe space to discuss such options that may not be available to those from a more working-class Unionist area. This sample were unanimous in their rejection of Brexit. Overall, their doxastic positions reject the rigid and compulsory nature of the master narrative and rather have developed an alternative narrative that is 'at minimum' open to discuss the merits of constitutional change which will be the focus of the next chapter.

9. 'Others': Identity narratives and constitutional flux

Introduction

This chapter will examine how 'others' within this cohort are navigating concerning potential constitutional change and how that impacts on identity subjectively. The first section entitled, *On constitutional change,* with sub-sections, *Loyalist violence, Passports, Lundified* and *Nudged closer to the door.* The next section is entitled *Nationalist triumphalism followed by, The debate.* This chapter ends with a conclusion drawing on both chapters eight and nine.

9.1 On constitutional change

One contributor has been on a personal journey predating Brexit and GFA that has led to a re-defining of his Britishness. Beginning in the mid-1980s, which he describes as a 'push factor', he attended the ''Ulster Says No' rally back in 85' because he 'was affronted' by what he perceived as 'to be treated this way… by such a right-wing Prime Minister as Maggie Thatcher… it wasn't a Labour government or a wishy washy liberal.' The rally in question took place at Belfast City Hall in response to the signing of AIA, attracting an estimated 100,000 Unionists. Sowing 'the first seeds of doubt', he viewed this as an 'assault or insult on what I perceived to be my identity at that time.' Andrew White argues:

> Unionist reaction to the Anglo-Irish Agreement reflected this profound negativity, wiser counsels realised that even if it could be struck down, it was symbolic of a wider shift in British and Irish politics that could not be reversed (White 2007:131).

From AIA to his experience of poverty-stricken Ireland this contributor asserts, that the prosperous north and poor south roles have 'been turned on its head.' Brexit for him has brought the recognition that the union 'is effectively English domination… and that applies to Scotland, Wales and even the regions within England' explaining 'the why in terms of how I moved from Ulster Says No to Ulster Says Yes.' According to McLean and Syed, 'holding one story makes the other impossible' but they argue, 'it is usually the one that threatens the dominant view' that is 'dismissed' (McLean and Syed 2015:336). Unusually, the reverse has taken place here through a cognisance of 'English domination', as it was perceived, that has led to the dominant pro-Union story being dismissed, opening a space for the articulation of an alternative narrative. His evolving thinking was also influenced through his business connections leading to 'the realisation that English people have not the slightest interest… Northern Ireland is an overseas place' to them. Emphasising his argument he speaks of 'that very brief Asian guy who was secretary of state [who] asked if a passport was needed… to go

to Derry'[36]. He concludes, 'that the union serves neither the British identity in Ireland or the Nationalist identity, it just serves none of us.' Because of his 'middle-class… orbit' he's 'not going to get a brick through the window' for voicing his constitutional views. He alludes to such reactions emanating from more working-class Unionist communities, where opposition to constitutional change is 'probably not even thought about… it's a gut reflex… it's a no surrender… it's totally instinctual.' In such areas, 'life is lived in a bubble… when they communicate its always on the basis of what they feel rather than what they think', he argues.

Bradley's time in the British army led him to question, the political system of the country he was fighting for, coming to believe that it was grossly unfair. Founded on the UK's 'first-past-the post-system' it has always been of serious concern to him. He opines:

> I didn't wake up one morning and go, Voila! I am for Irish unity… While the IRA would have been trying to bomb or shoot me into it, there was no way it was gonna happen. You couldn't even hear the arguments… through the noise of armed action but that armed action is over, as someone who was at the coalface during the conflict.

For him IRA violence was a blockage to acting on his natural constitutional inclinations which was part of his broader political awakening. His time in the British army was spent with 'lads… from working-class, poverty' sharing, 'the same dirt, talking to them, understanding their politics', giving him a deeper perspective 'of how abusive the Westminster system is to even people in Britain.' He contextualises present day realities with the historic. For him, partition created:

> two bastard states… one committed to religious rights, one committed to marching rights. One very much now evolved… playing a blinder on the world stage. Northern Ireland, worst region of the UK, worst region on the island of Ireland. In short, fuck all going for us.

His argumentation regarding the impact of partition for the entire island was not simply a historical act:

> Southern Ireland and Northern Ireland has other partitions, misogyny, sexism… LGBTQ rights… the most obvious one to me is class… I am open to the debate of what Irish reunification would be… but it has to… address the class imbalance… both in Northern Ireland, where it is worse, and southern Ireland.

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[36] In July 2022, leader of the opposition accused British SoS, Shailesh Varra, of asking officials if he 'needed a passport to get to Derry.' Varra denied this (ITV 2022).

Bradley's claims of a partition of misogyny certainly supported by the mother and baby homes scandal in the Republic, where a government report found that over 9,000 women and children died in state care from 1922 to 1998 (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2021). This is over double the period of the Troubles with nearly three times the deaths. Moreover, 'Northern Ireland is considered one of the most dangerous regions in Europe for women' (Ulster University 2023). For Bradley 'it's about taking the best of Northern Ireland, the best of the current Republic of Ireland and… that's your foundation and we create anew on top of that.' He believes a 'border poll must happen. We are entitled to it. It's part of our rights' inclusive of GFA. What 'is needed nailed down is the British Government' and 'the conditions, the benchmarks… for a border poll to be called.' He believes that organisations such as Ireland's Future, which he is involved with, as a 'pro-unity civic body… are quite entitled to pursue, through peaceful and democratic means' Irish reunification. For him it is about 'improving well-being… improving the quality of life of the population and… doing it in an open, transparent, public forum.'

Kathy believes any constitutional change she'll be voting on will not be for her 'future' but the future of her 'kids' and 'grandkids' and determines to 'go in' with her 'head' rather than heart in making her decision. In her interactions with 'some of the Loyalist fellas' she commonly hears talk of 'when we get a new Ireland, it's not if.'

> language plays a big part in it. I'm not averse to listening to what you want because that's the whole thing about good relations… for me… it's about honesty. If I'm going to have a conversation with you I want to be honest. With what I'm hearing from Loyalists on the ground, the big thing is they feel they're not being listened to.

She believes such communities are not well represented by their elected representatives, particularly the DUP, adding, 'when was the last time you see the DUP coming out into a community and saying what do you want? And yet I see Sinn Féin going out into communities and asking them.' She admits to not being a 'a great DUP supporter… my mate calls them the Dirty Underhand Party', supporting this by stating:

> It suits them to take laws on and have changes made.   You can't always want to be British and yet don't want the British laws, only when it suits you. You're either British, if you're DUP, or you're not.

Her assessment suggests a Britishness-flexibility with regard to the DUP when their specific ideological interests are incongruent with the British parliamentary law-making they subscribe to. Additionally, in a conversation with an un-named 'Republican', the issue of reunification is also problematic, who stated, 'look, I want a united Ireland but I don't want it now', stating:

'as a Republican, I need to know that I'm going to be better off because… we're finding it very, very hard and having to go to foodbanks… nearly begging to survive. I don't want to go down there and find out that I'm worse off than up here', she says.

Ironically, using 'foodbanks' and 'nearly begging to survive' indicates that the status quo is not working at all for this individual. Despite present adverse material conditions repressive schemes have been unconsciously internalised (Cronin 1996) that find comfort in the familiar that view a means of possible alleviation with fear and suspicion. In a cross-community workshop the topic of constitutional change was discussed, framed by the prospect of an increased tax burden and loss of state employment and pension:

> Is the British government going to pay out? They might say it's nothing to do with us. One of the Sinn Féin fellas turned round and said 'what about my pension?'... that has to be worked out… because they may say you're nothing to do with us now. You're an Irish citizen, the Irish government can pay it. He says, 'where is the Irish government going to get that money from?'

It is unsurprising that questions framed in the negative will receive a negative answer. Contrarily, if the group was asked would they be happy with reunification and have their income tax lowered by 10%, it is probable that the answer would be positive. Doyle (2021) discusses many of the concerns raised in the above contribution including public sector pay and pension liability. While many of the finer details around issues such as pensions will require clarification, Doyle argues that many of the 'UK government costs allocated to Northern Ireland… would not be relevant to a united Ireland' (Doyle 2021:314), for example, defence contributions. He concludes that the remaining 'figure will be approximately €3b, significantly lower than the figure of £9b to £10b, frequently quoted in the media' (Doyle 2021:334), making reunification extremely affordable, in relative terms. The overall point of note here, is that of myth-busting, and its importance to provide the most up-to-date and research-led information to enable informed decision-making in any future constitutional scenario. For Kathy, she needs 'to know that the information... is 100% correct', adding, 'I've decided that I will be a lot more vocal on it because I'm fed up with the Orange and Green.' She relays another conversation with a 'very high ranking Sinn Féin negotiator', and asked them:

> What can you get if we have a united Ireland tomorrow that you don't get today?... He said we wouldn't have a king and queen. I said no, but you've a president which is equivalent.

In terms of being head of state a president would be an equivalent, in that regard. The crucial difference is that presidents are elected and chosen by the people, where a monarch is in

place purely through heredity. In this respect there is no equivalence. Moreover, people in a republic are citizens where, in a monarchic society, they are subjects.

9.1.1 Loyalist violence

Kathy, in another conversation with an unnamed Republican, quotes, 'we fought to get what we wanted. Who's to say the UDA or the UVF don't fight to get what they want? Which is not a united Ireland.' The spectre of Loyalist violence was raised by several of the interviewees and remains an unresolved issue looming over northern society over a quarter of a century post-GFA. The British government and the PSNI's incapability or unwillingness, to effectively deal with Loyalist paramilitaries places an unnecessary burden on any constitutional conversation. With the LCC stating that it was 'temporarily withdrawing support' from the GFA in protest at the Northern Ireland Protocol (BBC News NI 2021), Quintin asks, 'what does that actually mean'? Bradley points out that 'on the Loyalist side they are militarily equipped and militarily still intact.' Indeed, former PUP leader Brian Ervine claimed that Loyalist paramilitaries remain intact and 'waiting on a time they may be called upon' (Madden 2024b), as an addendum to the LCC announcement of 2021. While dissident Republican organisations remain active, the response adopted by intelligence organisations appears to have been much more robust. Room exists for a comparative study into security force approach to both Loyalist and Republican paramilitary groups, and additionally, how these organisations are dealt with by the media. Nonetheless, dissident Republicans remain capable of derailing the process of constitutional change along with Loyalists. Bradley argues that the peace process is geared towards creating pathways for such groups to disband and enter the political arena permanently, stating:

> Is there a hierarchy of the IRA remaining in the army council…? I hope so because I don't ever want it starting again and I recognise that in order for it never to start again there has to be some form of control… The IRA that I fought simply doesn't exist and it's a delusion to believe that it does.

His comments regarding the IRA army council is equally applicable to Loyalist paramilitaries, yet several decades into the peace process their continued existence does not bolster confidence in their commitment to purely political activity. Lack of resolution on disbandment of such groups feeds into a wider 'us' and 'them' absolutist narrative where 'this whole business of voting to keep him out' perpetuates, according to Kathy. 'I would love…[that]you voted for the best person'. As one contributor argues, in a reunification scenario, unionism and Irish nationalism as they are currently constituted would cease to exist in 'any meaningful way.'

9.1.2 Passports

Within the panoply of issues related to constitutional change, passports are a recurring theme. On this Kathy is unequivocal, 'if my passport was up for renewal… I wouldn't be applying for a British passport… I would be happy enough to go for an Irish passport', referencing time and cost considerations. Convenience and utility of an Irish passport, with EU membership, is the more attractive option for her. Where once a staunch Unionist may have totally rejected any notion of carrying an Irish passport it appears the issue has become more fluid. Being British does not debar the privileges of Irish citizenship. As another interviewee explains, she does not see passport choice as 'that's my nationality'… [it's] what's easier to travel with, what's cheaper.' She continues:

> some people… would not get an Irish passport because of the principle. But I also think equally there's others that don't see it as… me saying that I'm Irish… because we can have dual nationality… getting an Irish passport, you're not having to give up your British citizenship, whereas, I think if that wasn't the case would it be a bit different.

This issue of passports is instructive in that it provides a glimpse into how identity could be maintained without the loss of citizen privileges in a new constitutional scenario. For Jayne 'identity… evolves and matures over time' and as such is comfortable being 'a holder of an Irish and a British passport.' Claire believes many Protestants would still identify as Unionist with a constitutional preference for the Union:

> but what that would mean to them now and what unity would mean to them now are very very different. It hasn't changed their constitutional preference but… the level of threat they would perceive to their potential new lives, yeah that is softening definitely. I think there's a whole bunch of people who just don't care.

What Claire refers to as a 'softening' is also reflective of the growing uptake in Irish passports and other things such as cross-border travel, that threatens the hegemonic mono-cultural, single identity narrative of NI/NoI.

9.1.3 Lundified

Claire has become an advocate for Irish reunification and is involved with the establishing of an Irish medium nursery, Naíscoil na Seolta, in east Belfast. She highlights some of the backlash she received from some quarters as a result, including threats from the far-right and, 'Loyalists putting my home address online and telling people to call over.' She admits that she 'nearly stopped writing.' On her 40th birthday she:

had to spend the night on the phone with the fuckin PSNI... it really nearly shut me up... these are like five people, and they have nothing, in my opinion, to offer a creative conversation about this place… and I am not gonna allow them to shut me up and I got stubborn about it and I also got clever about it. I realised I could speak in a kinder way.

Those of an alternative viewpoint, particularly residing in strongly Unionist communities appear to be more vulnerable to threats and intimidation that attempt to marginalise them and dissuade them from their position. This is an indication of the compulsory nature of the master narrative that when deviated from elicits violent and aggressive reactions at its most extreme end. Alternative narratives are to be expunged rather than engaged with, embodying a weakening of the master narrative and therefore the position of those in alignment with it. In September 2024 it was reported that DUP Education Minister, Paul Givan, met with the LCC who called on him to 'halt any plans to build an Irish language school in east Belfast.' It's chair, David Campbell, argued that the school 'has no meaningful support from the local Unionist and Loyalist population and no consultation had taken place with local residents', despite Belfast City Council receiving 'just two objections from a resident and an elected representative and nine letters of support from the public.' The application to allow the school to be built was taken by a recorded vote, receiving '11 votes in support and five against the plan — the opponents were all DUP councillors' (Bain and Campbell 2024). An inclusive unionism continues to falter on the rocks of the Irish language. Bradley argues that the 'DUP and its supporters… can't do parity of esteem, they just can't do it':

> they have this mentality that they are better than others. They are better than Catholics and Nationalists. They are better than people like me who they 'Lundify' and none of that offers a constructive positive future… delivery and quality of life and wellbeing.

Being 'better than' is the foundational pillar of the colonial mindset from which all other justifications evolve and it is the connecting thread from the incipient English empire to today. While it was commonplace for Unionist politicians to publicly demean others, particularly Nationalists and Republicans, their language is more controlled contemporarily. But as Arlene Foster's 'crocodile' comment revealed, the unsayable can emerge on occasion. Bradley believes the 'DUP have milked the system for all its worth and given money, jobs, titles, power, benefits' citing Foster and Peter Weir's appointments to the House of Lords. He is unequivocal in his assessment, 'the parties need to accept that there is an anti-agreement DUP who never want to work these institutions.' This assessment indirectly points to the settler-colonial rationale that demands 'superiority be maintained' (MacDonald 1986:20) as a priority. Post-GFA Stormont was a textbook example of instability until the DUP became the largest party.

Instability resumed once this arrangement was jeopardised because as MacDonald argues, 'the very nexus of the colonial apparatus' is 'political control' (MacDonald 1986:51). In his opinion 'politics up in Stormont has become stagnated because of 'an anti-agreement DUP, who… will not work the institutions for the greater good of all.' According to McAuley, the DUP:

> positions its supporters around this political discourse of betrayal and further suggests that it is only the DUP, which is in a position to stop the slide, and to reveal the 'truth' about contemporary political events. It is this construction that is at the heart of the DUP political project… Crucially, any concessions within the political process… are seen as a weakening of a core identity, a lessening of what it is to be 'British', Protestant and a Unionist… The heart of the DUP project continues… to construct discourses that re-emphasize and reinforce the central anxieties of many Unionists (McAuley 2003:68).

'Central anxieties', with their genesis in the colonial era, have infixed issues of 'core identity' within the political structure and therefore any attempted alteration to this narrative is viewed as 'risky and threatening for those in power' (McLean and Syed 2015:341). While stating that 'both Sinn Féin and the DUP have abused' the political system, Bradley believes that the DUP 'anti-agreement' stance requires that all the other political parties 'must come together and look at Plan B.' He refers to Foster as 'the worst leader of unionism in the history of this state' who could not get past 'her own suffering' and 'prejudice' to govern impartially. He scathingly views Sir Jeffrey Donaldson as 'the worst traitor to Ulster Unionism that has lived.' Both of course were former members of the UUP who resigned because of David Trimble's positioning of the party around GFA. When asked how he felt that many within the unionism would consider him a traitor, or Lundy, for his views on reunification he replies:

> I am quite confident in my argument about why I will no longer support the status quo… if somebody can get their rocks off calling me a Lundy… that's up to them… as an individual who is on a journey of life and who is evolved… in constructive and positive ways, I can't be 'Lundified'. I am past it.

He refers to NI/NoI is a 'socio-economic fucking basket case':

> all I have ever wanted… is a democratically elected government of local people, that is fiscally responsible, who understand why they are in government, working in transparent means to deliver on quality-of-life issues and the well-being of the population… and the economy… I don't know why anyone would call me a Lundy …in seeking… that because to me… Every single person who calls themselves a democrat should want that.

9.1.4 Nudged closer to the door

Bradley's political journey has reached something of a constitutional conclusion maintaining that the 'UK electoral system' is 'a disgusting process… and I have just had enough.' The democratic deficit created by this system appears acceptable to Unionists, dependent solely on maintaining the UK nexus with Westminster representation minus any means of achieving power. Irish reunification, for Bradley, offers a means to achieve 'a democratically elected government of local people' unavailable through the status quo. Advocating for Irish reunification he adds, 'was natural for me':

> this isn't really about me. This is about future generations. Now I am convinced absolutely that our wellbeing and quality of life will not be improved in maintaining the status quo.

By this account reunification is very much projecting forward in a positive manner while remaining in the UK is framed as not being fit for purpose. He continues:

> If we look at the recent IPSOS poll... IPSOS are saying 50% of the people polled here want the status quo... That's not 50 plus one that's 50, They are saying 27% are immediately pro unity.

The research found that the 27% support reunification, 19% would be classed as 'don't knows' and 5% said they wouldn't vote (Leahy 2022). On this particular study he comments:

> Donaldson came out of the traps early doors… to lay claim to the majority of people want to remain in the status quo, but I actually don't see it that way… 50% of the people polled do not want the status quo. So I believe it's all up for grabs

He believes that 'our voices are better heard in the Seanad and in the Dáil.' On his transition towards reunification he remarks, 'it was just one of those moments when I went, no more' leading him to attempt to concretise what reunification would entail, which up until that point was 'a lot of romantic and aspirational bollocks.' The Brexit experience 'has proven how not to run a referendum', opening a space in which constitutional change is 'up for grabs'.

For one interviewee, his interpretation of history is one of Whitehall policy of disengagement going back 100 years with the 'Westminster establishment pushing Home Rule… because they didn't want Irish politicians to hold the balance of power.' He argues 'gun runners Craig and Carson… secured a very unjust partition… Carson walked away, it was a tragedy for him.' He adds, 'Carson, [in]my understanding, was an Irishman first and foremost and would probably describe himself as how I would describe myself, I am a British Irishman.' In an oft quoted speech, Carson lamented to being ' a fool…in the political game that was to get the

Conservative Party into power'.[37] Brexit has parallels with partition in this regard in that both were exploited by elements of the Tory party to secure high office, a role contemporarily played by the European Research Group (ERG). Going against the grain of successive British government policy, leading ERG affiliate Jacob Rees-Mogg stated that the UK did have a 'selfish interest in Northern Ireland'[38]. This interest while momentary, was certainly selfish. In 1993 the British government stated in the *Joint Declaration* (Downing Street Declaration, DSD) that they had 'no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland' (DSD para.4). Contrasting the British government's approach to Scotland and NI/NoI, the interviewee states, 'really are you going to say there was never any selfish or strategic interest in Scotland.' Billig argues that the 'sense of geographic integrity' is displayed when 'nations' to do not claim 'all territory with equal tenacity. Some territory is imagined to be 'ours' and to be fought for; some can be ceded, as not really part of the homeland' (Billig 1995:76):

> The British government's position was in striking contrast with its position on Scottish nationalism. Scotland, declared the Conservative Party at the 1992 General Election, could not be detached without the break-up of the Union, of 'our' nation. Ulster could go without disrupting 'our' national identity which the party's leader claimed to defend 'come hell or high water' (Billig 1995:76).

The participant adds:

> if you step back from the emotional aspects about all this, about identity, and just look at the hard facts, unionism… is just being nudged closer and closer to the door, and when its opportune for Westminster it will be 'we can't get shot of you quick enough.'

In an interview with pro-unity website, *Irish Border Poll,* former Alliance leader, Lord John Alderdice talked of their 'now' being:

> no emotional attachment to Northern Ireland – commentators on UK affairs regularly speak about the UK without any thought of, or reference to, the Northern Ireland component… It's all over bar the shoutin'(sic) (Rooney 2024).

For this particular contributor British disengagement has been a century old project that accelerated with the AIA and reaching its nadir with Brexit. The 'validity of the original narrative', the UK as a 'nation of equals', and that NI/NoI was an integral part of the UK led to an inconsistency between 'the facts on the ground' and subjective interpretation that strongly

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[37] See, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1921/dec/14/address-in-reply-to-his-majestys-most (accessed 16 June 2023).
[38] See, https://www.podchaser.com/podcasts/the-moggcast-868095/episodes/episode-56-the-uk-has-a-selfis-85988293 (accessed 1 October 2023).

suggest that it is in fact a 'union of policy, not affection'. Fundamental issues which were 'not easily ignored, dismissed' led to a process of re-evaluation and the construction of a new personal narrative (McLean and Sayed 2015:336-337), paving the way for the consideration of an alternative constitutional future. Concluding that the UK 'is dominated by England…Decisions will never be made that benefit Northern Ireland if they adversely affect England.' As Gavin Esler, argues:

> The Johnson-Vardakar agreement suddenly confronted the Democratic Unionist Party and their supporters with a truth that should have been obvious for years. No matter how British you claim to be by birth right, no matter how many of your young men served in the British army and died at the Somme, you will never be treated as if your concerns are as important as those of England (Esler 2021:193).

Generally regarded as having betrayed the DUP, Johnson's aim was to maintain Conservative power by delivering Brexit, which they had robustly pledged to do. Were the DUP, therefore, simply 'puppets' in the Tory 'political game?' The contributor adds:

> you can waken a sleeping man but it's much more difficult to waken a man who is pretending to be asleep… unionism in my view is pretending to be asleep or its easier to pretend that this is not happening… but… if you look at the hard facts.

In their refusal to acknowledge the 'hard facts', Unionists, he argues, 'don't know what they are. It's as simple as that'. He argues that:

> Unionism is an entirely emotive construct. That doesn't mean facts don't matter… facts matter… so unionism is in an emotional flux at the minute… facts just get in the way of how they feel.

For him 'the most decisive jump… was no selfish or strategic interest… that was the game changer.' He believes cultural Protestants open to reunification 'need to deconstruct unionism' and in particular the DUP… narrative', adding, 'I don't say that in an aggressive or demeaning way but if you are pretending to be asleep and not facing reality you … live in a perpetual state of siege.' He analogises using the passing of his father from Dementia. It was:

> a long slow process… just bits [of his identity] were just sliced off month after month, over a long period of time… as a family we knew where this was going and the point came when Dad passed away and it was such a relief… I think it will be the same for unionism.

He continues, 'in a new Ireland… unionism [and] Unionists will not exist in any meaningful way… it will be a sense of relief because there will be no more treachery or no more betrayal',

the congenital presentiment of the Unionist tradition. He believes that there 'was no greater act of betrayal than… Unionists throwing their kith and kin from Cavan, Monaghan, Donegal… to the wolves.' He maintains that 'there is genuinely angst out there' amongst the Unionist community, recounting a conversation that there was 'talk… of a militia being formed' on the Ards Peninsula 'to protect the land.' He has spoken to people 'who have an absolute fear of a united Ireland in that they will lose their land', that 'they will be burnt out of their homes, their culture… decimated.' For the participant:

> fears of being burnt out… comes from… the way they treat other people, in terms of denying culture and resisting something like the Irish language… because that's the way *they* behave… Nationalist people will behave like them in a new Ireland, that you stamp them out.

Certainly, there is precedent of Unionists burning people out of their homes, particularly in Belfast in 1969 but also on the 12th July 1998 when three siblings, Jason, Mark and Richard Quinn, 9, 10 and 11 years old respectively died when their home was petrol-bombed by the UVF (CAIN). He recalls a conversation with a Spanish military veteran, saying… 'a thief thinks everyone a thief… and a liar thinks everyone a liar' adding, 'so when I talk of deconstructing … the Unionist narrative it's actually to do them a favour.' He continues:

> a person who does not move does not see their chains… unionism… [is] not free. It is bound by its past and its inability to change. It doesn't realise… it doesn't have freedom. It's in chains… of their own making.

This summation exemplifies the effects of the 'internalization' of a master narrative that places 'limitations on personal agency' (McLean and Syed 2015:342). An issue for Unionists therefore, is whether they can disentangle national identity from political ideology in the context of constitutional change, essentially whether unionism trumps Britishness or vice versa. For this former Unionist, this process of deconstruction is at an advanced stage as it is for others. In 2022 Ireland's Future organised an event in the 3 Arena in Dublin in which actor, James Nesbitt, from a Unionist background, was the keynote speaker. In October 2024, Nesbitt stated, regarding constitutional change:

> The debate is out there because it has to be out there… So much of what I was trying to say was that my background, my culture, my history, does not disallow me from considering myself an Irishman. I think that many more from my background are beginning to see that and feel that (McCambridge 2024).

9.3 Nationalist triumphalism

A process of deconstruction leading to a reconstruction of identity provides a means of developing from a 'negative to positive interdependence' (Hammack 2008:233) between what would formerly be unionism, and indeed nationalism. During the interview, on several occasions, this participant was asked to answer questions from a Unionist perspective, he replied, 'you're using the word 'Unionist' again… if you use the word British that stretches right into the SDLP.' Significantly, it is assumed that those that self-identify as British would automatically view themselves as Unionist or oppositely. This contributor rejects the Unionist label, favouring his British identity while supporting reunification, viewing both as congruent. He advocates a reunified Ireland re-joining the Commonwealth to lessen Unionist fears of their 'Britishness being threatened', arguing, 'how could they if Ireland was a member of the Commonwealth.' This topic is discussed by O'Leary (2022) who submits that 'it has not been the 'British Commonwealth of Nations for some time', but adds, 'there may be more resistance to this idea in the south than the changing of the national flag or national anthem' suggesting 'postponing the question until after reunification' (O'Leary 2022:268). While admitting to not being a monarchist he believes that 'there's a role for monarchy as head of state', adding, 'I wouldn't want that for Ireland. But I do think that aspect of identity could be catered for if Ireland… took back her rightful place as head of the Commonwealth.' Because the Commonwealth rules 'were changed to allow a republic to become a member and now there are 39 Republics', he thinks it 'would be a huge gesture for Republicans and Nationalists in Ireland to offer well before any referendum.' The Commonwealth is a 'voluntary association of 56 independent countries', primarily based on the former colonies of the British empire. It was rebranded in 1949 as the *Commonwealth of Nations* through the London Declaration. The British monarch 'is not automatically Head of the Commonwealth' which is collectively decided by 'member countries'. It is now open to any country to apply for membership[39] and several countries have left and re-joined, including Pakistan and South Africa, in 1989 and 1994 respectively. The interviewee states:

> I have spoken to very Republican minded people about this… you can almost read the body language, sort of no way and this sort of thing. Well, you know, like have a think about it.

He doesn't think it impossible that 'Mary Lou McDonald' be 'the person to sell it' in light of Martin McGuinness shaking hands with the Queen, Gerry Adams meeting Prince Charles or Michelle O'Neill meeting him at Hillsborough:

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[39] See, https://thecommonwealth.org/history (accessed 2 October 2023).

the optics of that reception… [Unionist politicians] lining up behind Sinn Féin… from within my community that was wow… you could see there was a genuine warmth and then… Prince Charles writing to Mary Lou to say he hoped she had gotten over her Covid… those sorts of things.

'Small gestures' he believes help deconstruct the narrative, and by his reckoning Republicans have already begun this process, particularly in relation to meeting monarchs and their associations with the British army. He returns to the issue of Commonwealth membership stating, 'the question that Republicans would need to ask themselves… how does it disadvantage them?' He believes a pre-emptive gesture 'is much more powerful than a gesture conceded' and would be 'the biggest of all' gestures. The interviewee poses an interesting challenge for Nationalists. Whether they could accept the symbolism of re-joining an association formed from the empire they hold responsible for many of the cataclysmic events of Irish history is questionable, but not impossible. Whether this would follow or proceed reunification would be another area of debate as O'Leary highlights. He believes that a unity referendum will not happen 'in a couple of years' but thinks that 'by the time of the next census if it hasn't happened, it will happen then.' He adds, that when 'we talk about the Irish question… the only way you solve it is by making it an Irish problem.' He adds a cautionary note to reunification campaigners:

> I don't want to rain on your parade because at the moment its sitting 40/40… Unionists aren't secure in the union, but neither are [Nationalists] in achieving a united Ireland and there's this 20% in the middle.

He argues that the road to reunification for Republicans is 'a huge seesaw':

> when you get an 'up the Ra' incident it moves one way, when you get Michelle O'Neill shaking hands with Prince Charles it moves the other way and it moves as a bloc…, talk to people of British identities, [which] includes them without excluding them and it also addresses that middle bloc… those of us, that hybrid identity… that's where the work has to be done. If that work is done and a New Ireland is achieved, that Unionist bloc will be like me at the death of my father.

Claire is also critical of particular aspects associated with Republicanism, and what she refers to as 'triumphalist language', an issue also raised by Quintin. She adds:

> I actually hate 'Up the Ra' singing… I don't get upset about it. It's not surprising to me… I understand the history completely. I've heard 'do you want a fish supper Bobby Sands' sung many many more times and I think it's completely hypocritical to single out the Wolfe Tones chorus when you put in a huge array of things sung officially by

the State which are not even problematised about war and… British colonialism... if I was in Sinn Féin, you can't tone police people… [but] I would be cringing.

In her family circle she has a relative 'who was upset about Martin McGuinness' culminating in a 'journey towards accepting and being ok with Sinn Féin.' In this regard, Claire would see that 'Up the Ra' singing as something not super helpful.' In a similar vein, another interviewee put it:

derogatory terms are derogatory terms and it's not okay. About not making things of the past and crimes and murders and different things that have went on, not making them jokes and songs. And I think that's just human decency.

Claire touches on a crucial aspect of the master narrative whereby state violence, colonialism, and so on, is normalised, embraced and perpetuated through a multi-layered system of reproduction. Imbued with moral superiority no equivalence can be made between 'our' violence and 'theirs' further marginalising those who constructed an alternative in resistance to the master narrative (McLean and Syed 2015:320). As a result, both remain in an inter-related symbiosis while paradoxically detached. Quintin argues that:

nationalism and Republicanism are at this stage of a pretty raw shallow argument for a border poll, unsubstantiated that a majority of people in Northern Ireland would vote for it as the Good Friday Agreement specified and that pisses people off.

A 'raw shallow argument for a border poll' could be assumed to be based on 'romantic and aspirational' rhetoric that is singular in its focus, exemplified through 'Up the Ra' singing. Reconstruction of identity to a positive interdependence is therefore hampered, perpetuating a negative interdependence that essentially perpetuates the status quo. As he points out 'it's actually easier in my experience to run a No campaign because you are just throwing flack at the Yes propositions.' Miniscule support for unity, for him:

is exacerbated by what nationalism and Republicanism are doing in terms of their discourse and in terms of their triumphalism and looking down on… both us others in the middle, plus other Unionists.

Nationalist 'triumphalism', although not defined by Quintin, if a widespread perception, will be a repellent for many 'others' and liberal Unionists. Indeed, it alludes to a counter-colonial appropriation of the colonial mentality whereby the once oppressed take on the traits of the oppressor. As another contributor put it, 'whenever unionism is in an emotional flux Republicans and Nationalists should back off a little.' Nationalist elation at unionism's perceived deterioration does little for progression towards interdependence. Quintin believes

that there 'probably should be a border poll' but 'when there is a settled view in the south, and I think that's an often overlooked one'. 'The biggest challenge for Republicanism':

> is the proposition of the united Ireland and how do you persuade Unionists who will die to stay British… [and] that this is a viable proposition… people do tend to go back to vote atavistically for their tribe.

This unquestionably is the 'biggest' challenge but arguably not the most important as there is no explicit 'requirement for Unionist consent to unity' (Humphreys 2018:94). A simple majority would suffice. Quintin does not regard himself as 'Unionist or Nationalist' and believes that 'we don't have traditional Nationalist-Unionist anymore', he seeks 'an Ireland of equals that meant it' that 'would undo the partition of 100 years.' While historic binaries may be diluting, comfort with the familiar is much less angst-inducing than contemplating the unexplored for many. As a self-proclaimed 'pragmatist', he argues that:

> we may find that… the status quo that will be our ideal future… [with] a Unionist and a Nationalist-Republican bloc… plus others, who are more relaxed… best of both worlds, Irish and British… [and] develop that as our least-worst option.

9.4 The debate

Quintin is 'excited about the debate' and the 'possibilities' but stops short of calling himself 'a campaigner for a border poll at the moment' although he is 'certainly persuadable to vote Yes if the conditions were right.' He believes the quality of debate and how it's been handled has been poor to date. He is also 'deeply disappointed that unionism has opted out.' He argues that:

> Unionism has flunked it. I can understand that a little. How can you be expected to part in something that could be the slippery slope and you're actually participating in helping the slope go faster.

Unionism finds itself with a dilemma that despite the lack of engagement the case of reunification continues to be built, particularly by academia, and civil society groups like Ireland's Future, moving significantly beyond a strictly Republican project. Having lost much of its conflict-related connotations it is firmly in the mainstream. Unionist inertia and disengagement has done little to halt the discussion and with their majority gone there is an increased onus on them to enter the discussion on the constitutional future of NI/NoI. The only other available option is to convince Nationalists and others of the merits of the status quo and their place within it. Nationalists would argue that they have indeed 'flunked it' and continue to do so evidenced in their opposition to the building of Casement Park for the Euros, and

ongoing animosity towards the Irish language, for example. Unionism's further swing to the right weakens the case for the status quo, not just for Nationalists but crucially for the constitutionally non-aligned. He believes that:

> a flailing unionism uncertain about its future and getting negative… [has] failed to develop any sort of sense of what the UK could and should do for them in the future… [remaining] backward looking and not terribly motivating to voters.

He also contends that 'dividing islands' is 'not a good idea… Why would you want to partition an island'? Continuance of the status quo is not problem free either. As Jayne argues:

> It is time for us to recognise that some of those processes and systems that were established are no longer fit for purpose and why some of our politicians would not be very exercised on them not working… for me always why… apathy… why are we not more angry about this? Why the vast majority of us just let it go past us and don't really recognise how hard fought all of that was.

Inability of the current institutions to deliver change or at a pace that is desired adds another layer to debate. Whether constitutional change occurs or not, many of the contributors seek alterations to the current political arrangements suggesting that change of some type will be required regardless of future constitutional direction. The sense of frustration is palpable for many of the interviewees. Jayne continues:

> we have some of the best universities in Europe here in Northern Ireland and in the south.   Yet and all our young people are choosing to go across to England, Scotland and Wales. And once they go, there are much more opportunities for them over there so why would they want to come back to Northern Ireland which they think is quite literally stuck in the past... We have a society that really doesn't care.

One interviewee believes significant societal progress has been made. In her ideal constitutional future, 'our schooling system is integrated and we're living in a peaceful society … there's no peace walls because they're hideous and they're no longer needed'. In September 2024 seventy metres of peace wall was removed that divides a part of Nationalist and Unionist west Belfast through the building of the EU funded Black Mountain Shared Space Project (Madden 2024a), indicating that progress is possible, potentially providing a template for other interface areas. As such, this contributor believes 'an independent Northern Ireland' is optimal:

> some people would say they're not Unionist or Loyalist, they don't care, they don't vote, they just want to live peacefully… then you have the minority… that say they're

independent-ists (sic)… I just think that they are separate and… need to be understood as separate.

What was termed 'Ulster nationalism' is not a new phenomenon and was closely connected with loyalism in the 1970s and 80s. This contribution suggests that there exists a latent Ulster nationalism although, publicly at least, this is yet to be articulated. Not the only participant to suggest such a scenario, it appears to be based on a rejection of, particularly Irishness, and to a lesser degree Britishness, as she admits to 'probably feel[ing] more British than Irish', but equally she would:

> love for a political party to talk about being Northern Irish, about Northern Irish identity, about Northern Irish culture… But there just doesn't seem to be that conversation because we're so wrapped up in the Green and Orange.

She argues that 'in order to change the narrative of British-Irish, we need to start this conversation of Northern Irish of having our own identity together' suggesting increased assimilation through the interdependence of an agreed Northern Irish identity. 2021 census figures show a rise in 'Northern Irish', particularly in majority Unionist areas, an option available from the 2011 census. How Brexit influenced a rise in 'Northern Irish' is unclear but certainly if this trend continues a purely British identity will continue to recede.   In this regard 'Northern Irish' is more strongly affiliated with Britishness.

On Irish unification, she maintains is 'not something that I personally would want… mainly for financial reasons [laughs]… I think we have come a long way and I don't want to rock the boat' adding, 'I don't think there's evidence or the appetite. I actually think the republic don't want us [laughs].' She continues:

> there's a lot of work that needs done to be able to live civilly with each other and peacefully… first before that conversation can even take place. It obviously is in the Good Friday Agreement… [and] at some point will need to take place.

She is fearful that a unity referendum could cause 'a lot of conflict and that northern society is not 'stable enough':

> I just don't want it to happen, I simply don't want it to rock the boat… I think we are starting to live civilly… and then we are going to introduce this controversial border poll which is just going to make everything worse.

From a starting point that acknowledges much work remains outstanding, opponents of a unity referendum use adjectives such as 'controversial', divisive, and so on, in their rejection of it.

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For its proponents there is nothing ''divisive', 'dangerous' or 'toxic' about contemplating Irish reunification' (Harvey and Bassett 2019:20) allowed for within the GFA that has 'a legitimacy that is democratically formidable (Harvey and Bassett 2019:10). Upheaval from 'rocking the boat' is based on an overt fear of the possible repercussions. If the status quo is the 'least-worst option' then Northern Irish remains an off-shoot of unionism. As there can be no neutral words, there can be no neutral constitutional position which will determine if one is in actuality Unionist or contrarily pro-reunification. Making the ambiguous 'reconciliation' as a prerequisite to commence the referendum process could motivate those of a pro-union disposition to deliberately thwart progress, reducing society to an endless loop of dispute, unable to go backward or forward, consistent with Gramsci's view that, 'the old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born.' The Republic's government commencing preparations for reunification would be a major boon for those seeking to persuade the undecideds of its merits, and would dispel the 'south don't want us' narrative that is prevalent across the political spectrum. Should Fine Gael, particularly, adopt reunification as a party political objective, in or out of government, a major obstacle in associating it as a Republican project will have been breached, making it more attractive for the politically conservative elements of NI/NoI. The contributor highlights the importance of 'finances' for her 'generation and the generation below':

> they are saying I don't want to pay for prescriptions, I don't want to pay for appointments, I don't want to pay to get my bin collected… wages may be higher… but that's not what people are seeing.

Together with the perceived additional financial burdens 'people are also feeling like we'll get lost' and that 'their identity is being taken from them.' How identity can be 'taken' from someone is not specified but if, as Todd argues, unionism is polity-centred, then any change in the constitutional status will be construed as identity 'being taken', which may be equally applicable to the 'Northern Irish.' She submits that 'we feel like then we can't celebrate our own culture, while admitting to the probable lack of inclusivity of 'the twelfth of July':

> people from a Protestant/Unionist background… that's important to them and that they want to celebrate [that]. So it's how do you do it without offending the 'other' but still maintaining… and celebrating your own culture in a way which isn't offensive.

Self-identifying as 'Northern Irish', for this interviewee represents a leaning towards the trappings of Orange-ism raising the question of where both sit with each other. For Nationalists, finding a place in any 'new Ireland' for the OO will present challenges, yet

overtures from political nationalism have had a positive tone, with Leo Varadkar being the first Taoiseach to visit OO HQ (McCormack 2018). In February 2024 the Republic's government, through their Shared Island Initiative announced a €10million[40] funding package for the Battle of the Boyne site 'to reflect its unique historic significance to communities North and South.' Nonetheless, constitutional change is something that would make this interviewee 'feel a bit threatened':

> I am quite secure in my… beliefs and… national identity, I do have friendships across the spectrum… I still identify as Protestant… [but] is it going to be back to the way it was in the Troubles were you couldn't go into the city centre… Protestants are in the minority, so then Protestants are targeted … it should never be the case for either… you do feel a bit threatened by it.

In this regard Protestant security is dependent on the existing social order. Moreover. there is no evidence or indication to suggest that Nationalist retribution would occur, although this may not allay such fears. In this instance a quote from Stoic philosopher, Seneca, is apt, that 'we suffer more in imagination than in reality.' Could this be an illustration of ' a thief thinks everyone a thief'? If so, a process of introspection rather than external projection could be illuminating. This interviewee has expressed agentic capacity in questioning her own identity yet she remains in alignment with Unionist culture and 'passive… in regards to the intersection of the personal and the structural.' As a consequence, passivity not only perpetuates but 'strengthen[s], the master narrative' (McLean and Syed 2015:337) despite dissatisfaction. Avoiding critical engagement with the Unionist master narrative that dismisses any contemplation of reunification is therefore augmented based on affective rather analytic reasoning. For Jayne the opposite is true. Living 'in a fairly middle class area' there is a 'desire' on her part to 'have dialogue and to have discussions' on Irish reunification. She explains:

> The entrenchment of the two, Unionist and Nationalist… for me is worrying. And I can't understand why we are driven by a status quo that is clearly not working and why we're not up for debate.

For her many of the 'big issues' such as 'education and health' are relegated under 'the transfer of goods' which does not 'affect' the vast majority' of people. 'I think in many cases I would have hoped that our politicians could be a little bit more mature and recognise what the real issues for Northern Ireland are.' Jayne's reference to the 'transfer of goods' relates to the

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[40] See, https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/2c23e-unprecedented-funding-of-over-800m-for-shared-island-investment-priorities-including-a5-road/ (accessed 21Febraury 2024).

NIP which was a live issue at the time of the interview. NIP was primarily a political issue for sections of unionism, with loyalism reacting violently, with messaging from both wings of unionism in lockstep. Also worthy of note from Jayne's contribution is that the NIP did not have much, if any, impact on the lives of people on the ground in NI/NoI, aside from some online delivery issues. Yet, there was already divergence on this before Brexit as some British companies refused to deliver goods to NI/NoI. On constitutional change, Jayne states:

> Absolutely, why wouldn't we have that conversation… Why is there a desire from the south to not want to have anything to do with us… there's England… that side of the house doesn't really want to know. And the south here in Ireland seems to be unsure of what their approach is to the north… It makes me angry that we're stuck in a situation where nobody's moving forward.

Is NI/NoI therefore, 'stuck' in a perpetual 'least-worst option'? A recurring theme throughout this interview process across the different categorisations is British disinterest and that 'the south don't want us'. Master narratives are extant on both sides of the border that are pro-partition that seek the maintenance and continuance of existing structures. While the idea of reunification may be appealing to the citizenry of the Republic, consecutive governments have failed to prepare for a unity referendum while contrastingly having Scottish independence as part of a governmental risk assessment, as per a Freedom of Information (FoI) request from journalist Aoife Moore[41], as of 2022. By not making Irish reunification an objective, as Varadkar called for, is the Republic in contravention of its own constitution? For Jayne, thinking 'about the border poll itself, in very blank terms, yes or no' is problematic, requiring 'a huge piece of work that needs to be done before we even get to a border poll.' The Republic's government will be crucial in this regard. Jayne attests to a general consensus in civil society and beyond, that requires significant preparatory work in advance of any unity referendum to enable 'informed decision' making. She adds:

> my friendship groups… my social networks, [are] very much wanting to move away from old party lines, very willing to have a conversation around a united Ireland, very willing to have a conversation around Europe. You know we travel… We see what the alternatives can be.

'Others', as they are collectively labelled here, offer an alternative to Nationalist-Unionist discourse. While McLean and Syed's narrative framework define those constructing an alternative narrative as a marginalised sub-groups (McLean and Syed 2015:330), this cohort could not be considered as such. While their views regarding reunification may be marginal

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[41] See, https://irelandsfuture.com/2022/01/23/derry-preparing-for-a-new-ireland/ (1:01:34) (accessed 23 January 2022)

within their communities the social status of this cohort is dominated by the middle-class providing a localised anomaly for narrative construction that challenges both the Nationalist and Unionist master narratives that seeks a future interdependence beyond the traditional binary. Jayne believes that there is 'a need for change': beyond the 'entrenched thinking' of nationalism and unionism:

> there's very much a middle ground… willing for change albeit with a lot of clever thinking about what that might look like, and what the south might want to learn from the north and how they could make that an easy transfer.

Through her job Jayne does 'a lot of work with teachers and young people around symbols and emblems and what that might mean, and how the traditional colours and traditional symbols are very clearly identified.' Referencing Paul Connolly's, *Too Young to Notice?,* she states that from 'three to five children can easily identify what side of the community they're from based on those traditional symbols and emblems.' On this Connolly submits that:

> Children from the age of three are already beginning to develop an awareness of the cultural events and symbols that surround them. By the age of five and six a significant proportion are already acquiring negative attitudes.

He concludes that it is not *if* something should be done but '*what* precisely' (Connolly et al 2002:55). A reconstruction to positive interdependence offers one such 'what.' As Jayne states:

> people are passionate about their identity. People are passionate about what sporting groups they belong to, what cultural groups they belong to, what churches they belong to, so yeah a discussion around respecting those for sure.

Respect for cultural difference must be an integral part of the discussion for constitutional change from this perspective. For Jayne, 'Brexit' happened. 'We've moved on. And on the impact minimal, minimal.' The promise of automatic re-entry back into the EU makes reunification for her, an attractive option, stating, 'for sure if we were to be part of Europe again, absolutely.' She adds:

> I think there's definitely a commitment to that [reunification]. How that might look I don't think there's been enough discussion on any level around that. But certainly in my lifetime I can see that as a goal.

Dearth of discussion regarding 'how that might look' reaffirms Quintin's 'raw shallow argument comment.' Jayne states being 'very mindful that my thinking around this has been very much shaped by the job that I do and the work that I'm engaged in.' There is a desire for people to

discuss this topic at civil society level which in many respects is being inhibited by political parties, including Alliance and the Green Party who are reluctant to engage in the debate at a corporate rather than an individual capacity. This could create a very different dynamic for people like Jayne who self-identifies as neither Nationalist or Unionist who argues that 'if we had the correct processes and institutions and the right people leading us, you know, absolutely.'

Claire has 'always supported Irish unity' and feels 'it's time to get a bit more vocal about that.' Living in a predominantly Unionist stronghold, she considers the potential repercussions:

> Is that gonna put my kids in any danger… the alternative is just to sit on your arse and not doing anything when the place you live is in a really crucial moment of change and that wasn't really an option.

Claire has actively engaged with the Unionist narrative and rejected it, embracing instead what could be legitimately considered an alternative narrative from within the northern Protestant community that is more closely aligned with Irish nationalism. Passivity is not an option for her, despite risks. She references other reunification advocates, such as Colin Harvey, who faced a considerable backlash from leading Unionist politicians and Loyalists for his work in this area. Nonetheless, Claire has been true to her word and has been a speaker at a number of events organised by Féile an Phobail and Ireland's Future, publicly expounding Irish unity. A dominant narrative cannot abet alternatives, displayed by campaigns to discredit those with a divergent vision, often by threats, as Harvey can attest (BBC News NI 2022), as well as Kathy and Claire. Unable to challenge an alternative by strength of argument or persuasion, the use of threats and harassment belies an insecurity of position in those who would adopt such methods. Rigidity and its compulsory nature are in fact weaknesses in this regard. Claire continues:

> by the time I did Ireland's Future I had worked out a language and a tone… true to what I believe and is not diluting my politics but that will land in a kinder way or a way that Unionists and Loyalists would not feel alienated… or threatened by that and that's actually really important to me.

Because of her advocacy Claire has received 'significant threats' and has 'accepted' that she may be forced to move, adding:

> I think unity is gonna happen. I don't want to leave my home and I don't want Newtownards, east Belfast… all these Protestant areas to collapse and to be chaotic… I want to help do the groundwork basically in whatever way I can.

Claire's determination to continue her campaigning in the face of negative repercussions demonstrates a depth of feeling and commitment to continue on a course she holds to be right. That she has to consider such options is a sad indictment of political discourse in NI/NoI where elements within the broader community, both in positions of leadership and others, fixate on a narrow political agenda that permits no divarication of any kind. Claire ponders 'why certain things matter to you' concluding that 'its identity isn't it. It's heart, its passion... It's being reared' with a particular world view. She continues:

> I do think it's just sectarianism, shit leadership, that kind of ingrained thing in the Protestant community that weird deference... a weird trust in England and in authority and in London and just failure to update these ideas.

Habitus is that 'ingrained thing' that is difficult to quantify representing a culmination of a multitude of influences. The conservative nature of political unionism is dominated by a *Stormont nostalgia* when Unionists were gifted a bespoke polity for unrivalled dominance. For 'us Prods', as Claire puts it 'voting with the DUP seems to sit beside disdain for the DUP.' She adds:

> I don't think that many Loyalists want to talk about unity and I don't think it's like sweeping through the Protestant community. All of my friends want to talk about unity and our wider family circles are beginning to think about unity.

Claire shares an insight with regard to how the presentation of the reunification conversation as ubiquitous is received by many Unionists:

> talking about the Royals and oh my god it is all over BBC at the moment and I cannot take it and like you are saying to the presenter... you are talking about this too much… [who is saying] this is being discussed around everybody's kitchen table and pub – like no its fucking not! But then I realised ooohh that's how your proper hard-core Unionist feels whenever we say Irish unity is being discussed around every table and pub and it is in our worlds but they are going to the radio – 'No it's not.' We are not talking about [the British royal family]. I never wanna talk about the Royals, Fuck off.

Claire makes an extremely valid point regarding particular discourses confined to echo chambers. Social media reflects this where particular topics, contributors and so on can be specifically targeted towards the consumer creating a discourse silo that appears universal. A challenge for the unity project is to how the non-engaged can be attracted to the debate. Social media is undoubtedly a powerful tool, yet Claire considers other approaches, were 'the easiest way to get unity is for Unionists and Fine Gael to cosy up… and just agree a very sensible corporate way forward.' A Unionist-Fine Gael concordat may not be such a fanciful suggestion

in that Ó'Beachain outlined how former Unionists negotiated suitable arrangements for themselves post-partition.

Contemporarily, while ideological similarities and difference may exist between political parties there is a general acceptance of the prevailing economic neo-liberal orthodoxy. Claire maintains that 'we have a neo-liberal peace' and that groups like Ireland's Future are 'quite embedded' in that same orthodoxy, 'and just making a unity version of that' is problematic for her. While Ireland's Future have spread their net wide politically, they are primarily dominated by a Nationalist, middle-class, intelligentsia, which, as Claire would argue, appear to seek the continuance of the neo-liberal status quo. As one previous contributor mentioned, 'if you've got significant elements of the middle-classes on side with you, you're probably in business.' This makes sense from a campaigning perspective in that 'others', particularly, are dominated by a middle-class electorate and will be a crucial constituency in deciding Ireland's constitutional future. Ireland's Future have had an array of trade Unionists, left-wing political parties and activists speaking at their events but class is not a dominant feature of their campaigning. Because 'we are stuck in a similar… a very neo-liberal state [in the UK, we] don't really have a chance to insert class into that debate either' Claire argues:

> I would dearly love unity but let's be more creative and more socially inclusive radical unity… I mean, am the I token prod, that's fine, I'll probably say what you want me to say.

Despite some misgivings she declares to be a 'Republican unity supporter' and a 'radical Protestant' who would prefer to be discussing 'socialism… ecology and the environment':

> but like Protestants, it's getting there, it really is... the danger is that class issues don't really come into the… official unity debate… since we are probably not gonna have unity in the next three to five years probably climate and all those things will organically come into the debate. I'd like to be talking about it now to pre-empt all that.

Inherent in reunification discourse is the assumption of improved material conditions, but if placed in the context of global warming:

> in the next ten years we are going to be in bad shit in terms of the food scarcity and like all the things coming down the line… [if] we are pitching it based on sensible economics, I think we are fucked because that can't be delivered.

Global warming is the single biggest threat to human existence and has been largely absent from the reunification equation. How environmental issues can be effectively dealt with on a partitionist basis is also a case yet to be made, providing an area to widen the argument for constitutional change. Claire maintains that:

the figures for unity are consistently going up. I mean I am always looking at the number of Protestants who say they... would support unity and its always single figures but even that has gone up from about 2% to about 5% or some would say its 7% but that's just the outliers like me... you're looking at people who say they are Protestant or people actually of no religion who say they want unity and a lot of Prods are no religion who say they don't know and I think that's the kind of pool that you are swimming in.

Certainly, Ireland's Future have identified willing participants from Protestant/Unionist backgrounds although Claire correctly identifies herself and others like her as 'outliers' and could be legitimately considered 'token Prods.' Beyond tokenism what is realistically on offer for Unionists and others in the event of reunification that enables them to embrace change while maintaining their identity? Is this even compatible? She challenges the view of Protestants being a 'homogenous lump', providing a broad scope in which Protestant opinion is formed. Amidst such reflections reunification can be considered in practical rather than ideological or emotive terms, in the context of 'their potential new lives.' Claire's book discussing the 1798 Rebellion created an opening by 'talking about history but… actually doing… politics':

rather than like whacking your head against a wall trying to get this disengaged Unionist population to be excited about a unity conversation its working out the areas of solidarity because there's gonna(sic) be a lot… and by talking about revolution or wages… or hospital waiting lists… or whatever those solidarities are amongst people, then what you are actually doing is politics. We are not calling it the unity debate.

1798 was moment in Irish history that witnessed Protestant and Catholic solidarity on a major scale, and has been largely written out of the modern day Unionist narrative despite the central role played in the United Irish movement by Presbyterians and other Protestants. Claire's ideal vision for her constitutional future would be a 'united Irish' state that is 'interNationalist':

I think the better chance of achieving that is in Ireland because at least it's a Republic… up until recent times [its] been more able to resist far-right… and transphobic politics because it has a little bit of liberation politics baked into it, solidarity with Palestine, so I think it is better but by the same clout whatever way a border poll goes I'll be caring about the same issues the day before as the day after and working on the same things the day before and the day after.

'I feel incredibly Irish', she adds.

Conclusion

While this sample was small and emerging organically from the research process, it is reflective of northern society in the post GFA and Brexit eras. Those that have been given the tag 'others' are those that reject the traditional binary classifications of Nationalist or Unionist, with a more socially liberal worldview. Several of the above were relaxed with self-identifying as British, Irish, or a mixture of both, others were categorically Irish and one was singularly Northern Irish. Flexibility viz-a-viz national identity correlates with an open-mindedness towards constitutional change. At the very least, most of the above were willing if not desiring evidence-based debate to take place. Several openly declared their middle-class status with a recurring feature of having travelled or lived abroad. This in turn appears to have had the effect of broadening perspectives beyond the 'the incestuous-ness of NI.' Having a broader world view situates NI/NoI within a wider European and global context of which they wish to be a part. Of course, this was not uniformly accepted across the sample, but class correlation may have been a factor, suggesting that socio-economic position could determine rigidity or flexible regarding constitutional preference.

A feature also worthy of note is that the majority of 'others' in the sample would reside or hale from strongly Unionist areas. Several of the interviewees recounted incidences of being threatened because they challenged the dominant narrative in various forms. good relations work, for example, is not risk free, as Kathy can attest, disclosing elements of a culture that cannot abet alternative viewpoints. Additionally, Claire was threatened directly for her public advocacy of Irish language education and reunification reinforcing the need to 'make this constitutional conversation a safe one'. The nuances of identity are apparent within a heterogeneous sample and biographically diverse. 'Others' are not easily defined. Classified on a blunt rejection of being neither Nationalist or Unionist, it is their flexibility from which they derive meaning (McLean and Syed 2015:321). Disengagement from those dominant narratives represents a struggle over 'ideological hegemony' (Lustick 1995:42) and in this sense, 'others' are a weakening of those same narratives. Their repudiation of the dominant binary identities has enabled the contemplation of alternative futures that do not align with the 'Orange and Green.' How this develops nearing a potential unity referendum scenario, will be determined by the strength and quality of the case being presented for constitutional change or the status quo. It is well documented that this constituency will be critical in deciding the constitutional direction ahead.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

Introduction

Drawing on the empirically-focused chapters, four to nine, above, this conclusion reflects on identity narratives, followed by Nationalist perspectives, Unionist perspectives and Other perspectives. These sections will be followed by a discussion on areas of agreement, then Brexit and its implications ending with final remarks.

> Ernest Renan declared a 'nation's existence' to be a 'daily plebiscite'… Nations do not have an absolute existence, but without a 'clearly expressed desire to continue a common life' the nation disappears into history... The notion of a daily plebiscite suggests a psychology of the conscious will, rather as Benedict Anderson's later idea of an imagined community implies a psychology of the imagination (Billig 1995:95).

At a moment of constitutional flux both the 'psychology of the conscious' and the 'psychology of the imagination' converge at a political intersection. Brexit has challenged the permanency of the UK where significant sections of its constituent parts now vocally question the validity of its continued 'existence'. Locally, the conditions have been created whereby the national question is the latent reference point of public discourse that asks whether current structures are sufficient for the future or not. Imbued with consideration of constitutional position that can deliver a better 'common life', each public debate is a 'daily plebiscite' on the status quo. The collective consciousness that wills structural continuity is juxtaposed by an imagined future within a reunified Ireland.

This thesis has sought to explore how civil society activists and leaders from different backgrounds have responded to this post-Brexit moment. They were chosen as a group whose views are not often researched in NI/NoI, but who often play a crucial middle-level role in society, outside the party-political world, where activists views simply echo the 'party-line', but often having a wider knowledge and a greater capacity to reflect and discuss complex social and political issues, than a random sample of 'ordinary people'. Depth of capacity to reflect the consequences of Brexit for the political context was therefore prioritised over the greater quantity and representativeness of a survey.

In seeking to make sense of the conversations with the researcher, the thesis uses the idea of master narratives as articulated by McLean and Syed (2015). Both contrary Nationalist-Unionist positions are founded on identity narratives that link communities and society through a temporal sequencing of events that have become embodied histories. Aiding sense-making 'across time' and 'across contexts', provides feelings of belonging, where the personal and communal, the individual' and the historical converge (Onnie Rodgers 2018).

Social experience, given structure through narrative, is 'inherently ideological' (Hammack 2008). Such narratives tell 'us' who 'we' are, and as Billig points out, there can be no 'us' without a 'them'. McLean and Syed's narrative framework outlines their concept of the master and alternative narratives that are formed in relational opposition to each other. As they explain:

> if cultures are represented as spinning wheels, master narratives are in the centre of those wheels – more rigid than those aspects of the culture that live at the rim of the wheels, such as alternative narratives. Those alternative narratives might be drawn in to the centre, becoming calcified master narratives themselves, or they may spin off, leaving the original master narrative in place – rigidly holding to the centre (McLean and Syed 2015:325).

Master narratives derive their strength from not accommodating alternatives. By ensuring that those viewpoints 'are literally unheard by a larger audience', they stifle the emergence of alternative narratives which are deemed to be a threat to hegemony, explaining the significance of the current constitutional juncture. Because of Britain's exit from the EU, and not the UK's, this moment of constitutional fluidity has created the conditions where both the dominant Unionist and alternative Nationalist narratives are competing for the ascendant position in the public arena. The success of the latter will be determined by its eclipse of the former. Indeed, the fact that reunification is now a matter of mainstream debate is in itself a weakening of the Unionist master narrative, as it is increasingly drawn closer to the centre 'as differing forces compete through new discursive constructs' (McAuley 2003). While Irish reunification may have once been at the 'rim' of the wheel, Brexit has brought it into the centre, removing its once tangential status while undermining the central rigidity of the Unionist master narrative.

Identity narratives, deeply enmeshed with the legacy of English colonialism and British imperialism in Ireland, is a historical fact arduous to circumvent when examining contemporary issues in NI/NoI. As Walker explains, the Unionist identity narrative and 'sense of history' is culturally steeped in the colonial era 'with its great emphasis on 1641, 1689 and 1690' and the 'idea of constant conflict between Protestant and Catholic' (Walker 1992:61) with a countering native-Nationalist identity narrative. The 'Irish fighting among themselves', 'framed, both inside and outside academia', as the 'two communities' thesis (Vaughan-Williams 2006:524) portrays Britain as the neutral arbiter despite considerable evidence of partiality and direct participation in conflict. Historically, successive British governments have grappled with what they term as 'the Irish Problem' which, ironically, was revived during Brexit negotiations, in what McVeigh and Rolston refer to as 'a classic return of the repressed' (McVeigh and Rolston, 2021:xi). A

more accurate classification of colonial divide could be applied which crucially links the 'fateful triangle of relationships in modern Ireland.' With Britain at the apex of this tripartite configuration, this structure remains the basis of contemporary realities. Like McVeigh and Rolston (2021) this thesis rejects O'Leary's suggestion that the GFA represents the 'final decolonization of Ireland' (O'Leary 2020:131), with NI/NoI more closely aligned to Kwame Nkrumah's definition of 'neo-colonialism.' With all the 'outward trappings of sovereignty', as in the case of NI/NoI with a devolved parliament within the UK, in 'reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside' (Nkrumah, 1974:ix). Devolution is not self-determination. With ultimate power residing in Westminster, political decisions can be made contrary to the wishes and interests of people in NI/NoI by an act of parliament without recourse, such as the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023, as an example *par excellence.* Economic policy is dictated by allocation of the Westminster 'subvention' (Doyle 2021:315), and further illustration of external direction is presented plainly in the GFA through the discretionary power of the British Secretary of State to hold a unity referendum or not. 'Northern Ireland is in Union with Great Britain but it is not part of Great Britain' (O'Leary 2020:xxviiii), and as such, lies somewhere between foreign and domestic' (Anderson 2022:18) on the British agenda. Additionally, the current UK system perpetuates semi-detachment and exclusion from the process of government formation indefinitely. As a consequence, NI/NoI 'is not master of its own destiny' (Nkrumah, 1974:x) and as a consequence NI/NoI remains neo rather than post-colonial consistent with Nkrumah's analysis.

10.1 Identity narratives

When viewed through the lens of McLean and Syed's narrative framework, the supporting narratives that augment the continuation of this system are representative of power, the connecting thread to the present 'at the very nexus of the colonial apparatus - political control' (MacDonald 1986:51). As O'Leary points out identification with 'colonial settlers' or with Ireland's 'pre-colonial inhabitants' remains the foundational fissure around which modern-day Nationalist and Unionist narratives evolved.

Contemporary Nationalist and Unionist identity formation share a sequential timeline founded on four key, historical events that have influenced contemporary identity narratives, 1) the Plantation of Ulster, 2) Partition, 3) The Troubles 4) Good Friday Agreement. This timeline has produced particular communal biographies that have been formed in opposition to each other. Nationalism and unionism in an Irish context form a symbiotic relationship based on a history of conflict. Such adversative identity narratives clash on constitutional preference which is a founding principle of the antagonism contemporarily.

Post-1969, the period of conflict leading to the GFA saw the emergence of a more assertive alternative Nationalist narrative that has, in correlation, begun a phase of gradual decline in Unionist dominance. By and large, constitutional inclinations remain wedded to community background. However, the absence of violent conflict post-GFA has allowed a reversion to notions of identity evident pre-1969, established by Rose (1971), to be increasingly explored, emerged in many of the interviews discussed in chapters four to nine. For McAuley, the GFA 'secured the Union for the foreseeable future' bringing 'widespread benefits to Northern Ireland.' It was during this period, he argues, that 'saw the partial renegotiations of the ideological boundaries within which many Unionists sought to express their identity.' As a result, 'some of the political and ideological bonds within unionism' and 'some of the interpretative frames within loyalism' shifted (McAuley 2003:62). This shift was certainly evident in many of the interviews, but even among strong Unionists the sense of confidence in the future of the Union, expressed by McAuley in 2003, was rarely voiced by participants. Brexit has further fuelled this exploration of identities, and not just amongst Unionists.

While community background is a significant contributor in determining constitutional inclinations Brexit discourse, fuelled by an English Nationalist agenda, and supported by a regressive political unionism, invoked discernible change in reasoning from soft Nationalists, liberal Unionists and others. The value of EU membership, and associated benefits, was contrasted with an isolationist and restrictive UK in which democratic norms appeared negligible. Without a means of redress the large swathe of moderates incorporating this broad spectrum began to consider other viable constitutional alternatives, most notably reunification. This differs from full reunification advocacy but certainly there are many who are persuadable outside of traditional Nationalist constituencies, and this was most clearly expressed in chapters eight and nine by those defining as 'others', from a Unionist or Protestant background.

Class remains consequential in establishing flexibility or rigidity to constitutional preference but not to the extent as previously assumed. Those who self-identified as working-class Loyalists in this cohort were open for discussion and debate, with one Loyalist ex-combatant expressing that there was interest in discussing reunification further within his social circle, albeit with a fear of Nationalist retribution that required addressing. Of course, those who were willing to take part in this research are a particular sub-set of working-class Loyalists. This thesis does not claim they are 'representative' of their wider communities, but rather that there are counter-hegemonic voices within working-class Loyalist communities, who are open to discussion. One, 'other', from a working-class background, opposed reunification on the grounds of material rather than ideological interest. Most 'others' from middle-class backgrounds felt comfortable in expressing desire/interest in reunification which may be more

restrictive in working-class Unionist communities. Moreover, alternative stances on various issues within dominant Unionist areas was risk-laden, connected more with ideological position than class distinctions. A corollary of a rigid and compulsory 'patriotic, defensive, glory-addicted version' of Britishness is that it is 'in a highly fragile place' that 'cannot withstand being problematized or critiqued' (Hirsch 2018). Mainstream unionism simply does not abet alternatives or self-reflection while loyalism has demonstrably withdrawn from cross-community work since Brexit for fear of the 'Nationalist agenda.'

By 'analysing the narratives of those who hold the power in the relevant context' one can establish who invests 'the most in sustaining the master narrative' (McLean and Syed 2015:39) and extrapolate why. Concepts used to structure the narrative framework offer a means to explore beyond public rhetoric the underlying dynamics extant in northern society and how they may impact a process of constitutional change. A refinement of the framework to cater for political and post-conflict situations, or periods of constitutional flux, is possible but the essence of the framework remains valid and applicable to the current context.

Deconstructing their respective narratives in the context of reunification could allow a re-framing of the collective Nationalists and Unionist stories, giving greater control over their future direction rather than 'passive recipients of their fate.' By adopting flexible rather than rigid conceptions of identity, an opportunity for 'reconciliation' and societal 'reconstruction' arises that could move divided communities 'from negative to positive interdependence' (Hammack 2008).

10.2 Nationalist perspectives

The contemporary Nationalist narrative is an extension of the colonial relational dynamic of the dominant and the dominated, where the native Irish were dispossessed and had their land and 'stuff stolen.' Themes of unfairness and humiliation were continued post-partition as Nationalists were classified as second class within a structure founded on sectarian discrimination, and this came up in most interviews, even if language varied. As a response to their depressed conditions a radicalisation occurred during the 1960s, influenced by the international zeitgeist of the era for radical societal change. As a counter-hegemonic response to Unionist domination, Nationalists rejected demoralisation and marginalisation for assertiveness, and 'at maximum' resisted the master narrative (McLean and Syed 2015:320). Discriminatory authoritarianism would inevitably collide with a mass-movement in pursuit of equality. Post-1969, contextualised within an environment of conflict, witnessed the hardening of identities. The prolongation of discrimination transferred directly to the British government under whose tutelage the Nationalist community remained classified as the 'enemy within.' Continuity of injustice from Partition to conflict and from conflict to the GFA was very much

part of the Nationalist lived experience, and was continually referenced in the interviews. Framed structurally within NI/NoI, the polity was viewed as a political expression of the Unionist master narrative which required their marginalisation, and this was strongly felt, especially by those participants who were old enough to have lived through the pre-GFA period as adults. The Nationalist counter-structural requirement for dignity created a self-reliance founded on an ethos of education which validated the Nationalist alternative narrative. Interestingly Unionist participants also recognised this greater self-reliance by Nationalists and greater focus on education – even if they did not always see its historic roots. The depth of the 'biographical, sequential and episodic' (McLean and Syed 2015:326) Nationalist narrative ensures a longevity creating meaning for the wider community (Mclean and Syed 2015:342). Despite embodied histories of oppression and struggle, Nationalist confidence has grown exponentially, particularly since GFA through full participation in the political process.

The GFA was a paradigm shift in this regard, heralding the 'twilight' of Unionist exceptionalism (Segal and Daniele 2024), not only through political and social inclusion, but also in its tacit acknowledgement of the structural inequities of NI/NoI from its foundation to that point. Nationalists, unsurprisingly, have in almost every interview, welcomed the agreement which recognised Irish identity as legitimate for the first time since the inception of the polity and crucially provided a mechanism by which Irish reunification could be achieved peacefully. Yet it is not without criticism. Aspects of living free from sectarian harassment appear to be ignored, the rate of desired change has been painfully slow and the longed-for peace dividend has failed to materialise, particularly for working-class areas. In light of the justified critique of the outworking of the GFA, particularly as Unionists are viewed as not having 'played fair', Nationalist confidence is exemplified by the conciliatory overtures made by their representatives in the public arena, and this was constantly referenced in interviews,by those from a Nationalist background. The post-partition Nationalist biography of subjugation and demoralisation have been eclipsed as the 'Protestant parliament for a Protestant state' is now redundant.

Nationalist comfort with post-GFA conditions was irreversibly damaged by a Brexit that highlighted the inequities of the status quo and NI/NoI's position within it. This cohort overwhelmingly supported reunification, albeit with reservations in some instances. Aspects of the Nationalist identity calcified, as the Westminster system of government and politics came under intense scrutiny. Moderate satisfaction with pre-Brexit conditions was eroded by post-Brexit realities as Nationalists became increasingly vocal in opposition. Demographic change, political shifts and Brexit revived the campaign for reunification with the guarantee of direct re-entry into the EU. As Hayward et al, point out, 'Nationalist identities are growing in volume and strength' leading to changing attitudes toward reunification (Hayward et 2022:5).

As one interviewee expressed, 'I would have thought myself there would always be a united Ireland, it was just a matter of time.' The once fringe aspiration entered mainstream discourse across Ireland and Britain providing a destabilising shock to surety of the Unionist master narrative. With neither unionism or nationalism in a majority 'the current constitutional arrangement is on a knife edge' which 'shakes the legitimacy of the foundations of the existing constitutional order', according to Colin Harvey (Ingoldsby 2020).

There is a recognition however, that constitutional change cannot be achieved by Nationalists alone, as political parties and civil society organisations such as Ireland's Future or Irish Border Poll espouse outreach and engagement with Unionists and others. Better standards of living are a vital part of the reunification argument, but for the Nationalist participants it is deeper themes of identity, fairness and democracy that interlace to improve society, and crucially not for the exclusive benefit of Nationalists. Some of the interviewees spoke of Nationalist triumphalism, an issue that will need taken seriously if Unionists, and others, are to be convinced of the merits of reunification. As Ciarán Quinn, a SF official writes, 'we may disagree with [Unionists] but we cannot deny their experiences or dismiss their opinions if we are interested in building a new and united Ireland that is a home for all' (Quinn 2023).

Brexit has irreparably damaged the normative permanency of the status quo amongst Nationalists as their alternative narrative based on the reunification of the national unit has moved from the rim, increasingly vying for the central position with the Unionist master narrative. Brexit shifted the Nationalist demand for a united Ireland, from an ill-defined long-term goal to a demand realistically achievable within a 10-year time-scale. Interviewees spoke about NI/NoI being ignored during the Brexit referendum and the initial post-Brexit negotiations. Even moderate Nationalists expressed a sense of being dis-enfranchised and marginalised again. Brexit in this respect, completely undermined the post-GFA sense of calm, and political consensus, with unity then seen as a longer-term project. Unity, in the opinion of many interviewees, will not only represent the fulfilment of the democratic obligations of GFA it will be a process of decolonisation that could render the conflict identities of Nationalist and Unionist obsolete in any new dispensation.

10.3 Unionist perspectives

Contemporarily, the validity of the Unionist master narrative is also undergoing a significant challenge. Holding a position of unrivalled dominance produced a confident unionism, but political developments from the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement to the GFA, and latterly Brexit, have damaged the impenetrability of that position. Political miscalculations coupled with British government indifference have left unionism increasingly less self-assured. The ontological insecurity (Billig 1995) created by Brexit has created an unsettling constitutional ambiguity

which appears to many of those interviewed for this research as reflecting the British government positioning pre-reunification.

With perceived British government disengagement from NI/NoI and a renewed campaign for a unity referendum, reunification is framed as a SF-Republican project which elicits a reflexive fear in some. Because unionism is 'primarily polity-centred' (Todd 2021) any potential change in constitutional position serves to heighten existential anxieties. Polity attachment within a UK construct is a foundational component of the Unionist identity narrative that is legitimating and reassuring. For many, this has been adversely affected by the GFA and its implications, which require equality for Nationalists. For others within this group the agreement has softened an oppositional standpoint allowing for an exploration of aspects of identity that were immersed by conflict. As a consequence, some of the interviewees were willing to engage in debate regarding constitutional change while not necessarily supporting it. This highlights the importance of civil society in any future discourse. Indeed, many were disillusioned with political unionism, led by the DUP, that repelled naturally ideological Unionists who were pro-EU and anti-Brexit. Struggling to 'deconstruct unionism', post-Brexit realities raised questions of the 'legitimacy of the existent hegemonic bloc.' Subsequently, several of the contributors were open to discussing viable alternatives to the status quo, allowing space for 'forces of both destruction and creation' (McAuley 2003). There were several within this sample who were unambiguously opposed to reunification yet surprisingly these were in a minority. Being open to discuss reunification dependent on wider political and social conditions does not equal support for it, but additionally constitutional preference may be not as rigid as widely presumed, as reflected in the conversations with this group of civil society activists and leaders.

Another prominent feature to arise within the interviews with the Unionist cohort was the issue of class. Class has been a consistent element of the Protestant-Unionist social structure initially emanating from the colonial era to the present. The Unionist-Loyalist dichotomy within the broadly Unionist identity is reflective of this. To self-designate as Loyalist in this structure is arguably to accept one's inferior position within it. Inherent within a hierarchical Unionist structure is an internal dialectic (Crouch and McKenzie 2006) that is submerged by a dominant narrative the prioritises constitutional considerations above all else. This clearly indicates how compulsory alignment with a master narrative can be stifling, in that class interests are inferior to constitutional interests leaving working-class Unionists impotent to affect their conditions. As one interviewee succinctly explained, 'we can't go against the system because we want to be part of it.' Therefore, this system is dependent on these same communities not challenging, and therefore, acquiescing to their social conditions. As McLean and Syed explain, 'internalization without negotiation' is a 'psychological process that serves to perpetuate, and

even to strengthen, the master narrative' (McLean and Syed 2015:337). Rigid alignment therefore is often 'unconscious', engendering a passivity to the 'intersection of the personal and the structural.' Reflection is not necessary because of master narrative alignment that leads to what McLean and Syed refer to as 'false agency' (McLean and Syed 2015:336). Agentic capacity is permissible provided it remains within the parameters of the master narrative. By stifling agency, self-reliance within the Unionist working-class has eroded in favour of state paternalism creating a sub-group (McLean and Syed 2015:330) collectively known as 'Loyalist' whose militant faction functions as political leverage for the elite. Cognisant of this dynamic, working-class Loyalists remain in a bind, choosing reticent acceptance over contestation. Issues constitutional or cultural deflect from the material as a stratagem that maintains Unionist class disparities.

Those self-identified Loyalists within this sample spoke of a lack of confidence in their communities, or a sense of not being listened to. Connecting their position with the structure of the polity and Unionist hierarchy, is problematic as it could undermine the basis of their identity. Loyalism, as a counter-revolutionary response to Nationalist demands for radical change did not require political development beyond stopping 'them.' Their guaranteed position of privilege within the structure coupled with a counter-revolutionary posture failed to produce a sustainable Loyalist politics in the long term. Moreover, this situation is an extension of the partitionist rationale that has left loyalism, as a bloc, in a rested development from which they appear incapable of emerging at present. Progressive, politically astute voices are present but are unheard because of a Loyalist populism that has become a caricature of regressive jingoism. A new brand of working-class Unionist politics is 'destined to remain at the fringes of political life' as it will not 'satisfy [the] core criteria of unionism' (McAuley 2003) founded on maintaining class distinctions, which is why the NILP were deemed a major threat to Unionist hegemony. However, rigid alignment to a singular unionism is softening as aspects of Irishness are being tentatively probed alongside disillusionment with the post-Brexit status quo.

On the cusp of potential constitutional change, the insecurity created by recognised British indifference is exacerbated by the decline of 'numerical superiority of unionism' (White 2007) and a resurgent political nationalism. What served to unite unionism in a 'purposeful sense' (Walker 1992) has now been undermined by Brexit, producing increased Unionist fragmentation. While the collective memories that construct identity remain (Hennessey et al 2019), bereft of any coherent vision of the future, political unionism particularly remains wedded to a regressive hope of reclaiming dominance which is unlikely to materialise. While the reunification alternative is on the fringes it may be drawn into the centre by disillusionment with political unionism and the search for constitutional certainty.

Within this Unionist cohort Brexit is rejected as negative. So too, for many, is the GFA in that they feel that they have lost and weren't 'sold the deal.' Nationalists having 'their day in the sun' as a consequence of the GFA produces a zero-sum conclusion, in the interviews, that is indicative of a master narrative's inability to allow alternatives. The 'pain of parity' appears to be unbearable for many (Murray 2000: 3-4). A latent desire to retain dominance in the wider Unionist community has not kept pace with demographic and political realities that appear difficult to accept. While a pivotal part of the GFA, the border poll clause was agreed to by unionism on the apparent basis that it would never be called. Feelings of insecurity are heightened by renewed calls for reunification, consistent with the GFA's provisions, which adds further to Unionist rejection of it. Furthermore, reunification was generally considered a Republican and SF project adding to its repudiation. While there were undoubtedly pro-union participants, all of them were relaxed about, at the very least, talking about reunification and its associated implications, while simultaneously, largely, not wanting it to happen.

10.4 Other perspectives

'Others' are impervious to rigid classification. Indeed, it is their rejection of the binary designations of Nationalist or Unionist that is their connecting thread. Within this heterogeneous group the nuances of identity are discernible, providing personal rather than cohesive group meaning (McLean and Syed 2015:321). According to Slavoj Zizek 'in a state of ethnic tension, the apparently 'neutral' stance of indifference towards ethnic identity, of reducing all members of a state to mere abstract citizens, in fact favours the largest ethnic group' (Zizek 2002:123). This assertion may be accurate, as the political centre ground dominated by the Alliance party were widely considered to be small 'u' Unionist although publicly constitutionally agnostic. Brexit and the resultant constitutional curiosity may be an indicator of a causal shift in the middle ground. As stated previously, this investigation was primarily concerned with gathering opinions from Nationalist and Unionist civil society and did not initially plan to give this middle ground perspective the same level of attention. However, it first of all emerged organically as a significant part of the research process, and secondly realpolitik dictates that this is a crucial constituency in the equation of constitutional change and is therefore a welcome component of this study.

A defining characteristic of this cohort is that they are primarily socially liberal and much more flexible in their national identity and comfortable with Britishness and/or Irishness in particular contexts. Representing an alternative to both the dominant Nationalist and Unionist master narratives, suggests a fluidity in self-identification correlating with an objectivity towards constitutional change. Discussion relating to reunification was not only welcomed but encouraged. As Jayne states, 'if we had the correct processes and institutions and the right

people leading us, you know, absolutely.' Unburdened by ideological dogma, their engagement with reunification discourse was analytically perceptive and utterly persuadable by the strength of argumentation on either side of the debate. A further delineating feature for the majority of this sample was their middle-class status with several participants openly alluding to this. A class-correlation viz-a-viz reunification was evident in this cohort, with middle class interviewees more likely to have already engaged in informal constitutional conversations, suggesting that socio-economic position could be a determining factor regarding constitutional flexibility or rigidity. Furthermore, several interviewees recounted living abroad or travelling which appears to have had a broadening effect in terms of self-identification. All were unambiguously pro-EU. As a direct route back to full EU membership, the attractiveness of reunification as a viable future alternative to a Brexit UK was greatly enhanced.

A further noteworthy aspect of the 'others', who took part in this research process, is that most of them live in predominantly Unionist areas. While the sample was not designed to be 'representative' and the thesis does not suggest that they are, nonetheless the strength of this aspect of the interviewee group defining as 'others', suggests that the 'softening' taking place within Unionist areas is impacting on the non-aligned who may have once had more liberal Unionist inclinations. Susan McKay in, *Northern Protestants: On Shifting Ground* (2021) illuminates the diversity within the broadly Protestant community who diverge from a puritanical Unionist master narrative. Deemed to be weakening of a cohesive front 'united in the matter of the 'natives', those who deviate are marginalised and often branded 'traitors' by their own community' (Clayton 1996:12). Betrayal runs deep within the Unionist psyche going back the colonial era and the Siege of Derry with the Judas of the Protestant-Unionist tradition, Robert Lundy, entering into their vernacular as shorthand for an arch-betrayer. It was no coincidence that an image of Lundy, the arch-traitor of Protestant mythology from the Siege of Derry, featured on the cover of McKay's text. Alternative narratives within the culturally Protestant community challenge the notion of a monolithic mass. Indeed, 'Protestant identities vary considerably, as do their motives for wanting the union' (Ruane and Todd 1998:65). Maintaining the union is fundamental to notions of Britishness for many Protestant-Unionists. A worrying aspect of challenging a master narrative with an alternative discursive position is the subsequent adverse backlash. In areas where the Unionist master narrative retains dominance, several of the interviewees relayed episodes of direct threats upon them due to either calling-out behaviours or challenging rigid alignment through alternative narrative construction in contrast to the Unionist narrative (McLean and Syed 2015:325). Developing divergent viewpoints outside the compulsory nature of dominant narratives within specific geographic communities proved a risk-laden exercise that the contributors admirably vowed

to continue with regardless. The struggle over ideological hegemony (Lustick 1995) remains fractious in a post-conflict society with the imperative that conversations regarding constitutional change should be safe. Because of their location within strongly Unionist communities, this cohort represents a weakening of the dominant narrative in those same areas in which it is recognised at an instinctual level as such.

All of this sample were supportive of the GFA but were also critical of it. While it was recognised that it had produced an end to high levels of violence, operationally it has not kept pace with change, the general consensus being that it requires updating. Of course, such a process would not be without challenges which was also recognised, but there was a feeling that structures based on the binary identities of Nationalist and Unionist were no longer reflective of contemporary NI/NoI. Sitting outside this dyadic paradigm many of the group reflected a multi-layered identity that embraced aspects of Britishness, Irishness and of being European. With a flexibility of identity, the majority of this group were willing to countenance reunification based on an objective reasoning of facts and evidence, consistent with their socially liberal values. The strength of the case being made in support of reunification, or not, will be vital in securing the support of this constituency who will be crucial in determining constitutional direction.

10.5 Areas of agreement

While there very clear distinctions regarding attitudes towards constitutional change there were several areas of commonality that were consistent across the three main cohorts of Nationalist, Unionist and 'other' interviewees:

i) Brexit was viewed as negative.

This was undoubtedly a common perception across the three groupings. However, the implications of if it were varied. For Nationalists it solidified their aspirations for reunification by highlighting the inequities of the UK political system. Moreover, a Brexit driven by English Nationalist xenophobia was contrary to Irish Nationalist pluralist values, intensified by the perceived unjustness to remove NI/NoI from the EU against the democratic wishes of the electorate. The democratic deficit inherent in the UK political system was further highlighted by the Brexit decision, hardening identities and making reunification more attractive to previously soft Nationalists. Some Unionists viewed Brexit as a constitutional weakening of the UK that precipitated British disengagement. The appeal of EU membership was widely desired across all groupings.

ii)   Criticism of the DUP.

Poor leadership from political unionism was a common theme across all groupings, particularly aimed at the DUP and how they handled Brexit. A common perception was that DUP posturing during the Brexit period was based on a desire to return a hard border to Ireland. As a direct assault on the GFA, DUP positioning therefore risked unravelling the entire peace process which was not welcomed by any of the interviewees. Additionally, a number of the participants went further by questioning the DUP desire to work the institutions fairly, and for the betterment of all, rather than for narrow party-political advantage.

iii)   Unionist existential fear.

All cohorts spoke of a fear within the Unionist community for their future, particularly in the event of Irish reunification. Questions were raised by some as to how Unionists might be treated in such a scenario, with an underlying fear of Nationalist retribution, an inversion of Unionist treatment of Nationalists, post-partition. This was particularly evident for Sam White who, as an ex-Loyalist combatant recounted an anxiety within that constituency. For others this fear reflected the absence of a clear vision from the Irish Government, they feared losing pensions, or not being entitled to health care etc. Existential fear is exacerbated by a lack of a coherent Unionist vision of the future, along with demographic and political change that has upended the foundational rationale of NI/NoI to maintain a Unionist majority in perpetuity. There was no sense among the interviewees that they saw political unionism as having a political vision, which could persuade 'others' and moderate Nationalists to be, or remain 'pro-union' to retain a voting majority in a future referendum even as demographics change. This was also to some degree reflected in the interviews with moderate Nationalists and 'others', who also did not see any outreach from political unionism to support policies and structures that might persuade them to remain in the UK. Issues such as the Irish language, and Gaelic games were frequently mentioned as examples of the unwillingness of political unionism to seek support beyond their declining constituency. Despite these tensions, some of the Unionist cohort, including notably, those self-identified Loyalists, were willing to engage in dialogue as to what Irish unity might look like, and their position and safeguards under such an eventuality.

iv)   Loyalist backlash.

A violent reaction from militant loyalism was raised across the groups, framed within an advancing reunification process. Interestingly, the most concern was raised by those within the Unionist cohort. While it was acknowledged in the other groupings, it did not have the effect of deterring interest in constitutional change, in some cases it had the opposite. This suggests that a Loyalist backlash will primarily act as a deterrent for Unionist support or participation in reunification. And indeed, precedents in this regard have already been established. How reunification can be made a safe process will require significant leadership from Unionist politicians particularly, as well as a non-partisan approach from the PSNI to deal with any threats in an efficacious manner. Being framed within the context of the GFA and the peace process, the unity referendum is a democratically endorsed mechanism for self-determination that remains untested. Rejection of this by any part of the community, whether by Loyalists or Republican dissidents, would be a violation of the democratic process. In the event of such a referendum being spurned from within unionism, credence would be given to the charge that they were indeed 'not playing fair', and that the peace process only progressed under the unspoken proviso that a unity referendum would never be called, assented to in order to placate Nationalists only. Failure to honour the commitment, or obstruct the triggering of a border poll, despite the inclusion of the provision in the GFA, would fall within the ambit of the denial of democracy, in the view of Nationalist interviewees.

v)   Evidence-led research and civil society engagement.

All cohorts considered it essential that information given to the public before any unity referendum campaign was based on evidence-led research so as not to repeat to lessons of Brexit. Civil society engagement was also considered crucial to any process to ensure the broadest inclusion. The Irish and British governments were considered key in relation to the dissemination of factual information and civil society facilitation.

vi)   The British government don't care and 'the south don't want us.'

There was a widespread perception of British government general indifference to northern affairs across all cohorts. While linked, the UK and Britain are also divergent, and that NI/NoI is deemed part of Ireland and not Britain when it is

expedient to do so (Billig 1995) as Brexit illustrates. This is particularly problematic for Unionists while it reaffirms the Nationalist position. Moreover, inertia by the Republic's government leaves Nationalists and others perplexed, and re-affirms the Unionist position which also highlights the gap between north and south for them. Pre-Troubles the Republic offered respite for northern Nationalists, yet since the onset of conflict there has been verifiable hostility emanating south to north, directed primarily at the Nationalist community, in the view of the majority of Nationalist interviewees. This leaves NI/NoI in something of a constitutional half-way house for many where the British are unwilling to relinquish a territory they have no great affection for, and the Republic is unwilling to commence a process as a constitutional requirement to reintegrate the island.

10.6 Brexit and its implications

Showing 'no respect at all!' (Dorling and Tomlinson 2020:54), the force of English votes forcibly excluded NI/NoI, and Scotland, from the EU, ignoring their democratic mandates to remain. When it was Brexit and not a UK-exit from the EU that materialised, significant damage was done to Unionist certainties.

A large-scale exit poll, carried out during the 2016 referendum in NI/NoI revealed that 85% of those 'brought up' Catholic voted to 'stay' in the EU, while 60% of those 'brought up' Protestant voted to leave (Garry, 2016/17). When the data was broken down by constitutional designation, that is, Nationalist, Unionist or neither, it found that 88% of Nationalists voted 'stay' (or remain), 66% of Unionists voted leave (34% stay) and 70% of those who identified as 'neither Nationalist or Unionist' voted to stay in the EU. In direct contrast, those identifying as Northern Irish voted by almost two thirds to stay. In terms of the 'long term future of Northern Ireland' under 'Remain in the UK under Direct Rule' was supported by 60% of leavers while 85% of remain voters wished to 'Unify with Republic of Ireland'. Interestingly 'Remain in UK under Devolution' was much more evenly split between leave and stay. John Garry concludes that 'core ethno-national characteristics' are a strong indicator of voting preference that divided 'leavers from remainers; equally, it divided Protestant Unionists from Catholic Nationalists'(Garry,2016/17:3).

Additionally, Garry found a correlation between 'political alienation', class and education. Those at the lower end of the socio-economic scale were also more likely to be less educated and feel most political alienation, and subsequently were more inclined to Vote Leave during the Brexit referendum. This cohort is also more likely to hold socially conservative views, on issues such as same sex marriage for example, and their views on immigrants, which Garry

identifies as 'a strong predictor of vote choice' which tends to be negative.[42] The more educated and well-off tended to vote remain, demonstrating a clear link between socio-economic factors and voting preference (Garry 2016/17:3-6). This data indicates that class is a relevant factor when addressing constitutional issues, particularly from a Unionist perspective. This view is supported in research carried out by Mathew Doherty for *The Detail* who found that the three constituencies that were outliers to the Brexit-supporting Unionist trend 'had the highest percentage of level four qualifications and in AB social grade' those constituencies being north Down, south Belfast and east Belfast, a 'Unionist heartland', with high concentrations of middle-class residents. Lagan Valley also has a high middle-class concentration and had a 'lower 'leave' vote than might have been expected' (McCaffrey 2016).

Voting to leave or remain within the EU and voting to reunify Ireland or remain within the UK are entirely different propositions with different meanings for different people. Supporting a position of remaining in the EU does not equate to support for Irish reunification, although since Brexit, Irish reunification offers a very direct route back to the EU for NI/NoI, perhaps the only route in the medium term, confirmed in April 2017 by the European Council. As Hayward et al, concluded, 'Brexit is perceived by most to have made a united Ireland more likely, including by the plurality of Unionists' (Hayward et al 2022:5). For those who wish to retain the advantages of EU membership, they may find a vote for Irish unity an attractive option, with a considerable minority of Unionists supporting remain as well as a significant majority proportion of those identifying as 'Northern Irish'. Indeed, the fundamental fact of voting remain and being forced to leave the EU regardless, raised basic questions of the UK as a political construct more generally and its ability to meet the needs of NI/NoI specifically.

Nationalist opinion in this study unambiguously viewed Brexit as negative for a number of reasons, including the democratic deficit created by the UK's structural realities. Jim believed that Brexit 'exposed so many things' about the 'UK government'. The English Nationalist agenda that drove Brexit was inconsistent with the values of the majority within NI/NoI reinforcing the perception of the expendability of NI/NoI for political expediency at Westminster. As he concluded, 'they do not give a fig about this place.' Underpinned by xenophobia, jingoism and isolationism another interviewee asked why anyone would want 'to stay in a union where Brexit is a way of life?' This was compounded for many by the DUP's decision to support the hardest of Brexits, a consistent feature across all three cohorts. In John's opinion, Brexit threw 'a hand grenade into the middle' of the tripartite relational

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[42] In September 2021 Lillian Seenoi-Barr, Director of the North-West Migrants Forum based in Derry, told the Northern Ireland Home Affairs Committee, that racism was 'incredibly high in unionist areas' although racist events were also recorded in nationalist areas. See, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-58572588 (accessed 16 September 2023).

components of the GFA that are 'now fraught with post-Brexit problems'. DUP positioning on Brexit has created an internal progressive-hardline dichotomy in the body politic of NI/NoI as their domination of Unionist discourse repels many liberal and progressive elements within unionism. Those of a pro-union inclination, or those content with the status quo from across the political spectrum, are now open to discussing the merits of reunification at the very least and at maximum seeking constitutional change entirely. As Glenn Bradley explains, 'I am convinced absolutely that our wellbeing and quality of life will not be improved in maintaining the status quo.' It is noteworthy that while Garry demonstrated strong Unionist support for Brexit no one in this sample admitted to supporting it. Indeed, several Unionists expressed vehement opposition to it.

Brexit has created ideological and emotional difficulty for Unionists because the parliament to which they pledge allegiance has demonstrated that NI/NoI in very real terms, is a dispensable appendage within the UK construct. It is not without merit that political unionism claims that Westminster decision-making regarding Brexit has created a fissure in the British constitution. Unilateral constitutional change by the British government is not without precedent. As Dawn contends, Brexit and the subsequent NIP 'has diluted the constitutional position of Northern Ireland within the Union.' For Sam White it was 'one of the worst things that could ever have happened to Northern Ireland.' It should not be underestimated therefore, the deep ontological insecurity that Brexit has revealed to unionism. The siege mentality, with its roots in the early colonial era, has been revived, particularly for those of a stringent Unionist viewpoint. Existential angst in the face of a growing Nationalist electorate has been exacerbated by an uncaring mother parliament with Unionists cast adrift to secure Brexit. To some, the post-Brexit era and the loss of political control is now 'about the turf', the re-inscribing of a colonial mentality, reinforced by the adage of, 'what we have we hold.' If Brexit is indeed, the last stand of what remains of the British empire, then it may also represent the last stand of a Unionist supremacy that harks back, melancholically, to a polity defined by its domination. Seismic shifts in demographics and political representation have ensured that there will be no return to those halcyon days of unionism. Yet, the colonial mentality endures. The GFA, however, has created the space for many to re-evaluate their identity narratives, by exploring aspects of Irishness previously considered out of bounds. The process of decolonisation, whether recognised as such, or not, allows such a redefinition to take place as identities move beyond narrow conflict-dictated confines. As John eloquently expressed, Unionists are 'set among the people of Ireland', whether they wished to be regarded as such or not, and therefore need 'to come to terms in a positive way with all that… whatever the political arrangements.'

Final remarks

While the identities of settler and native evolved into designations of Unionist-Nationalist, the fundamental basis of the relationship remained the same, that of the dominant and the dominated, with competing narratives. Unionism in the twentieth century was underpinned by the belief in inequality, rationalised in disparaging terms, forming the basis of NI/NoI under one-party Unionist rule, leading to violent conflict. Nationalist and Unionist narratives became configured around this dynamic. Post-conflict the Unionist narrative remains dominant, particularly in the media through their adoption of a sanitised syntax, or symbolically expressed annually in the ubiquitous wearing of the poppy across NI/NoI's television channels, for example. With the Unionist narrative deeply embedded structurally, the Nationalist narrative remains in juxtaposition through normative marginalisation, the aspiration for Irish unity being a case in point.

The mere discussion of a United Ireland retains an air of controversy with some of the interviewees above, despite being integral to the peace process and the GFA, democratically endorsed by the electorates north and south. The GFA laid the foundation for the deconstruction of this system through recognition of the Nationalist identity and aspirations as legitimate for the first time in NI/NoI since its creation. As an example of 'liberal consociation', the GFA contains within it 'arrangements that are conceivably transitional', with specific provision for a unity referendum. As a crucial component in securing Nationalist approval for the GFA, it is less so for Unionists. Content with this proviso while maintaining a numerical majority, and thus able to avoid the issue, demographic and political shifts have destabilised Unionist certainties. Brexit is perceived as an accelerant for constitutional change and not just among Nationalists, as this study demonstrates, but among some Unionists and those constitutionally non-aligned. It is within the fluidity of this contemporary context that the current constitutional flux lies.

When viewed through McLean and Syed's narrative framework, what is transpiring is the gradual eclipse of the dominant Unionist master narrative by the once alternative Nationalist or pro-unity narrative. Hard-line Unionist and Loyalist positions are now widely accepted as marginal, and in decline. Indeed, several of the Unionist contributors expressed the insecurity felt within their communities, which is in stark contrast to the uncontested Unionist experience of the twentieth century. Mainstream debate on reunification, by virtue of its openness, equates to an acute weakening of the Unionist master narrative that derived its strength through not accommodating alternatives and ensuring that those viewpoints were 'literally unheard by a larger audience (McLean and Syed 2015).

No longer able to control the narrative due to myriad of internal and external factors, the post-Brexit context has led to Unionist fragmentation while bolstering a plurality of progressive opinion from across the political spectrum, evidenced in this study, who reject Brexit and who are willing to countenance constitutional alternatives under the right conditions. Irish unity as a Brexit remedy could increase such splintering and more significantly decrease political power explaining the avoidance of the subject by political unionism. For some of the participants their worse-case scenario has yet to take place, that of being in a reunified Ireland, although in reality this may be far from the nightmare they envisage. Increasingly less assured, Nationalists, in contrast, are growing in confidence and more assertive, to the point of being accused of triumphalism by some interviewees.

Zero-sum perceptions that since the GFA Nationalists have 'won', are aggravated by facts beyond Unionist control, imbued with a distinct 'post-Brexit dimension.' The 'question of the future of Northern Ireland' is now situated within a UK of 'growing constitutional and regional tensions' (Connolly and Doyle 2021:11) that have precipitated significant inquiry into identity and constitutional reconstruction. Sections of the Unionist community reject reunification based on the fear of Nationalist retribution because of Unionist treatment of the latter community. Despite deep seated fears, most of the Unionists within this sample were very open to discussing the merits or demerits of unity. The three in this study that dismissed reunification outright were from working-class Unionist backgrounds. This suggests that it will be from within that constituency that the most fervent opposition will emanate. Yet, even within working-class Unionist communities, assumptions are unreliable, as Dawn and Sam White demonstrate through their openness to discuss unity, at the very least, from an undiminished Unionist perspective. Those of a middle-class Unionist persuasion or those currently living, or hailing from middle-class Unionist areas appear much more amenable to notions of unity. Nationalists, from across the *piste* welcomed constitutional change.

The 'causal interrelations between official ideology', constitutional preference and 'self-reported categories of identity' (Todd 2007:570) are undergoing a period of reinvention amidst this period of constitutional flux, rooted in the GFA and hastened by Brexit. John felt able to examine the Irish aspects of his identity through self-reflection and exploration of new geographies in a very physical sense since 1998. Another participant shared anecdotes of the upsurge in cross-border travel from within the Unionist community that was previously considered taboo. Others discussed learning Irish in a similar vein. While none of these examples could be considered seismic on their own, accumulatively they point to a gradual transformation in perception and outlook. This is supported in this investigation by the attitudinal change towards issues such as passports, a once sacrosanct representation of national affiliation that is now more extensile in a post-Brexit dispensation.

Opinions expressed in this research by civil society leaders are not constrained by Nationalist or Unionist party political dogma, and therefore a 'freer space' was available to openly engage with the nuance and complexity of views within the current constitutional juncture. It is precisely because of this, that civil society actors are playing, and will play, a pivotal role in any process of constitutional change. Contextualised primarily by immediate considerations, importantly several of the Unionist contributors were future-focused in discussing potential advantages for children and grandchildren rather than for themselves. Such advantages did not automatically align with the status quo, testing established assumptive positions. The Unionist identity narrative is demonstrating, slowly, and perhaps incrementally, a level of flexibility that challenges the mono-cultural hegemonic traditional Unionist worldview. Moreover, reunification may not be 'Nationalist' in order to secure success. Indeed, this study provides evidence that the blunt designations of Nationalist and Unionist may be becoming increasingly insufficient to determine constitutional preference. In a post-unity context could the designations of Nationalist and Unionist become redundant entirely?

To transition from the status quo to reunification, McCrudden and O'Leary argue that 'accommodation of ethnic-diversity may be a more successful way of achieving a non-ethnic future' (McCrudden and O'Leary, 2013:13). This investigation has established that 'identity and nationalism are rarely questions of the head or the heart alone' (Hennessey et al 2019:146). If the status quo is predicated on maintaining oppositional identities and division, does unity therefore offer a means of going beyond nationalism and unionism to create a new collective, truly post-colonial, identity narrative? To go from negative to positive interdependence? It is in the turbulence between cognition and affection that will reveal the true nature of the task of constitutional change.

While there is no inevitability to reunification, Brexit has increased its probability as a multitude of forces converge at a particular point in time. Meticulous planning and preparation are considered essential by all of the contributors here open to considering constitutional change. Because of the GFA, any constitutional process 'will not be a 'blank page' constitutional conversation' as 'the basic normative principles to guide the process are already there' (Harvey and Bassett 2019:22). As political tectonic plates shift, identities are equally capable of altering 'in relation to material circumstances and, crucially, interests' (Miller 1998:13). This study has shown that constitutional preference is not as rigid as commonly accepted but may be subject to re-evaluation dependent on wider conditions and circumstances. Moreover, some civil society Unionists are open to discuss reunification at the very least, without necessarily aspiring to it, highlighting the pivotal role civil society has to play in determining constitutional direction. Whether the 'once unthinkable' can become 'politically viable' will

remain to be seen. The GFA represents a radical departure from how the symbiosis between the Nationalist and Unionist narratives traditionally aligned. As a societal realignment takes place, adaptability rather than rigidity to changing circumstances will determine the ease with which any potential reconstruction may be navigated. In this regard, identity narratives, embodied histories transferred generationally, are a unifying bond between the individual and the community. Weighted with emotion and meaning, they aid sense-making of the past, present and into the future. While acknowledging those same histories, the participants above demonstrate that it is entirely possible that a new collective narrative could be forged. The act of talking and listening to opponents is simple, but challenging. As one interview put it, 'there's nothing wrong with good debate. There's nothing wrong with people disagreeing, having different points of view. I mean sometimes that gets us to a better place.' The form this 'better place' takes is yet to be realized, for most of the interviewees.

If Brexit is imperial England's final stage (O'Toole 2018) then its historic arc is nearing completion. Discarding territory will be an aspect of this recoil which will naturally involve the remaining part of England's first colony being released. Constitutional change will be seminal for everyone in Ireland, regardless of political persuasion, should it transpire. Civil society will play a crucial role in any prospective process as the bridge between the political and the public. A unity referendum would represent for the first time since the 1918 GE an expression of national self-determination whereby the people of this island could take full ownership of their futures democratically and unhindered. Recalling the Good Friday Agreement:

> it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively and without external impediment, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given (GFA, Constitutional Issues, 1(ii)).

No one's identity was diminished or threatened through discussion of constitutional change during this research.

In examining identity narratives within the context of constitutional flux, this thesis has drawn upon the narrative identity framework advanced by Kate McLean and Moin Syed to illuminate how civil society actors within nationalist and unionist communities are making sense of a potential unity referendum. Emphasis on identity narratives as a meaning-making process provides a nuanced lens through which to understand the stories people tell about themselves, their communities, and the state. By foregrounding narrative construction as both an individual and collective act, this study has shown how competing constitutional visions are embedded within evolving identity trajectories that are reflexively constructed, contextually situated, and deeply implicated in political futures. In this light, constitutional preferences emerge not merely

as political positions but as expressions of situated narrative identities shaped by memory, experience and the desire for coherence in uncertain constitutional times.

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Ciarán Hartley
School of Law and Government

22nd September 2022

REC Reference: **DCUREC/2022/135**

Proposal Title: **Identity narrative and constitutional flux. Nationalist and Unionist civil society perspectives on Irish unification**

Applicant(s):   **Ciarán Hartley, Prof. John Doyle**

Dear Ciarán

Thank you for your application to DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC). Further to expedited review, DCU REC is pleased to issue approval for this research proposal. This approval is conditional on the DCU Data Protection Unit (DPU) approving the project and any related documentation, such as a data protection impact assessment (DPIA). Research should not begin until this is in place.

DCU REC's consideration of all ethics applications is dependent upon the information supplied by the researcher. This information is expected to be truthful and accurate. Researchers are responsible for ensuring that their research is carried out in accordance with the information provided in their ethics application.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Melrona Kirrane
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

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Note: Please retain this approval letter for future publication purposes (for research students, this includes incorporating the letter within their thesis appendices).