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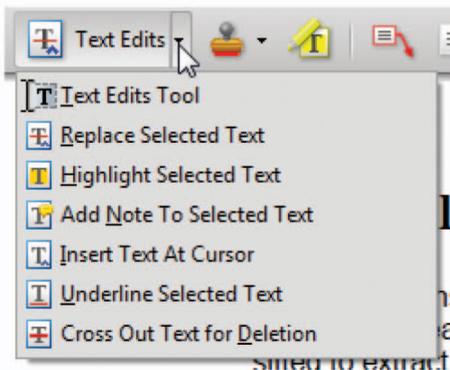
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IDEA PAPER

Convergence/Divergence: Party political discourse in Northern Ireland's transition from conflict

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This paper illuminates the role of political language in a peace process through analysing the discourse used by political parties in Northern Ireland. What matters, it seems, is not *whether* party discourses converge or diverge but rather *how*, and in what ways, they do so. In the case of Northern Ireland, there remains strong divergence between discourses regarding the ethos of unionist and nationalist parties. As a consequence, core definitions of identity, culture, norms and principle remain common grounds for competition *within* nationalism and unionism. There has, however, been a significant shift towards convergence between unionist and nationalist parties in their discourses on power and governance, specifically among the now predominant (hardline) and the smaller (moderate) parties. The argument thus elaborated is that political transition from conflict need not necessarily entail the creation of a “shared discourse” between all parties. Indeed, points of divergence between parties’ discourses of power and ethos are as important for a healthy post-conflict democratic environment as the elements of convergence between them.

Keywords: election manifestos; ethos; Northern Ireland; peace process; political discourse; power

Introduction

After a period that could be described as a collective holding of breath following the “indefinite” suspension of Northern Ireland’s Executive and Assembly in October 2002, the surge of relief that accompanied the restoration of devolution in May 2007 was to be expected. Somewhat more surprising was the subsequent “packaging” of Northern Ireland’s peace process by prominent British and Irish political actors as a model for conflict resolution elsewhere. Although the contents of this model vary between actors and stray, at times, from historical fact,¹ one element is present in all: the need for inclusive dialogue. Put simply, advocates of this model present “talking” as the alternative to violence, a first step towards political engagement and the key to success in Northern Ireland’s peace process.

Then-Secretary of State Peter Hain, for example, claims that experience in Northern Ireland proved it was possible to “prevent violence filling the vacuum left by the absence of political engagement” through, amongst other initiatives, “inclusive dialogue at every level.”² Prime Minister Blair’s political advisor,

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Jonathan Powell, goes further in using experience from Northern Ireland to argue that the prospects for peace “in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, and even, in the longer term, with Islamic terrorism,” are increased by people being “prepared to talk.”³ It is not only actors affiliated with New Labour who urged this approach. Hain’s predecessor as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in Major’s Conservative Government, Michael Ancram, also argues: “As we learned in Northern Ireland, terrorism can be contained by military action, but it cannot be defeated by it. In the end, you have to start talking.”⁴ Yet other political figureheads take very different lessons from Northern Ireland, foremost among them the former First Minister and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader David Trimble, who dismisses such claims as placing a distorted emphasis on the role played by secret talks in the Northern Ireland peace process.⁵ This viewpoint is supported by the academic work of Bew et al., among others, who assert that it is not so much the “talking to terrorists” that makes the crucial difference in a peace process, but the complex political and intelligence context within which such talks may (or may not) occur.⁶

The “exportable model” of Northern Ireland’s peace process was constructed by British politicians keen to play up their “beacon” of success in order to repel the shadows arising from contemporaneous failures of British diplomacy further afield. It thus wholly underplays the importance of the *public* political debate within Northern Ireland. The purpose of this paper is to outline the role of political discourse in affecting the context for political change towards, through and beyond a peace process. What can we learn about the nature of this political change from the “talking” done by local politicians not to terrorists but to the people whose votes they seek in the new environment of post-Agreement Northern Ireland?

Political discourse

This paper investigates the role played by open dialogue in Northern Ireland’s peace process, namely the language of political parties in their public exchange and exhibition. The unique role of discourse in describing, creating and changing the social world⁷ is particularly evident when it comes to the discourse of political parties. In terms of description, the role of language in embodying both an array of social practices and ideological assumptions comes to the fore in political discourse.⁸ With regard to shaping the social world, the discourse of parties with (or seeking) access to the exercise of power has a particularly direct and strong influence on the wider social context, from media coverage to legislation. As Charteris-Black notes, political discourse is *intended* to influence the opinions, identity and actions of the audience.⁹ Furthermore, the power of public political discourse has particular resonance in the context of transition from violent political conflict. In their study of the impact of devolution on identity in devolved regions of the UK, Wilson and Stapleton highlight the interrelationship of discursive and institutional change: “The new political structures and changing public discourses (of nation, state, culture and citizenship) provide new categories of membership, belonging, and allegiance, while simultaneously closing off others or altering others.”¹⁰ This offers particular opportunities and risks for transition from conflict.

Although a subject of daily media comment and scrutiny, there is room for more sustained scholarly analysis of political discourse as a critical dynamic in the embedding of Northern Ireland’s peace process. Notable influences on this study

include O'Neill, who explores the insights from critical philosophy for opening the "worldviews" of political actors in Northern Ireland,¹¹ and Lennon, whose detailed analysis of party manifestos focuses on the linguistic creation of the "collective self" of the party.¹² This is also seen in the study of the "discourse worlds" of political parties in Northern Ireland conducted by Filardo Llamas, who argues that the legitimising function of political discourse makes it a highly significant means of constructing a peace process.¹³ Whereas Filardo Llamas concentrates on political speeches of leaders around core points of debate in the peace process, this study analyses the use of language in the manifestos of the four main political parties in Northern Ireland in three election campaigns (occurring during the suspension of the devolved institutions, and immediately prior to and at the during the first term of DUP/Sinn Féin-led power-sharing). The "dialogue" considered here is the expression and exchange of ideas between political parties conducted in the public arena through election manifestos, as written discursive texts. Identification of elements of convergence and divergence in the political language used by parties in Northern Ireland during this process of transition can help to illuminate the shifting grounds for cooperation and conflict between them and, more generally, the nature of the political edifice that they are constructing between them. Underpinning this paper, as with the work of Filardo Llamas, Wenden and Schäffner and Wenden,¹⁴ is the premise that the ways in which "peace" is talked about affects the prospects for achieving it.

Propositions

There are four working propositions behind the research presented here. First, I propose that discourses of a peace process are inherently *political* discourses. Northern Ireland's experience has been notably politically centred and driven by politicians, but this merely serves to emphasize a feature shared by all peace processes due to the fact that inherently "political" issues of collective identity (and difference), legitimacy, power, and equality are central causes of violent conflict in the first place. Secondly, I suggest that inter-party dialogue, and political discourse more generally, can be a tool for conflict as much as a means towards peace. Political language can exacerbate difference as well as having the potential to transform it. Nor, importantly, need discourses be overlapping or corresponding in order to have a healthy post-conflict democratic environment. Related to this point, I also propose that a strong and stable "peace" is not the product of a shared, singular discourse across political parties, but rather that a *multiplicity* of discourses is necessary for healthy democracy and, by extension, peace.¹⁵ This idea has strong parallels with Little's concept of complexity as a paradigm for understanding ideational change in Northern Ireland.¹⁶ In addition to this, the final core proposition of this paper is that the multitude of political discourses in a peace process may have points of distinction (or *divergence*) as well as points of overlap (or *convergence*) between them, with the former not necessarily being less constructive than the latter. For the purposes of this paper, where there is a similarity or "family resemblance" in key phrases or concepts in the manifestos of two parties, I identify elements of convergence in the discourses of these parties. What might be the implications of this convergence?

At one level, elements of convergence between electoral manifestos – specifically in discourses of ethos (see below) – would reflect the existence of a discourse community. One of the most useful definitions of a discourse community is that

coined by Morris, namely “a community of assent”, a grouping centred upon agreement about ideology.¹⁷ In order for this ideological agreement to cement a community together, it needs to include not just common interests but a common vocabulary. The meaning and definitions of these words and concepts can be assumed within such a discourse community. Political parties play a particular role in reproducing and utilising the discourse of a community that is symbolically¹⁸ and politically¹⁹ constructed. In Northern Ireland it is possible to layer various definitions and experiences of community on top of one another; that is to say: shared space, norms, culture, interests, networks and discourses often serve not to criss-cross boundaries between communities in Northern Ireland but to thicken them. Hence, when the four largest political parties seek to garner votes they do so predominantly from within their (discourse) communities of unionism or nationalism. Stapleton and Wilson have written on the importance of the local context (or “frame of reference”) to the interpretation of political processes at the community level in Northern Ireland.²⁰ Throughout this paper we must be aware that political parties are constantly trying to “hit the right note” in relation to their particular community of support – they use language and ideas and identifiers that appeal to the voters. However, a flip-side to the necessary convergence among the political discourse of nationalist and unionist parties is the fact that this actually gives rise to grounds for close competition between the parties within that discourse community.

An ongoing issue for debate regarding Northern Ireland’s power-sharing architecture has been the lack of room for active and visible opposition, particularly within the Assembly.²¹ If all but the most minor parties have a hold on power simply by virtue of getting candidates elected, the mechanisms for radical shift and political accountability work within the communities rather than between them. Furthermore, if political candidates uphold similar values, identity and guiding principles for action, what would distinguish them from each other apart from competing discourses on the mechanisms and record of the exercise of power, i.e. what they would claim to do better/differently than their competitor? This paper gives an insight into both the nature of converging discourses within the communities (which highlights the possibility of change within communities) and into the fact that there are diverging political discourses within unionist and nationalism communities on the subject of power.

One way of analysing the nature of these points of discursive convergence and divergence is to compare political parties’ discourses around two core themes: those concerned with the exercise of *power* and those centred on articulating the party’s *ethos*. If discourses of *power* articulate core assumptions about accountability, responsibility, legitimacy and democracy, discourses concerned with party *ethos* are intended to embody collectively shared identity, beliefs, values, ideals and goals. Phrases and concepts falling into these broad categories together help constitute a manifesto that will both appeal to and influence potential voters. Political manifestos are ideal examples of the written communication which plays an important part in the construction of a discourse community.²² The language used by political parties in their manifestos evidently serves two fundamental purposes: persuasion (encouraging readers to vote in support of the party) and distinction (to set out the particular aims and identity of the party). For these reasons, political manifestos embody the language on ethos and power that is intended to both appeal to people and to influence them to think and act (vote) a particular way. It is precisely these two types of discourses that are examined and compared in this paper.

Political discourse in Northern Ireland

The causes of conflict in Northern Ireland are complex and multitudinous. Among the political players, however, the conflict itself came to be defined in terms of “identity”, with civic and economic issues rapidly sidelined by competing claims for legitimacy. Moreover, in the context of limitations on the exercise of democratic political power and immense pressure for in-group solidarity, party discourses of power and ethos became increasingly conflated. Peeling apart discourses about group values from conceptions of legitimate governance is particularly difficult in a context of conflict, when parties compete for the tightest weave between their political ideals and their political practice. It is my contention that, in a context of conflict, different interpretations of both power and ethos forced all parties apart. What happens to these discourses in a context of transition out of conflict?

This paper examines manifestos from the four main parties in Northern Ireland taken from three crucial elections during the peace process to date: the 2003 Assembly election, the 2007 Assembly election and the 2010 Westminster election. These particular elections have been selected because they each represent a particularly interesting juncture in the rebalancing of power between political parties in Northern Ireland’s peace process. An overview of the distribution of first preference votes in these elections, compared with the 1997 General Election to Westminster, as the last major election prior to the 1998 Agreement, illustrates the dramatic change in fortunes of the so-called “moderate” parties of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) as they saw their support bases rapidly overtaken by the more “hard-line” Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin, respectively (see Figure 1).

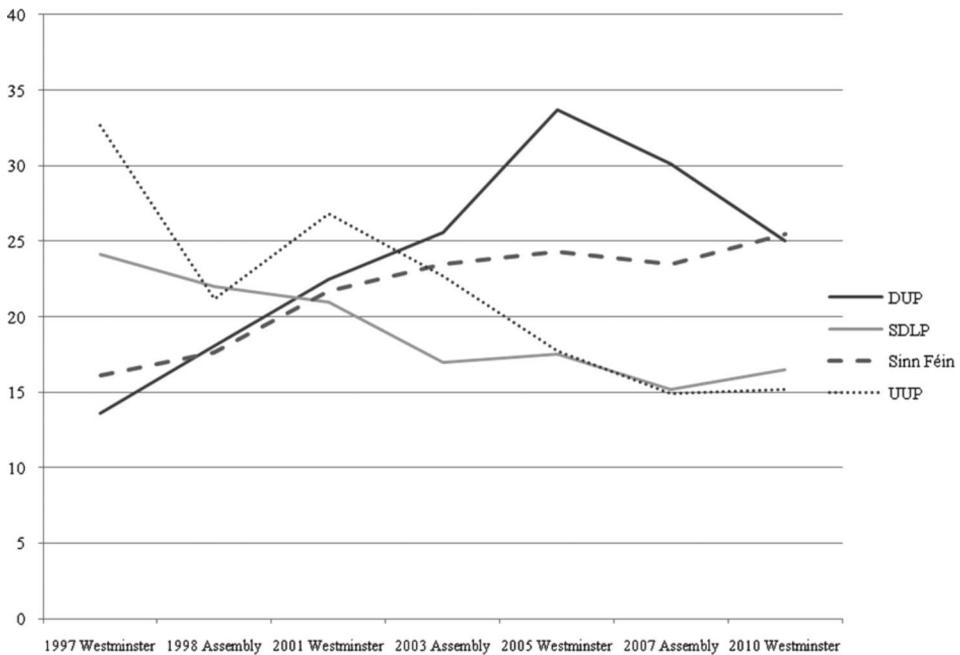


Figure 1. Percentage of (first-preference) votes won by the four main parties.

There is ongoing scholarly debate as to the reasons for this shift in power between the self-described “authors” of the 1998 Agreement and the previous critics who appear to have benefited most greatly from the new political context it generated.²³ This paper attempts to inform this debate by analysing the ideational, discursive realms of political change and competition between these parties.

The 2003 Assembly election manifestos: Clear unionist/nationalist divergence

The election to the new Northern Ireland Assembly that came in the immediate wake of the referendum following the 1998 Agreement reflected differing responses to it between nationalist and unionist voters. Nationalists apparently expressed confidence in the Agreement and its ‘architects’ by keeping the moderate SDLP as the largest nationalist party (22% first preference vote compared to Sinn Féin’s 17.6%). However, unionist unease with the outcome of the multi-party talks was reflected in dramatic vote loss for the UUP (down by one-third to 21.2%) and significant gains for the DUP (up 5% to 18.1%) and other anti-Agreement parties such as the UK Unionist Party. The UUP’s weakening position within its own constituency, exacerbated by IRA failure to complete decommissioning of its weapons, formed an internal defect in the juvenile Assembly and Executive. After a period of stalling and suspension, the Assembly election of November 2003 was intended to restart the functioning of the devolved institutions. Whilst the British government bargained on an affirmation of support for the Agreement and a boost to Trimble’s beleaguered leadership, the tactic backfired as the election saw a surge of support for the DUP (25.6% to the UUP’s 22.7% first preference votes). What is more, Sinn Féin itself overtook the SDLP by an even larger margin (23.5% to 17%), in a trend that was to continue. Given that the DUP’s electoral campaign had pivoted on its claim that the UUP had failed to “stand up to” Sinn Féin,²⁴ the results of this election made it even less feasible for devolution to be restored and power to be shared between the two largest parties.

Unionist discourses of power and ethos

Unionist parties continued to agree at this stage about the major issue concerning the exercise of power in Northern Ireland, i.e. the threat posed by republicans, but their disagreement as to how this threat should be addressed was profound.

The UUP’s major defence against DUP charges is that the Assembly and Executive see “nationalists and republicans, for the first time ever, participate[] fully, helping to make Northern Ireland work as part of the Union.” However, at the time of the election in Autumn 2003, the best Trimble can bring to the unionist readership of his manifesto is the rather subdued claim that:

Efforts were made in recent weeks to get republicans to engage in genuine acts of completion. Progress occurred. Republicans talked of pursuing their objectives peacefully.²⁵

This extract from Trimble’s foreword could be said to make the DUP’s point for them: if that’s the best that the UUP has to show regarding the commitment of

republicans to peace from five years of the Agreement dispensation, then unionism is arguably being sullied by mere association. 295

In contrast, the DUP's manifesto is a slick, well-presented, accessible document with a clear and consistent message: what it terms "Trimble's Agreement" is on the brink of bringing about a "nightmare" scenario of Sinn Féin predominance.²⁶ The manifesto makes this point in several ways, all of which seek to inextricably link the UUP and the Agreement with "Sinn Féin/IRA" in the minds of unionist voters: "As a result of the policies and actions of the Official Unionists we are closer to a united Ireland than we have ever been",²⁷ "DON'T LET THE IRA HAVE ITS WAY – VOTE DUP."²⁸ Against this repetitive message, the UUP's counter that "Continued vote-splitting only weakens unionism and creates opportunities for republicans" was unlikely to appear as anything other than feeble.²⁹ 300 305

The DUP's strongest articulation of the party's ethos is also presented through negative presentation of the alternative:

Now imagine where Northern Ireland will be in another four years if we allow the concessions to continue: Terrorists running the police, a joint role in the affairs of Northern Ireland for Dublin, Irish language and Gaelic culture given prominence, British culture and identity no longer in existence in many parts of the Province, Sinn Fein Ministers in charge of policing and justice and large areas of our towns and cities abandoned to the will of terrorists.³⁰ 310 315

The headlining in this scenario of the effective replacement of "British culture and identity" by "Irish language and Gaelic culture" is built upon what the DUP sees as the precedent set by the Parades Commission decisions. The DUP manifesto promises to end "the scandalous denial of civil and religious liberties to the Loyal Orders."³¹ 320

Although it also claims to support "parity of esteem for Ulster Scots" culture, the UUP places more emphasis on its policy "to ensure Northern Ireland remains British."³² In outlining of what it interprets this British identity to mean, the UUP manifesto makes this bold statement: 325

Northern Ireland must become a *tolerant, pluralist* society welcoming to all and inclusive of all. We stand for an *multicultural, multi-ethnic society* in which everyone plays a part.³³ 330

In their divergent interpretations of the particular meaning of the "British" ethos and identity of their parties, the UUP and DUP discourses reflect a wider debate within the UK at the time.³⁴ 335

Nationalist discourses of power and ethos 340

By this stage, nationalist parties had together moved to a clear position of defending the Agreement, a tactic that was consistent with the greater support for the 1998 Agreement among the Catholic population.³⁵ Where the SDLP and Sinn Féin diverged was in their views of where the threat to the Agreement predominantly lay. The SDLP, although having had some disagreement with the stance taken by Trimble in an effort to appease some of his party members, identifies the potential stumbling block as being the DUP alone: "The SDLP will not allow the DUP or 345

anybody else to turn the clock back on progress.”³⁶ Sinn Féin, however, maintains its active distrust of the British government:

In the last year the British government brought down the political institutions, removed your right to vote and undermined key parts of the Agreement. Through all of this we never gave up.³⁷

In this regard, Sinn Féin’s almost paranoid consideration of the malign influence of the British government mirrors the DUP’s self-perception as standing alone in defending the principles it holds dear.

Sinn Féin’s preoccupation with the “block” posed by the British government to the will of the nationalist people is reflected in its summary of what might be termed its ethos:

The process that we are involved in is about creating the conditions for a new, democratic, pluralist dispensation on the island and a new relationship between Ireland and Britain. *We want to end British jurisdiction in Ireland.*³⁸

More generally, Sinn Féin and the SDLP share the ideal of Irish unification as a common ethos of nationalism. Furthermore, in the post-Agreement context, both the SDLP and Sinn Féin uphold the principle of unity by persuasion (as envisioned by Irish Taoisigh [prime ministers] for over 40 years).³⁹ However, the SDLP makes it clear in its 2003 manifesto (and in subsequent manifestos) that it sees the conditions for Irish unity as being present in the context created by the Agreement. Moreover, the SDLP seeks to transfer its negotiating credentials directly from the Agreement to the goal of unification:

Achieving a majority for Irish unity any time soon will require the persuasion of some unionists. It will also require the reassurance of many others. Because of our unblemished record of peace and partnership and our unqualified commitment to the Agreement, *only the SDLP can persuade a majority in the North in favour of unity – just as we persuaded a majority of the North in favour of the Good Friday Agreement.* That is why only the SDLP can deliver a United Ireland.⁴⁰

In this statement, the SDLP are challenging Sinn Féin on its strongest ideological territory and, indeed, are indicating that Sinn Féin’s record actually counters its explicit aim of Irish unity because it has failed to win the trust of unionists.

The 2007 Assembly election manifestos: Divergence within unionism and nationalism

The election to the Northern Ireland Assembly in March 2007 followed the signing of the St Andrews Agreement in October 2006 which marked the culmination of talks between the British and Irish governments and Northern Ireland parties. Crucially, this Agreement saw the DUP and Sinn Féin agree to share power in a Northern Ireland Executive; devolution was restored and a transitional Assembly put in place for the intervening two months prior to the election being called. Whereas the DUP and Sinn Féin’s election campaigning had previously been directed from a position of criticism and opposition to the exercise of power, the 2007 campaign saw them now competing for predominance *within* the Assembly.

Unionist discourses of ethos and power

In a context of significant change, UUP and DUP discourses continue to converge on the fundamental issue of needing to preserve, develop and promote unionist culture and cultural identity. However, whereas there is a great deal of common ground between them in terms of what constitutes this identity and culture, namely Protestantism, Orangeism and the Ulster Scots language, there is significant divergence between the two parties on their consideration of how this culture is best promoted. This relates back to a divergent view of Northern Ireland's relationship with Britain. For the UUP, unionist culture can flourish in the context of cultural pluralism within the UK, centred on the fundamental principle of equal citizenship:

Ulster Unionists are proud of Northern Ireland's place in the *diverse, pluralist, modern United Kingdom*. We believe in a culturally diverse Northern Ireland in which the *rights of all are secured* within the Union. At the core of Ulster Unionist values is the conviction that *all in Northern Ireland*, irrespective of class, gender, religious belief, political opinion, sexual orientation, colour or race should share in the *cherished position of equal citizenship* in the United Kingdom.⁴¹

It is worth quoting that extract from the UUP manifesto in full because it contrasts so starkly with DUP discourse on the preservation of the unionist ethos and the threat posed to it by the progressive pluralism espoused by the UUP. The close ties between the DUP's identity and religious fundamentalism are particularly evident here:

The decision by the Government to introduce *new regulations aimed at tackling discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation* has meant that laws have been introduced which *restrict the religious freedoms of people living in Northern Ireland*.⁴²

For the DUP, the British government's interpretation of the meaning of equal citizenship but cultural diversity poses a direct threat to the ethos of unionists in Northern Ireland.

Whilst there is clear shared ground in their discourses of ethos, the UUP and DUP discourses regarding the exercise of power converge in only two particular areas in 2007. First, they both strongly criticise direct rule and shared a determination to see it ended once and for all. The UUP describe direct rule as, "unaccountable to us, routinely ignoring our wishes, and remote from our hopes and aspirations."⁴³ Second, the UUP and DUP still recall the danger of republicanism but, in contrast to previous campaigns, this threat is no longer framed in terms of IRA violence but rather as an election outcome in which Sinn Féin "abused the political process"⁴⁴ or "dominated the political agenda."⁴⁵ In continuity with previous election campaigns, the UUP and DUP each centre their arguments for securing unionist votes on the grounds that a vote for their unionist counterpart would in effect increase the power of Sinn Féin. The UUP, moreorless resigned to third place, focuses its discourse of power on the moral position that the entering into power of the DUP did not represent a victory for a unifying agreement *à la* the 1998 Agreement, but rather a triumph for the oppositional and divisive ideologies of the past:

The DUP and Sinn Fein are more interested in dividing power between themselves rather than sharing office for the benefit of Northern Ireland. The DUP and Sinn Fein are more interested in polarising our society rather than finding ways of uniting us.⁴⁶

The DUP prefers to frame its likely success as a sign of the renewed strength of unionism and its sharing of power as a sign of major and irreversible concession on the part of Sinn Féin:

Unionist confidence is at its highest level in a generation. Republicans are under pressure like never before, having being forced to abandon fundamental principles and long held beliefs. In the past unionists jumped first only to find that republicans failed to deliver.⁴⁷

Nationalist discourses of ethos and power

The SDLP and Sinn Féin continue to share common discourses regarding the ethos of their parties that has its roots less in the ideology and identity of Irish nationalism and more in the particular experience of Catholic movements for civil rights in Northern Ireland since the late 1960s. The insistence that, as the SDLP puts it, “equality and inclusion are at the core of our values,”⁴⁸ is readily transmuted into Sinn Féin’s campaigning slogan for a “United Ireland of Equals.”⁴⁹ The homogenising experience of the Troubles and shared memories of Northern Ireland’s autonomy thus merge into the grand ideological goal of Irish unification. On the matter of Irish unification, whilst both parties subscribe to the principle of unity by persuasion, the SDLP makes a case for having the upper hand in this regard, arguing that, “[b]ecause we have always stood for peace and partnership, only the SDLP can persuade a majority in the North in favour of unity” and can lead the way in translating its experience into realizing nationalist aspirations. This discourse diverges from that of Sinn Féin, which continues to focus on the obstacle to realising nationalist goals that it sees as being posed by the British government, which has “carefully fostered” the divisions at the heart of Ireland’s partition and conflict.⁵⁰

Just as unionist party discourses of power converge in their focus on Sinn Féin but diverge in their opinions as to what a DUP victory might mean, so nationalist party discourses converge in their focus on the DUP but diverge on the matter as to how a strong Sinn Féin vote might affect the exercise of power. Sinn Féin claims that a vote for it “is the best guarantee that the DUP will be moved to take up its place in the power sharing institutions.”⁵¹ The notion that the largest unionist party had to be pushed and corralled into entering power-sharing closely mirrored unionist belief regarding the need to tie Sinn Féin into democratic government. What is notable is the particular similarity between the discourses of the UUP and the SDLP on the matter of power, not least because both parties share a clear distrust of the motivations of the DUP and Sinn Féin as power-sharing partners and a concern about the retrograde implications their leading of the executive might have for Northern Ireland. As the SDLP claims:

The DUP and Sinn Fein want their ambitions for themselves to become the people’s agenda in this election. For the SDLP, people’s best ambitions are our only agenda.⁵²

Mainly because of this portrait of the DUP and Sinn Féin as duplicitous, the SDLP and UUP discourses share a common emphasis on their own party’s trustworthiness, morality and record of hard-work. The SDLP mantra in 2007 was “delivering for you,”⁵³ with an implicit statement that its political motivations were altruistic and based on knowledge of public concerns rather than based on party interests and a desire for power. At the same time, the SDLP attempts to challenge Sinn Féin’s

dominance in discourse regarding the goal of Irish unification by asserting that the consequences of Sinn Féin/DUP power struggles led to north/south cooperation being on a “go slow” track due to suspension and by highlighting that the Comprehensive Agreement between the two largest parties “did not offer a single extra area for North South cooperation or implementation.”⁵⁴ For its part, Sinn Féin’s identification of the potential “spoiler” of the peace process remains firmly focused on the British government, for example, with a pledge “to continue to highlight collusion and state murder” in order to ensure that the British Government “[a]cknowledges its role in the conflict.”⁵⁵

The 2010 Westminster election manifestos: Some unionist/nationalist convergence

The general election of May 2010 marked the end of the era of New Labour in Britain; in Northern Ireland, the UUP lost its last remaining seat in the House of Commons and the Alliance Party gained its first in over 35 years (at the cost of a seat for DUP leader and First Minister Peter Robinson). If one was to compare the context of this election to the general election of 2005, the difference is striking. Thirteen years on, Northern Ireland had a devolved Assembly up and functioning, with a relatively stable Executive (although still not necessarily effective or cooperative)⁵⁶ and a rise in dissident republican paramilitary activity not yet considered sufficient to delay the termination of the mandate of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning.⁵⁷

Discourses on power: DUP and Sinn Féin, UUP and SDLP

There are several strands of commonality between the discourses of the DUP and Sinn Féin in their 2010 manifestos, most particularly when covering issues surrounding the exercise of political power. To name the most prominent of these, the DUP and Sinn Féin converge in their assertions to offer strong leadership, in their promise of providing more effective institutions in Northern Ireland, and in their criticism of the British government. It is notable that the long-standing experience of being on the margins of power bleeds into the discourse of these two power-holders, both of whom reiterate a theme of political reform. The DUP states, for example, that “as politics normalises we must build on what has been achieved and refine our governance arrangements.”⁵⁸ In such discourses of political reform, both parties are hinting that they know that the current set up is not ideal, but that if they further cement their predominance within their community they might be able to scramble the extra power needed to edge their power-sharing counterpart slightly further to the sidelines.⁵⁹ The political reform desired by both these strong parties is not, therefore, to strengthen and embed the current institutions, but rather to revise them back towards a model slightly more favourable to their traditional idea of how power should be exercised. Thus, the DUP and Sinn Féin both present the power-sharing arrangements enabled by the Agreement as being merely a stage on the path to achieving full realisation of their political ideal for power. Of course, given the fundamental differences in the ethos of the two parties, these ultimate goals are in direct contradiction to one another – this constitutes an underlying tension at the heart of the power-sharing arrangements in Northern Ireland, whether this oppositional pull negates all efforts at effective government in the meantime is open to debate.

540 What is also notable is that, whilst Sinn Féin make some mention of the DUP,
 this is generally to reinforce the impression of their own successful rise to power.
 This is seen in Martin McGuinness' comment: "I am humbled to represent Sinn Féin
 as one of the leaders of government on the island of Ireland. I do so alongside a
 representative of unionism, Peter Robinson. He and I have equal power and equal
 authority."⁶⁰ For its part, the DUP makes but one mention of Sinn Féin, and one
 545 which reflects a determination to keep Sinn Féin in the unionist consciousness as
 dangerous illegitimate adversary rather than sharer of power: "The DUP has
 ensured that there is no question of Sinn Féin politicians having any direct or
 indirect access to sensitive intelligence as MI5 lead the fight against dissident
 terrorists."⁶¹ The very fact of power-sharing clearly still sits somewhat uneasily with
 550 the driving rhetoric of "Sinn Féin-IRA"⁶² that helped discredit the UUP and saw
 the DUP take its place as the leading spokesperson for unionism.

One significant (but temporary) tactical change in the 2010 election (having been
 first tried in the 2009 election to the European Parliament) saw the UUP running
 under the auspices of Ulster Conservatives and Unionists – New Force (UCUNF).
 555 Poor election prospects for the party, plus the predicted tidal wave of support for the
 Conservative Party in Britain, helped draw the two together in a bid to strengthen
 "moderate" conservative unionism in Northern Ireland. The alliance between the
 two parties helped produce a slick manifesto and greater election funds but failed to
 reverse the downward trend in UUP electoral fortunes and UCUNF failed to return
 560 any of its candidates to Westminster.⁶³ There are several reasons for this, some of
 which would be possible to locate even in certain tensions within the UCUNF
 discourse. For example, even the slogan of the UCUNF campaign, parachuted
 directly from the Conservative Party's campaign, "vote for change,"⁶⁴ sat somewhat
 565 uneasily with the fact that the UUP had been majority holders of power in Northern
 Ireland until just a few years previously. Also, the UCUNF manifesto managed to
 imply a tenuous position for Northern Ireland within the UK: "We want to end
 Northern Ireland's semi-detached political status and bring it back into the
 mainstream of United Kingdom politics."⁶⁵ If unionist voters had had any doubts
 570 about the security of their devolved province within the UK, they were waved out of
 the way by none other than the Conservatives and Unionists manifesto.

Because the UCUNF manifesto is so evidently the Conservative Party's creation,
 with a few minor and almost superficial changes throughout to speak to a Northern
 Ireland electorate, it is difficult to analyse it closely as discourse of the UUP as such.
 Having said that, it is notable that the SDLP also shares its emphasis on the
 575 importance of Westminster for governance of Northern Ireland. Party Leader
 Margaret Ritchie's foreword to the SDLP manifesto reaffirms the Houses of
 Parliament as where "key decisions are taken" and, "We in the SDLP are proud of
 our record at Westminster. We will continue to take our seats in Westminster and
 work hard to defend and promote your interests."⁶⁶ The SDLP does not restrict its
 580 criticism of Sinn Féin to this implied reference to abstentionism, but rather focuses a
 lot of energy on the failure of Sinn Féin-DUP leadership to deliver. At the heart of
 this failure, according to the SDLP, is the fact that "the DUP and Sinn Féin have
 displayed no desire or designs towards true sharing."⁶⁷ The UUP is also implicitly
 585 critical of the DUP in the UCUNF manifesto (without actually referring to the DUP
 by name), implying that any success of the post-St Andrews Agreement power-
 sharing arrangement is founded on the UUP's work in the 1998 Agreement: "Ulster
 Unionists did the heavy lifting while other unionist parties stood on the sidelines. As

a result the constitutional issues have been settled and the Union secured.”⁶⁸ The can-do, pragmatic emphasis in the UUP’s discourses on power is echoed by the SDLP, who restate its claim to offer an alternative to the “old adversarial politics” with “a politics which is about partnership and reaching agreement so that things get done.”⁶⁹

Discourses of ethos: DUP and UUP, Sinn Féin and SDLP

The difficulty in identifying particularly unionist discourses of ethos in the UCUNF manifesto is made all the more clear by the fact that one of the most significant differences between that and the Conservative party model is that the UUP has substituted the term “the UK” for all references to “Britain” liberally made by the Conservatives.⁷⁰ As a consequence, the UUP thus has very little meaningful reference to “British” culture or identity in their manifesto. Indeed, the closest to any articulation of unionist ethos is the assertion that “our core values as Conservatives and Unionists have not altered and our core beliefs remain consistent.”⁷¹ In contrast, the DUP are able to emphasise their contribution to strengthening Britishness:

Culture is an essential part of the mix that affirms who we are. The preservation, development and promotion of our rich culture both within Northern Ireland as a region within the United Kingdom and nationalist across the United Kingdom is the determined goal of the Democratic Unionist Party.⁷²

Analysis of the two manifestos indicates that, whereas the UUP was somewhat inhibited by the domineering Conservative party stepping in and taking over, the DUP was sounding confident enough to take unionist, Protestant, Orange culture to the British.

Comparison of discourses of ethos between the nationalist parties is slightly more straightforward, not least given that the message remains consistent: the values and goals of both parties centre on the desire for Irish unity. What is notable here, however, is that differing discourses on power between the parties have a lingering effect on the presentation of each party’s ethos. For example, the SDLP is keen to emphasize the importance of the 1998 Agreement as a step towards fulfilling the nationalist ethos:

The SDLP is committed to a united Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement established the democratic basis for unity and by providing the public with a credible and achievable vision we believe we can persuade the doubters.⁷³

Sinn Féin, too, blends previous traditional themes of discourse on power with its assertion of nationalist ethos, claiming that it seeks to “amend British Government policy from upholding the union to becoming persuaders for Irish unity”⁷⁴ (the similarity in the brash confidence of Sinn Féin here and the DUP quotation mentioned above *vis-à-vis* Britain is noteworthy). However, perhaps most significantly, both Sinn Féin and the SDLP share a fundamental emphasis on a “democratic basis for unity”,⁷⁵ the SDLP “envisag[ing] unity as a coming together rather than a takeover”⁷⁶ and Sinn Féin seeking to start now in “building this new Ireland, democratically shaped by the people.”⁷⁷ In proclaiming that, “The old ways are gone. They will not return. We will not let them,”⁷⁸ Sinn Féin’s manifesto recalls quite how far nationalism, and non-violent nationalism, has journeyed in the space of a decade.

Conclusion

640 If we were to attempt to create a “model” of Northern Ireland’s transition from
 conflict that considers not just dialogue with terrorists but debate between
 politicians, what might it look like? First, the obligatory note of caution must be
 struck: these are lessons from a process, not from a settlement. And such lessons
 645 should be read themselves as testament to the fact that this process is long, tortuous,
 winding and vulnerable to an array of conditions. I noted at the start of this paper
 that the conflict was manifest in the divergence between the political discourses of
 unionist and nationalist parties. More particularly, nationalist parties were forced
 apart by the closeness of their discourses on ethos (which propelled them into
 competition with each other) and by the different views on the exercise on power; the
 same is true of unionist parties. Considering party manifestos published in post-1998
 650 Agreement, post-St Andrews Agreement Northern Ireland, and in the wake of the
 first uninterrupted term of devolved governance, how have these patterns of political
 discourse shifted?

There remains strong convergence on discourses of ethos within unionism and
 nationalism; for example, the UUP and DUP agree on key elements of the values
 and identity of unionist culture (e.g. British, religious liberty), as do Sinn Féin and
 655 the SDLP about nationalist culture (e.g. inclusion, equality, unity). Yet this
 convergence does not appear to constitute as substantial an arena for direct
 competition among these “sister” parties as in previous years. The reasons for this
 could lie in the fact that discourses of power between the two main unionist and two
 660 main nationalist parties are actually even more distinct than before. Each party has
 settled into particular discursive themes on both power and ethos which distinguish
 it quite clearly from all three of the other main parties. Instead, patterns of
 competition and comparison are becoming slightly more complex. For example,
 there are strong elements of convergence between the SDLP and UUP on discourses
 665 of power, as in their criticisms of the DUP and Sinn Féin’s use of power-sharing or
 their common emphasis on the importance of Westminster. There are, notably, also
 emerging hints of common discourses of power between the DUP and Sinn Féin, as
 in their similar arguments on the need for reform of political institutions in Northern
 Ireland and in their shared wariness of the British government – although the
 670 underlying causes of these similar claims and the “solutions” these parties would
 proffer would still differ fundamentally.

Together, these as yet lightly drawn patterns indicate a nascent “complication”
 of politics in Northern Ireland which allows for competition and cooperation that
 cross-cuts the unionist/ nationalist binary. Looking ahead, it is possible to identify
 675 dynamics that may further complicate this pattern to destructive effect; the fact
 that Sinn Féin and the DUP, whilst sharing power, have no shared end goal may
 prove ultimately problematic. What this study has shown, however, is that parties’
 discourses of power and ethos are continually changing and so may actually
 become increasingly distinct from each other, thus further opening up the political
 680 arena. This may be further aided in a constructive way by any future rise of other
 parties, such as the Alliance party (which in 2010 gained a seat in Westminster
 and a ministerial post in the NI Executive), or indeed by new formations of
 existing ones. Such changes will generate fresh streams of convergence and
 divergence among the political discourses to give voice to the “new Northern
 685 Ireland.”

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Notes

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26. DUP, *Fair Deal Manifesto 2003*, 12.
27. *Ibid.*, "Message from the Leader," p. 3.
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29. UUP, "The Future not the Past," p. 3.
- 760 30. DUP, "Message from the Leader," p. 3, emphasis added.
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32. UUP, 2003: 5, 12.
33. UUP, 2003: 10, emphases added.
34. See, for example, Prime Minister Tony Blair's "Britain" speech, delivered in London on 28 March 2000, which claimed that devolution strengthened "Britishness," <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2000/mar/28/britishidentity.tonyblair> (accessed June 6, 2011).
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47. DUP, 2007: 3.
48. SDLP, 2007: 41.
49. Sinn Féin, 2007: 4.
50. Sinn Féin, 2007: 42; Sinn Féin provocatively quotes directly here (without attribution) the section of the 1916 Easter Proclamation of the Irish Republic that declares division in Ireland to have been "carefully fostered by an alien government." 795
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63. However, perhaps some *schadenfreude* comfort for the UUP was taken from the loss of First Minister Peter Robinson's seat in the House of Commons, following a pattern set by David Trimble in the previous Westminster election of 2005 and confirming the invidious position of unionist leaders in post-Agreement Northern Ireland. 820
64. Even the UCUNF website (no longer active) had this slogan as its address, e.g. <http://www.voteforchangenir.com/manifesto/index.php> (accessed June 6, 2011). 825
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66. SDLP, *For Your Future: SDLP Westminster Manifesto 2010*, "Message from Margaret Ritchie [party leader]", 2010: 1.
67. SDLP, 2010: 13. 830
68. UCUNF, 2010: 72.
69. SDLP, 2010: 1.

835 70. For example, whereas the title of the 2010 Conservative manifesto reads *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain*, that of the Conservatives and Unionists is *Invitation to Join the Government of the United Kingdom*. Similarly, the contents of the manifesto reflect virtually a straightforward use of the “Find and Replace” word-processing function, as in the foreword of both, on page ix, where the Conservative manifesto reads, “Now we ask you to join us for the next and most important stage of the journey: changing Britain so we can offer a better life to all our citizens,” the UUP/UCUNF manifesto has simply replaced the word “Britain” with “the UK.”

840 71. UCUNF, 2010: vii.

72. DUP, 2010: 15.

73. SDLP, 2010: 21.

74. Sinn Féin, 2010: 50.

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76. Ibid.

845 77. Sinn Féin, 2010: 5.

78. Sinn Féin, 2010: 20.

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