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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Healing past wounds with more than an elastic bandage–
A small scale evaluation of attitudes and aspirations of
contemporary Northern Irish Catholics.
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Arthur (1996, p. 1) suggests that literature on solutions to the Northern Irish "problem" could "span the entire circumference of the world" and yet Vaughan-Williams (2006, p. 513) points out that "we are still unable to define the precise problem or how it might be solved." Others argue that too much emphasis has been placed on problematising the situation (Campbell, 1998; Vaughan-Williams, 2006) or viewing it through a "deficit model" (McBride, 2015, p. 253). Consistently though, there has been a growing awareness of the need to move beyond simple calls for "toleration, respect and recognition" towards actual embedding of "the appropriate normative expectations associated with equal citizenship" (ibid, p. 249). At the same time, there remains a certain ambiguity or lack of articulation as to the contemporary and long-term expectations and aspirations of Northern Irish nationalists. Furthermore, much of the research that exists is quantitative, consisting of binary questions regarding Irish unity or satisfaction with the constitutional status quo. On account of such a gap in the literature, I conducted a small-scale research study in early 2016 to access the voices of ordinary people within the nationalist community by means of a Mixed Methods approach. The goal was not to prioritise these voices over those of unionists but to find out what possible changes have occurred in terms of nationalist perspectives, aspirations, and sense of identity almost two decades since the signing of The Belfast Agreement (1998). The findings of the research indicate growing flexibility as regards perspectives on Northern Irish constitutional arrangements at the same time as a growing desire for a society founded on principles of equal respect. The argument at the heart of this paper is thus that such a society needs to exist for a lasting solution to take hold for the long term in the north of Ireland.

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Introduction and contextualisation of the situation

The conflict in Northern Ireland "emanates from deep-rooted differences between the Protestant Unionist community, which seeks to remain part of the United Kingdom, and the Catholic Nationalist community, which seeks the unification of an Irish republic" (Church et al, 2004, p. 273). The problem though is not one of religious division in itself, but the fact that "religious ascription has typically been seen as coterminous with national identity" (Nagle, 2012, p. 3). This has been evident in voting patterns since the very creation of the state, right up to the present time, where the Northern Ireland Assembly election of March 2017 appears to have reinforced "headcountery" (Hughes, 2013), with effective deadlock in terms of seats held by the two main factions.

Donnelly (2017) refers to this as nationalism biting back to an effective 44% of the seats on offer, having fallen to "a meagre 36%" of the votes in the previous election. Consequently, debate on the issue of a united Ireland has arisen once again as exemplified by the works of Meagher (2016) although Whiting (2017) contends that this election was more about "bedding down better functioning Northern Irish institutions than moving closer to All-Ireland ones" (p. 2). He also highlights the impact of the DUP suffering as a consequence of being "the only major party to back Brexit in a territory that voted 56% to remain" and also holding views in contrast to "the strikingly secular and modern feel" of today's society (ibid). Yet, in spite of this growing sense of modernity, Northern Irish identities largely remain "construed on the British versus Irish faultline" (Tonge & Gomez, 2015, p. 1).

Although Northern Ireland only came into existence as a jurisdiction following the "partition of Ireland" (O'Neill, 2003, p. 380), divisions have occurred on the island for centuries. These existed in localised feudal form even before Britain's colonisation, and consolidation of this through plantations of the 17th century. Historical events of the late 19th and early 20th centuries increased Ulster's sense of separatism, and eventually led to the creation of Northern Ireland as a de facto Protestant state for Protestant people. Problematically though, even at the birth of this state, one third of the population identified as Catholic and Irish. Thus, the early decades of this new entity came to be characterised by discrimination against Catholics (Meagher, 2016a), causing their subsequent "political alienation" (O'Neill, 2003, p. 380) that some nationalists regard as sparking the conflict of the late 1960s.

Conflict raged for approximately one quarter of a century, before moves towards peace began in the early 1990s, leading to the Belfast Agreement signed on Good Friday, April 10th 1998 after two years of formal negotiations between representatives of unionism and nationalism. Brown & Macginty (2003, p. 85) describe this as being the end of "a lengthy, and often precarious, peace process", which formally recognised that Northern Ireland is a society with "deeply entrenched segregation" (O'Neill, 2003, p. 374); composed of "two historically antagonistic national communities" (ibid, p. 375). However, this agreement established "provisions for a new political and constitutional configuration in Northern Ireland, on the island of Ireland and between Ireland and Britain", and cemented "a strong equalisation policy" that had been blossoming since the late nineteen eighties (Todd, 2010, p. 2). Nagle (2012, p.12) further describes the deal as recognizing both nationalists and unionists' respective "self-determination claims, the need to share political power, as well as 'parity of esteem' for their cultural identities." This means that even though the society is still "riven by deep divisions" it has "the appropriate legal mechanisms" in place for a settlement (McBride, 2015, p. 249).

McBride (2015, p. 253) draws on the work of Walzer (1997, pp. 10-11) in discussing a continuum of societal development that moves from "resigned acceptance of difference for the sake of peace" through three further stages up to the point of a more meaningful "enthusiastic endorsement of difference." For such differences to be fully recognised, he argues that the nationalist identity needs to be included in "mainstream assumptions about what counts as normal" within the society (2015, p. 254). This is a view further supported by Morrow (2015, p. 212) who uses the example of the Orange Order to exemplify how the state, and perhaps the media to a considerable extent, give "institutional expression to a visible Protestant community." This is done through acceptance of their main marching day, 12th of July, as a public holiday and the ways in which, largely in the past, the security apparatus of the state was used to manage, and even enforce this sense of an 'Orange' hegemony over the society.

One means of giving institutional expression to nationalists would be the "joint British-Irish sovereignty" referred to by O'Neill (2003. p. 369), which would be anathema to many Ulster loyalists. However, this could also safeguard unionist interests in the long run because present arrangements appear to leave "both groups vulnerable to the contingency of demographics" (ibid, p. 383).

Indeed, according to Little (2003), cited in Vaughan-Williams (2006, p. 516) the 1998 Belfast Agreement is more like "a temporary elastic bandage over a deep wound than permanent multi-level suturing." Essentially, the 1998 Agreement was predicated upon a need to "minimize political violence" and "to prioritize the politics of national conflict over other struggles" (O'Neill, 2003, p. 387). The consequences of the latter are that within the Northern Ireland Assembly, parties can only be given the labels nationalist, unionist, or other; effectively crystallising the "monochrome notions of identity" referred to in Vaughan-Williams (2006, p. 518). Thus when the anti-austerity People Before Profit Alliance made an unexpected electoral breakthrough in the 2016 Northern Ireland Assembly election with the claim of being "neither Orange or Green" there was no legal provision for them to identify as 'socialist' (Socialist Worker, 2016). The framework, as it stands, seems unable to take on board "overlapping, confused, or even contradictory identities" which "slice through the alleged fault lines of conflict" (Vaughan-Williams, 2006, p. 518).

O'Neill (2003) has further argued that one approach to addressing issues of "opposing political aspirations, differing identities, and diverging loyalties" (p. 380) is to draw upon the work of John Rawls (1987) in advocating an 'overlapping consensus.' This is an arrangement where differing groups focus on dialogue as a means of establishing particular principles of justice that establish the foundations for a fair society, in which the rules of governance do not favour the interests of any single group over another (ibid). However, more contemporary thought seems to favour action over further dialogue and movement beyond toleration towards reaching "the sharp edges" of both communities recognising other cultural identities within Northern Ireland (McBride, 2015, p. 253). Morrow (2015, p. 211) even suggests that "the main political parties have moved away from reconciliation", which has created a vacuum of distrust and de facto stalemate, that necessitates "alternative approaches to pluralism." A critical first step in that is placating loyalist fears of the equality agenda simply being "a Trojan horse" (ibid, p. 213 & Neill, 2017) designed to "hollow out" the Union as Todd (2015, p. 4) highlights when discussing loyalist street protests in winter 2012 relating to the flying of the Union flag from Belfast City Hall (ibid, p. 2). Yet, it is perhaps not the visible erosion of their cultural symbols that offers the greatest existential threat to Ulster Unionism. It is the 1998 Agreement's scope for the contingency of demographics, as referred to in O'Neill (2003) and Sommers (2014).

Going beyond demographics to new areas of consensus

The 1998 Belfast Agreement was established to end military conflict, as much as addressing the underlying political conflict. Thus, the agreement leaves scope for both the unification of Ireland, in the long term, and the solidification of Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom. Indeed, the opening line of the section on Northern Ireland's constitutional future states that both governments, Irish and British, "recognise the legitimacy of whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland with regard to its status" (1998, p. 3). Ruane and Todd (2001, p. 923) therefore label the document as echoing and reconstituting the "political terrain" in contradiction and ambiguity. Others could argue that this has created a more positive, open-ended, and pluralistic political terrain than before.

Yet, an inherent problem of the 1998 Agreement is that it can inadvertently give the impression of nationalists simply having to bide their time until they become a majority, call for a border poll, and emerge victorious in a winner-takes-all situation. One likely consequence of Sinn Fein's success in the 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly elections is that such a call will now be made (Donnelly, 2017), particularly in light of developments surrounding Britain's departure from the European Union and subsequent demands for a second Independence Referendum in Scotland.

Hughes (2013) highlights the possible future role of demographics by suggesting that "the trend is for a growing catholic population while the protestant population is in decline and ageing" and that Northern Ireland has one of the youngest populations in Europe, and in every five year age group under 25 catholics are well over 50 per cent." Currently, the population of Northern Ireland is approximately 1.8 million people according to the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency website (2013), and has a Catholic population of around 40-45% (ibid). The key point of significance here is that this figure has risen substantially from the time of the 1921 partition when the Protestant population had close to a two to one majority. Prior to 1997, particularly in General Elections, the combined nationalist and republican vote had been in the region of 31 to 34% (Donnelly, 2015), but rose sharply with the advent of the peace process, suggesting that in a time of violence and political uncertainty, Catholics in Northern Ireland were not going to the polls.

Though it is unlikely that a majority of people in Northern Ireland would vote for an end to partition, there is a growing sense in the media that younger nationalist voters have been "radicalised" by the Unionist parties' failure to push forward the equality agenda (Cahill, 2017). Radicalisation has also been shaped by issues such as the 2012 Belfast flag protests (Hughes, 2013), political scandals involving the DUP (Whiting, 2017, p. 2) and by the fear that Brexit might "roll back the GFA" as predicted in Todd (2015). The Brexit issue may have particularly contributed to the voting surge in support of Sinn Fein, as a pro-EU party, in March 2017, though it does not necessarily mean that new voters see concerns over "austerity, Brexit, and civil rights best protected within a united Ireland framework" (Whiting, 2017, p. 3). However, Meagher (2016c) has argued that Sinn Fein's "age-old bid for Irish re-unification now comes wearing neutral, utilitarian colours, responding to a genuine, contemporary issue."

This new argument for instigating a discussion on Irish unification has been given further support by such research as the Modelling Irish Unification economic study conducted by Kurt Hübner and Renger Van Nieuwkoop (2015) in which three unification scenarios were examined in detail. This was done through a series of "simulations generated from a 'computable general equilibrium' (CGE) model of the economies of Northern Ireland and the ROI" (vii) that highlighted areas of potential benefit as being "harmonization of the tax systems across the Island, with the North adopting the tax rates and regulations of the south"; "diminished trade barriers and greater access of Northern Irish firms to the common market"; and "adoption of the Euro in the North" (viii). The latter two suggestions, made prior to the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum of 2016, have now taken on much greater significance in light of Britain's intention to withdraw from the grouping. Suddenly, economic arguments that could have previously been dismissed as idealistic are now grounded in political realities (Meagher, 2016a). Thus, some would argue that for the first time in decades Irish unification is no longer contingent upon demographics alone, but rather a means of offering the best outcome for Northern Ireland's future (Meagher, 2016b) that is increasingly being framed in consideration of future possibilities within an All-Ireland context (Emerson, 2016). Prior to this, some of the literature labelled the desire for Irish unity to be based on "utopian ideals" (Aughey, 2005) or what Hassan (2002, p. 68) terms a "romantic desire for a united Ireland", as also voiced in Mitchel et al (2009).

Possible future repositioning of voting patterns

Various press surveys carried out over the past decade have suggested that Catholics are increasingly content with the constitutional status quo (Clarke, 2012), and this is further supported by research conducted through The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (2010a/2010b). This survey organised jointly by Queens University and The University of Ulster since 1998 is a means of recording "the attitudes, values and beliefs of the people in Northern Ireland on a wide range of social policy issues" (2015). More contemporary surveys of this nature have included a 2016 Ipsos Mori Border Referendum Poll and a Lucid Talk Poll of May 2017 in which each of these substantiated the view that Irish unity is not an immediate priority for all nationalists.

Despite the results of the 2017 Assembly Election, voting patterns over the past decade have suggested societal transition within Northern Ireland, and a shift towards parties not simply defined by constitutional alignments. Nagle (2012, p. 1), for example, has argued that through the current power sharing arrangements we are seeing "the repositioning of Irish nationalism from a secessionist movement to a substate nationalism mobilizing for more resources within the framework of devolution." He goes on to add (ibid, p. 7) that "Irish nationalists, while voting for parties who they believe will act as strong defenders of their ethnic interests in the public sphere against unionists, are relatively content with the constitutional status quo (Mitchell et al 2009, p. 402)." Todd (2010, p. 7) further supports this by suggesting that the "tenor" of Northern Irish politics is changing; that its citizens are learning to live with the possible implementation of alternative constitutional settlements; and it "is no longer possible to read ethnic self-conceptions, national identifications and political perspectives from political 'bloc' voting, nor is that voting in any simple sense expressive of 'identity-politics'."

Within both the academic and popular literature, there had been a growing sense of optimism for the creation of a new social and political space in which identities are not constructed with such binary rigidity. This though has been challenged to some extent by developments around the 2017 Assembly elections in which Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams asserted that the actions of Arlene Foster, Democratic Unionist Party leader, in denigrating nationalist aspirations regarding equality of culture, language and symbols, had "radicalised" Sinn Fein's vote (Cahill, 2017). Some

commentators are even suggesting that the two mainstream Unionist parties may retreat into a single alliance that relies entirely upon sectarian "headcountery" (Hughes, 2013) to preserve the constitutional status quo. That though, on the basis of the survey described herein, would be a mistake because "the fault lines of conflict" (Vaughan-Williams, 2006, p. 518) are not as clear cut as in the days before the Belfast Agreement of 1998.

Research study and methodology

The study came about as a result of wanting to address a perceived gap in the literature on Northern Ireland. This concerned the limited amount of investigations into the political attitudes of the growing Catholic population and their sense of identity (ies) two decades after the Belfast Agreement. This had to be a small scale study, for pragmatic and epistemological reasons. Firstly, although born in Northern Ireland, I am based in London. Secondly, in line with principles of qualitative research, the goal was to attain depth of responses rather than breadth, in presenting a "plurality of interests, voices, and perspectives" (Greene & Caracelli, 1997, p.14) from within the nationalist community. By "reporting multiple perspectives" in a detailed way I hoped to sketch "the larger picture that emerges" (Creswell, 2009, p. 176) and make sense of nationalist attitudes and aspirations.

To do this, I firstly designed a survey as a means of collecting both qualitative and quantitative data to help understand the intended phenomena under investigation. In designing the survey, I was aware of a challenging balancing act of asking enough questions to get meaningful responses, whilst not asking so many as to deter possible respondents from taking part. Thus I opted for eight questions, alongside basic demographic information on age, location, and professional status. The reason for the latter two was to establish if and how attitudes differ according to variables of geographic position within Northern Ireland, and what we can loosely term social class. This was deemed important because historically, working class Catholics have voted for Sinn Fein whilst the middle classes have cast their ballots for the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), or the Alliance Party. Thus the questions, excluding demographic information, were expressed as follows; in a way that lends itself to generation of data that is both qualitative and quantitative.

Actual questions used in the survey

1. Which of these terms best describes your political views?

a. Nationalist (*likely to vote SDLP*)
b. Republican (*likely to vote Sinn Fein*)
c. Unionist (*likely to vote for a pro-British party*)
d. Other (please specify)

2. What are your main reasons for holding these political views? Give three if possible.

3. Do you think there will ever be a united Ireland?

a. Yes, within my own lifetime.
b. Yes, but not within my own lifetime.
c. No, there will never be a united Ireland.
d. Other (please specify).

4. If there were a referendum for a united Ireland tomorrow, how would you vote?

a. Yes, I would want a united Ireland.
b. No, I would not want a united Ireland.
c. I would be undecided.
d. Other (please specify).

5. What are your main reasons for your voting decision in the previous question (4)?

6. Are you happy living in Northern Ireland as it is now; part of the UK with power sharing between Catholics and Protestants?

a. Yes, I am happy with this and would be content with no change.
b. Yes, I am happy with this but would like to see a united Ireland at some stage.
c. No, I am not happy with the present arrangements.
d. Other (please specify).

7. If you answered yes to the previous question, what are the main reasons for your contentment with the state of Northern Ireland as it is now?

8. If you are not happy with Northern Ireland as it is now, what could Unionist parties or the British government do to persuade you to be happy with Northern Ireland as a permanent part of the United Kingdom?

Sample, survey distribution, and analysis

Having designed the research instrument the next issues for resolution concerned dissemination of survey and choice of sample. I drew on the work of Patton (1990) in choosing potential participants fitted to the study's "theoretical apparatus" (Silverman, 2005, p. 130). Since I needed responses from the Northern Irish nationalist community, it was best to select a "small, homogenous sample" (Patton, 1990, p. 173) where "participants are included in a study on the basis of their ability, as judged by the researcher, to provide information relevant to the central purposes of the research" (Borg, 2006, p. 9). Therefore, I administered the questions on the online platform *SurveyMonkey*, which was accessible via a link sent out to two hundred people, purposefully selected from across a range of organisations and social media sites, carefully balancing the selections according to age, geography, gender, interests, and perceived social status.

As practical examples of this, I sent the survey to young people of a similar age in schools and universities in different parts of Northern Ireland, whilst also contacting groups within which an older, more conservative demographic usually participates, such as church organisations. In sending out the link, I also suggested that people could forward it on to others so long as they were of a Northern Irish 'nationalist' background, but this tended to happen only in very few cases. Thus, it may have been better to send print versions of the survey, in some cases, or to share the link more publicly, but the latter could have lent itself to bias in the event of people, outside the intended demographic, completing the task.

In the end, I had a response rate of 77 people, which is approximately 38.5% of the original sample that had directly received the *SurveyMonkey* link. Since the research study was qualitative, and the data evaluated by a process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), this was not such a major issue as it might have been in research that was purely statistical. The goal of a qualitative study is to attain trustworthiness, and convince an audience that the findings are worth paying attention to. In this

case, themes that emerged achieved Teddlie & Tashakkori's four criteria for trustworthiness (2009, p. 212). Labelled as "credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability" these could be measured by examining the responses in light of both theory, from the literature, and voting practices in the 2016 and 2017 elections. However, it is still important to stress that this should be seen primarily as a small-scale pilot study where the qualitative aspects of the study make the greatest contribution to knowledge.

Overview of initial findings within the study

Fundamentally, this study provided a glimpse into the perspective of a small group of (Northern) Irish nationalists whose attitudes reflect to some extent broader views and values of those within their community, as borne out by recent political developments. Responses were characterised by frustration at the political impasse of the time (early 2016), combined with a desire for equal citizenship within society, which would ultimately manifest itself in voting patterns at the 2017 Assembly Election. However, responses also suggested that today's nationalist voters have a myriad of reasons for their choices, and there are a range of variables that go beyond demographics and traditional voting patterns. Ultimately, there appears to be a demand for nationalism to be fully accepted into the mainstream of society, echoing McBride (2015) in his call for "a society founded on equal respect" that is not just evident in governmental mechanisms but also apparent in everyday lives and expectations (p. 264).

One salient point to emerge from this study is that it appears Catholics may vote for nationalist or republican parties in elections, but would not necessarily vote to unite Ireland, and abandon the British state, in an official referendum. This seems to tie in with the findings expressed in surveys described by Clarke (2012) and also The Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys (2010a/2010b). However, where this survey differs from those is that here I have left scope for further qualitative analysis of why people are choosing particular answers rather than relying on statistics alone, which do not always allow researchers to sketch full details of the picture that has emerged from the responses. Yet, in the first instance, the statistics shown below provide an interesting glimpse of possible contradictions and very definite complexities as regards contemporary nationalist aspirations. There is a clear contrast between Figure One, which shows

'political views', and Figure Two's 'attitudes to voting intentions in an immediate referendum on Irish unity.'

FIGURE ONE – Political views of the research sample	
LIKELY VOTING OPTION	PERCENTAGE OF SAMPLE
Nationalist (likely to vote SDLP)	29.5%
Republican (likely to vote Sinn Fein)	54.9%
Unionist (likely to vote for a pro-British party)	1.9%
Other (please specify)	13.7%

Roughly in line with Catholic/nationalist voting patterns of recent elections the percentage of those likely to vote Sinn Fein was much greater than those likely to vote SDLP. The surprising element is that less than 2% of voters would vote for a Unionist party despite seeming contentment with the constitutional status quo, and of the 13% who identify as 'Other', 40% claim to not cast their vote in elections. The remaining 60% of this category mainly vote Alliance, with one suggestion of the Green Party, and one suggestion of not voting "purely on party affiliation", but "for people I know will work for the benefit of the community." The latter emphasis on community echoed a response by an SDLP voter who suggested voting for the party because on a local level, Sinn Fein members seemed "more interested in photo opportunities than dealing with actual problems in the county."

Such an emphasis on more pragmatic politics could be taken as a sign of the society moving on from entrenched positions where the national question is the be-all and end-all. This is further supported by the fact that even though roughly 85% of Northern Irish Catholics vote for nationalist or republican parties only 48.8% of those surveyed said that they would vote for a united Ireland in a referendum 'tomorrow.' The results of this question can be seen in Figure Two, but statistics alone do not paint the full picture. Although the majority of those who would vote for a united Ireland 'tomorrow' are Sinn Fein voters, this figure includes a minority of SDLP voters and one person who traditionally votes

Alliance. This means firstly that not all Sinn Fein voters see a united Ireland as possible or practical in the short term, whilst others appear to be opening up to this possibility or option within parties not normally associated with aspirations for Irish unity.

FIGURE TWO – Attitudes to voting intentions in an immediate referendum on Irish unity	
LIKELY VOTING OPTION	PERCENTAGE OF SAMPLE
Yes, I would want a united Ireland.	48.08%
No, I would not want a united Ireland.	15.38%
I would be undecided.	34.62%
Other (please specify)	1.92%

The figure of 48% is certainly very different to the 85% of those who vote for parties that are traditionally seen as being strongly in favour of Irish unification. Of course this is not so different to the findings of surveys conducted through the media within Northern Ireland, but the difference here is that a further question was asked about contentment with the state as it is. Here, 22.5% of respondents suggest that they are happy with the present arrangements and would like no change, whilst roughly 51% are happy but would like to see a united Ireland at some stage. 16.3% are not happy with the present arrangements and 10% have other opinions, or are ambivalent. This seems to suggest that around 80% of Northern Irish nationalists, whilst not entirely happy with the present situation, are open to the possibility of their concerns being resolved within the current constitutional arrangements.

Answers to a further question on unification again suggest moves towards a greater sense of compromise and pragmatism, as seen in Figure Three. It is also important to consider the correlation between parties that respondents claim to vote for and responses to this question because the split on who expects to see a united Ireland in their lifetime reveals that Sinn Fein supporters have a similar expectation about this to their SDLP counterparts.

FIGURE THREE – Views of respondents on whether or not there will ever be a united Ireland.	
OPTION TO CHOOSE FROM	PERCENTAGE OF SAMPLE
Yes, within my own lifetime	11.76%
Yes, but not within my own lifetime	47.06%
No, there will never be a united Ireland	35.29%
Other (please specify)	5.88%

On the whole, the statistics suggest that Northern Irish nationalists' political beliefs are no longer as straightforward as they once were, though the majority still vote along religious and ethnic fault lines. The statistics also challenge those, mainly in the liberal unionist media, who believe that Catholics can be persuaded to vote for pro-Union parties. In fact statistics reveal a greater drift towards ambivalence than the likelihood of voting Unionist. Yet, in a situation of such complexity, it is impossible to get a grasp of the full picture on the basis of statistics alone. Therefore, in order to get a sense of possible or pragmatic shifts in the Northern Irish nationalist mindset, it is important to now focus on more qualitative aspects of the study and give expression to the data through the authentic voices of the research participants.

Findings from qualitative aspects of the study

It is clear from the literature that the Catholic population of Northern Ireland has risen steadily though less clear as to whether or not they feel that this can be equated with a growing stake and equal voice in their society (Hassan, 2002; Nolan, 2012; Breen, 2013). Though some academics have focused on the future impact of this demographic change, there have been few studies that have sought to assess the likely implications of this in terms of aspiration, ideology, and political pragmatism. Most surveys conducted with regards to nationalist attitudes and aspirations tend to be quantitative in nature, and disseminated via the media. Thus, even though they attract a much wider range of responses, the end results are largely numerical. One of the strengths of this study and qualitative research in general is that even though responses are fewer in number, they have greater depth on account

of being accompanied by deeper responses than simply those binary or sliding-scale choices that feature in statistical surveys.

This survey therefore left scope for respondents to offer views or opinions alongside their more quantitative responses. That can be seen in practical terms with questions one and two, for example, where firstly respondents are asked to choose the party that best represents their political affiliation, and then to give up to three main reasons for holding those views. Through taking this qualitative approach I have gained responses that both support and challenge existing ideas about Irish nationalism, including the issues that influence people's voting patterns and broader political affiliations and concerns. From this I have been able to decipher that nationalism can no longer be reduced to straightforward communal positions around the constitutional question. Indeed, for the majority of respondents issues that impact on their daily lives, as suggested in McBride (2015) and Whiting (2017), appear to be greater priorities. The latter sentiment was strongly voiced by one respondent, designating as 'other/Labour[2]' who suggested that "the economy and society in Northern Ireland needs proper politics about the real issues affecting day to day lives." Interestingly, the only respondent who identified as 'Other/Conservative' echoed this interest in social issues by asserting that none of the Northern Irish parties will "rise above tribal politics" and "tackle the 'Nanny State' or bring any kind of quality to the political debate here or elsewhere."

Even Sinn Fein and SDLP voters observed a lack of focus in dealing with social issues, with supporters of the latter blaming the former party for not addressing everyday issues and problems. Others advocated a move away from the politics of the past and a culture of blame, with one rural voter going so far as suggesting that their vote was now flexible, and dependent upon responses to social issues "rather than party affiliation." Another suggested voting for parties that would protect their rural county from "the threat of fracking" which suggests potential affiliation to parties such as the Greens and Independents who designate as 'other.' This desire for movement away from a culture of blame also suggests a shift away from the "factory of grievances" narrative suggested by Buckland (1979), cited in Morrow (2015, p. 211), towards Walzer's (1997) idea of progression towards "principled

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[2] This was on the proviso that they might one day stand in Northern Irish elections – though not clarified if that were Irish or British Labour.

recognition that the others have rights" as a crucial step on the way to eventual "enthusiastic endorsement of difference." It also appears to reflect Tonge's (2014, p. 17) assertion that there is a growing "cognisance amongst nationalists of the seeming impossibility of imposing Irish unity upon reluctant unionists without consent in Northern Ireland." Perhaps there is a realisation too that the best avenue for such consent is to work together with unionists on issues that really matter in people's everyday lives such as the environment and the economy.

Although this brief snapshot of attitude and aspiration is only part of the broader response, the "tenor" of Northern Ireland's politics appears to be changing (Todd, 2010, p. 7). However, this is not necessarily leading to changes in voting patterns based on identity politics. The majority of respondents still claim to vote for one of the two main parties on the nationalist/republican side, but do not appear to see a pressing need for Irish unity. Indeed, as Hassan (2002, p. 68) suggests, the emphasis is shifting away from straightforward reunification to the pursuit of equality within Northern Ireland. Several of the respondents voiced a need for "parity of esteem" (Nagle, 2012), and "equal citizenship" (O'Neill, 2000), in sentiment rather than precise usage of those terms.

Problematically, there is a recurring doubt about the capacity of the Unionist parties to actually engage with nationalists in an equal partnership. Those parties thus are not seen as meeting their end of the bargain in terms of creating the conditions for an "overlapping consensus" (O'Neill, 2003) of power-sharing. There is a sense that they want to dictate rather than negotiate terms, and that they struggle to understand the concept of "equal citizenship" as discussed in O'Neill's (2000) work on the issue of parades. However, from the perspective of these respondents, there has to be consensus if Irish unity is ever to occur. Two respondents said that there would be no point in having a disgruntled minority in a united Ireland, or it would leave things just the same as before. Regardless of party affiliation, most respondents seem more content with the certainities of Northern Ireland than the step into the unknown that a united Ireland would bring to their everyday lives. The problem, as voiced by one respondent, a Sinn Fein voter, is that many nationalists see reunification as the only way in which they will ever be able to gain any meaningful equality.

Another respondent, an SDLP voter in his forties, says "it is good to see power sharing working" but adds "I sometimes doubt Unionist parties would be interested if they were the second largest party in government." A female Sinn Fein voter in her thirties describes Unionist parties as "living in the past" whilst this is again echoed by an SDLP voter in her fifties who suggests that they need "to move on from the past." The term "sectarian" appears several times, with one instance coming from a respondent who votes 'Other' although is in favour of a unified Ireland for "social, economic and cultural" reasons. He suggests that he would like to see Unionist parties or the British government "repeal sectarian legislation like the Act of Settlement" in order to create better conditions for Catholics living in Northern Ireland. Further to this, a male Sinn Fein voter in his late thirties describes Unionist political actions as being "sectarian". Echoes of this are again found in the response from another male Sinn Fein voter who says "unionism needs to cast adrift its 'zero-sum', bigoted mentality before it can even think about attracting Catholic voters."

However, it is important to stress that not every respondent was so damning of the Unionist parties. The majority appear to be ambivalent towards unionism, whilst an Alliance voter in his forties lumps all major political groupings together in the assertion of being "sick of the traditional parties and their jaded views", which are impeding progress on such issues as "the provision of NHS here." A voter in the 'Other' category echoes this with the statement that "the party system hampers political progress" and there is "an obligation to leave behind old prejudicial politics so that we can create a more socially progressive State." This respondent, who provides no demographic information other than location, further asserts that there is "a growing awareness of the harm past ideologies inflicted upon powerless people from all communities who were used as voting fodder."

Interestingly, the solitary respondent who claims to vote for an unspecified Unionist party also voices frustration with the current choices on offer to the Northern Irish electorate. This voter, in their twenties, believes that "the country is at detriment being 'run' by the current situation" and that there "is too much politics within politics, meaning that if the MLA's and Ministers political agendas and beliefs were removed and their sole focus on making Northern Ireland a sustainable economic prosperous country then NI would be a good place to live." There is also a

sense of Sinn Fein in 2016 contributing in some part to the apathy because of "focusing on slogans" rather than solutions, to quote one voter amongst several, whose words echo suggestions in the literature regarding parties on both sides of the constitutional divide who have adopted a stance whereby pragmatic choices in everyday politics differ radically from public pronouncements. Mitchell et al (2009, p. 12) refer to this type of organisation as a "tribune party" which they define as one that combines "robust ethnic identity mobilization with increased pragmatism over political resource allocations."

A shift towards foundations for equal citizenship

One of the most significant findings of this study is that it now appears as if most Irish nationalists can accept existing constitutional arrangements so long as these grant them a sense of what they see as equality. At the same time many still aspire to a united Ireland, and appear to see no contradiction in acceptance of both Northern Ireland as it is and the unified island they would like to see. The variation of responses connected to an acceptance of more flexible and open-minded constitutional arrangements supports the idea that there has been a gradual sea change in expectations of nationalists within Northern Ireland (Nagel, 2012; Fissuh et al, 2012). However, several of the respondents did not see this being reciprocated on the unionist side, as regards parity for the Irish language and equality of each side's national symbols. Several respondents voiced the belief that unionists cannot countenance the notion of equality in areas of symbols and language, and some Sinn Fein voters suggested that such equality would only ultimately be found in an All-Ireland context.

Yet, a further point of interest is that at the time of the study, the demand for movement towards a united Ireland no longer seemed to be as pressing an issue as creating conditions of equality within contemporary Northern Irish society. This emphasis on creating conditions of equality was mainly stressed by Sinn Fein and SDLP supporters although even those who designated as 'Others' and 'Alliance' voters voiced a need for change. Furthermore, lines of demarcation between traditional Sinn Fein and SDLP attitudes appear to have blurred to the extent that some SDLP voters are more enthusiastic about the prospect of a united Ireland than their Sinn Fein counterparts. At the same time, some other SDLP voters are happy not so much with the status quo as it

is, but with the prospect of meaningful power sharing in the medium term. This again suggests a blurring of traditional boundaries not just communally, but also individual affiliations.

This supports Hassan's (2002) claim of Northern Irish 'nationalism' evolving into a more "complex, internally differentiated ideology, based on an interrelated core of concepts that cut across and qualify each other" (p. 68). It now appears possible, for example, to be an Alliance voter and have an aspiration for a united Ireland, and to not see this party as being unionist or pro-British, but as a genuine neutral alternative prepared to position itself within the framework of what is best for Northern Ireland. Sinn Fein voters too appear to be prepared to put Northern Irish interests first, even if that northern may still be spelt out with a small 'n' in many cases. There are Sinn Fein voters in the study who do not believe there will ever be a united Ireland, even though they may aspire to one, and that they consequently have to make Northern Ireland work for the sake of "peace" - a recurring quote and paraphrase. Though this may have been known for some time, and is effectively Sinn Fein's unofficial policy, it is quite unusual to have that voiced so openly by the party's supporters, even when having anonymity.

That suggests a growing confidence on the part of Sinn Fein supporters that the peace process is working and they are seeing positive results from it even though true parity of esteem has not yet emerged. This also supports Nagle's (2012) argument that Irish nationalism is moving away from being "a secessionist movement" to a "substate nationalism mobilizing for more resources within the framework of devolution" (p. 1). Furthermore, as Mitchell et al (2009, p. 402) have suggested, the nationalist parties themselves are increasingly content with "the constitutional status quo" even if, in the voice of one respondent, the present arrangements are "a stepping stone." That respondent, a Sinn Fein voter in his forties, may appear to echo the fear of many unionists that some nationalists see this present process as a "generational truce" rather than "a permanent peace" (Nolan, 2012, p. 3). However, closer analysis of his responses shows that the "stepping stone" is not actually a united Ireland but a shift towards greater equality within Northern Ireland, regardless of the constitutional context that occurs in, for now. Even in the aftermath of the UK's EU referendum result there might still be more of a demand for an internal settlement that guarantees an equal stake in a just society, than for arrangements framed in an All-Ireland context.

Overall findings and recommendations

Though this study was relatively small scale, it has provided a unique and interesting glimpse into the mindset of contemporary Northern Irish Catholics. The vast majority of respondents in the study were between the ages of 25 and 54, with fewer responses from those under the age of 24, and those from 55 upwards. Though the latter was anticipated to a greater extent on account of the survey being collected online, the lack of engagement from younger respondents does point to a limitation, but can also be explained by the apathy that was evident in 2016, and then energised, even "radicalised" in 2017 (Cahill, 2017). Despite this, there appears to be contentment with the constitutional status quo, so long as equality of citizenship and aspiration is offered.

The problem is that even twenty years after the signing of the Belfast Agreement, Northern Irish society has never quite reached the level of suturing its deep communal wounds. Nationalists still feel that their self-determination claims and their symbols are not treated with equal reverence, whilst "parity of esteem for cultural identities" (Nagle, 2012, p. 12) has not been attained. Though political power may be shared, many nationalists detect no meaningful sense of what O'Neill (2000) describes as "equal citizenship." For that to happen, each side needs to find a means of tolerating, if not quite accepting, the aspirations of the other. This does not, of course, mean that all the onus is on the unionist side, because nationalists need to a find a way of articulating their Irishness that is not bound up in any constitutional pre-conditions.

This study then has been useful in giving people from the nationalist community a forum for expressing their opinions. Though drawn from a relatively small sample, that has provided a striking glimpse into contemporary attitudes and aspirations. Furthermore the study helps to explain events surrounding the Assembly elections of 2016 and 2017. This is because the 2016 election suggested a waning attachment to nationalistic ideals, and greater contentment with the status quo. Such contentment though depended upon an advancement of the equality agenda, and growing parity of esteem for both cultures. When that failed to materialise in the infancy of the new Assembly, nationalists found themselves playing the part of "vanquished" national community in a non-inclusive political culture (O'Neill, 2003, p. 382). That, as warning signs in the survey suggested, would inevitably produce a

surge of radicalisation and a return to long-held cultural ideals, as came to happen in the election results of the 2017 Assembly.

Despite this surge of nationalist sentiment and changing demographics (Nolan, 2012; Hughes, 2013), there still appears to be a foundation of hope for Northern Ireland's immediate future. This survey has shown that many nationalists are prepared to put the desire for a united Ireland to one side if they can be equal partners and citizens within the constitutional status quo. Unfortunately, the survey also revealed considerable lack of trust regarding the Unionist parties' ability to create such a state, and suggests a further failing on the part of the 1998 Agreement. Essentially, since this agreement was predicated upon a need to "minimize political violence" and "to prioritize the politics of national conflict over other struggles" (O'Neill, 2003, p. 387), it lacks the mechanisms to push dialogue beyond a state of endless "problematisation" (Vaughan-Williams, 2006). The fact of that is clear from events in the lifetime of the Assembly that constantly seems to break down on issues relating to symbols, culture, justice, language, and the elusive, hard-to-define 'parity of esteem.'

Unless nationalists feel that they are equal citizens, and that symbols of the state reflect their identity, this society is always going to be held prisoner not just to the past, but to the contingency of elections and demographics. Victory by numbers, as proven in Northern Ireland's past, offers no hope for the future. Unfortunately, by its necessary ambiguity (Ruane and Todd, 2001, p. 923), the Belfast Agreement encourages this in some ways, and thus still "leaves much work to be done in institutionalising the rights that could secure equal citizenship status for all" almost seventeen years since O'Neill (2000, p. 42) first suggested this. For this to happen, unionists need to trust more in the strength of equality as a tool for guaranteeing nationalist contentment with the status quo. Of course, unionist trust is always going to be hard to attain when between 50-60% of nationalists, as seen in Figures One and Two, still aspire to a united Ireland in some form.

Such an aspiration for a united Ireland does not have to be seen as an existential threat to present arrangements, as supported by qualitative analysis of responses within this study. Even those who seek eventual unification of the island have no desire to create a fresh conflict, with unionists as the angry, vanquished minority. That is explicitly stated several times by respondents, and could be interpreted as a sign that even though nationalists are not 100%

happy with the constitutional status quo, they are content with conditions of relative peace, and contemporary social normality.

Nobody voiced a desire to return to armed struggle, or criticised the fundamentals of the Belfast Agreement (1998), even though ambiguity seems to exist with regard to its long-term purpose. Perhaps a solution then, in the short term, might be for all sides to sit down and talk again about what this framework actually means to them, particularly in creating parity of esteem. In doing so, contemporary Irish nationalism might also have to confront some of its own ambiguities particularly that seen herein of being happy as equal citizens within Northern Ireland, but also keeping alive the dream of Irish unity at some point in the future. The consensus though, on the basis of these responses, appears to be that a stable Northern Ireland is a much better prospect for nationalists right now because in the voice of one respondent "we have not dealt with past hurts on all sides." Almost twenty years after the Belfast Agreement nationalists are caught in a half-way house synthesised in respondents' words as "feeling culturally and historically Irish" but needing to facilitate a "more mature kind of politics in the North" before there can be talk of permanence, in whatever constitutional form that eventually comes in. Whatever that is though, there has to be a consensus on its implementation.

On a final note, it is undeniable that Brexit has played a major role in "rehabilitating the concept of Irish unity" (Meagher, 2016a). Due to the fact that the political landscape of Ireland, north and south, has been changed so radically in such a short period of time, this research study might have its greatest value in being seen as a pilot study for tracking further changes in nationalist perspectives since early 2016. Most commentators still appear to believe that the UK Referendum result has produced no significant change in the demand for immediate Irish unity, though the Lucid Talk Poll of May 2017 has suggested a surge of support for the notion of a border poll. There could of course be a myriad of reasons for that and evidence still suggests that Northern Irish nationalists continue to seek "normative expectations associated with equal citizenship" (McBride, 2015, p. 249) rather than any desire of dragging unionists into a united Ireland against their will or "supplanting unionist identity as the dominant identity in Northern Ireland" (ibid, p. 256).

Above all, there seems to be a growing recognition that demographics alone offers no solution to a situation that remains

complicated even two decades after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Solutions lie in mutual respect that not only entails unionists respecting nationalists, but also nationalism seeking "genuine compromise with unionists, loyalists, and the broader Protestant population" (Hopkins, 2015, p. 1). In doing this, nationalists are also moving beyond what could be seen as purely "a resigned acceptance of difference for the sake of peace" (Walzer, 1997, p. 10). By reaching a point of accepting the validity of the opposing position and showing "enthusiastic endorsement of difference" (ibid), they may also paradoxically push forward their arguments for Irish unity by showing unionists they have nothing to fear in such a scenario, either culturally, economically, or militarily.

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