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HOROWITZ'S THEORY OF ETHNIC PARTY COMPETITION AND THE CASE OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND LABOUR PARTY, 1970-79

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This article uses Donald Horowitz's theory of ethnic party competition in order to understand the development of the Northern Ireland Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) during the first decade of its existence. The main contention of the article is that Horowitz's thesis, although based primarily on observation of party competition in divided societies in Africa and Asia, is remarkably applicable to the SDLP in terms of the party's evolution against the backdrop of the Northern Ireland conflict in the 1970s. Horowitz's theory helps explain why the SDLP failed in its original objective of mobilizing a cross-community constituency behind a radical, reformist agenda, and instead became what Horowitz terms an "ethnically based party", representing the interests of only one side of the political divide in Northern Ireland.

Keywords: Horowitz, ethnic party competition, Northern Ireland, SDLP

Introduction

From the inception of the state in 1920, party politics in Northern Ireland were organized on a sectarian basis: most Protestants¹ voted for the Ulster Unionist Party, whose main political objective was to retain the Union with Great Britain; most Catholics voted for the Nationalist Party, whose main political objective was to undo the partition of Ireland and create a unified, independent Irish state. Protestants having a clear majority in the region, so long as voting continued along these lines, the Unionist Party could expect to remain in government in perpetuity. So it was that the Unionists held office without interruption from 1920 until March 1972, when in response to escalating violence between the two communities in Northern Ireland the British government suspended the local Stormont² parliament and established direct rule from London.

When the SDLP was launched in August 1970, it presented itself as a wholly new political alignment. With leaders drawn from both sides of the religious divide in Northern Ireland, the new party hoped to transcend the traditional politics of nationalism and unionism. The SDLP sought to mobilize a cross-community

constituency behind a radical, reformist agenda, concentrating on socio-economic issues rather than the sterile debate over Northern Ireland's constitutional position which had dictated all political competition hitherto.

By the end of the 1970s, however, it was clear that the SDLP had failed in this endeavor. Indeed, two of its most senior founding members left the party in this period, citing the SDLP's neglect of its original, cross-community ambitions as the reason for their departure. With the installment of a new leadership at the end of 1979, a leadership seen as essentially nationalist in its outlook, the SDLP was considered by some political commentators to have become exactly that which it had set out to replace: a sectarian political party. Donald Horowitz's theory of party competition in an ethnically divided society helps to explain how this came to be.

Horowitz's Theory of Party Competition in an Ethnically Divided Society

In his seminal text, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (2000), Horowitz begins his examination of the ethnic party system by recalling Giovanni Sartori's assertion that political parties "both 'presuppose' and 'produce', reflect and affect. ... Party and society act on each other."³ However, as Horowitz points out: "Nowhere is the reciprocal relationship between party and society more evident than in ethnic politics."⁴ Horowitz demonstrates how a political party operating in a society divided on ethnic lines invariably comes to reflect that division; it becomes, in his words, an "ethnically based party."⁵

Horowitz explains this as a result of the simple fact that parties in divided societies, like all political parties, must compete for electoral support. In order to do this, he reasons, "they may need to make compromises with their own beliefs or the beliefs of key supporters along the way. These compromises may require them to espouse positions that impair their chances of attaining the majority they seek."⁶ In this Horowitz identifies a centrifugal force acting on parties in divided societies, as elites are obliged to move away from the political centre in order to placate the more irreconcilable elements of their electoral base, or risk losing their support.⁷

From this it can be seen how Horowitz's theory, although based primarily on observation of party competition in divided societies in Africa and Asia, has direct relevance to Northern Ireland, and in particular to the development of the SDLP. For the SDLP was founded with the intention of creating a movement that would cross the communal divide in Northern Ireland, a movement that would win support from both Catholics and Protestants. However, true to Horowitz's model, this article demonstrates how the political situation in Northern Ireland from the time of the SDLP's establishment served to compromise the party's founding ideals. While the SDLP continued to articulate an anti-sectarian agenda, the onset of the Northern Ireland conflict, leading to the ever-greater polarization of society, made impossible the construction of a cross-community constituency of any significance. As a consequence, the party was forced to rely on the support of the Catholic community, and thus the SDLP became another "ethnically based party".

Horowitz's theory demonstrates how a political system in which there are ethnically based parties on both sides of a communal divide tends to deepen division and exacerbate conflict between opposing groups. This is because of the way in which such parties seek to rally their supporters:

In such a system, mobilizing known supporters and appealing to marginal voters are effectively the same thing, for there are virtually no uncommitted votes to be had on the other side of the ethnic boundary. What is uncertain is not *how* a voter will vote if he votes – a Creole will vote for the Creole party, an Ibo for the Ibo party, and so on. In such a party system, all that is uncertain is *whether* a potential voter will vote.

Accordingly, turnout becomes all-important, and there is no electoral reason to be moderate about ethnic appeals.⁸

Such “ethnic appeals” both increase the likelihood of violence between antagonistic communities, and decrease the likelihood of their respective leaders being able to reach the common ground necessary to negotiate a political settlement between the rival groups. However, the situation can be yet worse when there is political rivalry *within* as well as between ethnic communities. In order to explain how, it is first necessary to emphasize Horowitz’s point that ethnic parties operate in mutually exclusive electoral blocs:

Ethnic parties function in a segmented electoral market. If party competition is taken to mean competition for support from the electorate, rather than all forms of interparty rivalry, then party competition in an ethnic party system occurs *within but not across* ethnic group lines.⁹

Ethnic parties do not compete for votes from the opposing ethnic group. In reality, they only seek votes within their own community. But as Horowitz explains, the fear of ethnic party leaders that they might, in the process, be outflanked by more extreme elements within their community causes them to adopt ever more intransigent positions in relation to the opposing ethnic group:

The possibility of intragroup competition creates strong incentives for parties to be diligent in asserting ethnic demands, the more so when they consider the life-or-death implications of that competition for the party’s fortunes. Outbidding for ethnic support is a constant possibility.¹⁰

As such, elections in ethnic party systems are fundamentally different to those in normal political societies. In the latter, party competition tends to be based on social and economic issues, essentially revolving around how a country’s wealth and resources are managed and distributed. During elections in normal societies, parties with rival socio-economic agendas tend to move to the political center as they compete for “floating voters”, undecided voters or those without overly strong political views who might be persuaded to change an existing party allegiance. Thus party competition in normal political societies leads to moderation and consensus politics (see Figure 1).

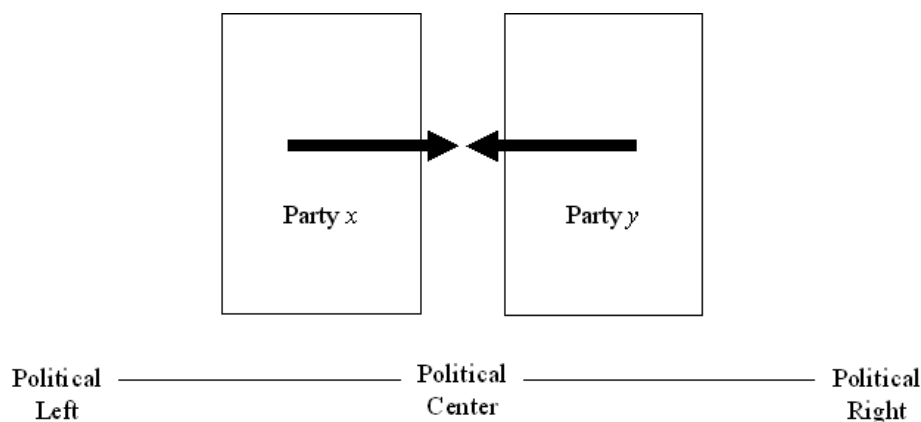


Figure 1. Orthodox Model of Party Competition

As Horowitz explains, in an ethnically divided society, quite the opposite occurs. Given that there is little chance of a voter crossing the ethnic divide – that is voting for a party which does not represent the interests of their particular ethnic group – there are few such floating voters as are found in a normal political society. As a result,

it is far more important to take effective steps to reassure ethnic supporters than to pursue will-o'-the-wisps by courting imaginary voters across ethnic lines. The near impossibility of party competition for clientele across ethnic lines means an absence of countervailing electoral incentives encouraging party moderation on ethnic issues. ...

Competition, if it comes, will be located on the flanks in the form of new parties appealing for support within each ethnic group. The threat of such competition drives both parties [from opposing ethnic communities] to protect their flanks, thus pushing their positions apart.¹¹

As a result, whereas party systems in normal political societies have a centripetal dynamic, ethnic party systems tend towards a centrifugal effect (see Figure 2).

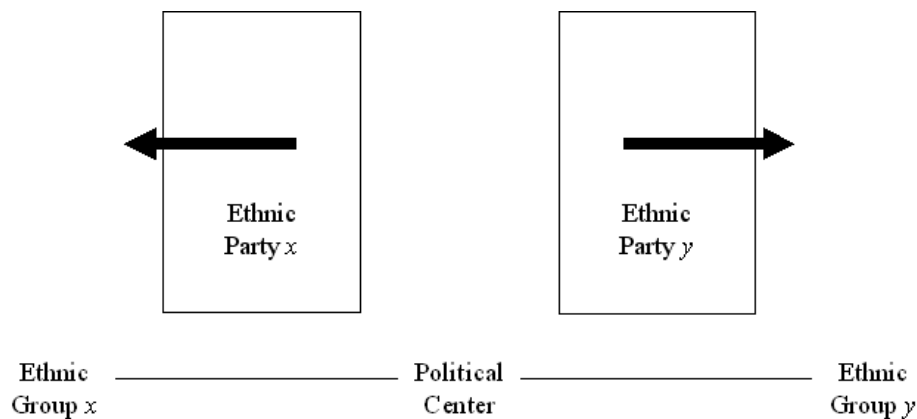


Figure 2. Model of Ethnic Party Competition

Following from this, Horowitz suggests that an ethnic party system where there is competition within as well as between ethnic communities will result in even greater polarization and conflict between the two groups. Indeed, where there is more than one party on each side of the ethnic divide, the chances of a political compromise between the two communities are greatly reduced as the fear of “intraethnic outbidding” steers established party leaders away from moderation.¹² The result is that ethnic parties are pulled ever further from the political centre (see Figure 3).

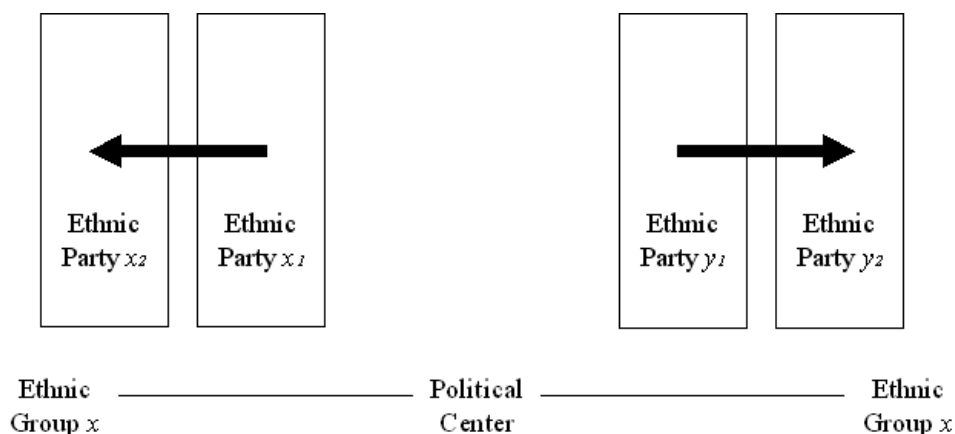


Figure 3. Model of Intra-Ethnic Party Competition

One political scientist, Paul Mitchell, has already applied Horowitz's insights in this respect to Northern Ireland.¹³ In particular, Mitchell has examined party competition in Northern Ireland from the early 1980s, when the electoral advent of Sinn Féin provided a new symmetry to the party system, with two main parties then competing for support in the nationalist community, as was already the case in the unionist community. Mitchell, following Horowitz's arguments, showed how the established party in each bloc, the SDLP in the Catholic community, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) in the Protestant community, found itself constrained by its communal rival, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) respectively. Claims from the latter, more extreme parties, that the established political representatives of the community would "sell-out" to their ethnic opponents, often forced the SDLP and the UUP to retreat from the path of compromise and return to a harder political line in order to sustain their support.

Whilst recognizing the validity of Mitchell's analysis of the Northern Ireland party system in the 1980s, this article shows how Horowitz's theory can also be used to explain political developments during the first decade of the conflict. Specifically, it shows how Horowitz can account for the SDLP's political trajectory in this period. For although the party had no credible rival for the nationalist vote in the 1970s, it is arguable that the SDLP was always subject to the pressure exerted by those more militant sections of the Catholic community. That republicanism¹⁴ did not really register in electoral terms until 1981 does not mean that it was not a threat to the SDLP until then. Even though it was primarily military in its orientation until the 1980s, the republican movement always commanded sufficient support, or at least was able to rely on a certain ambivalence within the Catholic community, to limit the SDLP's authority and condition its political outlook. Indeed, the fact that the revival of militant republicanism in Northern Ireland actually *preceded* the SDLP's formation by some months¹⁵ meant that the new party was, from its inception, vulnerable to a pull from the right. The repression and radicalization of the Catholic community in the early 1970s only increased this pull as the republican movement continued to expand in such conditions. This article seeks to demonstrate how this consequently impacted on the evolution of the SDLP.

This approach is fully consistent with Horowitz's theory. For while he certainly considers the process of "intraethnic outbidding" to be most notable when an ethnic party is faced with an actual electoral rival – as the SDLP did with the rise of Sinn Féin after 1981 – Horowitz recognizes that centrifugation can occur even when formal electoral competition is not evident: "Competitive concerns can influence the

behavior of an ethnic party even when it effectively dominates the scene.”¹⁶ The conduct of ethnic elites, he argues, is always conditioned by the fear that they might be deposed:

Ethnic party leaders, including leaders of dominant ethnic parties, often entertain understandable apprehensions that an intraethnic competitor party will steal their clientele from them. Many of the actions taken by seemingly secure ethnic parties can be understood in this light – as measures to prevent competition from emerging and to defeat it when it does emerge. Consequently, it is possible for a party to adopt a competitive posture even without active party competition.¹⁷

In this it is clear that Horowitz’s analysis is just as useful for understanding the behavior of the SDLP in the 1970s as it is for the decades after.

The Origins of the SDLP: A Troubled Birth

As noted, the SDLP was established with the intention of actually transcending religious division in Northern Ireland. But Horowitz’s work suggests that the party was not unique in this:

Many organizers of parties that turn out to have a limited ethnic base believe, with undue optimism, that they are creating a party that will span ethnic divisions. ... A wholly ethnic party system may come into being despite such ideological convictions.¹⁸

The SDLP was undoubtedly conceived with the “undue optimism” of creating a movement that would span the communal divide in Northern Ireland, a movement that would secure support from both Catholics and Protestants. Though predominately Catholic, the founding members of party also included Protestant activists, and from its launch the SDLP was presented as an anti-sectarian alignment. To this end it adopted a radical socio-economic agenda which it hoped would attract Protestant workers alienated by the conservative policies of successive Unionist governments. As a means to reassure would-be Protestant supporters who feared that their abandonment of the Unionist Party would bring an end to the Union with Britain, the SDLP declared that there should be no change in Northern Ireland’s constitutional position without the consent of a majority of its population. Nonetheless, the party articulated a desire for “co-operation, friendship and understanding between North and South with the view to the eventual reunification of Ireland”.¹⁹ The SDLP hoped that, over time, it would be able persuade Protestants that their interests were best served in an all-Ireland state. For the meantime, however, the party was more concerned with the reform of Northern Ireland. The SDLP considered this and the reconciliation of the two communities in Northern Ireland to be preconditions of any constitutional change.

Unfortunately for the SDLP, the party’s attempt to launch a new form of cross-community politics in Northern Ireland came at a time when the region was experiencing the most extreme polarization since the state’s inception. Indeed, the SDLP’s birth coincided with that of what became known as the Northern Ireland “Troubles”. The civil rights movement of the late 1960s,²⁰ in which many of the SDLP leadership had made their names, was seen by most Protestants as an essentially Catholic mobilization, thus leading first to confrontation and then to outright street violence between the two communities. This in turn forced intervention from London, with the Westminster government sending British troops into Northern Ireland in

August 1969. In essence, the troops were deployed to protect the Catholic community, more vulnerable given Protestants' monopoly over the local state security apparatus. However, after initially being welcomed as liberators of besieged nationalist districts in Derry and Belfast, relations between the British army and the Catholic community quickly turned sour.

The emergence of the Provisional IRA²¹ played no small part in this. With the Provisionals' commencement of an armed campaign against the Stormont regime, the British army began to police rather than protect the Catholic minority, and to do so in an increasingly colonial fashion.²² Attempts to suppress republican activity proved indiscriminate and ever more aggressive, alienating significant sections of the Catholic populace and thereby increasing support for the Provisionals. The army's curfew over the Falls Road district of Belfast in July 1970, during which five civilians were killed,²³ provides the most notable example. Paddy Devlin, one of the SDLP's founding members, remembers the impact which the curfew had in the run-up to the party's launch:

Overnight the population turned from neutral or even sympathetic support for the military to outright hatred of everything related to the security forces. As the self-styled generals and godfathers took over in the face of this regime ... I witnessed voters and workers in the Docks and Falls constituencies turn against us to join the Provisionals.²⁴

As such, from the moment of its inception, the SDLP had a ready-made rival for the leadership of the Catholic minority.

State repression of the nationalist community came to a head with the introduction of internment in August 1971. With this, hundreds of Catholics, many innocent of any involvement with the IRA, were incarcerated without trial or due process. Despite the violence emanating from the Protestant community, no loyalist²⁵ paramilitaries were interned. As such, Catholics saw internment, "not as a carefully planned and executed military operation against the IRA, but a punitive expedition against their community."²⁶

This placed the SDLP under enormous pressure. Already the party had walked out of the Stormont parliament in protest at the army's shooting of two Catholics in Derry in highly questionable circumstances.²⁷ But internment forced the SDLP into an even greater display of disaffection, encouraging its supporters to withdraw from public office, and joining other opposition groups in calling for a campaign of civil disobedience.²⁸ This was only 12 months after the party's launch, at which it had promised to participate in the Northern Ireland state as a means to secure its reform. But already the SDLP had been driven into abstention and now a commitment to the abolition of the Stormont regime.

Despite this, it was not until the tragedy of "Bloody Sunday" in January 1972 – when British paratroopers fired on an anti-internment rally in the Bogside area of Derry, resulting in 14 deaths – that London was finally persuaded of the need to assume direct responsibility for the governance of Northern Ireland. But as well as providing the final nail in the coffin for Stormont, Bloody Sunday dealt a further blow to the SDLP. As with internment, the IRA reaped a bitter harvest from the British army's actions, as scores of young nationalists, convinced of the need to defend their community, swelled the republican ranks.²⁹ In propaganda terms, too, the republican movement gained increasing legitimacy in its claim that, in the face of such state terror, the only option left open to the minority was to rise against it, to overthrow British rule in Ireland and unite the country by force. This, and the consequent surge in support for revolutionary republicanism, was made clear by the SDLP's John Hume in an interview with Irish state television the day after the killings, when he said that: "Many people down there feel now that it's a united Ireland or nothing."³⁰

This statement was used against Hume for years afterwards, unionists claiming that it revealed both his and the SDLP's true colors, that is their overriding commitment to a united Ireland. In fact, Hume, speaking from atop of Derry's old town walls, was referring to the residents of the Bogside district below: "*Many people down there* feel now that it's a united Ireland or nothing."³¹ Hume was talking about the close-knit community which made up a large part of his electoral constituency, nearly every member of which had just had a relative, friend or neighbor shot dead by the British army. Thus his claim that "it's a united Ireland or nothing" was not a rallying cry, but simply an interpretation of the existing political situation as he saw it. It was a comment on the overwhelming disaffection of Catholics from the Northern Ireland state in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday. Indeed, such was the Catholic community's hostility to the state at this moment that it threatened to make the SDLP's original reformist project a political irrelevancy. This was the point that Hume was making. For, as is conveniently omitted from unionist accounts, he continued his interview in saying: "Alienation is pretty total and we're all going to have to work very hard to deal with the situation."³² Hume was not simply calling for a united Ireland as unionists like to think, but rather making the point that the actions of the security forces had made it near impossible for leaders of the minority to argue for anything less.

The impact which this had on the SDLP's position was clearly seen in the proposals for a new system of government for Northern Ireland which the party put forward following Stormont's collapse. Yet even then, despite the more nationalist intent of the paper, the SDLP's *Towards a New Ireland* (1972) document still showed the party as trying to reconcile Protestant and Catholic in Northern Ireland. In essence, the paper proposed a form of joint British-Irish sovereignty over the region, this to accommodate and safeguard the political identities of both communities.³³ However, the novel of idea of political condominium for Northern Ireland was advocated only as an interim solution, with institutions also being set in place to facilitate the withdrawal of the British state and the reunification of Ireland.³⁴ Of course, Irish unity had always been the ultimate aspiration of the SDLP, but the party's original idea of gradually persuading Protestants to embrace this end was now being eclipsed by the SDLP's determination to achieve a unitary state. In this it seemed that the party was competing with the republican movement for the support of the Catholic community, promising to accomplish the same goal as the Provisionals but through peaceful means.

The "unificationist" intent of the SDLP's proposals reflected the mood amongst the Catholic community following Stormont's demise.³⁵ But the party's adoption of a more patently nationalist program was also a result of the polarization between the two communities in Northern Ireland. Indeed, in the two years since the SDLP's formation, any middle ground that had existed previously was thoroughly eroded by the turn of events. This made the construction of a viable cross-community constituency impossible, and so caused the party to fall back on its core support in the Catholic community. In this, arguably the SDLP had become an ethnically-aligned party even before the fall of Stormont. Already the party reflected rather than transcended sectarian division in Northern Ireland as was initially intended.

The 1973 Assembly Elections

This was not empirically evident, of course, until the vote for a new assembly for Northern Ireland in June 1973. This, and the vote for new district councils in the previous month, gave the SDLP its first opportunity to measure its support amongst the electorate. However, the Assembly election – the first stage in the British government's plan for the creation of a wholly new, inter-communal administration for

Northern Ireland – clearly showed the SDLP's failure to win any significant level of Protestant support.

Although it is impossible to determine the religious breakdown of the election result, the use of the proportional representation/single transferable vote (PR/STV) system in the Assembly poll at least allows for analysis of how electors' preferences were transferred from one party to another, thus giving an idea of the extent of cross-community support which individual parties achieved. In fact, it has been suggested the British government reintroduced the PR/STV model for elections in Northern Ireland³⁶ in the belief that it would build up the middle ground in Northern Ireland by allowing for the transfer of votes from the political extremes to "centrist" parties.³⁷ If so, the outcome of the Assembly election was quite the opposite of what Whitehall had hoped for. Rather than bolstering the political centre, voters tended to transfer their support to more hard-line candidates within their respective communities³⁸ – as of course would be predicted by Horowitz in a situation of ethnic conflict. Moreover, even on the first preference vote, centrist parties such as the Alliance³⁹ and the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) fared poorly, winning a combined total of only 12 per cent of the poll.⁴⁰ This suggested just how narrow the political middle ground in Northern Ireland was by this stage.

Although the SDLP actually performed very well in attracting transfers from other parties, it seems that very few of these came from Protestant voters. Indeed, the vast majority of the transfers it won came from alternative nationalist groups. While it did accrue some support from Alliance and NILP voters, receiving 15 and 14 per cent of their transfers respectively, the percentage of votes transferred from unionist and loyalist parties was so negligible that it could not be computed.⁴¹ From this it seems safe to conclude that the SDLP had failed to construct a bi-confessional political constituency of any consequence.

An early analyst of the SDLP, Ian McAllister, feels that this was the party's own failing. For him the SDLP's only noteworthy effort to reach across the sectarian divide at this time came in an advertisement placed in a Protestant daily newspaper which elucidated the party's political proposals.⁴² In this, however, McAllister largely overlooks the continued efforts which the SDLP made to open up a dialogue with loyalist leaders from late 1972. These efforts began when the SDLP's John Hume and Ivan Cooper met for private talks with William Craig and John Taylor,⁴³ both former Unionist government ministers who commanded great influence amongst the loyalist rank and file.

Though little came from these discussions, the SDLP continued to hold out hope of reaching some agreement with a section of the unionist community. To this end it advised individual party branches to make any possible contact with local loyalist organizations, a means to circumvent unionist leaders' reluctance to sanction official talks with the SDLP.⁴⁴ It was in the context of this initiative that, as McAllister notes, the party published its political proposals in the Protestant daily, *The Belfast News Letter*.

These proposals represented a certain modification of the condominium scheme put forward in the SDLP's *Towards a New Ireland* document the previous year, with representatives from London and Dublin acting merely as guarantors of an agreement that would leave essential power with the people of Northern Ireland themselves.⁴⁵ The press interpreted the SDLP's scheme as an attempt to mollify unionists' opposition to joint sovereignty,⁴⁶ and it did appear to go some way to meet the idea of an independent Northern Ireland which William Craig had been arguing for. Indeed, in confidential a meeting with officials from the Dublin government, Hume had suggested that the SDLP's proposals were a logical outcome of the party's discussions with Craig and Taylor.⁴⁷ This showed how seriously the SDLP took these talks, and how sincere it was in its efforts to convince an element of unionist opinion that the two communities could work out mutually acceptable constitutional structures.

The response to the SDLP's effort, however, showed its futility. Though there were further talks with Craig and Taylor, little came of them, and other loyalist leaders continued to disassociate themselves from such moves.⁴⁸ The reaction of the unionist grassroots, to whom the SDLP claimed to be appealing, explained why. Directly responding to the party's advert in *The Belfast News Letter*, Samuel Smyth, a press officer in Craig's Ulster Vanguard movement, rubbished the SDLP's claims to be seeking dialogue and reconciliation: "It must be realised that the SDLP, by their policy of non-participation over the past few years have, in fact, been the main obstacle to a dialogue taking place." Agreement, he continued, "is only a description of that which takes place over time between two States or communities when one is not dedicated to the destruction of the other. Your task, SDLP, is to prove to us that such is not your intention."⁴⁹ In this Smyth spoke for many unionists, who now saw little to distinguish the SDLP from the IRA. Both, it was considered, were set on ultimate abolition of the Northern Ireland state. In Protestant eyes, all that differed between the two was their methodology.

Consolidation of the Catholic Vote

The SDLP's failure to win even the trust never mind the support of the Protestant community shows the validity of Horowitz's model of party development in the context of a society divided on ethnic lines. The ignominious failure of the SDLP's attempt to reach across to the unionist grassroots in the early part of 1973 made abundantly clear what had been the case since at least the collapse of Stormont: the SDLP could not hope to win any significant electoral support from the Protestant community. In this context it made sense for the party to concentrate its energies instead on maximizing its vote within the Catholic community. This is congruent with Horowitz's thesis:

Once ethnic politics begin in earnest, each party, recognizing that it cannot count on defections from members of the other ethnic group, has the incentive to solidify support of its own group. As ... experience shows, there is no point holding back from consolidating the party on an ethnic basis.⁵⁰

The SDLP's concern to secure the nationalist vote, even at the expense of its cross-community aspirations, was clearly reflected in the party's manifesto for the Northern Ireland Assembly elections, *A New North, A New Ireland* (1973). After attempting to ease unionist concerns about the party's political strategy in its advert in *The Belfast News Letter*, this document represented a retreat to the unificationist vista of *Towards a New Ireland*. Once again the case was made for political institutions which would "ensure equalization and harmonization in all fields in both parts in Ireland. This would ensure the progressive removal of any social and economic barriers to integration."⁵¹ In case this technocratic approach left any nationalists confused, the conclusion of the manifesto reassured them in the plainest of terms that: "This Party remains firmly committed to the unity of Ireland as the ultimate solution to our basic political difficulties."⁵²

The outcome of the Assembly election is often cited as evidence of the SDLP's consolidation of political power within the Catholic community.⁵³ For its share of the poll eclipsed that of its opponents in the nationalist electoral bloc, with 22.1 per cent of the first preference vote against the 1.2 per cent claimed by the near defunct Nationalist Party. As a result, the SDLP entered the Assembly as the sole representatives of the minority community.⁵⁴ But this picture is very misleading. A closer examination of the figures shows that the SDLP won the support of less than half of all eligible Catholic voters in Northern Ireland at 47.3 per cent.⁵⁵ The idea that

the party established political hegemony over the minority in the Assembly election ignores the existence of a vast abstentionist constituency, residing largely within the Catholic working class. This section of the populace refused to back the SDLP's reformist agenda – even with the more nationalist hue it was now assuming – but did not become significant until mobilized by Sinn Féin in the early 1980s. Only then, with the electoral rebirth of republicanism, would the precarious nature of the SDLP's ascendancy within the nationalist community finally be exposed.

While most academic commentaries overlook this frailty, it did not go unnoticed by those organizing the SDLP at this time. Denis Haughey, party chairman for most of the 1970s, believes that the SDLP was only too aware of the limitations of its support base. He attributed this to the historical experience of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, which led to a certain pessimism regarding constitutional politics amongst a significant section of the community. This, Haughey feels, always conditioned the SDLP's political authority, and so too its behavior:

there was ... a big proportion of the nationalist community who never accepted the leadership of the SDLP. That was clear to me and to others of us in the early '70s. ... [T]hose of us who looked at the demographic statistics and so on were aware that even though we were getting ... [up to] 160, 000 votes, that that was not by any means the whole nationalist community voting. ... We were always conscious of the fact that there was a big element of people who in principle didn't vote and ... a big element of people who thought it was pointless voting ... because they just despaired of ever bringing about any change.⁵⁶

Knowing the futility of its appeal to Protestants, but also aware of the limitations of its support amongst the Catholic community, the SDLP went into negotiations for a new political settlement for Northern Ireland knowing that it had to deliver from a nationalist perspective.

The Sunningdale Agreement

The Sunningdale Agreement⁵⁷ of December 1973 did not provide the transitional structures which the SDLP had argued for in *Towards a New Ireland* and *A New North, A New Ireland*. The centerpiece of the Agreement was a new, power-sharing administration for Northern Ireland which brought the SDLP into government alongside the Ulster Unionist Party and the centrist Alliance Party. The SDLP's desire for an all-Ireland dimension to the settlement was eventually satisfied by the promise of the creation of a so-called a Council of Ireland. However, this institution was not the engine of Irish reunification the party had hoped for. Indeed, the areas in which the Council of Ireland would have authority were limited to apolitical fields of common interest between North and South such as the tourism and trade.⁵⁸ Moreover, the body's executive arm, the Council of Ministers, operated on the basis of unanimity.⁵⁹ As such, no decision with regard to North-South relations could be taken without Unionist ministers' agreement; they could resist any act of "harmonization" which they felt compromised the constitution of Northern Ireland. In addition, the competencies of the Council of Ireland could not be extended without further assent from the Northern Ireland Assembly, where unionist representatives had a clear majority. This gave Ulster unionism a double veto over the Council's power.⁶⁰ As such, the Unionist Party leader, Brian Faulkner, was able to recall that

all of us in the Unionist deputation were convinced that we had come off the best at Sunningdale ... We felt elated and expected our success to

be recognized. One member of our delegation remarked that Sunningdale would go down in history as a Unionist victory.⁶¹

Unfortunately, Faulkner's reading of the Sunningdale settlement was not endorsed by the unionist community at large. Many Protestants, erroneously, saw in the Agreement exactly that which the SDLP had hoped for: a harbinger of Irish unity. Loyalists, opposed to any compromise with Irish nationalism, exploited such fears and, with an infamous slogan declaring that "Dublin is just a Sunningdale away", turned the untimely Westminster election of February 1974 into an effective referendum on the Agreement. The result showed a clear majority of the unionist community in opposition to the Sunningdale.⁶² Using this as a mandate for further action, loyalist activists and paramilitaries organized a general strike which brought Northern Ireland to a standstill and finally toppled the power-sharing administration.⁶³

The SDLP was outraged, both by the loyalist strike, and the British government's failure to intervene and save Sunningdale. However, the party cannot be seen as blameless for the Agreement's demise. Indeed, the SDLP played into loyalist hands in its presentation of the Sunningdale accord. Rather than a framework within which nationalists, North and South, might co-operate with unionists and persuade them of the value of Irish unity, the Agreement was extolled as a mere precursor to that seemingly inescapable end. The most memorable and oft-cited example of this *faux pas* was provided by the SDLP Assembly member, Hugh Logue, when he told a Dublin audience that the proposed Council of Ireland was "the vehicle that would trundle Unionists into a united Ireland."⁶⁴ It was exactly this fear that so undermined Protestant support for Sunningdale, such that even moderate unionists eventually backed the strike which destroyed the Agreement.⁶⁵

Why was it, though, that the SDLP was prepared to provide loyalist opponents of the accord with such a propaganda coup, effectively supporting what they were claiming, namely that Dublin was just a Sunningdale away? The likely answer is that the party was responding to criticism from the Provisionals and the radical left, both of whom claimed that the SDLP had betrayed its civil rights origins by joining a "partitionist" government which continued to employ such repressive measures as internment without trial.⁶⁶ That such charges of "collaboration" emanated from groups which did not appear to pose any real electoral threat to the SDLP is beside the point. Recalling Horowitz interpretation of party dynamics in a divided society:

Competitive concerns can influence the behavior of an ethnic party even when it effectively dominates the scene. ... Ethnic party leaders, including leaders of dominant ethnic parties, often entertain understandable apprehensions that an intraethnic competitor party will steal their clientele from them. Many of the actions taken by seemingly secure ethnic parties can be understood in this light – as measures to prevent competition from emerging and to defeat it when it does emerge. Consequently, it is possible for a party to adopt a competitive posture even without active party competition.⁶⁷

This helps to explain the particularly defensive behavior of the SDLP at this time. For the party's response to the criticism leveled at it with regard to Sunningdale was to hold all the more tenaciously to its ever more nationalist credentials, and in particular to the idea that the Council of Ireland would deliver Irish unity. Indeed, it should be remembered that Hugh Logue's infamous comment that the Council was "the vehicle that would trundle Unionists into a united Ireland" was made in direct response to a republican heckler amongst his audience, who accused the party of "selling out" on the national issue.⁶⁸ As Horowitz reasons, such censure is bound to provoke an intransigent response from a party operating in an ethnically segmented society:

This is partly because the ethnic cause has an element of sacredness to it. The charge of neglecting it may carry an indelible stigma. ... If an ethnic party is discredited and loses the support of the group it represents, for failing to protect the interests of that group, recouping the loss will be difficult. ... Competitive comebacks for ethnic parties cannot be counted on.⁶⁹

It was for precisely this reason that the SDLP chose to portray Sunningdale, incorrectly, as an *interregnum* between British and Irish rule. Equally, it was precisely this fear that caused unionists to turn so decisively against the Agreement.

The Greening of the SDLP

The late 1970s is commonly depicted as a period of further “greening” of the SDLP.⁷⁰ There were a number of reasons for the party’s drift to a more hard-line position at this time. Most important amongst these was the intransigence of the unionist community. Buoyed by their defeat of the Sunningdale settlement, unionists of all shades became increasingly inflexible from the mid-1970s, convinced that if they held out long enough Westminster would either restore an essentially majoritarian system of government in Northern Ireland, or fully integrate the region into the UK. With such a mindset, there was little of chance of compromise with the SDLP.

Another reason for the party’s retreat to a more nationalist position in the late 1970s was the political indifference of the British government in this period. Seeming to abandon all hope of establishing a local settlement in Northern Ireland, the London government now settled into the role of ruling the region directly from Westminster. At the same time, the British state looked to at least contain the threat of the IRA by adopting a more stringent approach to security. The former strategy seemed to pacify unionists, the Protestant middle classes in particular becoming increasingly acceptant of direct rule as the best possible form of government available to Northern Ireland at this time.⁷¹ The latter policy, and the strict military policing of the Catholic community which it entailed, served only to further alienate nationalists.

It also appeared that the Irish government, hitherto wholly supportive of the SDLP, had abandoned the party in the aftermath of Sunningdale’s collapse. Seeming to accept that it was the overplaying of the “Irish dimension” of the 1973 settlement that had brought it demise, Dublin purposely sought to distance itself from the Northern Ireland problem in the late 1970s. However, this did little to encourage unionist conciliation and only heightened northern nationalists’ sense of isolation.

By 1977, the SDLP also faced an electoral challenge within Catholic community with the formation of the fundamentalist Irish Independence Party (IIP). The challenge was short-lived, but the IIP’s blunt demand for a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland did win some support, particularly in more rural constituencies. In doing so the IIP encouraged the agitation of those in the SDLP who wanted the party to adopt a more nationalist stance in order to secure its flank.⁷²

Change was also occurring within the republican movement at this time, with a more astute leadership beginning to reorganize the Provisionals and introduce a political element to their strategy.⁷³ Though the threat to the SDLP posed by a politicized republicanism would not be made manifest until the early 1980s, already developments were serving to undermine the party’s position.

These factors – the intransigence of the unionist community; the indifference of the British government; the inaction of the Irish government; the induction of the IPP; and the inception of political republicanism – forced the SDLP to take an ever more nationalist line. This in turn led to the defection of two of the party’s most senior founding members, Paddy Devlin in 1977, and the party leader, Gerry Fitt, in 1979.

On leaving, Fitt and Devlin, both more left-wing SDLP leaders, cited the dilution of the party's socialist agenda and the neglect of its cross-community aspirations as reasons for their departure.⁷⁴ "I have never been a Nationalist to the total exclusion of my Socialist beliefs", Fitt told the press on resigning: "The SDLP is nationalist."⁷⁵ Fitt's replacement as SDLP leader, John Hume, and the new party deputy, Séamus Mallon, appeared to confirm this interpretation, both being considered more traditionally nationalist in their outlook.

Fitt's and Devlin's critique of the SDLP had a certain legitimacy. However, as reference to Horowitz has demonstrated, the blunting of the party's socialist and anti-sectarian instincts was an inevitable consequence of the SDLP's placement in an ethnic party system. Moreover, it is perhaps ironic – given that it was Fitt and Devlin who were the SDLP leaders most vocal about their intention to reach across the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland – that their respective political fortunes after leaving the party should demonstrate exactly why the SDLP had recoiled from this objective, and therein give final confirmation of the applicability of Horowitz's model. Standing for the European parliament in 1979, Devlin won a derisory 1.1 per cent of the vote. He narrowly retained his seat on Belfast City Council in 1981, but failed to be re-elected in 1985.⁷⁶ Fitt, meanwhile, having represented West Belfast at Westminster since 1966, promptly lost his seat to the Sinn Féin leader, Gerry Adams, in the 1983 election. Fitt's and Devlin's political demise after quitting the SDLP follows the pattern identified by Horowitz:

The rise of an ethnic party system also precludes a significant role for independent candidates or for popular personalities who have defected from ethnic parties to run on other tickets. With ethnic groups polarized, it is a risky course for voters to register a preference for even a popular candidate of their own ethnic group if that candidate is not affiliated with the party of that group.⁷⁷

Fitt and Devlin were quite right to suggest that the SDLP had failed to uphold the ideals that had animated the party at the time of its formation. But Horowitz shows that a radical socio-economic agenda, and the intention to mobilize an inter-bloc constituency on that basis, is often found to be unviable in the context of a deeply divided society:

Over and over again, socialist intellectuals in the developing world have organized parties intending to do battle on class lines, only to find that their potential followings had rather different ideas ...⁷⁸

Horowitz gives examples of numerous political parties in other ethnically segmented societies who, after starting out with a leftist program, soon found that they had to re-order themselves on ethnic lines and play down their socialist commitments:

Attempts by the Left to span group boundaries become electorally costly. Potential supporters of a left-wing party want to know on which side of the ethnic conflict the party stands. This demands an abandonment of the former Left strategy if the parties are to survive. ... In an ethnic party system the choice for a Left party is to adapt and become essentially an ethnic party or to wither and die.⁷⁹

This is exactly the choice which faced the SDLP, and it chose to become an essentially ethnic party so as to maintain its political relevancy.⁸⁰ With the onset of the Troubles, the increasing polarization of the two communities, and thus the obvious impossibility of attracting any significant level of working class Protestant support, the SDLP chose to quietly step back from its more original strategy of

building a bi-confessional constituency through the pursuit of a leftist political program, and instead decided to concentrate on consolidating its Catholic support by adopting a more patently nationalist position on the constitutional question.

Conclusion

Shortly after the collapse of the Sunningdale experiment in 1974, a despondent John Hume gave an earnest interview with *The Belfast Telegraph* in which he seemed to give subjective credence to Horowitz's interpretation of elite activity in ethnically divided societies. " ... [T]here are serious limitations to political leadership in Northern Ireland", Hume said,

people can only be led as far as they want to be led. There is ample evidence to demonstrate the truth of that, and therefore a great deal of what happened has been the inevitability of events rather than being particularly shaped by anyone.

It's not the way I wanted it to be, when I set out. I was prepared for a much more gradual development. I believed that the original civil rights campaign, which was in many respects a cautious movement, had the support of quite a number of Protestants at the beginning. And that strict non-violence was the right way forward and would have brought us much more slowly but more surely to a better future.⁸¹

The efforts made by Hume and his colleagues to translate the civil rights campaign of the late 1960s into a political movement which would win cross-community support for reform and equality in Northern Ireland were thoroughly genuine. However, they were also thoroughly unsuccessful. As Hume's comments suggest, there were severe limitations to the SDLP's ability to lead people to embrace a more progressive form of politics in Northern Ireland. Even before the SDLP came into being, the prospects of bringing Protestant and Catholic in Northern Ireland together behind a single political program were optimistic, society having observed a kind of communal cold war in the decades that followed the bloody birth of the state. In the 1960s, there were signs of a thaw in relations between the two communities, but any *rapprochement* was short-lived, as the idealism of the civil rights movement rapidly gave way to street conflict and the retreat of the two ethnic groups behind more familiar political frontiers. By the time the SDLP arrived in August 1970, a new phase in the historic conflict between Protestant and Catholic in Ireland had already opened up. It would prove to be the most enduring.

The problem for the SDLP in the 1970s was the same as that which has afflicted all progressive political movements in Northern Ireland since the state's inception. This is the problem of Northern Ireland's constitutional status, and the overwhelmingly ethnic basis of political preferences on this subject, with most Protestants adamant that region should remain part of the United Kingdom, and most Catholics hoping for some form of unification with the Republic of Ireland. Although, from its launch, the SDLP tried to focus minds on the reform rather than the reconstitution of the Northern Ireland state, the party was still obliged to take some position on this subject. Indeed, even to take no position on the constitutional question, or to try to project an image of neutrality on the issue, can be interpreted as acceptance of the political *status quo*, and thus unionism by default – as is seen in the case of the centrist, but nonetheless unionist, Alliance Party. A Northern Ireland party which does not articulate at least a desire for Irish unity can not hope to achieve any significant degree of support amongst the Catholic community, as the Alliance Party bears witness to.⁸²

By advocating a policy of "unity by consent" – that is accepting that Irish reunification could only take place with the support of a majority in Northern Ireland,

which by definition meant winning over Protestants to the idea – the SDLP went as far as any party emanating essentially from the Catholic community could go in accepting partition. What the SDLP tried to do in adopting this position was, in effect, to postpone the constitutional debate and reassure potential Protestant supporters, the objective being to create a broad, cross-community constituency which would allow for the pursuit of a radical reformist program, producing such positive change that, in time, attitudes towards reunification might evolve of their own accord. But the aspiration to Irish unity had to be there for nationalists from the outset. Moreover, as events in the early 1970s unfolded, as the Catholic community radicalized, as alienation from the existing state deepened, and as republicans tried to convert this disaffection into a campaign that would unite Ireland by force, the SDLP was forced to move beyond the idea of unity as merely a long-term aspiration, and instead to actually articulate an alternative, non-violent approach towards its achievement.

Of course the SDLP's increasing predetermination towards Irish unity, and the violence and polarization that came with the outbreak of the Troubles, only made it less likely that the party would win any substantial Protestant support. Following Horowitz's model, the SDLP became an ethnically based party, its support almost entirely derived from one side of the communal divide. In turn this meant that the SDLP became more subject to the minority's ambition of Irish unity. Any idea of abandoning or even demoting this objective and concentrating on the internal reform of Northern Ireland became politically inconceivable. The party's original intention of sidelining the constitutional question, imagining that it would be addressed only after division within Northern Ireland had been overcome, became impossible. The SDLP had to be seen to uphold and to pursue the end of Irish reunification if it was to survive.

The SDLP, then, became an ethnically based party because of the simple fact that it was operating in an ethnically divided society, and thus an ethnic party system. This became more evident to political analysts examining Northern Ireland in the 1980s, when the arrival of Sinn Féin provided the SDLP with its first sustained electoral contest. This, accordingly, forced the more moderate party to become increasingly concerned for its support within the nationalist bloc, and so increasingly neglectful of its original cross-community ambitions. However, as Horowitz suggests, there is not necessarily a need for formal electoral competition in order for a party in an ethnically segmented society to become subject to a centrifugal pull, something which the development of the SDLP in the 1970s clearly demonstrates. This centrifugal effect compromised the SDLP's founding ambition of creating a cross-community movement for reform in Northern Ireland, and instead saw the party align itself with one ethnic group in the region, the Catholic community, by taking an increasingly nationalist stance. But by using Horowitz, and therein comparing party competition in Northern Ireland to that in other divided regions of the world, it becomes clear that there is nothing exceptional about the SDLP's abandonment of its formative agenda and its submission to the imperatives of ethnic politics.

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Notes

¹ The terms “Protestant” and “Catholic”, and “unionist” and “nationalist”, are used interchangeably when referring to the two main communities in Northern Ireland, this to allow for variety of expression in the text. For the same reason the appellations “majority” and “minority” are also used in reference to the unionist and nationalist communities respectively.

² Stormont is the name given to the buildings which have housed the Northern Ireland parliament, operational or otherwise, since the early 1930s. However, the term is also used as a synonym for the Westminster-style, majoritarian system of government which allowed the Protestant community to dominate state and society in Northern Ireland from 1920 to 1972.

³ Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (London: University of California Press, 2000), p. 291. Horowitz is citing Sartori’s *Parties and Party Systems: Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 192.

⁴ Horowitz (2000), p. 291.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 331-2 [emphasis in original].

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 342 [author’s emphasis].

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 346, 347.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 357-9

¹³ See Paul Mitchell, “Conflict Regulation and Party Competition in Northern Ireland”, *European Journal of Political Research*, 20 (1991); “Party Competition in an Ethnic Dual Party System”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 18 (1995); and “The Party System and Party Competition”, in Paul Mitchell and Rick Wilford (eds.), *Politics in Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1999).

¹⁴ Although tracing its origins to the French-influenced, and primarily Protestant, United Irishmen of late 18th century Ireland, “republicanism”, as the term is used in reference to contemporary Northern Ireland, tends to refer to the more extreme form of Irish nationalism which has been prepared to use physical force to achieve Irish unification. From 1969, the Provisional IRA provided the primary expression of this tendency. However, in the early 1980s, republicanism also attained political representation through the electoral success of Sinn Féin that came on the back of the prison protests and hunger strikes of 1980-1. Together the IRA and Sinn Féin are commonly referred to as “the republican movement.”

¹⁵ Following the ignominious failure of the IRA’s “border campaign” of 1956-62, the republican movement had moved away from militarism and, under a decidedly left-wing leadership, began to concentrate on political agitation around socio-economic issues. However, with the renewal of political conflict in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s, and with Catholic communities in Belfast in particular left vulnerable to attacks from Protestant extremists and the state security forces, more traditional republicans began to push for a return to a militarised movement. This led in December 1969 to a split between the leftist “Official” IRA and the more hard-line “Provisional” IRA. Sinn Féin divided the same way the following month. By the time the SDLP came into existence over half a year later, the Provisionals, aided by the indiscriminate and at times brutal actions of British troops amongst the Catholic populace, had managed to establish a support base in Belfast which would, with the turn of events, continue to grow in the coming months. For a fuller account of the emergence of the Provisional IRA see Richard English, *Armed Struggle: A History of the IRA* (London: Macmillan, 2003), ch. 3.

¹⁶ Horowitz (2000), p. 342.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 306, 307.

¹⁹ *The Irish Times*, 22 Aug. 1970.

²⁰ For a comprehensive explanation of the civil rights movement and its relation to the outbreak of the Northern Ireland Troubles, see Bob Purdie, *Politics in the Streets: The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1990).

²¹ Refer to note 15 above.

²² Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, *The Origins of the Present Troubles in Northern Ireland* (London: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1997), pp. 54, 176-7; Niall Ó Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites: Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), ch. 4.

²³ Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, *The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland: Power Conflict and Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 130.

²⁴ Paddy Devlin, *Straight Left: An Autobiography* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1993), p. 134.

²⁵ Mirroring the term republican, “loyalist” or “loyalism” tends to refer to the more extreme form of unionism which is prepared to use violence as a means to protect the Union with Britain.

²⁶ Ian McAllister, *The Northern Ireland Social Democratic and Labour Party: Political Opposition in a Divided Society* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 99.

²⁷ Ó Dochartaigh, pp. 267, 270.

²⁸ Austin Currie, *All Hell Will Break Loose* (London: O’Brien Press, 2004), pp. 175, 177; Devlin, pp. 161-2; McAllister, p. 100.

- ²⁹ English, p. 151.
- ³⁰ Quoted in Barry White, *John Hume: Statesman of the Troubles* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1984), p. 120.
- ³¹ Author's emphasis.
- ³² Quoted in White, p. 120.
- ³³ The SDLP, *Towards a New Ireland* (Belfast: SDLP, 1972), p. 4.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ³⁵ Gerard Murray, *John Hume and the SDLP: Impact and Survival in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998), p. 18; P. J. McLoughlin, *John Hume and the Revision of Irish Nationalism: 1964-79* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis: Queen's University Belfast, 2005), pp. 93, 105-6.
- ³⁶ Under the terms of Westminster's Government of Ireland Act of 1920, PR/STV had been the original method of election for Northern Ireland. The system was proposed, as it was for the southern Irish parliament envisaged by the Act, in order to increase minority representation in both jurisdictions. However, while PR/STV was retained in the South, it was abolished by the Unionist government in time for the Northern Ireland elections of 1929; Paul Mitchell and Gordon Gillespie, "The Electoral Systems", in Paul Mitchell and Rick Wilford (eds.), *Politics in Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1999), pp. 67-8.
- ³⁷ Michael Cunningham, *British Government Policy in Northern Ireland, 1969-89: Its Nature and Execution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 53.
- ³⁸ Paul Dixon, *Northern Ireland: the Politics of War and Peace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 139.
- ³⁹ Coalescing around the most progressive and secular elements within unionism, the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, established in April 1970, might have seemed the SDLP's most obvious competitor for votes in the 1973 Assembly election, for it also appealed for support from both religious communities. However, adopting a more *laissez faire* economic philosophy, it was with middle class liberalism rather than working class solidarity that the Alliance sought to build its bridge across the political divide. Moreover, while the party stood for equality of opportunity for Catholics in Northern Ireland, its support for the constitutional *status quo* remained undiminished. As such, it could rely on the votes of only a very small section of the minority community. The Alliance Party's steadfast commitment to an inclusive brand of unionism meant that it did maintain a cross-community appeal through the Troubles and beyond, but a very narrow one, limited to the most liberal Protestants, and the least nationalist Catholics. In one sense the Alliance challenges Horowitz's thesis in its resisting the centrifugal pull of the ethnic party system; on the other hand, the restrictions of its support suggest why most parties operating in a divided society eventually submit to this force.
- ⁴⁰ Michael Laver, *The Theory and Practice of Party Competition: Ulster, 1973-75* (London: Sage Publications, 1976), p. 34.
- ⁴¹ HMSO, *The Northern Ireland General Elections of 1973* (London: HMSO, 1975), Cmnd. 5851, tables 36 and 38, pp. 73, 75. As little as 0.25 per cent of all transfers travelled across the political divide as defined by the authors of this paper; para. 169.
- ⁴² McAllister, p. 127.
- ⁴³ *The Guardian*, 14th Feb. 1973; *The Irish Times*, 28 Feb. 1973.
- ⁴⁴ *The Belfast Telegraph*, 6 April 1973; *The Irish Times*, 6 April 1973.
- ⁴⁵ *The Belfast Newsletter*, 4 March 1973.
- ⁴⁶ *The Guardian*, 5 March 1973; *The Irish Times*, 5 March 1973.
- ⁴⁷ Notes on discussion with John Hume MP, 3 March 1973 [no author]; NAI, Department of Taoiseach, 2004/21/466. The SDLP's belief that there was a genuine thaw in its relations with loyalist leaders at this point is demonstrated by Hume's further suggestion that figures like Craig and Taylor would now be willing to accept invitations to official functions in the Republic.
- ⁴⁸ *The Irish News*, 7 March 1973; *The Irish Press*, 8 March 1973.
- ⁴⁹ *The Belfast News Letter*, 6 March 1973.
- ⁵⁰ Horowitz (2000), p. 318.
- ⁵¹ SDLP, *A New North, A New Ireland* (Belfast: SDLP, 1973).
- ⁵² *Ibid.*
- ⁵³ Paul Bew and Henry Patterson, *The British State and the Ulster Crisis: From Wilson to Thatcher* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 56; Dixon, p. 141; McAllister, pp. 50, 126.
- ⁵⁴ The political representatives of the Official IRA were actually the SDLP's closest rivals with 1.8 per cent of the first preference vote. The Provisionals boycotted the election. Bew and Patterson, *The British State and the Ulster Crisis*, p. 56; Sydney Elliott and W. D. Flackes, *Northern Ireland: A Political Directory, 1968-1999* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1999), p. 533.
- ⁵⁵ Enda Staunton, *The Nationalists of Northern Ireland, 1918-1973* (Dublin: Columbia Press, 2001), pp. 276-7.
- ⁵⁶ Denis Haughey; interview with author, Cookstown, Northern Ireland, 30th July, 2004.
- ⁵⁷ Despite the common usage of the term, "the Sunningdale Agreement" was not, in fact, a binding political agreement. Rather, in the words of Kenneth Bloomfield, one of the most senior Northern Ireland officials involved in the negotiation process, it was "an agreement to reach an agreement" (*Stormont in Crisis Stormont in Crisis: A Memoir*, Belfast: Blackstaff 1994, p. 203). What emerged from the Sunningdale conference of December 1973 was a communiqué which outlined the points on which the

British and Irish governments and the Northern Ireland parties involved were agreed upon, and the actions which they intended to take on the basis of that agreement. The understanding was that a second conference would be held in early 1974 at which a formal accord based on the December communiqué would be signed by the two governments and the participating parties. This second conference never took place. In spite of this, convention is followed in the main text by referring to the December 1973 communiqué as “the Sunningdale Agreement”. A copy of the communiqué can be found in Richard Deutsch and Vivien Magowan, *Northern Ireland, 1968-73: A Chronology of Events, Volume 2: 1972-73* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1974), appendix 7.

⁵⁸ The Sunningdale communiqué, article 8.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, article 7.

⁶⁰ Garret FitzGerald, *All in a Life: An Autobiography* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1991), p. 209. One senior Northern Ireland official went so far as to describe the Council of Ireland as “a sham”, arguing that the need for unanimity meant that there was no danger to the unionist position; Bew and Patterson, p. 73.

⁶¹ Brian Faulkner, *Memoirs of a Statesman* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978), pp. 236-7.

⁶² Elliott and Flackes, p. 537.

⁶³ For an authoritative account of the loyalist strike, see Robert Fisk, *The Point of No Return: The Strike which Broke the British in Ulster* (London: André Deutsch, 1975). A more recent interpretation is provided by Don Anderson in *14 Days in May: The Inside Story of the Loyalist Strike of 1974* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994).

⁶⁴ Quoted in Paul Bew and Gordon Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: a Chronology of the Troubles, 1968-1999* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999), p. 77.

⁶⁵ Currie, p. 266; Paul F. Power, “The Sunningdale Strategy and the Northern Majority Consent Doctrine in Anglo-Irish Relations”, *Éire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies*, XII: 1 (1977), p. 56; Ruane and Todd, p. 133.

⁶⁶ Bew and Patterson, pp. 65-6.

⁶⁷ Horowitz (2000), pp. 342, 343.

⁶⁸ Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles: Ireland's Ordeal 1966-1996 and the Search for Peace* (London: Arrow Books, 1996) p. 209; Dixon, p. 147.

⁶⁹ Horowitz (2000), p. 344.

⁷⁰ Bew and Gillespie, pp. 123, 124-5; Dixon, pp. 173-4; Henry Patterson, *Ireland since 1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 251-2.

⁷¹ Bew and Gillespie, pp. 118, 125, 127; Bew and Patterson, pp. 92ff. Colin Coulter explores more fully the idea of the Protestant *bourgeoisie*'s contentment with Westminster rule in his chapter, “Direct Rule and the Unionist Middle Classes”, in Richard English and Graham Walker (eds.), *Unionism in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1996).

⁷² Murray, p. 68; Gerard Murray and Jonathan Tonge, *The SDLP and Sinn Féin: from Participation to Alienation* (London: O'Brien Press, 2005), pp. 60, 105. Ironically, the only defections from the SDLP to the IIP were by members from North Antrim led by John Turnly, one of the party's few Protestant members; Murray, pp. 69-70.

⁷³ English, ch. 5; Ed Maloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), pp. 151ff.; Murray and Tonge, pp. 101ff.

⁷⁴ Devlin, pp. 277ff.; Murray, pp. 63ff.

⁷⁵ *The Irish Times*, 23 Nov. 1979.

⁷⁶ Elliott and Flackes, pp. 232, 549.

⁷⁷ Horowitz (2000), pp. 340-1.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 337-8

⁸⁰ In fact, this was not unlike the choice faced by Paddy Devlin's former party, the NILP. The only difference is that the NILP aligned itself with the Protestant rather than the Catholic community by coming out in favor of the Union in 1949. Moreover, it was only by doing so that the NILP was able to gain sufficient support from a hitherto suspicious Protestant working class to allow it to pose any serious challenge to the Unionist Party. However, correspondingly, the NILP's ability to attract Catholic votes became more difficult after it openly pledged its support for the constitutional *status quo*; Elliott and Flackes, p. 371.

⁸¹ *The Belfast Telegraph*, 27 Oct. 1974.

⁸² Refer to note 39 above.