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Authors(s)	Todd, Jennifer
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Elite intent, public reaction and institutional change

Jennifer Todd

The Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) of November 1985 produced intense public and political reactions in Northern Ireland. In successive polls in January and February 1986 (conducted respectively for the BBC, the *Belfast Telegraph* and the *Irish Times*), over 75 per cent of Protestants opposed the AIA and only 8 per cent approved of it, while only 10 per cent of Catholics opposed it and over half approved of it. Over half of Protestants believed it gave a decision-making role to the Irish State, while less than a third thought that role merely consultative, while the proportions were reversed for Catholics (Cox, 1987: 339; see also http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/politics/polls.htm). The strongest and most intense response came from the unionists.

In this chapter, I make use of new data from a research project funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (Breaking Patterns of Conflict, 2007-10) to reveal the intent of the political elites who made the AIA and the nature of the institutional change that ensued. This shows that the AIA had a profound impact for the governance of Northern Ireland, although for different reasons than the Northern Ireland parties anticipated, or the governments intended.

The formal provisions of the AIA are well documented in this volume. It clearly stated that there would be no derogation of sovereignty, while reiterating the principle that Northern Ireland's constitutional status was dependent on the will of a majority in Northern Ireland, and granting the Irish Government a role in policy-making in the Anglo-Irish Inter-Governmental Conference (IGC) and a permanent presence in Northern Ireland in the form of an Anglo-Irish Secretariat. The Irish

Government would (in various formulations in the document) ' put forward views and proposals' within the remit of the conference (Article 2b) and 'put forward views on proposals for major legislation and on major policy issues' on matters 'where the interests of the minority community are significantly or especially affected' (article 5.c). The actual Irish influence would depend on British decision and the remit of the IGC would decline as an agreed devolved administration was set in place in Northern Ireland (the declared aim of the Governments) (articles 2b, 4b, Hadden and Boyle, 1989, 22-5). Yet both Governments committed themselves to 'determined efforts' to resolve any disagreements (Article 2b), a phrase which – according to British and Irish negotiators – signalled that this was to be much more than mere consultation (Witness seminar, December 11, 2006). The 50-page 'catechism' written by officials which informed both heads of Government in their subsequent dealings with the press described the conference as ' a unique mechanism' without executive functions and without derogation from sovereignty but ' more than consultative' with an 'obligation on both sides' to resolve any differences (Witness seminar, December 11, 2006. See also FitzGerald's speech in the *Irish Dáil*, Nov. 19, 1985).

The AIA provoked an intense public response. The IRA, in their Christmas message, said it was **'**a highly sophisticated counter-revolutionary plan' designed to 'isolate republicans' (*Irish Times,* 19.12.85). Fianna Fáil, then the opposition party in the Irish State, initially rejected it as inadequate, a sell out of Irish constitutional claims for the sake of a powerless conference, although on entry to government in 1987 they were happy to work the Agreement. The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) welcomed the Agreement, as did the Irish Government parties. A clear majority (59 per cent) in the Irish State approved the signing of the Agreement, while only 29 per cent disapproved (*Irish Times*/MRBI poll published on 23 November

1985). Although there was slightly less support for the Agreement (47 per cent) amongst the British public (Cox, 1987: 349), there was much stronger support for it in the British Parliament with only a few dissenting voices.

Unionists and the wider Protestant community in Northern Ireland were outraged at the AIA. Protestant church leaders are usually significantly more moderate than the unionist political parties. In a public letter they reported the hurt and anger of their people who

> are deeply concerned that this form of secrecy will continue in the future with the exclusion of the Loyalist representation from the nerve-centre of decision making….. Presbyterians are apprehensive of the degree of vagueness that exists as to the role of the representatives of the Republic of Ireland. They are afraid that almost every aspect of domestic policy, e.g. security, education, social services etc, will be under the scrutiny of an outside power, not always sympathetic to the ethos of the majority of the Ulster people. …. The greatest hurt felt by the loyalist majority is the role given to representatives of the Republic of Ireland in the administration of Northern Ireland. It is seen as an intrusion, a thorn in the flesh and something foreign and unacceptable above all grievances. This is the root cause of discontent' (*Irish Times*, 14.12.85).

The political parties were stronger in their denunciation of the 'diktat' (see Aughey 1989): the AIA was popularly described as a 'Trojan Horse', and unionists who associated with British officials who operated it were called 'Quislings' and 'collaborators'. Unionist MPs resigned their posts to provoke by-elections (held on

January 23 1986) to allow their constituents to express their dislike of the AIA, Their constituents responded with a very strong turnout and definitive rejection of the Agreement (Cox, 1987: 341-3). Mass public rallies were held, and loyalist paramilitary violence increased. A. T. Q. Stewart, the eminent historian, noted the breadth of unionist anger: 'It is not Unionist intransigence with which [Mrs Thatcher] now has to deal, but a kind of patriotism, the emotion of an entire religious community… Even the we-mustn't-bite-the-hand-that-feeds-us Unionists are as deeply hurt as the we-will-eat-grass variety' (Stewart, 1986).

The unionist reaction, Mrs Thatcher reported, was 'much worse than I expected' and exaggerated Dublin's role: 'The decisions are made by us and will continue to be made by us' (interview with *Belfast Telegraph*, 17.12.85). In the next sections I outline the intent of the makers of the AIA and the way it actually functioned to change modes of governance in Northern Ireland. In conclusion, I argue that while Mrs Thatcher was formally correct, substantively - both in its intent and its functioning - the AIA undermined core unionist assumptions about Northern Ireland. Also, if less dramatically, it challenged nationalist assumptions.

The Anglo Irish Agreement: the intent and interpretations of its makers
The AIA was negotiated by a small number of senior British and Irish civil servants and politicians, and implemented by a slightly larger group. We have talked to nearly all of these actors in a recent research project ('Breaking the Patterns of Conflict') funded by the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences and led from University College Dublin (see www.ucd.ie/ibis/bpc). Interviews and day-long witness seminars with key actors in the process where up to eight participants were

questioned by academics, were taped and transcribed. Respondents included ex-*Taoisigh*, Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, and very senior civil servants from both States. The transcripts will – after respondent approval – be opened to researchers. Pending this, the quotations used here are unattributed.

Both British and Irish negotiators shared the aim of restoring peace and stability to Northern Ireland. The Irish political elite had long argued that the problem lay in the '*insulation of Northern Ireland from Ireland*' (witness seminar, September 7 2005; the first statement of this position was in Lynch, 1972). After the failure of the Sunningdale initiative in 1974, that insulation increased and the Irish Government was effectively excluded from all input into Northern Ireland affairs. British-Irish relations in the late 1970s were described by an Irish official as '*poisonous*'. Meanwhile the surge of republican support in Northern Ireland after the hunger strikes of 1981 worried the Government: should republicans become the main nationalist party in the North, it would delegitimate Irish Government policies and destabilise the island as a whole. Peace and stability were thus an urgent policy priority on the Irish side. The British, in turn, were aware that the 'rolling devolution' initiative begun by Jim Prior in January 1982 was going nowhere, and for them *'the eggs were all in that basket at the time'* (witness seminar, 11 December 2006). As it became clear that this option was exhausted – and Mrs Thatcher saw it as a failure by summer 1983 - they were 'bereft of new ideas' (Goodall, 2010). None of their strategies had improved the security situation, the single most important concern for Mrs Thatcher and her closest advisors (interview 18 May 2010). Indeed Sir David Goodall (2010: 16) recalls Mrs Thatcher, as early as 1982, saying reflectively 'If we get back next time … I think I would like to do something about Northern Ireland'.

From the Irish perspective, it was urgently necessary to show to nationalists in Northern Ireland that gradualist reform could be brought through peaceful lobbying and negotiation and could improve their situation. In the 1980s, it was common to speak of 'nationalist alienation': the term referred to restricted political opportunities, a daily sense of grievance in encounters with the security forces, continued economic inequality, and sensed cultural humiliation (see Ruane and Todd, 1996: 116-203). The New Ireland Forum (1983-84) brought together nationalists north and south, and the New Ireland Forum *Report* (1984: 4.2, 4.15, 4.16) argued that an Irish dimension of some form was necessary to give to nationalists 'effective political, symbolic and administrative expression of their identity' (4.15). This justified Irish input into policy-making in Northern Ireland in terms of a symbolic politics of recognition, and similar arguments were central to political rhetoric before and after the AIA (for example, Garret FitzGerald's *Dail* speech, 19 November 1985).

In interviews and witness seminars, however, a much more practically and policy-oriented legitimation of the Irish dimension was given. The role of the Irish Government in the IGC was presented as a means to institutional and policy change. Even the most mildly nationalist of the Irish respondents was critical of the counter-productive and (in their view) biased policies of the British Government, particularly in respect to security. They believed that this lay at the root of nationalist public sympathy with republicans. Their response was to attempt to change not the fact but the impact of the British presence. They described the key idea as '*Irish in rather than Brits out*'. Early suggestions of joint policing were eventually vetoed politically (by the Irish Government) (see Lillis, 2010; Goodall, 2010), but the general idea of '*Irish in*' was followed in the AIA. Michael Lillis (2010: 5), one of the chief Irish negotiators, was explicitly interested in practical input and cooperation which would

allow growth towards joint authority, even at the cost of renouncing constitutional claims. As I have argued elsewhere (Todd, forthcoming) the Irish presence agreed in 1985 can be conceived as a 'wedge' which could open up contest over the rules and logic of British institutional practices in Northern Ireland, and could be further developed as more opportunities opened. The Irish side inserted the wedge before being clear how precisely it would be used: they did so, however, with a very clear vision of what had to be changed.

The AIA promised to change the logic of British decision-making in three ways. First, it gave an institutional forum (the AIIGC) in which to raise issues. The very existence of this as a legitimate channel allowed further lobbying (including in the US) when it did not satisfactorily resolve issues. Second, its very existence implicitly changed the meaning of sovereignty by taking the Irish Government as a partner in conflict management, and moving Northern Ireland out of the domestic paradigm of British Governance. Third, it gave official (British and Irish) certification to liberal nationalist concepts of 'parity of esteem' and 'institutional recognition' of the different 'traditions' on the island of Ireland (Preamble, Article 4a). The Irish negotiators in the witness seminars and interviews placed primary emphasis on its potential practical impact. They needed to prove that the IGC could change the effects of the British presence and improve the situation of nationalists in Northern Ireland. From the first days of the Secretariat, they were busily involved in attempting to secure change in policing practices (in particular UDR accompaniment by the RUC in relations with the public), constraints on marches, nominations of nationalists to state and semi-state bodies, palpable reform of security. Both Garret FitzGerald (19 November 1985) and Peter Barry (23 October, 1986) emphasised these practical

benefits in the Dáil, pointing out that a role for the IGC in improving conditions for nationalists would continue even in the event of devolution.

It is in this context that the Irish lack of concern for unionist worries must be understood. When asked by Christopher Farrington why they had not thought to balance Irish support for nationalists by explicit British support for unionists, one senior Irish civil servant replied '*The thinking of the Agreement was to redress an existing imbalance. Your question implies that you're approaching it on the basis of constructing a balance. But the thinking on the Irish side was that there's been a terrible imbalance which needs redressed...*'. (witness seminar, December 11 2006) . From the Irish perspective this was the beginning of a process of change, although significantly less than the joint authority for which they had hoped (and which would indeed have been more egalitarian than the AIA). It was a chink in the perceived power imbalance within Northern Ireland, not a final settlement but a '*foothold*', a '*building block*', a wedge which they would use to further their aims to end nationalist alienation and ensure peace and stability. It was not a 'Trojan horse' which could surreptitiously lead to a united Ireland: by 1985, the Irish political establishment were clear that this could only come by consent, indeed by majority vote in Northern Ireland. It was however seen as a step that might possibly lead to *de facto* joint authority (Lillis, 2010: 5; witness seminar December 11 2006). Most of all, it was an attempt to change the rules-of-the-game of British governance in Northern Ireland. For the Irish, its virtue was precisely its capacity to change the form, not the fact, of British rule. While in the past, nationalists had been left with a choice of submission, subversion or insurrection, this was a wedge that would allow nationalists to work to change institutions gradually and opportunistically, within the existing political

system, as far as joint authority (although there was no suggestion that it could ever 'trundle' unionists into a united Ireland).

The Irish did not expect unionists to welcome this, but it was significantly closer to unionists' own preferences than their own favoured joint authority option would have been. Indeed until close to the final date, some were unsure whether it would be more welcomed or more opposed by unionists or by nationalists. They had consulted with John Hume through the negotiations, but not with other SDLP leaders and until a few days before, they did not know if Seamus Mallon would support the agreement (see interview, witness seminar, December 11 2006). Since it was a serious compromise for nationalists, they expected that unionists too should have to put up with it.

Why did the British accept this Irish wedge? Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Tom King suggested that in fact it was a British win, with the Irish accepting 'for all practical purposes and in perpetuity there will not be a united Ireland' although later he apologised to Parliament for this statement. Mrs Thatcher (1995: 402), without apology, wrote that the AIA left the British making the decisions while promising better security cooperation. The British makers of the AIA would not have disagreed with her but would have added important qualifications. Bew, Gibbon and Patterson (1995: 213-17) accurately describe these 'maximalists' (among whom they include the Cabinet Secretary, Lord Robert Armstrong, Sir David Goodall, and Sir Geoffrey Howe (then Foreign Secretary) as seeing no essential conflict between Irish perspectives and British interests. In interview and witness seminar, senior officials and politicians from the maximalist camp discussed their perceptions at the time. One senior official noted that one *couldn't sit round the cabinet table in London and talk about Irish business without thinking of all the people who had done that before you*

over the last two hundred years. And here was our opportunity to add something to that story, something better than had gone before' (witness seminar, December 11 2006). The two hundred years at the British cabinet table between 1783-1983 of which the British actors were conscious went back before the Act of Union and spanned the expansion and contraction of empire. It encompassed a very wide range of possible and legitimate constitutional relations between the 'cousins' (Goodall, 2010: 15) of Britain and Ireland, and more generally of British-Irish, north-south, Protestant-Catholic, unionist-nationalist relations. This long historical view gave them significant *'flexibility'* and negotiating scope, and indeed some of those interviewed had still longer historical perspectives. Of course British State interests were paramount for them all, but the maximalist conception of the state and its interests was not of the territorial sovereign nation state of the twentieth century. A longer sense of history and a more global sense of geography, where the rise and fall of empire coexisted with continuity of the state, let them define Ireland as close to British interests and identities, but the specific form of partition and Union which was put in place in 1921 much less so (witness seminar, 11 December 2006; interviews, 18.06.2009; 7.05.2010; 18.05.2010). For this wider group of British officials and politicians it was simply a matter of *'flexibility'* in relations while respecting the interests and perspectives of each side. This flexibility, however, put them at odds with unionists' territorially bounded concept of the United Kingdom.

Significant numbers of the Conservative party were willing to test out the AIA in 1985 because of their concerns about security and their belief that the Irish State could help in this respect. The new willingness to rely on the Irish State was furthered by its diplomatic initiatives when, in the course of countless dinners and meetings, the Irish interest in peace and stability was explained (FitzGerald, 1991: 468; 569;

interview, 15 December 2009). After 1985, some of the British political establishment wished to limit the impact of the AIA, in part because of their own sense of the impropriety of Irish intervention, in part because they believed that the fact of the Agreement was defeat enough for unionists, without adding more substance to the symbolism, in part, perhaps, because they felt enough attention had been given to Northern Ireland (Interviews, 27.11.08; 18.06.09) But if the Irish influence was not advanced as quickly as the Irish desired, neither was it pulled back: rather British-Irish strategic cooperation on Northern Ireland increased. A senior Irish official who had worked with taoisigh on Northern Ireland issues from the early 1970s to the mid 1990s described the difference between the early period when the Taoiseach's input was disregarded and his attempted communications refused and the later period with frequent informal phone calls and consultations between prime minister and taoiseach.

If unionist definitions of the union, and Northern Ireland's place within it, were not shared by senior British politicians and officials, nor were Irish nationalist objectives and assumptions. British and Irish senior politicians and officials were acutely aware of the differences of views, perspectives, backgrounds, aims and assumptions on each side, and the different interests embodied in the very different forms of each state. As one senior politician pointed out, this was not the first international agreement where the parties who signed it expected it to fulfil differing aims (interview, 18.05.2010). The AIA was designed not to mask these differences but to accommodate them. What changed in the 1980s was that key members of the British political elite came to see that they could not restore political stability in Northern Ireland while continuing to accommodate unionist perspectives. When instead they emphasised the long historical view with its potential convergence with

Irish perspectives, new political options opened out. The shift was subtle but important, opening the British Government to a level of Irish input into the governance of Northern Ireland, and moving them away from a territorial notion of sovereignty. From a British (maximalist) perspective, this kept the key aspects of sovereignty – freedom of decision making on issues of high politics – while acknowledging the unusual and difficult situation of Northern Ireland. The interviews and witness seminars confirm the insight of Jim Bulpitt's (1983) analysis of the logic of Conservative statecraft, not least the dual vision which prioritises the high politics of the state-centre and is tolerant of a very wide range of administration in the regions. Unionists were right that the AIA made Northern Ireland anomalous within the Union, but from a long historical perspective such anomalies were not unprecedented. But if from a British perspective, the AIA met both British and Irish interests and perspectives, what exactly it would imply in institutional and policy terms was left open.

The effects of the Agreement

Different groups had radically different views of the effects of the Agreement. From the British maximalist perspective, the AIA would have no radical constitutional consequences. It would open other policy matters to discussion and debate on their merits, taking into account conflicting views in a divided society. For the Irish Government, it would begin to move towards a balance in the politics of Northern Ireland. For Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and sections of the British elite, it would simply be of symbolic significance. For the unionists it would let nationalists have more of an influence on policy than themselves, it would remove the unionist voice, it would lead

to a gradual, creeping increase in Irish and nationalist influence. Nationalists in Northern Ireland were rather more sceptical of its potential impact.

What then were the effects of the AIA? Streeck and Thelen's (2003) typology of mechanisms of incremental institutional change provide a way of thinking about informal processes of institutional change. As I have argued elsewhere (Todd, forthcoming), the effects of the AIA can be defined as (i) layering, which helped change specific policies although significantly less than the Irish had hoped and unionists had feared; (ii) displacement, which generalised Irish influence through the field of strategic thinking about Northern Ireland and (iii) conversion, which changed political opportunities for nationalists, and thereby changed their aims and strategies.

First, the AIA created a new layer of institutions. The IGC was not itself a decision-making body but it could help set the political agenda, influencing those with decision-making powers, either directly (when they attended IGC meetings) or indirectly, by helping define policy orientations which would then be insisted upon by the prime minister or responsible members of the cabinet. For the first years, the members of the Secretariat and British and Irish Governments were very slow to claim any effect of the IGC, because it might further inflame the unionists with whom negotiations were sought. However later reports show that significant changes were achieved:

- Curbs were put on Orange marches through nationalist areas, and the police stood firm against Orange pressure. The process began in summer 1985 and continued for more than a decade.
- There was a swift repeal of the Flags and Emblems Act, in response to Irish demands (FitzGerald, 1991: 573).

- The Irish Government added its weight to pressure for a stronger Fair Employment Act (eventually enacted in 1989).

- The Secretariat nominated 'massive' numbers of nationalists onto public and semi-state bodies (Lillis, 2010)

While significant, the changes were outweighed for the Irish actors by the failure to achieve change in areas to which they gave even greater priority:

- Joint British-Irish courts were proposed in the IGC and were immediately vetoed by British judges at the highest level.

- Policing reform had been promised in the AIA. Article 7c defines the objective of 'making the security forces more readily accepted by the nationalist community'. The reforms suggested did not take place. For example, the proposed accompaniment of Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) personnel by police in their relations with the public was never consistently implemented. These issues were raised repeatedly in the IGC. The Irish members of the Secretariat made a log of each proposal made by them, the date and recorded everything that happened in respect to it. They had long discussions with British army and police chiefs, who are reported to have blamed each other for the deadlock. Senior Irish politicians and officials are evidently and visibly still angry about this lack of response (witness seminar, December 11 2006).

- Change in a whole set of security-related issues was painfully slow. Irish civil servants described *'stand-offs', 'no meeting of minds', 'polar opposites'* in discussions on security in the latter half of the 1980s (Interview, January 8

2009). Below the apex of the NIO and NICS, there was reported resentment and bureaucratic inertia which was (so some Irish officials believed) designed to block change (interviews, 19.9.08 ; 15.01.2009). This changed only after 1998, in part through the detail of the 1998 Agreement, in part through the Prime Minister's willingness directly to order cooperation and break the veto power of other institutions.

In short, the IGC did not come to bypass other loci of decision-making. Veto-power remained with the judiciary, the NIO and in full SOSNI, the military and police. The new layer of institutions changed the issues that came onto the political agenda (policing, equality, marching, symbols, courts) and the frequency with which they appeared on this agenda, but it did not typically change the outcomes or the loci where decisions were made.

The AIA however had unanticipated effects in the form of 'displacement' (the 'diffusion' of new models 'which call into question existing, previously taken for granted organizational forms and practices' (Streeck and Thelen, 2005: 19) The very presence of the Irish Government in the IGC and Secretariat meant that 'you got a sovereign government, the government of the United Kingdom, agreeing to have within its institutions a group of people from another jurisdiction to advise it on how to rule part of its own territory, and … under Treaty obligations, to make determined efforts to resolve differences' (interview, Irish official, January 16 2009). This was a new set of rules of conflict management, and, at the level of strategic thinking and planning, '*Irish in*' became the norm in all areas to do with conflict regulation in Northern Ireland. The Irish State played a key role in the Brooke and Mayhew talks in

the early 1990s, and was a crucial actor in the talks which led eventually to the 1998 Agreement.

Displacement also took another form, with senior British policy-makers becoming significantly more willing to open Northern Ireland to international influence. The process was painful, with President Bill Clinton going against British advice in granting visas to republicans Gerry Adams and Joe Cahill. John Major and his Cabinet eventually accepted that there would be a US role – guided by the two Governments – in the Northern Ireland peace process, while with Tony Blair's premiership, that role was – at least temporarily - welcomed. Lord David Owen (2002; 22) notes that this marked a major change in British policy. The process was promoted by the prior opening of Northern Ireland to Irish influence so that the Irish could legitimately lobby in the US when their advice was ignored. It was also eased by that prior opening: the threshold whereby Northern Ireland was seen as sufficiently 'different' to warrant a level of external advice had been passed in 1985.

Equally older institutional arenae were 'converted' to new purposes. The media and the public sphere more generally became populated with political elites from the Irish State, and northern nationalists and Catholics newly nominated onto State bodies, together with nationalist and unionist politicians. This was the period of the Cultural Traditions Group, when the many varieties of nationalism and unionism were publicised and officially recognised (Crozier, 1989: 1990) and of the Community Relations Council. Republicans were marginalised, but constitutional nationalists in the SDLP were on every public body and the legitimacy of nationalist aims was no longer questioned. Indeed these aims were calmly asserted by the conservative nationalist figures now populating the public sphere. Even satire (the temporarily popular late night television programme, *The Show*) kept a firm balance

between nationalism and unionism (Ruane and Todd, 1990). Common sense, as it was broadcast and discussed, had changed: now nationalist alienation, nationalist rights, nationalist equality, paths to a united Ireland, parity of esteem were concepts that became part of public debate in Northern Ireland while before they were voiced only by 'extremists' from the margins. Now liberal nationalism – equal institutionalisation of nationalist and unionist identities – could be used as an argument, not a winning one, but a plausible one which sometimes won. The evident prominence of nationalists and nationalism in the public sphere and the opportunities for further political advance prompted more nationalists to participate in Northern Ireland politics in order to change it incrementally: voting for nationalist parties increased after 1985 and within this bloc, the SDLP increased its share of the vote (O'Leary and McGarry, 1996: 321). Most important of all, republicans too saw the prospects of gradual change in the institutional matrix of Northern Ireland, and saw opportunities there for further advance.

That advance had to wait until after the peace process and settlement of 1998. By 2010 most of the positions long advocated by the Irish Government in policing and criminal justice, in respect to marches, public culture and equality had been enacted in a British-initiated reform process. The AIA began the process of change, but it accelerated only when other factors – the prospect of a stable multi-party agreement – gave enough sense of urgency to motivate change in established intra-state regimes.

Explaining the unionist response

The narrative presented above shows that unionist responses to the AIA were highly rational – all varieties of unionists had reason to be deeply disturbed. The AIA did not change the fact of British sovereignty but it did change its meaning in a way that did

not suit either unionists' interests or unionists' assumptions about the place of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom. The long historical sense of British policy makers – sometimes themselves from old Irish land-owning families - was not shared by twentieth-century Ulster unionism, although perhaps an earlier generation of Irish unionists would have understood it (Jackson, 1995). Ulster unionists instead looked to sovereigntists – Enoch Powell, Ian Gow and Margaret Thatcher herself – to express and protect their interests. But Thatcher and her closest associates – because of their overriding emphasis on security – saw the need for new moves. Once the AIA was in place, a threshold had been crossed and it was hard for the British to row back without signalling state weakness. In the 1990s, as it became clear that Anglo Irish cooperation was necessary to get peace and settlement negotiations started and to keep them moving, the ideas – if not the letter – of the AIA were generalised.

If the British view was disturbing to unionists, the Irish view was even more so. The wedging strategy met the worst fears of many unionists, that they would be 'trundled' into a situation – joint authority - that they had always explicitly opposed. The Union would – the Irish agreed – be maintained short of an explicit vote for change, but for unionists it might be a form of union not worth fighting for. Subsequent events showed truth in their fears. Notwithstanding the slow progress of reform – by 1995 policing, criminal justice, security and marches were still deeply disputed – the potential for increasing Irish and nationalist influence remained. Moreover in some spheres change had come quickly: the newfound legitimacy of nationalist discourse meant that unionists had lost a key cultural resource – the defining of political common sense. The involvement of the Irish Government with the British in all strategy was, eventually, accepted by unionists, although they became more relaxed about it only in the context of the loosening of the Union in

1997 and the explicit asymmetry between its different parts and with the amendment of the Irish Constitution in 1998 to express an aspiration to unity not a claim to sovereignty.

The AIA also challenged the constitutional assumptions of many nationalists and republicans. The division among northern Catholics as to whether or not Irish input would be substantial and would substantially better their position reflected in part different views of the British State itself, and its capacity for incremental change. By the 1990s, the republican leadership also came to accept the view that significant change could come gradually, and that the impact of British sovereignty could be decreased short of a united Ireland.

All parties in Northern Ireland found new motivations to negotiate after the AIA: O'Leary and McGarry (1996: 250-60) emphasise the slowness of reaching a settlement, but also detail the movement towards negotiations from the late 1980s. Republicans wished to accelerate the pace of change, perhaps precisely in order to create a form of union that unionists would not want. They became convinced that a gradualist and peaceful strategy could change the impact of British rule and could be worthwhile, at least as an interim goal. Nationalists in the SDLP wanted to increase their say in daily politics, and to decrease the British role. Devolution, on their understanding, would not replace the Irish dimension but rather decrease the British. Unionists too decided to negotiate in order to close the door opened by the AIA. They accepted that there would be an Irish dimension but if they could make it voluntary and symbolic, they would remove the 'wedge'.

Was the AIA a major constitutional moment? Yes, in that it changed the character of Northern Ireland and the meaning but not the fact of British sovereignty in Northern Ireland. It did not have immediate effects on policies and institutions. Its

impact was over a longer term, and is still not fully played out. Public and in particular unionist reaction anticipated the institutional effects of the AIA long before they happened, and that reaction diverted state attention from reform to negotiations. When, after 1998, reform came back onto the agenda, Irish influence remained (though still far from decisive) through a renewed British-Irish Inter Governmental Council, and through now habitual informal contacts. The AIA was significant because it held out long-term possibilities of radical change and legitimated new policy directions. These have only partially been realised. The prospect of creeping joint authority, with or without devolution, remains as one – although far from the only – possible future for Northern Ireland.

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