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ABSTRACT

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This paper examines Ulster unionism's responses to and its increased disaffection from political developments in Northern Ireland since the 1990s. I suggest that Ulster unionist politics—and, by way of extrapolation, Northern Irish politics—cannot be understood without taking into account the "soft" or "hidden" face of political power. I argue that this aspect of political dynamics has been under-researched and under-appreciated in Northern Ireland and outline an alternative narrative of the "peace process" as the product of resistance and agenda-setting activities. This changed perspective requires a re-conceptualisation of the role played by unionist politics, which are seen to embody a paradox of alienation and powerlessness operating alongside the effective prevention of specific British government and Irish nationalist policy proposals. I conclude with the suggestion that the "peace process" occurred largely despite rather than because of elite intervention.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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INTRODUCTION

A recurring theme in the literature on contemporary Northern Irish political developments is how shifts in ideological and military thinking during the late-1980s and early-1990s ushered in a "new politics" that eventually supplanted the seemingly intractable violence.[1] This new political environment witnessed the demilitarisation of working-class urban and rural border areas and the decommissioning of paramilitary weaponry; it also saw the emergence of civil society groups and an increased willingness by local politicians to engage in dialogue and to participate in the newly established cross-border and power-sharing institutions.[2] The establishment of these political institutions was complemented with an innovative and wide-ranging series of initiatives that radically reformed the existing policing and justice structures.[3] However, along with these qualitative and substantive changes, there remained enduring problems associated with entrenched sectarianism, unresolved debates surrounding victims and ways of dealing with the past, and the electoral attenuation of the "middle-ground".[4]

While a series of explanatory models has been developed and propagated by academics and politicians to account for the changes and continuities,[5] this paper explores ground that is relatively under-researched and often wholly under-appreciated. In fact, I argue that a key element in understanding these changes and

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[1] Jonathan Tonge, *The New Northern Irish Politics*? (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2005).

[2] Cillian McGrattan, *Northern Ireland, 1968-2008: The Politics of Entrenchment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[3] Christine Bell, "Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland", *Fordham International Law Journal*, 2004, 26(4), 298-314.

[4] Peter Shirlow and Brendan Murtagh, *Belfast: Segregation, Violence and the City* (London: Pluto Press, 2006).

[5] Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, "Path-Dependence in Settlement Processes: Explaining Settlement in Northern Ireland", *Political Studies*, 2007, Vol.55 (2), pp.442-58; see also Gerry Adams, *Hope and History: Making Peace in Ireland* (Dingle: Brandon, 2004); Cathy Gormley-Heenan, *Political Leadership and the Northern Ireland Peace Process: Role, Capacity and Effect* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Donald L Horowitz, "Explaining the Northern Ireland Agreement: The Sources of an Unlikely Constitutional Consensus", *British Journal of Political Science*, 2001, Vol.32, pp.193-220; Eamonn Mallie and David McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland* (London: Coronet Press, 2002); George Mitchell, *Making Peace: The Inside Story of the Making of the Good Friday Agreement* (London: Heinemann, 1999); Brendan O'Leary, "The Nature of the British-Irish Agreement", *New Left Review*, 1/233, 1999, pp.66-96; Jonathan Powell, *Great Hatred, Little Room: Making Peace in Northern Ireland* (London: The Bodley Head, 2008).

continuities are the operation of "hidden" or subterranean political dynamics.[6] In other words, the politics of "soft" power—that is, political resistance and strategies based on obstruction or delaying of policies and/or agenda-setting activities—have played and, indeed, continue to play a profound role in shaping developments in Northern Ireland. This paper is, therefore, a critically informed complement those approaches that stress overt decision-making and the reframing of ideological discourses by political elites. While a focus on the explicit choices and utterances of politicians underpins much of the literature on Northern Ireland and accurately reflects the remarkable changes that have taken place, several benefits accrue from the decision to shift the analytical perspective to focus on underlying continuities and the political dynamics at work in resistance and agenda-setting activities. Firstly, by the focus on underlying continuities and resistance strategies highlights the role that feedback and path-dependent mechanisms play in perpetuating outcomes. This shift, I suggest, may lead to greater theoretical and empirical precision regarding how policy intervention shapes the persistence and resolution of political conflict.[7] Secondly, the perspectival shift may help to clarify the environment against which policies are operating and in which they are being implemented. This greater attention to context, I suggest, not only results in more accurate accounts of change and continuity, but it also serves to write-back into history the experiences of groups who perceive themselves to be marginalised by established narratives.

This paper concentrates on that second aspect. In particular, it stresses the underlying continuities in policymaking and, specifically, the cross-time resilience of political entrenchment in Northern Ireland. Thus, on the one hand, the basic structure of governmental policy for restoring devolved power carried through with little change since the early 1970s—namely, an institutionalised Dublin involvement and the desirability, in principle, of devolved power sharing. However, on the other hand, decisive changes in policy direction or in the operation of political initiatives took place at a lower or ground level key issues in the peace process as issues such as equality legislation, police reform, institutionalised power sharing, and North-South cooperation were framed against and were radically shaped by the agenda-setting and obstructionist activities of Ulster unionism. Furthermore, those activities emerged from unionist unease with and resistance to wholesale reform.

In short, the paper explores the paradox of unionist perceptions of powerlessness and feelings of alienation regarding political change and the fact that those perceptions and sentiments provided strong obstacles to the policy trajectories of Irish nationalist and British government actors. The central arguments are :

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[6] Peter Bachrach and Morton S Baratz, "The Two Faces of Power", *American Political Science Review*, 1962, Vol.56(3); Jacob S Hacker, "Privatizing Risk without Privatizing the Welfare State: The Hidden Politics of Social Policy Retrenchment in the United States", *American Political Science Review*, 2004, Vol.98 (2), pp.243-60.
[7] Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, "The roots of intense ethnic conflict may not in fact be ethnic: categories, communities, and path dependence", *Archives européenes de sociologie*, 2004,Vol.45: 209-32.

(a) that unionist resistance to British government and Irish nationalist proposals served to transform the context in which those proposals would be enacted; and

(b) without being powerful enough to directly influence policy reform, the consistent opposition by unionists to what were perceived as unfavourable proposals, slowly transformed the direction of political progress.

The perspectival shift also requires a re-problematisation of Ulster unionist politics. For example, several academics have stressed how an asymmetrical relationship exists between Northern Irish nationalism (largely supported by successive Irish governments) and Ulster unionism (which is not supported by Westminster and mainly ignored by British popular opinion).[8] According to this interpretative model, that vulnerability inspires reactionary and instable politics.[9] Thus, Paul Dixon points out that unionist political conservatism is fluid and that

> During periods of high insecurity about their constitutional position, unionists have generally been readier to advocate more violent tactics, against both the state and republicans, to achieve their strategic aim: defence of their position within the [U]nion.[10]

This paper does not fundamentally challenge this reading of unionist politics; it does however, seek to refine it by examining how unionist vulnerability and alienation affected wider political changes. For example, although Dixon stresses the idea that unionist strategy is delimited by an ever changing range of opportunities and constraints, it is the contention of this paper that unionist mobilisation consisted of overt and hidden manifestations and that both played crucial roles in influencing government policymaking. The overt manifestations have been extensively documented by scholars and may helpfully be said to include mass demonstrations and political statements.[11] The more hidden forms, which are the specific focus of this paper, relate to a politics of alienation and are discernible in the tenor of the unionist press and the persistence of long-term policy trajectories.

The paper proceeds in two parts. Firstly, I briefly describe the principal explanatory models for political developments in Northern Ireland before outlining an alternative approach that emphasises a shift from overt actions to concealed and long-term processes. The second section concentrates on Ulster unionist political responses

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[8] Arthur Aughey, "The 1998 Agreement: Three Unionist Anxieties", in Michael Cox, Adrian Guelke, and Fiona Stephen (eds.) *A Farewell to Arms? Beyond the Good Friday Agreement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Christopher Farrington, *Ulster Unionism and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2006).

[9] Christopher Farrington, "Unionism and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland", *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 2006, Vol. 8, pp. 277-94.

[10] Paul Dixon, "Contemporary Unionism and the Politics of Resistance", in Maurice J Bric and John Coakley (eds.), *From Political Violence to Negotiated Settlement: The Winding Path to Peace in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2004), p.139.

[11] Henry Patterson and Eric Kaufmann, *Unionism and Orangeism in Northern Ireland since 1945: The Decline of the Loyal Family* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

to changing events as a means of illustrating this alternative model and I identify three key areas where Ulster unionist agenda-setting affected real change in the operation of government policy.

AGENDA AND PATH-DEPENDENT CHANGE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

As alluded to above, the literature on the Northern Ireland peace process is heavily skewed towards agential formulations. In a recent critical intervention in the debate, Ruane and Todd identified four main schools of thought on the gradual transition from violence to (unstable) peace.[12] These include, firstly, explanations based on shifting power dynamics—in particular, the narrative that emphasises the importance of the military stalemate between the Provisional IRA and the British Army. Secondly, and somewhat closely related narrative mode is that that emphasises ideological and cognitive shifts. Specifically, this narrative stresses the notion that nationalist leaders in the North and South of Ireland developed new and more accommodative ways of expressing their identity and their desire for Irish unity—an emerging assertiveness that was mirrored in the accession to the leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party by David Trimble, an articulate former law lecturer who sought to eradicate unionism's non-participatory, rejectionist tendencies.[13] The third explanatory approach is to concentrate on the emergence of civil society groups and the opening of spaces for cross-communal, grassroots engagement. Finally, Ruane and Todd highlight the contribution made by consociation-inspired literature. While they correctly point out that the establishment of "new forms of democracy are not themselves a sufficient explanation of agreement" (p.447), the consociational, policy-learning narrative has in fact become increasingly dominant. Indeed, the notion that the British government in particular gradually learned how do manage the conflict and convince the warring protagonists of the benefits of consociational prescriptions underpins attempts by political elites to export the "lessons" from Northern Ireland to other troubled areas.[14]

Ruane and Todd argue that insights from the path-dependency literature help to provide a more precise understanding of the role that these factors played in the outworking of the peace process—particularly in the convergence of previously conflictual stances. Path-dependency refers to a specific type of historical sequence where later events conform to the framework established by earlier interventions. In other words, political events, choices or omissions rule out once viable alternative options and set in place self-reinforcing historical patterns or "paths". As the economist Douglass North has pointed out: path-dependence is not

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[12] Ruane and Todd, "Path-Dependence", pp.445-7.

[13] See Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London: Allen Lane, 2002); Dean Godson, *Himself Alone: David Trimble and the Ordeal of Unionism* (London: HarperCollins, 2004).

[14] Cillian McGrattan, "Learning from the Past or Laundering History? Consociational Narratives and State Intervention in Northern Ireland", *British Politics*, Vol.5 (1), 2010; Eamonn O'Kane, "Learning from Northern Ireland? The Uses and Abuses of the Irish "Model"", *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, forthcoming.

"inertia"; rather it is the constraints on the choice set in the present that are derived from historical experiences of the past.[15]

Certainly, the conflict itself displayed path-dependent characteristics: identities and party policies became institutionalised, reinforced, and reproduced by an overarching system of what was essentially zero-sum power dynamics.[16] In other words, communal identities became progressively entrenched through violence, segregation and sectarianism—a gulf that was mirrored in the policy positions of the local parties who mobilised voters based on hard-line manifestos.[17] Ruane and Todd, however, argue that these patterns were "breached" through changes in the international sphere in the form of the ending of the Cold War and in Anglo-Irish governmental relations and an ideological and strategic reassessment on the part of the local politicians with a subsequent willingness to participate in shared institutions. The convergence of these changes created, they argue, a "window of opportunity" at which point "rational self-interest began to point to settlement rather than to conflict and allowed [the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday] agreement to be reached".[18]

I would suggest that the path-dependency literature also sheds light on the question of change and continuity in Northern Ireland, albeit for alternative reasons. In this regard, it is helpful to refer to Jacob Hacker's critique of the path-dependent analysis of the welfare state.[19] Hacker makes two main points. Firstly, he reprises Bachrach and Baratz's influential critique of pluralist theory,[20] namely, that by emphasising "affirmative decisions" analysts may miss the ways in which actors effect change by shaping the terms of debate and preventing the successful operation of legislation. In other words, while the welfare state provides the context for social and public policymaking, "actors who wish to change popular and embedded institutions in political environments that militate against authoritative reform may find it prudent not to attack such institutions directly". Instead, Hacker points out that one option employed by political actors who wish to mobilise against popular or entrenched institutions is to avoid arenas where policy is debated and voted upon, but rather, that they attempt to influence the operation of policy at what he calls the "ground-level"—or else build new institutions on top of existing ones (p.244). Hacker's second point follows from this—namely, that by ignoring agenda setting, obstruction or resistance in favour of overt or conflict-ridden decisions, analysts risk de-contextualising the political environment. Furthermore, this may

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[15] Douglass C North, *Understanding the Process of Economic Change* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p.52; see also Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[16] Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, *The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland: Power, Conflict and Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); McGrattan, *Northern Ireland*.

[17] Ruane and Todd, "Ethnic conflict"; McGrattan, *Northern Ireland*; Cillian McGrattan, "Dublin, the SDLP, and the Sunningdale Agreement: Maximalist Nationalism and Path-Dependency", *Contemporary British History*, 2009, Vol.23 (1): 61-78.

[18] Ruane and Todd, "Path Dependence", p.453.

[19] Hacker, "Privatizing Risk".

[20] Bachrach and Baratz, "Two Faces".

result in analysts missing crucial elements of how power operates by methodologically writing out how political interventions "interact with the broader life circumstances of citizens".[21]

Hacker advocates reframing path-dependent analysis to take into account the role that these subterranean strategies play in shaping the historical trajectories of policies and institutions. As alluded to above, he points out that institutions need not be subjected to wholesale reform or disarticulation while still undergoing subtle and radical transformation. One such process of change is what Hacker refers to as institutional "conversion", which occurs, he argues when policies are implemented in ways that may be at variance to the original legislation, but without the formal revision of those policies—such as is the case where regulatory bodies or agencies enjoy a large degree of discretion from the primary legislative institution.[22] Hacker also describes how changes in the context in which policies are operating may substantively alter their effects, despite the original framework remaining constant. For example, he points out that while unemployment insurance provision may be framed as to exclude service workers, a large-scale shift in employment patterns from manufacturing to services need not affect the original policy but fundamentally impacts upon the overall provision of workers' protection.[23] This process of what Hacker calls policy "drift" refers to "changes in the operation or effect of policies that occur without significant changes in those policies' structure".[24]

I contend that the idea of policy drift is essential to understanding contemporary political developments in Northern Ireland. Although Hacker's critique is focussed on the application of path-dependent analysis to social and public policy, as pointed out above, the Northern Ireland conflict displayed unmistakeable path-dependent features—not least in the long-term reproduction of conflictual relationships. Ruane and Todd correctly highlight the importance of specific events that acted as catalysts for change, precipitating a transformation or a "breach" in the hitherto resilient, path-dependent conflict. However, although overt interventions such as the decision by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to call a ceasefire in September 1994 or the election of David Trimble as leader of the Ulster Unionist Party in September 1995 were crucial steps in creating a context for the establishment of new political institutions; that context was also informed by subterranean processes that effectively delimited what was actually negotiable and politically possible.

Arthur Aughey has alluded to the idea that the Northern Ireland "peace process" occurred within a relatively restricted framework. Thus, he argues that the emergence of a peace process was the result of the decision by John Major's Conservative government sought to find a form of words which would enable the

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[21] Jacob S Hacker, "Policy Drift: The Hidden Politics of US Welfare State Retrenchment", in *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies*, edited by Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.44.
[22] Ibid, p.46.
[23] Ibid, p.45.
[24] Hacker, "Privatizing Risk", p.246.

IRA to stop its campaign and which would enable Sinn Féin to abandon its support for "armed struggle", thereby taking its place in "normal" politics.[25]

The creation of that discursive framework required at the very least implicit unionist consent. In other words, although governmental initiatives were aimed at bringing the Provisional Republican movement into the political sphere those initiatives took place within certain non-negotiable parameters. While Provisional Republicans and constitutional Irish nationalists held hopes that an IRA ceasefire would encourage movement towards the gradual reunification of the island of Ireland, a prerequisite for British government strategy was the need to work within boundaries that were acceptable by Ulster unionists and to which they could offer their consent. In short, although the government sought to end Provisional Republican violence, the success of any peace initiative also depended on the acquiescence of Ulster unionism. The persistent concern of unionists that the government was acting to a Provisional Republican agenda lay at the heart of the growing Protestant alienation from the peace process.[26] However, that very concern and alienation in turn served to emphasise the boundaries of what was acceptable and curtail the prevailing trend within the British government decision-making apparatus to engage with the Provisional Republican movement.

The change of perspective from overt decisions to underlying constraints does not necessitate a wholesale revision of existing narratives; rather, in broadening the analytical lens, we may begin to make sense of how surface level changes occur alongside long-term continuities. That perspectival change requires paying attention not only to the empirical historical record but also to how the actual operation of policies may vary despite their structure or framework remaining constant over time. In this view, settlement processes may be the result of a complex dynamic between a series of causal factors—in other words, analysis of elite intervention or strategic and ideological shifts so favoured by journalists and political scientists may actually occur within an agenda that has been framed or delimited by the continued resistance or obstruction of certain groups. Groups may resist policy implementation without having the structural power to reverse it, and may effectively prevent the (unwelcome) "recalibration" of policies.[27] This suggests that implicit rather than "open" political conflict may occur between asymmetrical groups and that it may have unforeseen and unintended consequences—in short, although power relations are vital for maintaining policy trajectories,[28] policy choices and "hidden" political conflicts may in-themselves exert independent and uncertain causative effects.[29]

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[25] Arthur Aughey, "British Policy in Northern Ireland", in *Public Policy under Blair*, edited by Stephen P Savage and Rob Atkinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p.207.

[26] Farrington, *Ulster Unionism*.

[27] Hacker, "Privatizing Risk", p.244.

[28] Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions and Social Analysis* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.37.

[29] Ian Kershaw, *Fateful Choices: Ten Decisions that Changed the World, 1940-1941* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), pp.480-81; (2006), Paul Pierson, "Public Policies as Institutions", in *Rethinking Political Institutions:*

ULSTER UNIONISM AND THE SETTLEMENT PROCESSES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

This section argues that the perspectival change involved in looking at political resistance requires a re-conceptualisation of the role that Ulster unionism played in the Northern Irish settlement. In a 2004 article, Henry Patterson pointed out that the vast majority of research on Ulster unionism focussed on it as an ideology to the detriment of party political histories.[30] Much of that research examined how unionists assimilated historical upheaval and how they sought to articulate a political vision in response to the changing circumstances. Two seminal works have acted as points of departure for this literature: firstly, Todd's 1987 article on a dichotomous ideological structure (in which she distinguished civic and moderate currents from religious and traditional ones);[31] and, secondly, Aughey's deconstruction of unionism in the aftermath of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement.[32] Several authors, including Aughey, have described how the 1985 Agreement acted as a catalyst to unionism—although unionists remained intensely sceptical about British intentions, having been sidelined in the negotiations leading up to the Agreement, it also precipitated a recognition that "unionists could not afford to be on the outside of a process that would determine their future".[33] David Trimble epitomised this new pro-active sentiment, evidenced in his idea that the Union could best be defended by engaging with Irish nationalists and providing the IRA with a "soft-landing" for the ending of its campaign.[34] Overlapping with this work has been those analyses of ideological shifts within Ulster unionism and, in particular, a stress on the pervasive sense of "alienation" felt and articulated by unionists in response to political developments.[35]

The sense of structural decline and ideological marginalisation is echoed in the two party histories that have appeared since Patterson's 2004 article.[36] A common thread linking these works is what might be seen as an emerging consensus on the Trimble leadership—namely, that he underestimated the importance for grassroots unionists of symbolically loaded issues such as policing reform and the inclusion of

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The Art of the State, edited by Ian Shapiro, Stephen Skowronek, and Daniel Galvin (London: New York University Press, 2006).

[30] Henry Patterson, "The Limits of "New Unionism": David Trimble and the Ulster Unionist Party", *Éire-Ireland*, 2004, Vol.39 (1 and 2), p.163.

[31] Jennifer Todd, "Two Traditions in Unionist Political Culture", *Irish Political Studies*, 2 (1987), pp. 1-26.

[32] Arthur Aughey, *Under Siege: Ulster Unionism and the Anglo-Irish Agreement* (London: Hurst, 1989).

[33] Arthur Aughey, "The 1998 Agreement: Three Unionist Anxieties", in *A Farewell to Arms? Beyond the Good Friday Agreement*, edited by Michael Cox, Adrian Guelke and Fiona Stephen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p.92; see also Farrington *Ulster Unionism*.

[34] See Trimble, quoted in Patterson, "Limits", p.166.

[35] Among others, see Andrew Finlay, "Defeatism and Northern Protestant "Identity"", *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, 2001, Vol.1 (2), pp.3-20; Alan Finlayson, "Loyalist Political Identity After the Peace", *Capital and Class*, 1999, Vol.69, pp.47-76; Neil Southern, "Protestant Alienation in Northern Ireland: A Political, Cultural and Geographical Examination", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2007, Vol.33 (1), pp. 159-80.

[36] Patterson and Kaufmann, *Unionism*; Graham Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party: Protest, Pragmatism and Pessimism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

Sinn Féin in government prior to IRA decommissioning and, instead, prioritised cross-border arrangements:

> [Trimble's] dismissive approach towards aspects of the unionist communal mood, because certain institutional arrangements had been settled to his satisfaction, was one of his greatest weaknesses as UUP leader.[37]

Unionists perceived a resurgent and articulate Sinn Féin as an anathema to their understanding that the violence was primarily the responsibility of the organisation's paramilitary wing, the IRA. The idea that was propagated by Irish nationalists that the leadership of Sinn Féin and the moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) created the peace process and had made major concessions in so doing further added to unionist unease with political developments. Thus, for unionists, the problem with the peace process was not only that they never felt "ownership" of the events; rather, increasing numbers of unionists felt that the peace process was structurally biased against their narrative understanding of the conflict and their communal self-identification.[38]

Missing from these analyses is an in-depth appreciation of how Ulster unionist resistance to both Westminster's devolution policies and Irish nationalism's project for transforming existing constitutional arrangements effectively prevented their effective operation. In other words, Ulster unionism's contribution to the development of the peace process occurred because of rather than despite that marginalisation and perceived alienation. The prioritisation by unionists of physical and constitutional security challenged the British state's ability to impose a settlement on Northern Ireland and established a parameter on how far Irish nationalists could push a reunification agenda. Simply put, British state and Irish nationalist devolutionary policies could only be enacted against a background of unionist acquiescence. Unionist alienation was not only real but was instrumental—albeit in a tacit and hidden form—and it acted as a catalyst for delaying change and transforming the context in which the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement of April 1998 was signed and implemented. I suggest that the effect of unionist resistance and agenda-setting can be seen in three key areas: security; parading and inter-communal relations; and constitutional arrangements.

The prioritisation of security

Through the Anglo-Irish Agreement Margaret Thatcher's government provided Dublin with a consultative role in the affairs of the North in return for a promise of greater security cooperation. Although the most noticeable effects of the Anglo-Irish Agreement on unionist politics relate both to the anger towards and the profound alienation from the British state that it provoked,[39] this should not be taken as the

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[37] Dean Godson, *Himself Alone: David Trimble and the Ordeal of Unionism* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), pp.818-19; see also, Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule*, p.315.
[38] Farrington, *Ulster Unionism* p.182; see also Kirk Simpson, "Untold Stories: Unionist Remembrance of Political Violence and Suffering in Northern Ireland", *British Politics*, 2008, 3, pp.465-89.
[39] Aughey, *Under Siege*; Farrington, *Ulster Unionism*.

whole story. Certainly, unionists had to confront a new political environment in which decisions on the future of Northern Ireland would be taken at an inter-governmental level; however, their resistance to the Anglo-Irish Agreement also served to transform the context in which the operation of the Agreement and future government proposals would be framed. Certainly, unionists lacked the political power to bring down the 1985 Agreement, which, unlike the "Sunningdale" power sharing executive of 1974, had no "physical" institutions apart from its secretariat and, which due its inter-governmental nature, did not depend on unionist participation. However, as Hacker points out, it is rational to expect politically and institutionally marginalised actors to attempt to "adapt existing policies to their ends than to wage a frontal assault".[40]

The diminished position of unionism was acknowledged in the conclusions of a cross-party task force that had been set up in the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Agreement to draw up a cohesive unionist response. While the Report concluded that the Agreement was detrimental to the unionist position, it failed to offer any single serious alternative to continued opposition. Instead, unionist discontent was manifest in the idea that constitutional and physical security must take precedence over political progress—and indeed, that the prioritisation of security policies was the only option that would prevent grassroots support haemorrhaging to terrorist organisations:

> The catalogue of injury and insult is endless. The net effect is a community increasingly confused as to what is and what is not acceptable in a democratic society; a community torn between loyalty to the law and established order, and the compelling conclusion that violence and anarchy are the likeliest route to political reward.[41]

The need for physical security effectively meant tackling the IRA's armed campaign. This reprioritisation was also underway in British government thinking, for as Thatcher's memoirs reveal, the British government quickly became disillusioned with the Agreement, which she complained had "alienated the unionists without gaining the level of security cooperation [with the Republic] we had a right to expect".[42] In this regard, the shift towards political dialogue in the 1990s did not relate so much to a major policy shift as much as it reflected the perception that the Anglo-Irish Agreement's ability to induce a more pro-active approach to IRA violence by the Irish Republic was producing diminishing returns. Thus, in January 1990 her then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Brooke, announced that the Anglo-Irish Agreement would be suspended if inter-party talks between the SDLP and the UUP moved to a formal footing. In November of the same year, Brooke went on to confirm Britain's commitment to the principle of consent, claiming that "the heart and core of the British presence is … the reality

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[40] Hacker, "Policy Drift", pp.47-8.
[41] "The Task Force Report: An End to Drift, 16 June 1987", available at www.cain.ulster.ac.uk, accessed 18 June 2007.
[42] Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p.415.

of nearly a million people living in a part of the island of Ireland who are, and who certainly regard themselves as British".[43]

In what was viewed as a significant intervention, Brooke also addressed republican concerns in the same speech, stating that "The British government has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland". However, despite gradual moves towards winding down its armed struggle, the IRA only called a ceasefire in 1994. Again, however, the question of physical and constitutional security came to the fore in unionists' reactions. The unionist press, for example, remained intensely sceptical over republicans' intentions—with the Belfast Newsletter claiming that :

> There is nothing permanent about the Provo [IRA] ceasefire which started this morning … the only comfort which the decent law-abiding people of Northern Ireland can take from it is that for a period the IRA shootings and bombings will stop.[44]

The background to this sentiment was captured by a Belfast Telegraph journalist, who, dismissing John Hume's suggestion that the past be left behind pointed out that "It is hard to imagine quite how 3,168 families [of victims] will ever draw a line under their past".[45]

Parading and the persistence of moderation

Unionist alienation spilled over in a series of confrontations over Orange Order parades on the Twelfth of July holidays during the mid-1990s, which witnessed some of the most violent riots in Northern Ireland since the early 1970s. Despite the violence, a residual moderate opinion is discernible within the unionist constituency that disavowed the more extreme elements and which sought to restore order to unionist protest. The key voices in this constituency were the *Belfast Newsletter*, the *Belfast Telegraph* and the Protestant Church leaders. Orange parades had a long history of confrontation in that they were inextricably linked to zero sum power politics in those areas where their route took them through mainly Catholic villages and housing estates—with the group who threatened the most trouble getting their way.[46] During the 1990s, the perception among Protestants that Sinn Féin was behind the various residents' groups who objected to the parades through their areas and that the protests represented a new phase in a post-conflict republican struggle—in other words, that they were an element in the so-called "Tactical Use of the Armed Struggle". For example, at the beginning of July 1995, the Newsletter complained that

> The Provos [Provisional IRA] have presented the government with a long shopping list—on British withdrawal, the standing down of the RUC, the release of convicted

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[43] Peter Brooke, quoted in Henry Patterson, *The Politics of Illusion: A Political History of the IRA* (London: Serif, 1997), p.228.
[44] *Belfast Newsletter*, 1 September 1994.
[45] Lindy McDowell, "Questions the victims couldn't ask", *Belfast Telegraph*, 1 September 1994.
[46] See Eric P Kaufmann, *The Orange Order: A Contemporary Northern Irish History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.155.

prisoners and acceptance of SF's entry into full-scale political dialogue without the decommissioning of arms. It does not require much brainpower therefore to conclude that failure to meets these demands would almost certainly reactivate the armed wing of the republican movement.[47]

Although the Newsletter echoed the feelings of historic loss following the police announcement that the parade would be banned, it also condemned the loyalist "element bent on violence [which] took full advantage of the deteriorating situation to break through police ranks and any semblance of control was lost"[48]. Faced with massive Orange Order protest, the RUC reversed its original decision and allowed the march along the mainly Catholic Garvaghy Road, allowing the head of the Order to ask its supporters to stay away from the Ormeau Road march in Belfast, which had also been banned, so that those "bent on causing problems would not have the cover of peaceful protesters".[49]

Despite the apparent victory for the Orange Order, the *Newsletter* warned that the broad direction of political change detrimental to unionism:

> …the peace process is, with the connivance of our government, weighted heavily against the unionist position and tilted in favour of those elements that make up the pan-nationalist front. The government position is one of shifting sand, pathetically retreating on every demand that is presented by those who would purport to speak on behalf of the terrorists, both republican and loyalist … While a blind eye is being turned to the issue of decommissioning … the terrorists, their apologists and those who would share the same political objectives are demanding that the convicted killers be released from prison and that inclusive talks begin which would embrace those who never once have denounced or abandoned the 'armed struggle'.[50]

Following the breakdown of the IRA's ceasefire at the beginning of 1996, the following year's July marches were again tense. The unionist MP David Burnside argued that the stand-off in Portadown and elsewhere across the North represented a calculated republican strategy based on identifying "Catholic towns" and staging protests: "This is their way of splitting up Northern Ireland as a political entity".[51] The Presbyterian Moderator, Dr Harry Allen, condemned loyalist violence and intimidation which, he said, "bring[s] our Protestant faith into disrepute in the eyes of the world and assist[s] the IRA in its evil work".[52] Similarly, the *Belfast Telegraph* argued that unionists could not "absolve themselves of responsibility" for the rising communal violence, it also urged Orange and unionist politicians to rally behind the forces of law and order and praised the intervention of the RUC chief constable in preventing "drift" by forcing the march once again down the Garvaghy Road. The Church of Ireland Primate, Robin Eames, likewise urged restraint and called for

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[47] *Belfast Newsletter*, 2 July 1995.
[48] *Belfast Newsletter*, 11 July 1995.
[49] Martin Smyth quoted in ibid.
[50] *Belfast Newsletter*, 19 July 1995; original emphasis.
[51] *Belfast Newsletter*, 9 July 1996.
[52] *Belfast Newsletter*, 10 July 1996.

moderation: "Protest on either side will be utterly diluted by the sort of behaviour we've seen trying to bring this province to its knees again…We have got to find a way out of this impasse".[53] Likewise, the *Newsletter* appealed for dialogue:

> There must surely be moderate people within the Garvaghy Road nationalist community who could reach across the divide to fellow townspeople out of the Protestant and Orange tradition and work out some form of commonsense agreement which would avoid any more of this ritual controversy and wrangle over the annual Drumcree parade.[54]

Despite these pleas, the Drumcree stand-off occurred again in 1997. The Newsletter again, however, urged moderation and echoed the ideas expressed by Dr Eames in previous years asking for the "voices of the 'silent majority'" to make their feelings heard.[55] The paper criticised extremists on both sides for their destabilising influence:

> The scale of the rioting, burning, and looting, coupled with vicious gun attacks on police and troops, demonstrate that this was very carefully planned and orchestrated to raise the temperature in the run-up to the Twelfth.[56]

This discourse of moderation, restraint and caution contrasted with those loyalist paramilitary leaders who appeared determined to provoke a return to all-out ethnic hostilities.[57] Thus, when loyalist paramilitaries escalated their campaign against the Good Friday Agreement prior to the Twelfth in 1998 by burning down Catholic Churches, Orange Order spokesmen joined in the wave of criticism:

> We unreservedly condemn the arson attacks on RC churches and call on all right-thinking people in the Protestant and loyalist community to isolate those who would engage in such sacrilege and wanton destruction.[58]

The campaign rapidly petered out following the deaths of three Catholic children in a firebomb attack on a house in Ballymoney on 12 July, with the Chaplain of the County Armagh Orange Order asking the Orangemen to drop their march at Drumcree, reasoning that "no road is worth a life". The First Minister and Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, David Trimble, also attacked the loyalist escalation and asked the Order to return home claiming that it was the only way in which the Portadown brethren: "can clearly distance themselves from these murders and show the world that they repudiate those who murder young children".[59]

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[53] *Irish Times*, 10 July 1996.
[54] *Belfast Newsletter*, 11 July 1996.
[55] *Belfast Newsletter*, 4 July 1997.
[56] *Belfast Newsletter*, 8 July 1997.
[57] Godson, *Himself Alone*.
[58] *Belfast Newsletter*, 3 July 1998.
[59] *Belfast Newsletter*, 13 July 1998.

CONSTITUTIONAL GUARANTEES

The December 1993 Downing Street Declaration reaffirmed the two governments' commitment to the principle of consent and roundly rejected the Hume-Adams idea that Britain should become a "persuader" for Irish unity. Ostensibly, the Frameworks Documents of February 1995 represented something of a concession to Irish nationalism insofar as it detailed areas in which cross-border bodies could cooperate following a successful end to the ongoing political talks.[60] However, even then, the published document represented a climb-down from the "dynamic, enabling, progressive" functions envisaged for these institutions in a leaked early draft.[61] Although the Newsletter admitted that the Document reaffirmed the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, it remained suspicious about the nationalist project and the possibility that nationalists would use the Document as a starting point for negotiations: "Permanent peace, we are assured, is the objective of the whole exercise, but on whose terms?"[62] The doubts over republican intentions led the paper to link the Frameworks Documents to the decommissioning debate by claiming that

> …no unionist worthy of the name could sit down with those who for 25 years caused so much suffering to innocents in both the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities and who have shown absolutely no remorse for their actions, refusing to totally renounce violence as a means of achieving their political objectives.[63]

The newspaper praised the commitment of the new Unionist Party leader, David Trimble, on the issue following his accession in September 1995 and stated that "there can be no all-embracing talks with the political representatives of the IRA or the fringe loyalist groupings until the terrorists on both sides abandon for good their illegal murder weaponry and announce their organisations as redundant".[64] Indeed, following the signing of the 1998 Agreement, the *Newsletter* stated that the political parties must ensure that the decommissioning of weapons demanded in the text be linked to the release of paramilitary prisoners: "Such a prerequisite is absolutely essential as a confidence booster to the great silent majority in our two communities, who, during the duration of the Troubles, have never ever engaged in violence".[65] The paper pushed for a "Yes" vote on the Agreement by arguing that unionist unity was of paramount importance. It likewise referred to government efforts to meet the needs of victims[66] and included interviews supporting the Agreement from prominent victims' spokespersons such as Alan McBride whose wife had been killed in the 1993 Shankill bombing: "we victims are being asked to

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[60] Murray and Tonge, *Sinn Féin and the SDLP: From Alienation to Participation* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2005), p.189.
[61] Henry Patterson, "Response from both sides has been predictable", *Irish Times*, 23 February 1995.
[62] *Belfast Newsletter*, 23 February 1995.
[63] *Belfast Newsletter*, 27 February 1995.
[64] *Belfast Newsletter*, 11 September 1995
[65] *Belfast Newsletter*, 11 April 1998.
[66] The British government appointed Adam Ingram as the first Minister for Victims on 12 May and announced that it would set aside £4 million for victims' needs; *Belfast Newsletter*, 13 May 1998.

accept the most with this deal, but I am still voting in favour of it".[67] Despite the fact that only a slender majority of Protestants voted in favour of the Agreement,[68] the paper claimed that its middle-of-the-road stance had been vindicated:

> Unionists whose hearts a week earlier had been set against the agreement because of the manifestation of the prisoners issue at Sinn Féin and loyalist rallies, put their anger aside and, looking at the bigger picture, liked what they saw.[69]

David Trimble claimed that the Agreement represented a victory for unionism: despite long-standing nationalist policy, Britain would not become a persuader for Irish unity; the principle of consent was accepted by republicans; Sinn Féin was committed to decommissioning; and cross-border bodies would not be evolutionary but would be answerable to a unionist veto in a devolved Northern Ireland assembly.[70] However, the Agreement also provided for a commission to investigate police reform whose eventual report recommended that the police structures be thoroughly overhauled and the name changed. The Patten Report seriously undermined Trimble's interpretation of the Agreement as unionists perceived the "disbandment" of the police as a fundamental attack on their understanding of the conflict as being primarily about republican aggression. For example, unionists pointed to the fact that IRA had killed 1,771 people in comparison to the RUC which was responsible for 52 deaths.[71] In this way, for many Protestants, the Patten Report symbolised the growing marginalisation of the unionist narrative understanding of what the conflict was all about.[72]

Uncertainty over decommissioning continued to bedevil the devolution of administrative powers to Northern Ireland following the 1998 referendum result. The IRA's refusal reluctance to decommission its weapons was partially based on its perception that handing over its arms was tantamount to surrender and, since in its eyes it remained undefeated on the field of battle, the request was an attempt to humiliate the movement. The IRA's refusal to disarm meant that the New Labour government had to apply pressure elsewhere in order to secure the implementation of the Agreement,[73] and, following a review of the implementation process, David Trimble agreed to enter a power sharing executive with Sinn Féin prior to decommissioning. Trimble's commitment was, however, based on the proviso that he would resign after two months if decommissioning still had not happened. Thus, the formal transfer of powers happened over a year and a half after the 1998

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[67] *Belfast Newsletter*, 15 May 1998.

[68] Although Northern Ireland voted as a single constituency, meaning that the exact figure is unavailable, it has been estimated to have been as low as 53 percent; see Patterson and Kaufmann, *Unionism*, p.223

[69] *Belfast Newsletter*, 23 May 1998.

[70] Paul Bew, "The unionists have won, they just don't know it", *Sunday Times*, 17 May 1998.

[71] David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney and Chris Thornton, *Lost Lives: The stories of the men, women and children who died as a result of the Northern Ireland troubles* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1999), pp.1483-84.

[72] Simpson, "Untold Stories".

[73] Eamonn O'Kane, *Britain, Ireland and Northern Ireland since 1980: The Totality of Relationships* (London: Routledge, 2007), p.163.

Agreement, and when it did occur, devolution lasted only from December 1999 to February 2000.

However, the pressure on Trimble continued after that date: his lack of a credible alternative to power sharing (opposition to the 1998 Agreement being the reserve of the DUP and his intra-party rivals), meant that he was susceptible to the governments' and the SDLP's reluctance to abandon the republican movement. Trimble re-entered the power sharing executive in May 2000, however, in response to growing disquiet within his party and the threat of an electoral wipe-out at the hands of the DUP in the forthcoming Westminster general election, he again promised to resign if decommissioning had not occurred by July 2001. Although the IRA's decision to begin decommissioning in October 2001 owed much to the 9/11 attacks in the United States, it also allowed Trimble an opportunity to re-enter the power sharing executive in November. The third period of devolution lasted until October 2002 when Trimble resigned following revelations of continued IRA activity in the North.

While the constitutional gains highlighted by Trimble in 1998 remained untouched, his party was replaced as the largest unionist party by the DUP in 2003, whose commitment to decommissioning occurring before it would enter power sharing ensured the continued suspension of the devolved assembly. Even following the IRA's final act of decommissioning in September 2005, Sinn Féin's refusal to support the reformed police service played a significant role in ensuring that that suspension continued until the May 2007 accord entrenched Sinn Féin and the DUP as the two largest ethnic parties in a devolved power sharing settlement.

DISCUSSION

This paper suggested that a perspectival shift from the deconstruction of ethnicised narratives to a focus on the alienation they produce provides an alternative lens through which to view the Northern Irish conflict and its settlement. This shift allows us to see that unionist marginalisation in-itself profoundly affected the operation of governmental and Northern nationalist policy direction. The perspectival shift suggests further avenues for research on the Northern Irish conflict. For instance, the idea that a residual strand of moderation underpinned unionist politics suggests an important counterfactual—namely, that a more "moderate" political stance by northern nationalists (such as that advocated in the 1970s by SDLP leaders such as Gerry Fitt and Paddy Devlin that power sharing need not be linked to cross-border institutions) or, arguably, a greater willingness to adopt a more hard-line stance vis-à-vis the IRA's reluctance to decommission may have produced a more flexible approach by unionist politicians. Secondly, although it is also beyond the scope of this paper, the idea that resistance and delay influences policy changes in electorally powerful groups might credibly explain the gradual acceptance by Sinn Féin of policing reforms and the Northern Ireland Office Protocols for community

restorative justice.[74] Again, a shift in perspective from the decision-making of political elites to the role that liminal groups play has certain normative and historical implications involved with the idea of rescuing hidden or lost narratives and restoring marginalised experiences to the centre of political analysis.[75]

The paper's implications extend beyond an analysis of Ulster unionism and Northern Ireland and intersect with important questions raised by political scientists about the historical processes at work in the persistence and settlement of conflicts. The emphasis on hidden processes overlaps with, for example, Stephen Stedman's identification of "spoilers", but demonstrates that marginalised voices and resistance-oriented tactics may play an important and essentially conservative influence by delaying or moderating the pace and extent of change.[76] In addition, clarity on the hidden politics of peace processes may result in more accurate depiction of the role that feedback processes play in (re)producing conflict and more nuanced theoretical insights regarding how those processes are altered. Again, attention to the importance of agenda-setting may help to clarify policy direction for elite policymakers—a major criticism of the way that the two governments handled the Northern Ireland peace process, for example, was that their ambiguous and often contradictory positions propagated a climate of suspicion and distrust that was inimical to dialogue.[77] Finally, the perspectival shift from radical transformation to underlying continuity and from overt interventions to hidden resistance may reinforce the idea that peace processes involve precarious political dynamics and that conflictual relations may be highly resilient.

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[74] See Martyn Frampton, *The Long March: The Political Strategy of Sinn Féin, 1981-2007* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Fidelma Ashe, "From Paramilitaries to Peacemakers: The Gender Dynamics of Community-Based Restorative Justice in Northern Ireland", *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol.11 (1), pp.298-314; Cillian McGrattan, "Community-Based Restorative Justice in Northern Ireland: A Neo-Traditional Paradigm?", *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, forthcoming.

[75] See, for example, Fidelma Ashe, "Gendering Ethno-Nationalist Conflict in Northern Ireland: A Comparative Analysis of Nationalist Women's Political Protests", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2007, Vol.30 (5), pp.766-96; Kirk Simpson, *Truth Recovery in Northern Ireland: Critically Interpreting the Past* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

[76] Stephen John Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes", *International Security*, 1997, Vol.22 (2), pp.5-53; see also O'Kane, "Learning".

[77] Cillian McGrattan, *Politics of Entrenchment*.