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Can Northern Ireland become normal? Attitudes to the role of government in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

In the policy framework on 'community relations' published under direct rule in March 2005, *A Shared Future*, government indicated that the goal in Northern Ireland was to develop 'a normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere, and where all people are treated impartially' (OFMDFM, 2005: 8). It was an ill omen that this policy was shelved when devolution was re-established in May 2007 (Wilford and Wilson, 2007). But do public attitudes, as expressed in responses in the 2007 **Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT)** Survey to questions on the role of government and political attitudes, suggest that such a 'normal' Northern Ireland is emerging?

If it were to be so, we would expect to find a commitment to universal norms – of democracy, the rule of law and human rights – widely respected

across post-war Western Europe and embodied since 1949 in the Council of Europe. We would also expect a move away from the nationalistic politics – geared to introducing, strengthening or removing borders – which led to war and now predominates elsewhere in Europe only in pockets: Flanders, the Basque Country, Cyprus, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. We would anticipate a focus on the devolved assembly as the key political institution, rather than the governments in London and Dublin – as was evident throughout the 'peace process' – and on more day-to-day concerns, rather than constitutional issues.

Universal norms

Unlike western Europe generally after World War II, when there was a consensus that nationalistic excess and intolerance had led the continent to ruin – and that therefore universal norms were both imperative and widely supported – in Northern Ireland

there has been no such consensus on how the 'troubles' should be understood (Dawson, 2007). Indeed, the Belfast agreement, described by one of its negotiators as an 'agreement to disagree' about the future, also reflected an inability to agree on the past and what was wrong with it.

The legacy of this normative ambivalence is evident in answers to the 2007 NILT questions about politically-motivated violence (Table 1). When asked 'Do you have sympathy with the reasons for violence from loyalist/republican groups even if you don't condone the violence itself?' 29% expressed some sympathy vis-à-vis loyalist violence and 30% with regard to its republican counterpart.

Table 1: Do you have sympathy with the reasons for violence from loyalist/republican groups even if you don't condone the violence itself (%)?

	Loyalist groups	Republican groups
A lot of sympathy	3	5
A little sympathy	26	25
No sympathy at all	70	69
Don't know	2	2
Total	100	100

It should be stressed that only small minorities expressed 'a lot of sympathy' (3% and 5% respectively) and there was the qualifying clause about not condoning violence. It is still remarkable, though, given that violence is so generally stigmatised in Europe, that such large proportions of the population would be prepared to volunteer 'sympathy with the reasons for violence', a question focused essentially on perceived legitimacy.

Particularly noticeable is that 11% of Catholics expressed 'a lot of sympathy' when it comes to republican violence. If this is thought, a decade and a half into the 'peace process', to be a perverse result, it raises once more the question as to whether the 'constructive ambiguity' which characterised that process has in the pursuit of short-term Realpolitik engendered long-term problems for the legitimacy of democratic arrangements, as the former deputy first minister Séamus Mallon forcefully argued (Guardian, March 14th 2007).

By universal standards, the most extreme denial of human rights and the rule of law during the 'troubles' was manifested by internment, introduced in 1971 and followed by an upsurge of violence before it was phased out in the mid-70s. Detention without trial has again come on to the public agenda, in the context of the 'war on terror' and the debate in the UK about detention of suspects. The current government proposed, amid much opposition, an extension to 42 days for 'terrorist' suspects – nearly 10 times as long as that found by the European Court of Human Rights, in a 1988 ruling on a Northern Ireland case, to have contravened the requirement to bring a suspect 'promptly' before a court as required by article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The NILT question on this issue, however, found a clear majority of 58% sympathetic to the notion that 'the authorities' should definitely or probably be allowed to detain people for as long as they wanted (Table 2). This rose to 66% among Protestant respondents, while falling to (a still substantial) 40% among Catholics. Note that this high positive response came despite the question offering no limitation whatsoever to the period of potential detention or indeed any restriction to 'terrorist' offences.

Even the modest question as to whether protest marches – such as characterised the early civil-rights movement – should be allowed attracted striking dissensus (Figure 1). This is a fundamental human right in a democratic society, yet one third of respondents, rising to 36% among Protestants, said such demonstrations

Table 2: Do you think the authorities should have the right to detain people for as long as they want without putting them on trial (%)?

Definitely should have right	23
Probably should have right	35
Probably should not have right	21
Definitely should not have right	15
Can't choose	6
Total	100

should probably or definitely not be permitted.

We should put these striking results in context. Most respondents did not express views which conferred legitimacy upon, still less personally condoned, paramilitary violence. Most did not definitely believe that the authorities should be able to detain people indefinitely and other civil liberties in the survey mostly attracted majority support. Yet, in another, international, context, survey research has found that Northern Ireland is a more 'bigoted' society than any of 18 comparator western democracies (Borooah and Mangan, 2007).

The lack of a broader consensus on fundamental norms of a civic society does not bode well for Northern Ireland's future. The failure of successive UK governments to grasp the nettle of 'dealing with the past' – such as by an impartial and independent commission of historical clarification – may yet come home to roost.

Nationalistic politics

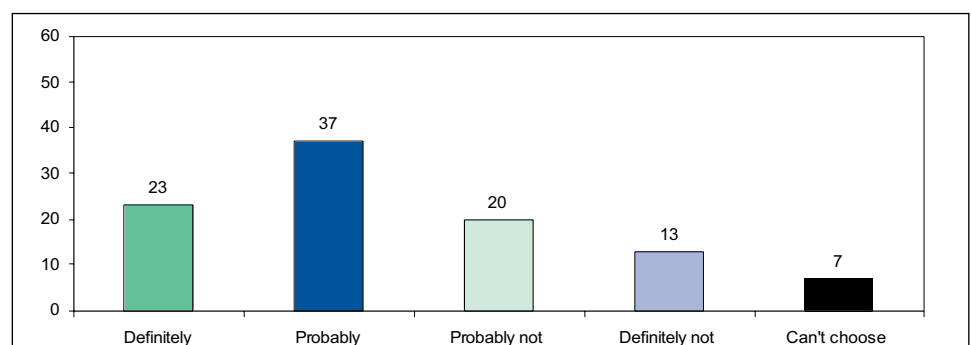
A commitment to universal norms goes with a commitment to the public good and, in particular, to the idea of non-discrimination between

fellow citizens. Nationalism, though, speaks the collectivist and conformist language of 'community', rather than the individualist and democratic discourse of the citizen, and advances the cause of one such imagined community over another (Özkırımlı, 2005: 89, 102). It thus includes in Northern Ireland the 'unionist' version of nationalism as well as the 'nationalist' version of nationalism, however much these are conventionally counterposed to one another.

Elections in the last decade have shown a big swing to the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin (SF). The survey found these parties to enjoy a total support of 34% of respondents. It is true that these figures are significantly below contemporary electoral performances: in the 2007 assembly election the two parties secured 56% between them. But the latter is likely significantly to exaggerate support: the NILT question allows a none-of-the-above answer (15%) more characteristic of electoral abstainers, and the more motivated supporters of the nationalistic parties may well turn out in greater numbers than their rivals at election time (though there may also still be a residual reluctance to declare support to interviewers for what used to be 'pariah' parties).

The official view in London and Dublin is, however, to downplay concern about this political polarisation, on the grounds that these parties have moderated their stance. It is arresting therefore that a recent study of 'populist radical right parties' in Europe, which defines such parties as 'nativist' (nationalist plus xenophobic), authoritarian and populist, includes the DUP within the family (Mudde, 2007: 55). And it places SF just on the borderline outside – being

Figure 1: Should organising protest marches and demonstrations be allowed (%)?



authoritarian, populist and nationalist, like the DUP, but nativist only towards the English and Protestants (Mudde, 2007: 52).

The greatest success that any such party has achieved in general elections in recent years was a 27% score by the Freedom Party of Austria in 1999 (Mudde, 2007: 44) and, when it was subsequently invited into government by the Christian Democrats, Austria faced sanctions from other EU members anxious that democracy was under threat. The next strongest performer, the Flemish Interest, is denied access to government by all the Belgian democratic parties for the same reason. Yet in the assembly election, the DUP scored fully 30%, with a further 26% for SF. What was thus the strongest performance in any election by the populist radical right across the continent was considered with equanimity in London and Dublin, with no concern in either capital about their democratic credentials.

There is, however, more positive news, supportive of the argument (Brubaker, 2004) that, over time, the embers of ethnic conflict tend to burn themselves out as day-to-day concerns take over. Table 3 shows that when respondents to the NILT are asked to define their own identity in nationalistic terms four in ten now prefer the plague-on-both-your-houses 'neither'.

Table 3: Do you think of yourself as a unionist, a nationalist or neither (%)?

Unionist	36
Nationalist	24
Neither	40
Other	<1
Don't know	<1
Total	100

What is particularly striking is how the 'neither' option rises in popularity as one goes down the age cohorts: close to half of under-45s adopted it. Unsurprisingly, there is also evidence that support for 'neither' has been rising over time: in the first NILT survey in 1998 it attracted the support of one third of respondents when it came second to 'unionist', favoured by 40%, with one quarter identifying as

'nationalist'. As Table 4 shows, a related feature of the current survey is that, when asked how they would feel in the event of a vote for Northern Ireland to become part of a united Ireland, a much smaller proportion (12%) of respondents said they would not be able to live with it than those who said either that they could live with it (46%) – while not liking it – or would accept the wishes of the majority (39%). Similar results occurred in response to a question about how people would feel if a majority of people never voted to become part of a united Ireland. Such findings corroborate the indications of a public preference for a higher priority to be given to policy issues.

Table 4: If the majority of people in Northern Ireland ever/never voted to become part of a united Ireland do you think you

	Ever voted for united Ireland	Never voted for united Ireland
Would find this almost impossible to accept?	12	4
Would not like it, but could live with it if you had to?	46	34
Would happily accept the wishes of the majority?	39	58
Don't know	3	4
Total	100	100

'Bread and butter' issues

Also on the positive side of the balance, the 2007 survey, as previously, found a clear public preference for political argument to move on to policy rather than constitutional issues (Table 5). Just 12% of respondents wanted the latter to be prioritised, as against 65% the former.

Table 5: Do you think it is more important that the Assembly spends its time dealing with policy issues or constitutional issues (%)?

Policy issues	65
Constitutional issues	12
Both equally	20
Don't know	3
Total	100

Again as in previous surveys, improving the health service and the economy/employment figured jointly as the two main concerns, well ahead of others. Even within the constitutional arena, the devolution of policing and justice was seen as much more important than traditional border politics (Table 6).

Table 6: On constitutional issues that the Assembly will have to deal with, which of these do you think is the most important (%)?

Devolution of policing and justice	53
Securing Northern Ireland's union with the United Kingdom	26
Bringing about a United Ireland	9
None of these	7
Don't know	6
Total	100

Relating to this, and again in line with the results from earlier NILT surveys, while respondents were more likely to believe that it was the UK government which continued to call the shots, they overwhelmingly wanted the assembly, rather than Westminster, to be the key political institution influencing the way Northern Ireland is run (Table 7).

Table 7: Which of the following has the most influence/ought to have most influence over the way Northern Ireland is run (%)?

	Which has most influence	Which ought to have most influence
Northern Ireland Assembly	36	68
UK government at Westminster	45	11
Local councils in Northern Ireland	7	11
Irish Government	2	3
European Union	3	2
Other	1	1
Don't know	5	3
Total	100	100

Conclusion

The latter trends represent more positive pointers, but they do not outweigh the disturbing trends earlier identified. Thus, the continued dominance of nationalistic politics has seen 'bread-and-butter' issues – critically, the future of academic selection – deadlocked on sectarian lines and the devolution of policing and justice indefinitely postponed, while the assembly has adopted little by way of legislation other than measures maintaining parity with Westminster. A decade on from the Belfast agreement, the NILT survey would indicate there is still some road to travel towards a 'normal' Northern Ireland.

Key Points

- Around one quarter of respondents to the NILT survey have some sympathy with violence in pursuit of political ends.
- 57% of respondents were sympathetic to the notion that 'the authorities should be allowed to detain people for as long as they wanted'.
- A large majority (65%) think that it is more important for the assembly to concentrate on policy issues rather than constitutional ones and, even in respect of constitutional issues, just over half place priority on devolving policing and justice, rather than whether Northern Ireland is part of the UK or Ireland.
- While 45% of respondents see Westminster as having, under current practice, the biggest influence over how Northern Ireland is run, 68% think that the Assembly should have the biggest role in the governance of Northern Ireland.

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The **Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2007, 1,179 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

The survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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