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**EMERGING CONSOCIATIONALISM:
PROSPECTS FOR POWER SHARING IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

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ABSTRACT

The cessation of violence in Northern Ireland now makes a political "solution" imperative as the terrorists await constitutional developments. One such option, which has been unsuccessfully attempted in the past, is a devolved power sharing executive in the Province. Evidence is emerging, however, from the often neglected forum of local government that a "voluntary coalition" or consociation between the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) has evolved since 1989. This paper addresses the reaction of local political leaders, the electorate and the government to power sharing and assesses whether this development offers a platform for consociationalism at the macro political level.

Introduction

The precipitative events of the last 12 months in Northern Ireland have taken most observers by surprise. After 3,168 deaths and 25 years of terrorist violence, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) announced a cease fire on 31 August 1994. This was subsequently followed (14 October 1994) by a reciprocal cessation of violence from the combined Loyalist Military Command, an umbrella group comprising the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Ulster Defence Association and the Red Hand Commando. The IRA announcement claimed its cessation was in recognition of the "potential of the current situation and in order to enhance the democratic peace process". The Loyalists, in turn, stated that their cease fire was "completely dependent upon continued IRA cessation since the Republican cease fire has yet to be declared permanent". The termination of violence came on the back of the Anglo-Irish Joint (Downing Street) Declaration (15 December 1993) and a flurry of secret discussions which included an unpublished peace plan devised by John Hume (Social Democratic and Labour Party - SDLP) and Gerry Adams (Sinn Fein) and controversial meetings between representatives of the British Government and Sinn Fein. The Joint Declaration, described as a "framework for peace", stated that the ultimate decisions on governing Northern Ireland would be made by a majority of the citizens therein; the Republic of Ireland would, as part of an overall settlement, seek to revise its constitutional claim to sovereignty over the 6 counties of Northern Ireland; and Britain would not block the possible reunification of Ireland, if it was backed by a majority in the North. Britain maintained that it would not enter into formal talks with Sinn Fein until it unequivocally renounced violence and for 3 months after the start of a permanent cease fire by the IRA.

The two governments responded to the cease fires with different degrees of magnanimity in an effort to encourage the peace process, on the one hand, but detract from critics, on the other, that such gestures were a "reward" for terrorism. The ban on broadcasting imposed on Sinn Fein was lifted and the people of Northern Ireland promised a referendum on future proposals for its governance emerging from a framework document drawn up by the British and Irish governments. Border crossings were opened, financial and economic aid promised from British, European and American sources and an unofficial scaling down of military presence in volatile areas got under way. The Republic of Ireland began a programme of releasing IRA prisoners (with less than 3 years to serve), somewhat misguided in the British view, which was seriously set back when a postal worker was shot (November 1994) in an IRA fund-raising robbery. This served only to remind both governments (if indeed they needed such a reminder) that the men of violence were waiting in the wings whilst politicians were given an opportunity to reach an acceptable constitutional agreement. One relic of past failures to reach a compromise was the 1974 power sharing executive, established under the Heath Government as a representative body elected using proportional representation and intended to operate within an all-Ireland dimension referred to as a Council of Ireland. A loyalist backlash against power sharing and the Irish framework led, eventually, to the collapse of the administration and the reimposition of Direct Rule. What then are the current prospects for some sort of devolved power sharing administration emerging during the respite in violence ?

The aims of this paper are threefold. Firstly, we review the theory of consociational democracy, integral to which is the whole idea of power sharing, in the light of circumstances

now pertaining in Northern Ireland. Secondly, we address the question of whether conditions are now favourable for power sharing. We consider this through the responses of local politicians and the electorate to power sharing and examining whether the government has, in fact, a hand in engineering consociation. Finally, we offer some observations on the implications for developments at the constitutional level.

Consociationalism

Consociationalism or power sharing has been advocated as one of a number of methods of tackling ethnic conflict regulation and is regarded as an alternative to majoritarianism or Westminster-style democracy². Its advocates recommend it as a form of governance best suited to societies deeply divided by religion, race, ethnicity, language, ideology and culture. Examples of its application in practice include the Netherlands and Luxembourg from 1917 to 1967, the Lebanon from 1943 to 1975, Cyprus from 1960 to 1963 and Northern Ireland in 1973-74.

Consociational democracy has four basic principles, the most important of which are executive power sharing or a grand coalition and a high degree of autonomy for the segments of the plural society; the secondary principles are proportionality and the minority veto³.

Executive power sharing involves government by a grand coalition comprising representatives from each of the main segments. It can take a variety of forms such as a grand coalition cabinet in a parliamentary system, as opposed to one-party non-coalition cabinets typical of the majoritarian Westminster model. The second principle prescribes delegating decision

making to each of the segments. Issues of common concern should be made jointly by representatives of all segments and others left to each segment. This segmental autonomy again contrasts with unitary and centralising tendencies in majoritarian democracies. In order to guarantee the fair representation of minority segments, proportionality in political representation, civil service appointments, and the allocation of public funds is recommended as an important component of consociationalism. As an extension of this principle, there can be over-representation of small segments, and/or parity of representation when all segments are represented equally regardless of their size in the population. Again, this contrasts with disproportional representation which favours the majority or the largest party, synonymous with the Westminster first past the post plurality system. Finally, the minority veto should exist to protect the vital interests of minority segments. Given the arithmetic of power sharing coalitions, minorities can be overruled or outvoted. If, however, their vital interests are at stake they can veto the decision making process. This contravenes all principles of majoritarian government.

There are nine conditions that favour the establishment of consociational democracy in a plural society and its successful operation: the absence of a majority segment, segments of roughly the same size; a relatively small number of segments; a relatively small total population; foreign threats that are perceived as a common danger; overarching loyalties that counterbalance the centrifugal effects of segmental loyalties; the absence of large socio-economic inequalities; geographical concentration of segments; and pre-existing traditions of political accommodation⁴. Lijphart argues that "these are helpful conditions, but they should not be regarded as either necessary or sufficient. The presence of all or most of them

does not guarantee consociationalism, nor does their absence prevent it"⁵. The principles of consociationalism can operate at both central and local government levels.

The application of consociational principles or power sharing to Northern Ireland has both its advocates and critics. In the former category O'Leary suggests that the most favourable conditions for power sharing are largely absent in Northern Ireland⁶. He also points out that all previous attempts at voluntary consociational experiments have failed, the Sunningdale Agreement and the power sharing executive 1973-74, the Constitutional Convention of 1975, the all-party talks of 1979-80 and the Northern Ireland Assembly 1982-86. With the emergence of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, however, he detected a shift in policy from voluntary to coercive consociationalism but pronounced the latter to be a failure also. In spite of these conclusions on power sharing, he is an advocate of the principle:

Power sharing in a devolved government, that is, local consociation, has been widely prescribed as the most desirable solution for Northern Ireland...I share the conviction that Northern Ireland's constitutional choice is between consociational democracy and no democracy but the key question is whether consociation is feasible in Northern Ireland⁷.

Wilford also acknowledges that finding a workable consociation in Northern Ireland is unlikely, primarily because of the emphasis placed upon elites to engage in the politics of accommodation, given the history of mutual distrust which exists⁸. He presents evidence of "inverted consociationalism" where the focus has changed to a bottom-up approach to cross-community confidence-building synonymous with recent fair employment and education policies. He argues:

Instead of seeking to manufacture a fragile consensus which spans an inextricably divided society, they (the policies) seem to represent attempts to erode the modernist and monolithic blocs within which the region's social segments are cast⁹.

Chief amongst the critics of consociationalism is Barry who is concerned that applying such principles could, in fact, make things worse in Northern Ireland¹⁰. He argues that there is no easy alternative to accommodation between the two communities but suggests that Britain's stance of insisting on a power sharing constitution in any final settlement, as a guarantee that the Catholic minority will be accommodated, makes a resolution less rather than more likely. In short, the enforcement of consociational devices are naive and transferring the experiences of a country such as the Netherlands "does not support the constitutional requirement of power sharing in Northern Ireland"¹¹. On the other hand, he claims that:

it would be enormously encouraging for the future of Northern Ireland if a party representing a substantial proportion of the Protestant vote...were voluntarily (our emphasis) to offer a coalition to a party representing a substantial proportion of the Catholic vote and if this party were to accept. For it would show, in the clearest possible way, that representatives of both sides recognised the necessity for reaching an accommodation¹².

Importantly, he concludes that consociational devices cannot create the conditions for political accommodation where these do not exist. The leaders must want to compromise, to create and sustain a system of power sharing and settle the issues in dispute, and their supporters must be prepared to endorse their actions¹³.

Yet there is evidence emerging of a "voluntary coalition" representing a substantial proportion of the Catholic (SDLP) and Protestant (Ulster Unionist Party - UUP) population in the often neglected area of local government in Northern Ireland. The remainder of this paper examines whether consociationalism is taking root in Northern Ireland through a case study of local councils posing three key questions: do local political leaders want it; are

followers prepared to endorse it; is there evidence of the government trying to engineer consociationalism ?

To address the first question, research was undertaken in 12 councils (out of a total of 26) which are described as "power sharing" local authorities and a further 3 councils, with similar political characteristics, which do not share power. The research entailed gathering documentary evidence from council minutes and local newspaper reports, non-participant observation of monthly council meetings in the 15 councils over a 6 month period (Nov. 1993 - June 1994) and in-depth interviews, totalling 50, with leaders of each political group within these councils. To address the second question an analysis of the most recent (1993) local government elections was undertaken to assess the response of voters or "followers". Had power sharing, for instance, encouraged the politics of moderation by a decline in support for Sinn Fein and the DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) ? Did it lead to more cross-party voting between the SDLP and UUP ? Finally, we looked for evidence of the government's hand in engineering consociationalism by favourably supporting those councils involved in power sharing. The results of the research on these three questions and their implications for consociationalism are presented individually, preceded by a short introduction on the evolution of power sharing in local government.

Background to power sharing

Since the reorganisation of local government in 1973, the twenty six district councils in Northern Ireland have been responsible for a limited range of public services, principally refuse collection, street cleaning and the provision of leisure and recreation facilities. Their

relatively minor role is illustrated by a current estimated net expenditure budget of £192m from a total public expenditure purse of £8 billion¹⁴. Yet local authorities are important, apart from the executive functions they undertake.

Firstly, as the only democratically elected forum in Northern Ireland since the demise of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1986, they are of symbolic significance. Secondly, in the absence of any devolved government, councillors are the most accessible source for constituents with concerns about education, health, housing and other mainstream services, over which local government has no direct control. Thirdly, councils employ about 9,000 people in an economy which is noted for its high level of unemployment (14.2%)¹⁵.

Given the lack of any other constitutional platform, local councillors indulge in political debate and occasional skirmishes which have little to do with their executive functions. Acrimony heightened in 1985 when Sinn Fein councillors were elected to local authorities and the situation deteriorated further following the Anglo-Irish Agreement in November of the same year. Unionist-controlled councils became the vehicle for protests against the Agreement which included suspending council business and, in some cases, refusing to strike a district rate. After a sustained campaign of opposition, unionist councils drifted back to normal business due, *inter alia*, to concerns that their refusal to meet with government ministers had the potential to delay social and economic progress in their areas¹⁶.

The local government elections of 1989 marked a turning point in council chambers with a degree of moderation not unrelated to the decline in representation from the political extremes¹⁷. Dungannon District Council is credited with leading the way through an experiment in responsibility sharing¹⁸. In May 1988, the council established a special

committee which passed a resolution recognising "responsibility sharing as an important step which might help us to develop trust in the community"¹⁹. The motion was initiated by the UUP, the SDLP, and Independent Nationalists. It was agreed that the position of the chair would be rotated, on a six monthly basis, between council members "who deplore violence and seek to pursue political progress by political means"²⁰. Considering the fury of unionists at wider political developments in the province, Dungannon's decision to rotate the chair has to be viewed as a major step forward in relations at local level between unionists and nationalists. The Enniskillen bombing of November 1987 appears to have had a profound impact upon local politicians in Dungannon. As Beirne wrote:

Many councillors....felt the need to bring an end to sterile adversarial politics in a common commitment to economic and general well-being of the area, and they found in their opposition to political violence more in common than they had previously recognised²¹.

Other councils followed suit in the wake of the 1989 elections. Eleven local authorities appointed mayors/chairmen and deputies from both political traditions²². The power sharing trend continued following the 1993 elections with 12 councils now participating and an upbeat mood on its development. As one observer noted:

There may be some cause for hope in Ulster's new councils. The UUP, Alliance and the SDLP have expressed varying degrees of enthusiasm for "partnership", code word for sharing the main positions of authority, and the British government has hinted that such arrangements may be rewarded with increased powers to local government. There are several local councils where a combination of these three parties can form the critical mass necessary to take control and to blur the orange/green divide. A growth in power sharing would do a great deal to change the mood music of Ulster politics and to build the trust between parties which is the necessary precursor to a larger political accommodation²³.

The STV proportional representation system of voting operates at local council level in

Northern Ireland and was introduced in 1973 as a reaction to Unionist hegemony from 1920 and a recognition of the emerging multi-party system which could be more adequately represented, nationalist minorities in particular. The system clearly had an impact on the composition of local authorities and few majority councils exist. Following the 1993 elections, for example, only 5 of the 26 councils were majority councils²⁴. Technically, therefore, the remaining 21 councils could be described as "hung" councils, where "no single party holds a majority of council seats but in which the majority of councillors belong to a political party"²⁵. Although 21 councils can be described as hung, there are obvious political coalitions which form, based on either unionist or nationalist cleavages. Those hung councils where there is a combined UUP - DUP majority, for example, are described as unionist controlled councils and those with a combined SDLP - Sinn Fein majority as nationalist controlled councils. Where unionists or nationalists do not form the largest single grouping these are described as no-majority councils, perhaps a strange use of the term since, by definition, all hung councils have no majority. Hence the option for a political party such as the UUP, with the largest number of seats (but not a majority), is to form an explicit or implicit agreement with the DUP (intra-unionist cleavage) or to power-share with nationalists, usually the SDLP (mixed cleavage). Conversely, the SDLP as the largest party may adopt Sinn Fein as partners or power share with unionists, normally the UUP. The 21 hung councils in Northern Ireland can thus be classified as follows:

Table 1: Hung councils in Northern Ireland (n = 21)

| Type of hung council | Intra-unionist cleavage (normally UUP/DUP) | Mixed cleavage (normally UUP/SDLP) | No unionist or nationalist majority |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Formal coalition | 9 unionist councils | | |
| Power sharing | | 4 nationalist councils 3 unionist councils 2 no majority councils | |
| Minority administration | | | 3 no majority councils |

What is of particular interest here, of course, is the power sharing cohort where the largest party numerically, eschews the natural political cleavage and shares power with a party representing a different religious tradition. This group contains not only 4 nationalist, 3 unionist and 2 mixed councils (highlighted in table 1) but a further 2 SDLP and 1 UUP majority councils who have opted to share power or adopt hung council characteristics - a total of 12 out of 26 councils. Power sharing would normally entail the rotation of the chair/vice chair positions and committee chairs, proportionate distribution of committee members and sharing of representation on external public bodies²⁶. Power sharing councils, including the partners involved, are listed in table 2 for the period 1993 - 1995.

Table 2: Power sharing councils in Northern Ireland

| Nationalist | | Unionist | | No overall majority | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| 1993/94 | 1994/95 | 1993/94 | 1994/95 | 1993/94 | 1994/95 |
| Derry [*] SDLP/IU | Derry IU/SDLP | Banbridge [*] UUP/UUP | Banbridge IN/UUP | Dungannon SDLP/UUP | Dungannon IN/UUP |
| Down [*] SDLP/UUP | Down UUP/SDLP | Armagh SDLP/UUP | Cookstown UUP/SDLP | Moyle SDLP/IU | Moyle IU/SDLP |
| Limavady SDLP/UUP | Limavady UUP/SDLP | Ballymoney DUP/SDLP | Craigavon UUP/SDLP | | |
| Magherafelt SDLP/UUP | Magherafelt UUP/SF | Fermanagh UUP/SDLP | Fermanagh SDLP/UUP | | |
| Newry & Mourne SDLP/UUP | Newry & Mourne UUP/SDLP | | | | |
| Omagh SDLP/UUP | Omagh UUP/SDLP | | | | |

* Majority councils which adopt power sharing characteristics.

Having briefly summarised the background to power sharing in local government we now turn to the key questions posed earlier.

Do the leaders want it ?

The research response to this question is recorded here by summarising the views of each of the main political parties in local government, the Ulster Unionist Party, the Democratic Unionist Party, Sinn Fein and the SDLP based on qualitative evidence from recorded interviews with party political leaders²⁷.

The Ulster Unionist Party:

Summary position of the party:

- (i) responsibility sharing is a cliché; participation in the pact with the SDLP is a useful charade which conveys the "right" corporate image when it matters;
- (ii) it makes for a more civilised and efficient way to conduct council business and is consistent with democratic principles;
- (iii) there is tacit support for it in practice, but no wish to publicise it electorally, particularly in the face of DUP opposition on councils as they can exploit the obvious disagreements with the SDLP and assert themselves as the only "real" unionist party;
- (iv) responsibility sharing doesn't hurt the majority party as they will always win the vote - more unionists councils should do it and "steal a march" on what has been a very effective SDLP public relations exercise;
- (v) the Northern Ireland Office is, in some way, surreptitiously implicated in promoting the idea of responsibility sharing by cajoling councils through a "nod and wink" policy implying more powers and increased investment for those who co-operate.

As one UUP political leader put it:

The whole thing is a window dressing exercise and I told Patrick Mayhew that when he said to me that you must be happy with this power sharing council. I argued that we had no powers to share, and you get whatever the SDLP want you to have, so if you call that power sharing that's what we are doing, but I suppose it's better than Castlereagh or Belfast councils.

That said, there should be more power sharing as it is the democratic thing to do and it doesn't harm you in any way as you are going to win the vote anyway. To me it is logical and it doesn't make a button of difference. In public relations terms the SDLP do a good job. Unionist councils are stupid not to see that²⁸.

The Democratic Unionist Party:

Summary position of the party:

- (i) implacable opposition to responsibility sharing, although there are odd exceptions usually resulting from local difficulties where relationships between the DUP and UUP are particularly strained (e.g. Ballymoney);
- (ii) it is no more than a "window dressing" exercise, it is undemocratic and something of a myth since there is no real power to share;
- (iii) the government and the SDLP have a similar agenda, to replicate the local council model at national/all-Ireland level; pressure is exerted from SDLP headquarters on local councillors to promote the policy at all costs;
- (iv) the UUP do not promote the idea electorally and it lacks support amongst their party councillors at grassroots level;
- (v) responsibility sharing has been selective in that it doesn't involve the entire "unionist family" (UUP & DUP) by excluding the DUP; a cosy relationship has developed between the SDLP and the UUP resulting in an ineffective and lethargic opposition party, this has led to bad decisions;
- (vi) nationalist areas are being more favourably treated by government, resulting in alienation.

The party position was best summed up by one councillor:

People see it as a joke, it has been dressed up to such a degree that people see it for what it is, a public relations exercise between the SDLP and UUP in which they orchestrate to keep us off committees, which is farcical when you consider that it's supposed to be about sharing. The UUP have never explained why they engage in responsibility sharing nor have they ever fought an election on it. If you look at their propaganda there is no mention of it. It's an embarrassment to them as they go

around the doors. I am not sure they want people to know. The SDLP do try to promote it but the UUP certainly do not. If you spoke to them privately they would say they have little confidence in it. Maginnis (UUP, MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone) steam-rolled them into it and now they can't get out.

No doubt the Northern Ireland Office will use every opportunity to try to get cheap publicity out of responsibility sharing and unfortunately councillors here have been what I would call "manna" to the Northern Ireland Office and I would ask what have they really got, the Downing Street Declaration ? I don't give much credibility to the Northern Ireland Office. I think they are a bunch of unprincipled men, they are opportunists and expediency is the order of the day²⁹.

Sinn Fein:

Summary position of the party:

- (i) they view the SDLP/UUP pact as an unholy and fragile alliance which frequently comes under pressure, one consequence of which is that each party is forced to "square up" to Sinn Fein and the DUP, respectively, in order to prove their credentials in the pact, hence Sinn Fein and the DUP can be isolated; one of the "advantages" of the pact, therefore, is that the SDLP and UUP can, under the guise of fairness and equality, exclude their electoral opponents, Sinn Fein and the DUP;
- (ii) there is only an illusion of power sharing as the majority will prevails;
- (iii) there is an ambivalence about its value, some see it as useful, others as a farce; the former are Sinn Fein members who have benefitted from proportionality on committees, the latter are those who have been excluded or under-represented on committees;
- (iv) the SDLP has lost its way with the nationalist community through its neglect of controversial grassroots issues, in their bid to pander to the unionists;
- (v) Sinn Fein (and the DUP) seek to embarrass the alliance by exposing political contradictions in decisions taken jointly by the SDLP and UUP;

(vi) the relationship between Sinn Fein and the UUP could improve but for the presence of DUP members on councils.

As one Sinn Fein councillor remarked:

Often than not the SDLP find themselves trying to placate unionists, and they do that by being hard on Sinn Fein, but occasionally things arise and they can't do that and the alliance breaks down. Unionists are then on their feet saying "Yes, we knew it all the time, you're a bundle of rogues, Provies (refers to Provisional IRA) in disguise - at least these Sinn Fein fu..ers (expletive) are honest, you're a bunch of hypocrites". I don't know any council that shares power within the understanding of that term. Why the SDLP actually share the chair is that, in the final analysis, they will always use their majority to get what they want. Other parties would probably do the same if they were in that position. There is an illusion of power sharing because unionists were given the chair or vice-chair of some of the main committees, but that is not power sharing.

The chair is a much sought-after position in councils and one thing that puzzles me is why unionists in other areas don't rotate it. It goes back to the point that if you're a majority you have nothing to fear by putting a nationalist in the chair because no matter what the chairman says, the majority party can overrule. The chairman only facilitates the meeting. At the end of the day there is no power sharing³⁰.

SDLP:

Summary position of the party:

- (i) sharing responsibility is intrinsically good at local level and it does not, in any way, dilute nationalist representation; in general, it has a moderating influence on council business;
- (ii) there is a minority feeling among SDLP councillors that the Northern Ireland Office and government ministers are more predisposed to responsibility sharing councils;
- (iii) the "success" of responsibility sharing is not a precursor to transferring more powers to local government, which should only come as part of an overall political settlement at the macro level; examples of irresponsible councils are frequently cited;

- (iv) there is a view that UUP councillors in nationalist controlled councils accept the notion of responsibility sharing and try to work with it, albeit reluctantly;
- (v) there is also a view that in unionist councils responsibility sharing is only acceptable where unionists are coming under pressure electorally, the slim majority or "writing on the wall" scenario;
- (vi) the perception of power sharing has been one of predatorial advantage; the future lies in changing attitudes whereby civic ownership becomes a core public good, and partisan advantage, as a private good, is relegated to the political dust bin.

One councillor précised the party view as follows:

From the SDLP perspective, responsibility sharing has been in operation from the beginning of local government as we now know it (1973). In essence our party policy predates the moves we are seeing now and there are signs that the government would like to go that way and encourage good feeling and co-operation in councils. This should influence those not currently well disposed to partnership to see that it is not only in their interest, but in the interest of the community to share power. It just reinforces what we have been trying to do down the years. Nobody has indicated to me that there would be benefits from responsibility sharing but there may well be winks and nods. At the moment there aren't any signs but there maybe in the future, I can only speculate. It is only reasonable to assume that government is going to be inclined to favour areas where there is a high level of co-operation³¹.

In summary, therefore, SDLP political leaders view power sharing as both conciliatory and a common sense approach to the smooth implementation of council business. The UUP are split between moderates and hardliners. The former contend that power sharing councils do better when it comes to securing government funds and since the UUP are the largest party in all non-sharing councils, forgoing the possibility of funds is too risky. Hardliners, on the other hand, argue that power sharing is contrary to the principle of majoritarianism in a

democracy and the SDLP, because of their United Ireland agenda, should not hold high office in any form of government whose demise they are dedicated to securing. Such a position is particularly prevalent amongst UUP councillors who are faced with a strong DUP presence (Belfast and Ballymena are examples here). Power sharing with nationalists of whatever hue is anathema to the DUP. Sinn Fein's position is dictated by how well served as a party they are, under specific power sharing arrangements.

Are followers prepared to endorse it ?

What has been the response of the electorate to power sharing, if any ? To address this we examined voting patterns in the 1993 (PR) local government elections, looking at the origins and destinations of transfers. Firstly we tested to see whether vote value transfers in power sharing councils differed significantly from those not sharing power. Secondly, we examined whether there had been a general decline in support for Sinn Fein and the DUP as a result of the emergent trend towards responsibility sharing. Was the politics of moderation more prevalent amongst the electorate ? Finally, we considered whether power sharing encouraged cross-party voting between the SDLP and the UUP. Each is considered in turn.

Statistical tests reveal that there is a significant difference in transfer voting patterns in sharing and non-sharing councils and hence worthwhile to pursue these differences further³².

Dealing with the second issue, since 1989 the responsibility sharing era, there has not been a significant decline in support for Sinn Fein or the DUP in local elections. In 1993 Sinn Fein's first preference vote increased by 1.3% and they gained 8 extra seats (total of 51 councillors). The DUP vote decreased only marginally by 0.5% with the loss of 7 seats (total

of 103 councillors)³³. The third issue is more complex to address and necessitated an analysis of voting transfer patterns from detailed election results. Under the STV system a voter's first preference is transferred if it cannot be used to help elect his/her first choice candidate. This may be because the candidate has either a surplus of votes needed to get elected (over the quota) or because the candidate has no chance of being elected. The figures below therefore represent vote values or the weighted transfer value, under STV, of votes from candidates with either a surplus or those who were excluded. In the former case, the vote value is a fraction of the first preference vote and in the latter, full first preference values are transferred as they have not helped to elect anyone. The analysis was used to compile tables which showed the party origin and destination of transfers. From these, the following summary information was extracted:

(i) Inter-party transfers: SDLP ↔ UUP

| | | |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Not sharing | SDLP → UUP = 1% | UUP → SDLP = 1% |
| Sharing councils | SDLP → UUP = 11% | UUP → SDLP = 3 % |

There is, therefore, a greater propensity to transfer across the political divide in power sharing councils, although it is more significant among SDLP voters than UUP voters.

(ii) Intra-party transfers: DUP ↔ UUP and Sinn Fein ↔ SDLP

| | | |
|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Not sharing | DUP → UUP = 30% | UUP → DUP = 14% |
| Sharing councils | DUP → UUP = 41% | UUP → DUP = 19% |

There is, therefore, a greater propensity to transfer within the unionist parties in power sharing councils, although it is more significant among DUP voters than UUP voters.

Considering transfers within the nationalist parties:

| | | |
|------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Not sharing | Sinn Fein → SDLP = 18% | SDLP → Sinn Fein = 8% |
| Sharing councils | Sinn Fein → SDLP = 29% | SDLP → Sinn Fein = 7% |

Within nationalist parties, Sinn Fein voters are more likely to transfer votes to the SDLP in power sharing councils. The reverse, however, is true of SDLP voters in power sharing councils who are marginally less likely to transfer to support Sinn Fein candidates.

In summary, there is a greater propensity to transfer votes within and between the main political blocs in power sharing councils with one marginal exception, SDLP transfers to Sinn

Fein. The higher transfer patterns can be seen in power sharing councils, with the tendency more significant from nationalists to unionists thus:

| | | |
|------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Not sharing | Nationalist → Unionist = 0.6% | Unionist → Nationalist = 2.8% |
| Sharing councils | Nationalist → Unionist = 12.5% | Unionist → Nationalist = 4.1% |

These results are insightful because they not only show higher transfer patterns between the SDLP and UUP as one might expect in power sharing councils but, equally, higher transfers within political blocs. O'Leary in discussing consociational engineering through the promotion of favourable conditions such as a multiple balance of power claimed that power sharing could, at best, "create a cross sectarian majority"³⁴ (UUP-SDLP) rather than a grand coalition (since the DUP and Sinn Fein would be excluded). These data would tend to suggest that grand coalition principles are emerging from voting patterns in power sharing councils. Equally, of course, one must be circumspect as electoral results and associated transfer patterns cannot be treated solely as a referendum on power sharing.

Government engineering ?

Is there evidence that the government is somehow surreptitiously involved in engineering consociation ? Certainly there is a perception among councillors that those councils who share power are in some way financially favoured by the government or its agencies when it comes to industrial investment. To test this assertion, investment data in each council area by both the Local Economic Development Unit (LEDU) and the Industrial Development Board (IDB) were collated for a 3 year period³⁵. The data referred to the number of new

jobs created, not safeguarding existing jobs or financial assistance given to each council. A 3 year period was chosen to provide a medium term overview of government support in each council, given the irregular nature of investment patterns, and to assess the average level of job creation. Using the 1991 census data on employment, the average number of jobs created was then shown as a percentage of those unemployed from the economically active population in each council. The results were as follows:

LEDU data: 6 out of 12 sharing councils had a below average level of jobs promoted (Moyle, Limavady, Ballymoney, Banbridge, Derry & Fermanagh);

and 6 above average (Down, Magherafelt, Omagh, Newry & Mourne, Armagh, Dungannon).

IDB data: 10 power sharing councils had a below average level of jobs promoted (Moyle, Limavady, Down, Banbridge, Newry & Mourne, Omagh, Armagh, Magherafelt, Fermanagh, Ballymoney);

and 2 councils above average (Derry and Dungannon).

LEDU and IDB investment data in councils do not substantiate the view that the government is actively promoting power sharing councils in local industrial development or indeed that such councils, in themselves, can attract investment.

Although these data do not support consociational engineering, a comprehensive programme of equality and equity initiatives is now in place aimed at tackling the underlying divisions which exist - one of the conditions favourable to the promotion of power sharing principles. Such an approach recognises that equality and equity across the two communities must be addressed in parallel with efforts at the macro level to achieve progress on the political, security and economic fronts. The government's objectives in this regard illustrate both the

breadth and depth of its intent:

- to ensure that everyone enjoys equality of opportunity and equity of treatment;**
- to increase the level of cross-community contact;**
- to encourage greater mutual understanding and respect for the different cultures and traditions³⁶.**

This policy is operationalised via a number of initiatives. Equality and equity measures include the Targeting Social Need Initiative, aimed at reducing social and economic differentials in the community through programmes such as, Making Belfast Work, the Londonderry and Rural Development Initiatives³⁷. Fair employment issues, a source of much inequality, have been addressed through legislative changes such as the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 which strengthened previous employment legislation by establishing two new enforcement bodies, the Fair Employment Commission (replacing the Fair Employment Agency) and the Fair Employment Tribunal. A cross-community contact scheme, administered by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland, was introduced to establish and develop contact between schools, youth and community groups. This paralleled education reforms in schools where two cross-curricular themes, education for mutual understanding (EMU) and cultural heritage, became intrinsic to teaching a range of school subjects under the common curriculum. A cultural traditions programme was also established to support arts, museums and Irish language groups in a way which encouraged respect for the richness and diversity of shared cultural heritage.

Alongside these initiatives the Government established, in 1987, the Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU), reporting directly to the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service

on all aspects of relations between the two traditions. The Unit was charged with "formulating, reviewing and challenging policy throughout the government system with the aim of improving community relations"³⁸. It was also responsible for developing new ideas which would improve relations, and supporting ongoing efforts aimed at prejudice reduction. A new independent voluntary body, the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council (CRC), was also set up in 1990 to promote better community relations and the recognition of cultural diversity in Northern Ireland. Finally, the 26 local authorities in Northern Ireland were invited, by CCRU, to become involved in a community relations programme in their areas³⁹. All councils have opted to join this initiative and now offer a series of cross-community arts, culture, sports and drama programmes. In short, "equality of opportunity and equity of treatment" measures have become a central tenet in the government's approach.

Conclusions

Are conditions therefore emerging which are conducive to political accommodation and consociationalism ? The evidence is mixed but provides some cause for optimism. In the 6 nationalist controlled councils power sharing will continue by virtue of the SDLP's commitment to it as a party policy. In the 2 councils with no overall majority it may be no more than a matter of political expediency where parties seek alliances, making a virtue out of necessity. Four unionist controlled councils shared power in 1993-94 (Armagh, Ballymoney, Banbridge and Fermanagh). Following the June 1994 annual general meetings this changed to Banbridge, Cookstown, Craigavon and Fermanagh for the year 1994-95. In

the 1993-94 grouping Ballymoney can be explained as an aberration, Armagh and Fermanagh as two councils narrowly held by unionists and Banbridge as the only example where there is a clear unionist majority and proposals (at that stage) to rotate the chair.

In the 1994-95 grouping, the disappearance of Ballymoney is no real surprise. The absence of Armagh and the emergence of Cookstown (another marginal unionist council) in the group does, however, validate SDLP claims that where power is finely balanced in favour of unionists, they are more willing to share power, described by one SDLP councillor as the "writing on the wall scenario". Banbridge and Craigavon cannot, however, be explained in this way. Both have strong unionist majorities, and in Craigavon's case has been associated with the most blatant examples of sectarianism⁴⁰. Does this, therefore, represent a bold initiative by the UUP in these councils and signal a change in attitudes amongst UUP members province-wide ? Is this a significant but small step towards consociationalism ?

As one UUP councillor put it, "things are now blowing towards partnership but it will be a long haul"⁴¹. If political leaders are moving, albeit slowly, towards accommodation then the electorate at least provide evidence of a greater propensity to transfer votes within and between the main political blocs in power sharing councils. Not only should this afford some endorsement of power sharing but highlight the fact that the electorate subscribe to a multi-party coalition not simply a cross-sectarian majority comprising the UUP and SDLP. In short, the electorate want compromise. Critics could well argue that such an insignificant forum as local government is a weak example of the emergence of power sharing. It is, however, the only barometer from which degrees of political accommodation can be measured. Moreover, political accommodation at the local level juxtaposed with policies

aimed at promoting equality and equity would seem to indicate a multi-faceted "bottom-up" approach of the type referred to by Wilford when he prescribes "the need to generate sufficient grassroots support upon which amenable leaders could rely, rather than to depend upon, elite accommodation atop mutually exclusive and distrustful communities"⁴². Whilst it would be wrong to claim any major development, a new mood of optimism prevails amongst local politicians which could be built upon in the momentum of the euphoria generated by the cease fires. The emergence of an infra-structure of consociationalism at local government level could provide the foundation for compromise which has eluded the political elites thus far. The basis of that consociation is the SDLP - UUP power sharing arrangement in councils but not exclusively so. A grudging recognition exists between the DUP and Sinn Fein that neither party will disappear and working arrangements are in place to carry out the business of local government. A "grand coalition" this is may not be, but attitudes have changed and a sense of realism prevails that provides some cause for optimism.

Footnotes and references

1. The author wishes to acknowledge the research assistance of P. Quirk in the project upon which this paper is based.

2. John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary have developed a taxonomy of conflict resolution methods which they divide into 2 sections: (a) methods for eliminating differences, which include genocide, forced mass-population transfers, partition and/or secession, integration and/or assimilation; (b) methods for managing differences, which includes hegemonic control, arbitration, cantonisation and/or federalism, consociationalism or power sharing.

J. McGarry and B. O'Leary, (eds.), *The Politics of Ethnic Regulation*, (London, Routledge, 1993) pp. 4-40.

J. McGarry and B. O'Leary, "The political regulation of national and ethnic conflict", *Parliamentary Affairs*, 47, 1 (1994), 94-115.

3. A. Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977).

A. Lijphart, *Power Sharing in South Africa*, (Berkeley: University of California, Policy Papers in International Affairs, 1985) No.24.

A. Lijphart, "Consociation: The model and its application" in D. Rea (ed.), *Political Cooperation in Divided Societies*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982) pp. 166-186.

4. A. Lijphart, "Consociational democracy", in V. Bogdanor (ed.) *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Science*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) pp. 137-139.

5. Lijphart, *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Science*, p.138.

6. B. O'Leary, "The limits of coercive consociationalism in Northern Ireland", *Political*

Studies, 37, 4 (1989), 562-588.

B. O'Leary and J. McGarry, *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland*, (London: Athlone Press, 1993) p. 303.

7. O'Leary, "The limits of coercive consociationalism", p.572.

8. R.A. Wilford, "Inverting consociationalism ? Policy, pluralism and the post modern", in B. Hadfield (ed.), *Northern Ireland: Politics and the Constitution*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992) chapter 3 pp. 29-46.

9. Wilford, *Northern Ireland: Politics and the Constitution*, p.44.

10. B. Barry, *Democracy and Power: Essays in Political Theory I*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).

11. Barry, *Democracy and Power: Essays in Political Theory I*, p.149.

12. Barry, *Democracy and Power: Essays in Political Theory I*, p.149.

13. Barry, *Democracy and Power: Essays in Political Theory I*, pp. 5-6.

According to consociational theory, if the favourable conditions outlined do not exist, political elites can establish and maintain a system of consociational democracy if they are:

(a) willing to make the compromises necessary to sustain the system and;

(b) capable of persuading their followers to abide by those decisions.

For an interesting discussion of this situation in relation to South Africa see: J. McGarry and S.J.R. Noel, "The prospects for consociational democracy in South Africa", *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 27, 1 (1989), 3-22.

14. Department of Finance and Personnel and H.M. Treasury, *Northern Ireland Expenditure Plans and Priorities 1993-94 to 1995-96*, (Belfast: HMSO, 1993).

15. Department of Finance and Personnel and H.M. Treasury, *Northern Ireland Expenditure*

Plans and Priorities 1993-94 to 1995-96.

16. M. Connolly and C. Knox, "Recent political difficulties of local government in Northern Ireland", *Policy and Politics*, 16, 2 (1988), 89-97.

17. C. Knox, "Local Government in Northern Ireland", *Public Money and Management*, 9, 2 (1989), 59-63.

18. Dungannon Council is erroneously credited with power sharing. Some SDLP councils e.g. Down District Council shared power since 1973. Unionists are also sensitive to the use of the term "power sharing" and have substituted "responsibility sharing" as a synonym.

19. Dungannon District Council: minutes of special committee 30 May 1988.

20. Dungannon District Council: minutes of special committee 30 May 1988.

21. M. Beirne, "Out of the bear pit", *Fortnight*, May (1993), 24.

22. Armagh, Banbridge, Derry, Down, Dungannon, Fermanagh, Limavady, Magherafelt, Moyle, Newry & Mourne and Omagh.

23. L. Clarke, "Extremists hold the line in a tribal poll", *The Sunday Times*, (1993) 23 May.

24. The Ulster Unionist Party controls Banbridge, Coleraine and Lisburn; the SDLP controls Derry and Down.

25. S. Leach and J. Stewart, *The Politics of Hung Councils*, (London: Macmillan, 1992) p. 8.

26. S. Elliott, "Sharing", *Fortnight*, July/August (1993).

27. The Alliance Party was excluded since they have only 2 members in all 12 power sharing councils, an interesting fact in itself, given the rationale of the party.

28. Interview with Councillor J. Cochrane (UUP), Down District Council.

29. Interview with Councillor M. Morrow (DUP), Dungannon District Council.

30. Interview with Councillor J. McAlister (Sinn Fein), Newry and Mourne District Council.

31. Interview with Councillor A. Doherty (SDLP), Limavady Borough Council.

32. The statistical test used was a chi-square test for two unrelated samples (those councils sharing power and the remainder) with a categorical dependent variable. The dependent variable was SDLP/SF/UUP/DUP voters in either power sharing councils or councils not sharing power. The hypothesis: *there is no significant difference between SDLP voters' transfer patterns in sharing and non sharing councils*, was tested. The same test was carried out for the UUP, DUP and Sinn Fein voters. The results revealed a significant difference in each political party's voting transfer patterns in sharing and non-sharing councils.

SDLP: chi-square = 672; critical value (0.05) = 9.49

Sinn Fein: chi-square = 623.4; critical value (0.05) = 9.49

UUP: chi-square = 837.9; critical value (0.05) = 9.49

DUP: chi-square = 310.6; critical value (0.05) = 9.49.

33. P. Carmichael, "The 1993 Local Government Elections in Northern Ireland", *Irish Political Studies*, 9 (1994), 141-147.

34. O'Leary, "The limits of coercive consociationalism", p.574.

35. Sources: Hansard written answers, "Job creation", 14 April 1993: 648-656;

DHSS and Registrar General for Northern Ireland, *The Northern Ireland Census 1991 Summary Report*, (Belfast, HMSO, 1992) table 16.

36. Department of Finance and Personnel and H.M. Treasury, *Northern Ireland Expenditure Plans and Priorities 1993-94 to 1995-96*, (Belfast: HMSO, 1993).

37. Targeting Social Need is a government initiative which tackles areas of social and

economic differences by targeting government policies and programmes more directly at those areas or sections of the community suffering the highest levels of disadvantage and deprivation. Underpinning this approach is the assertion that community differentials, or greater levels of disadvantage among Catholics (unemployment, education, skills), contribute to divisions in the population. These differential experiences sustain feelings of disadvantage, discrimination and alienation, which in turn influence Catholic attitudes to political and security issues. There has, interestingly, been a backlash to targeting resources in this way. Protestant alienation is now openly acknowledged.

38. Central Community Relations Unit, *Community Relations Policy*, (Stormont, Northern Ireland Office, 1988).

39. C. Knox, J. Hughes, D. Birrell and S. McCreedy, *Local Government and Community Relations*, (Coleraine, Centre for the Study of Conflict, 1993).

40. Craigavon Council was involved in a bitter sectarian wrangle with the Catholic Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) over the allocation of a football ground, the outcome of which was a large compensation pay-out by the council and a number of councillors surcharged and debarred from office.

41. Interview with Councillor D. Nelson (UUP), Banbridge District Council.

42. Wilford, *Northern Ireland: Politics and the Constitution*, pp. 34-35.