Executive Summary:

- Northern Ireland’s devolved administration is a complex and successful example of power sharing in an ethnically divided and post-conflict society.

- However, increasing levels of voter apathy and disenchantment with the party system and the political culture engendered by the Assembly are unmistakable.

- In other words, the democratic deficit is a fundamental problem that is located in the relationship between voters and politicians, not in administration or devolution per se.

- This submission does not, therefore, propose an overhaul of the governance system but suggests the need to re-examine measures of restoring confidence in the legitimacy of representative democracy in Northern Ireland.

- These include transparency mechanisms to shed light on politicians’ relationships with intra-bloc non-governmental organizations and a revisiting of the nature of mandatory coalition.

1. Anti-Politics in Northern Ireland

1.1 A rarely acknowledged feature of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement relates to how it understands democracy as synonymous with a type of post-conflict politics. The preamble Declaration of Support, for instance, links democracy to a vision of peaceful politics: paragraphs four and five see it as having something to do with ‘resolving differences’ and rapprochement and reconciliation. A more substantive definition of democracy might point to socio-economic justice, gender inclusion, the cultivation of pluralist norms, and the promotion of citizens’ active participation in policy design and implementation along with credible mechanisms for holding elected representatives to account. This point was made early on in the process by the political sociologist Chris Gilligan, who suggested that while the emphasis on
political elites worked to ‘circumvent confrontation’ in had the simultaneous effect of ‘rendering people impotent’.¹

1.2 This de-politicizing tendency has inspired an increase of antipolitical sentiment that makes its presence felt on numerous layers. For example, only around a quarter of voters trust the parties to govern: a 2016 finding by the Ulster University/Queen’s University Belfast operated Northern Ireland Life and Times survey indicated that 23% of respondents did not support any of the parties. Devolution is broadly supported, but the Assembly does not fare well in responses: 20% of voters believe that it is ‘good value for money’.

1.3 More problematically, perhaps, are the figures relating to trust in the Assembly, which tends to decline in relation to how old the respondents are: in 2015, 34% of 18-24 year olds believed that the parties in the Assembly would work for Northern Ireland’s long-term interests always or most of the time, compared to 27% and 30% of the 55-64 and 65+ cohorts respectively. That younger people avow greater levels of trust in the Assembly is perhaps indicative of the resilience of social conservatism in Northern Ireland. For instance, on the ‘wedge’ issue of abortion, younger cohorts tend towards traditional viewpoints. While both the DUP and Sinn Féin reject the idea that Great British abortion legislation should be extended to Northern Ireland (the 1967 Act, in particular) only around a third of their supporters disagree. However, younger cohorts seem to be less favourable to a ‘pro-choice’ attitude than might be expected (in 2016, 41% of 18-24 year olds believed abortion should be illegal, compared to 35% of the 35-44 cohort). The key variable on how socially conservative respondents are seems to be religious belief, or the lack thereof (for instance, 28% of people of no religion feel abortion ought to be legal compared to 14% of both Catholics and Protestants).

1.4 While media headlines continue to stress the violent and divided nature of Northern Ireland – over 2,000 people have been intimidated from their homes since 2012, for instance – what might be called the antipolitics of the Agreement, the de-democratizing tendencies, have witnessed another type of division opening up:

namely that between the governed and the governing. But the very passing into history of the quotidian dimensions and politicians that once constituted the substance of ethno-national division does not easily unveil the character of the deepening democratic divisions. Frequently, in fact, they remain obscure: as survey evidence suggests, younger cohorts, whom we might expect to be more questioning of received wisdoms, are often among the most traditional and conservative elements of society.

1.5 This fact alone seems to draw attention as to how our ideas change across time and to the troubling thought that the ‘agreement generation’ is getting older and overtaken by younger, more polarized cohorts – who having been born after the 1994 ceasefires, have never really directly experienced the dangers that can attach to simple ethnic affiliation and attributions.

2 Power-Sharing in Northern Ireland

2.1 The power-sharing assembly that was set out as Strand One of the 1998 peace accord and subsequently established by Northern Ireland Act 1998 is widely held to reflect core, though modified, consociational principles. These are: proportionality in elections and ministry allocation; segmental autonomy; and ethnically based veto mechanisms. Stefan Wolff suggests that the Northern Irish example is a ‘successful case’ of what he terms ‘complex power sharing’, meaning ‘the implementation of a self-governance regime whose successes as a conflict-settlement device requires a relatively complex institutional structure that cannot be reduced to either territorial self-governance, power sharing, integration, or power dividing’.2

2.2 Wolff’s description usefully illustrates what might be called the consociational method of focusing on rules and procedures, in other words, institutional engineering. This focus highlights issues such as whether electoral engineering can incentivize cross-community vote pooling or how veto mechanisms and proportional-based ministerial allocations might dissuade or constrain political elites

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from pursuing narrow, bloc, or party self-interest at the expense of executive coherence.

2.3 The approach does not engage with the substantive vision of democracy: cultural norms and practices, for example, tend to be treated in a rather shallow fashion that implicitly recognizes but manages to displace the concern articulated by Jürg Steiner: ‘To have the right kind of power sharing institutions is a necessary condition for successful consociationalism but not a sufficient condition; one needs also the right kind of accommodative culture’.3

3. Proposals:

3.1 The levels of alienation outlined above speak, we would argue, to a more radical or fundamental approach to democratic deepening in Northern Ireland that moves beyond the surface level of institutional engineering.

3.2 This point is substantiated by a recently emerging body of literature looking at anti-political sentiment (focusing on the UK, in particular). Diagnoses tend to focus on demand-side issues (unrealistic expectations of politicians’ ability to effectively govern in the full glare of social media or to tackle complex problems with simplistic solutions) or supply-side concerns (the imposition of ideological or institutional constraints on popular political participation in the legislative process by decision-makers). The growth of apathy and alienation in Northern Ireland suggests a need to look at both sides of the equation and consider how supply and demand interact.

3.3 For that reason, we advocate the need for an imaginative and multi-layered approach that moves beyond simplistic (though important) questions to do with institutional engineering or inclusivity (positive discrimination) enhancement mechanisms – after all, both could be attempted, but in the absence of attitudinal change and a transformation of the relations between political elites and the public disenchantment with politics will persist. These include:

3.3.1 Transparency mechanisms to illuminate relations between political representatives and community-based organizations. Unless causal chains

depicting policy design, implementation, and oversight are easily accessible, scrutiny remains a hollow goal and accusations of pork-belly politics, contained in a series of scandals involving the devolved institutions, will fester. These mechanisms may include the development of an online database of meetings and decisions derived from ministerial diaries.

3.3.2 Feedback mechanisms. Empowerment of citizens needs to mean more than devolving responsibility for policy design and implementation – there is no positive evidence that citizens wish to have their capacity enhanced in these ways. Instead, a more minimal approach might be test-based on the e-petition mechanism pioneered at Westminster and in Holyrood. Localizing decision-making also raises the quality of public deliberation and is consistent with the arguments for e-petitions: giving residents powers to instigate votes or investigations into local issues enhances public political participation and builds links with elected representatives.

3.3.3 Revisiting the Petition of Concern. The petition of concern mechanism is derivative of the consociational idea of protection of rights and identities through communally based vetoes. It retains an important symbolic function that exceeds this logic and can be easily framed as less of a veto than an ethnic weapon. We remain unconvinced that Northern Irish politics needs to remain a zero-sum game that requires such a guillotine-effect. The revisiting of politician-voter relations inherent in the previous point implies an overhaul of ethnic tribune behaviours.

3.3.4 Revisiting mandatory coalition. The introduction of Opposition at Stormont seems to point towards the logical conclusion that a voluntary coalition arrangement might replace the enforced power-sharing now in place. This would see the emergence of more fluid coalitions with an Opposition. The ethno-nationalist question could be accommodated by requiring that any Executive Coalition must include voices or parties from both main communal blocs. This would disincentivize electorally weaker parties from attempting to outbid or underbid their intra-bloc rivals and encourage dialogue and political cooperation across the ideological divide.
3.4 Distrust in politicians is not necessarily antidemocratic in and of itself – indeed, it may be viewed as an essential attribute of democratic functionality in that it involves citizens scrutinizing vested power. Matthew McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz have characterized such surveillance as falling between two poles: a policing function in which public action on wrong-doing is delegated to specific agents, and a fire alarm system in which vigilance is decentralized and devolved to the community at large. Our proposals lean towards the latter and suggest that the governor-governed relationship is maintained by watchfulness on the part of the latter: successful firefighting depends on effective warning systems.4

4. Conclusions

4.1. We suggest that the rise of apathy, alienation and disenchantment within Northern Ireland cannot be dismissed as evidence of normalization; rather it points to a dangerous vacuum that antidemocratic (anti-peace process) elements may hope to exploit.

4.2. We have followed the French political theorist Pierre Rosanvallon in characterizing democracy not simply as rules, institutions and procedures but as something inclusive of but not contained by the congruence of practice and perception.5 Instead, political legitimacy is located in the relationships through which people try to bring about positive changes in their lives.

4.3. As such, we have argued and proposed that overcoming any democratic deficit in Northern Ireland is logically dependent on recalibrating the relations between governed and governing rather than simply tinkering with those involving the latter.

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