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Irish Nationalist and Republican Attitudes to the Good Friday Agreement: Sell-Out or Steppingstone?

This article examines attitudes across Irish republicanism and nationalism to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA). The research draws on qualitative interviews conducted between 2009–2018, throughout the nationalist and republican spectrum, charting evolving attitudes across this green base. Interviewees include GFA negotiators, including the SDLP, a key architect of the Agreement, and Sinn Féin, the party that went on to claim ownership of the GFA. Interviews were also conducted with dissident Irish republicans who have never accepted the GFA. This article puts a particular focus on nationalist and republican attitudes to armed actions in pursuit of Irish unity. Further, it examines attitudes across the Irish republican/nationalist spectrum to a potential border-poll, resulting from the central principle of the GFA (consent); and analyses positions on the required 50 % plus one for Irish unity.

Keywords: Irish republicanism, IRA, Irish nationalism, Sinn Féin, SDLP, dissident republican.

Stališče irskih nacionalistov in republikancev do Velikonočnega sporazuma: Izdaja ali priložnost?

Članek obravnava stališča irskih republikancev in nacionalistov do Velikonočnega sporazuma iz leta 1998. Raziskava temelji na kvalitativnih intervjujih, opravljenih med pripadniki vseh republikanskih in nacionalističnih strank med letoma 2009 in 2018, in prikazuje, kako so se stališča te zelene baze sčasoma spreminjala. Med intervjuvanci so tudi stranke, ki so sodelovale v pogajanjih o Sporazumu, med njimi SDLP kot ključni arhitekt sporazuma in Sinn Féin, ki si zanj pripisuje največ zaslug. Intervjuji so bili opravljeni tudi z disidentskimi irskimi republikanci, ki sporazuma nikoli niso sprejeli. Poseben poudarek je na odnosu nacionalistov in republikancev do oboroženih akcij za doseganje irske združitve. Članek preučuje stališča celotnega spektra irskih republikancev in nacionalistov glede morebitnega referenduma o združitvi, ki temelji na osrednjem načelu sporazuma (soglasje), ter glede zahtevanih 50 odstotkov plus en glas za irsko združitve.

Ključne besede: republikanci, IRA, nacionalisti, Sinn Féin, SDLP, disidentski republikanci.

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1. Introduction

One of the most enduring images of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) period emerged at a rock concert in the Waterfront Hall in Belfast on May 19, 1998. The aim of the concert was to promote a yes vote in the upcoming referendum on the Agreement.¹ On stage, Irish rock star and leader of the music group U2, Bono, stood between then Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) leader John Hume (McLoughlin 2010) and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader David Trimble (Godson 2011), and lifted their hands into the air to cheers from the crowd. Hume and Trimble had jointly won the 1998 Nobel peace prize “for their efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland” (The Nobel Prize 1998). Hume stood there as founder and party leader of the largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland, the SDLP. It would be another 3 years before the more hard-line Sinn Féin would electorally surpass the SDLP (Murray & Tonge 2005; McGlinchey 2019b).² As a key architect of the Agreement, Hume and the SDLP did not anticipate that the electorate would swing more in favour of their nationalist rival, rather believing that the electorate would reward them for their part in reaching the historic Agreement. Therefore, the two decades since 2001, have witnessed the nationalist community in Northern Ireland being led by Sinn Féin (Maillot 2015; Bean 2007), which has been viewed as the greener and stronger representative of nationalist interests in the post-Agreement era.

Twenty-five years on, the core principles of the Agreement have not changed, regarding consent and power-sharing. However, changes were made to the Agreement in 2006 by the St Andrews Agreement. A key change was made regarding the mechanism for electing the First and deputy First Ministers. In 1998 the Ministers were appointed on a cross-community basis. St Andrews resulted in the First Minister coming from the largest party within the largest designation, and the deputy First Minister was drawn from the largest party within the second largest designation (Agreement at St Andrews 2006). Therefore subsequent elections have been dominated by a race to be First Minister (despite the legal status of the two posts). A system under which the SDLP has lost out to Sinn Féin, the party perceived as greener and a more stringent defender of nationalist interests. One of the SDLP architects of the 1998 Agreement, and subsequent party leader (2001–2010), Mark Durkan, has proven a critic of changes at St Andrews: “I resent the changes that were made at St Andrews. I predicted it would lead to tribalism” (Durkan 2018). But despite changes to the allocation of the First Ministers, the Agreement has remained largely unchanged and has therefore come under criticism for being treated as a relic, rather than a living document. This has opened up an interesting debate around the extent to which the Agreement, which constitutes an international treaty between the British and Irish governments, can or should be altered. Against this backdrop, this article examines nationalist and republican attitudes to the Agreement at the time of its inception, as well as twenty-five years on.

2. Methodology

This work addresses the following research questions: 1) What attitudes exist throughout the republican and nationalist spectrum to the GFA?; 2) To what extent is the GFA viewed as a sell-out of traditional republican principles, or alternatively as a pragmatic steppingstone to achieving the ultimate objective of Irish unity? In answering these questions this article draws on the author's archive of primary interviews conducted with several individuals across the spectrum of nationalism and republicanism between 2009–2018, bringing together the range of views which exist throughout.

Interviewees include politically elected representatives from Sinn Féin and the SDLP, including the former deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland Seamus Mallon (1998–2001), who was SDLP Deputy Leader (1979–2001). Also interviewed is John Hume, SDLP founder member and party leader (1979–2001); whose vision greatly informed the GFA. Interviewees also comprise other members of the SDLP negotiating team during the GFA talks, including Mark Durkan who was SDLP party leader from 2001–2010 and deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland from 2001–2002. Further, this article draws on interviews conducted with Gerry Adams, who was the Sinn Féin President from 1983 to 2018; and Danny Morrison who was Sinn Féin's Director of Publicity from 1979–1990. Finally, this article includes primary interviews with dissident republicans, reflecting the diverse spectrum of opinion that exists throughout the green constituency. In drawing together attitudes of the SDLP, Sinn Féin and dissident republicans, this article offers a uniquely holistic examination of nationalist and republican attitudes to the GFA.³

The fact that interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2018, has allowed for the charting of evolving attitudes within nationalism and republicanism. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and a thematic analysis was conducted on the data collected. The data which emerged provides insight into the range of opinion across the nationalist and republican family regarding the GFA, its implementation and the future of the Agreement regarding a potential border-poll on Irish unity; with a particular focus on the required 50 % plus one for constitutional change.

Beyond the aforementioned primary interviews, this work engages with academic secondary literature on Irish republicanism and nationalism, as well as wider literature on social movements and peacebuilding. It also cites primary material from republican organisations, correspondence between Sinn Féin and the SDLP in 1988 (Linen Hall Library, Northern Ireland Political Collection 1988), the Oireachtas report on unionist concerns over a united Ireland produced by Senator Mark Daly in 2019, the Building Peace conference at Queen's University Belfast in 2018 to mark 20 years since the GFA, and media sources. Therefore, primary interview material is contextualised and triangulated within this wider range of sources.

3. Armed Struggle in the Pursuit of Irish Unity: Nationalist and Republican Attitudes

The GFA dramatically transformed the political landscape in Northern Ireland, largely ending the latest period of violence, which had taken place since 1969. Coulter et al. (2021, 2) have stated: “It is important to mark at the very outset, then, that the single greatest achievement of the GFA has been the (almost complete) ‘removal of the gun from Irish politics’”. Throughout the last 150 years, armed violence in the pursuit of a sovereign united Ireland has re-occurred, during the 1916 Easter Rising (McGarry 2011; O’Donnell 2008), the Irish Civil War (1922–1923) (Hopkinson 1988; Murray & Sagarra 2022; Pakenham 1992), the IRA border campaign (1956–1962) (Bowyer Bell 1997; Flynn 2009), the post 1969-period (Provisional IRA) and sporadically since 1994 from dissident republicans. Notably, at each point in time, a line has been drawn (by those involved) regarding the legitimate use of violence. Fianna Fáil, the party which comes from the anti-treaty tradition, would regard violence as legitimate until approximately 1923. The Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) regards violence as legitimate until its ceasefires of 1994 and 1996. Whereas, dissident republican groups continue to argue that violence remains legitimate in the pursuit of Irish sovereignty, as Ireland is still partitioned. Each position provides a justification for armed actions within that particular context; and decries violence after that period as unjustified and illegitimate.

In 1998 Sinn Féin and the leadership of the Provisional Movement attempted to draw a definitive line under armed violence in the pursuit of a united Ireland. The party has strongly condemned ongoing dissident violence. Prior to the Agreement (and subsequently), the Sinn Féin leadership argued that the process needed to be managed carefully to prevent splitting the republican movement; as reflected in Jonathan Powell’s (2008) diary *Great Hatred, Little Room*. The Provisional leadership aimed to carry with them as much of the movement as possible; and limit those breaking off to form or join dissident organisations (McGlinchey 2019b; White 2006; Whiting 2015; Currie & Taylor 2011; Frampton 2011; Horgan 2013; Morrison 2013; Tonge 2012). They were largely successful in this regard as Sinn Féin, and the Provisional Movement maintained most of its base.

Accepting the GFA, was a historic step for Sinn Féin, as until that point the party had been completely opposed to any idea of consent.⁴ However, the Agreement was presented by the leadership as transitional on the road to a united Ireland. As pointed out by O’Leary, “There was a core bargain at the heart of the Agreement. Nationalists endorsed it because it promised them political, legal, and economic equality now, plus institutions in which they have a strong and proportionate stake, with the possibility of Irish unification later, provided simple majority consent emerges in both jurisdictions” (O’Leary 2019, 217). Given

that acceptance of consent was a major step for Sinn Féin, it is worth noting some of the factors which influenced then party President Gerry Adams during that process. Adams has recalled:

Personally, I was re-enforced in my view by organisations like the African National Congress. We were taking decisions and then when we went to meet with them, when we went to meet with Mandela, to meet with the ANC leadership, and we were swapping experiences, we discovered that it's an issue of strategic compromise [...]. So if you are asking me whose experience did we draw upon, it was probably, of all the different forces, it was the ANC (Interview 7).

A key point is that when the GFA was reached, political positions and aspirations were not eradicated, they were accommodated. As Jonathan Powell, Prime Minister Tony Blair's Chief of Staff, noted: "the Good Friday Agreement was an agreement to disagree. The two sides couldn't even agree on its title" (Powell 2008, 108).⁵ The pursuit of respective political positions would continue, non-violently. Sinn Féin has clearly argued that the Agreement was not a settlement. A decade after the GFA was reached, Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams commented: "The Good Friday Agreement is an accommodation, you know. The Good Friday Agreement isn't a settlement. It's an Agreement on a journey without agreeing on the destination" (Interview 7). SDLP negotiator, and party leader (2001–2010) Mark Durkan has recalled the time of the talks leading to the Agreement:

When we were in negotiations, I remember using the term collective ambiguity. Everybody now always talks about the Agreement as constructive ambiguity or whatever, but they did say at the time that there would be a use for a degree of collective ambiguity, but it's ambiguity in a very honest sense (Interview 1).

Durkan has emphasised the fact that there were only two possible constitutional options, a United Kingdom or a United Ireland. Therefore, there was no ambiguity regarding the constitutional options. Durkan continued:

You knew that the Agreement was one that unionists were going to have to hold up to their people and be able to show certain things about it and I can remember in the talks actually comparing it with the sort of holograms that you get on a bank card. You know that you hold it up to different light and so you see a different thing in it, but you're honest about the fact that both things are there (Interview 1).

Unionists were able to tell their base that the position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom (U.K.) would remain unchanged, and nationalists were able to tell their base that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland could be changed to being part of a united Ireland, if most of the population of North-

ern Ireland voted for constitutional change (the consent principle contained in strand One of the GFA). Ultimately, this roadmap forward, provided nationalism and republicanism with a non-violent path through which to pursue the political objective of a united and sovereign Ireland.

4. Fifty Percent Plus One: A Lack of Nationalist Consensus Around Consent?

The Consent principle is a key element of the GFA and was arguably the most difficult part for Irish republicans to accept, as it was opposed to a cornerstone of traditional Irish republicanism, which stated that the right of Irish sovereignty is inalienable and does not need to be put to a vote (Bowyer Bell 1997; McGlinchey 2019b; White 1993; 2006). In 1997 Sinn Féin took the historic decision of accepting consent, resulting in some members of the party or the Provisional Movement breaking away and forming the dissident organisation the 32-County Sovereignty Movement (32CSM).⁶ At a debate in 2018 in Queen's University Belfast, marking 20 years since the GFA, Sinn Féin's Conor Murphy provided an insight into the party's acceptance of consent in 1998:

There were a lot of players involved in creating the space that culminated in 1998. From a republican perspective it was a big, big challenge for us. The idea of signing up to the consent principle was a very significant challenge. A huge psychological challenge. We had prepared the ground for some time back. To change that mind-set took a long number of years. There has to be a reconciliation. That debate began a long way back within republicanism. We were dealing with difficulties in engaging republicans. People who had suffered at the hands of the state (Author's notes).⁷

Sinn Féin's historic acceptance of consent, altered the party's strategy to one of persuading unionists (and the middle ground and wider population) of the benefits of a united Ireland, in the hope that demographic change would eventually contribute to conditions being met to hold a border-poll on Irish unity. With both nationalist parties, Sinn Féin and the SDLP, espousing consent since 1997 (along with the PIRA ceasefires), the distinctive message of the SDLP was lost (Murray & Tonge 2005). Both parties were singing from the same hymn sheet. Sinn Féin progressed to espousing ownership of the Agreement, becoming a stringent defender of it. Meanwhile the party's electoral fortunes continued to grow north and south, as their message increasingly emphasised equality, rather than unity.

4.1 Brexit: A Changed Landscape and a Potential Border-Poll?

The Northern Ireland political landscape was transformed once again in 2016 with Brexit. The constitutional winds shifted as Northern Ireland was forced out

of the European Union (E.U.) with the rest of the U.K., despite a majority in Northern Ireland voting against Brexit (98.9 % voted to remain in the E.U.). The result is a middle ground which will consider whether their interests are better served remaining in the U.K. but outside the E.U., or in a united Ireland within the E.U. Amidst the post-Brexit fall-out, momentum has gathered around a potential border-poll. This is also because demographic change has heralded a nationalist majority in Northern Ireland for the first time since the foundation of the state in 1921. Interestingly, in 2018, at a debate in St Mary's University College in West Belfast, SDLP leader Colum Eastwood (2015–present), remarked that: “A border-poll will be about re-joining the EU” (Author's notes).⁸

In the years since Brexit, debate has opened up within nationalism regarding a potential border-poll and what form it should take. Sinn Féin has held to the position that a vote for Irish unity requires 50 % plus one (and no more) as defined by the GFA. However, there are others within nationalism who have questioned the viability of 50 % plus one, stating that such a result would be highly divisive. Former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern (1997–2008) voiced his wariness of 50 % plus one when addressing an Irish parliamentary committee meeting in Dublin regarding his role as an architect of the GFA:

There are a whole lot of questions. How would you bring together An Garda Síochána and the PSNI, how would you bring together the Courts? How would you bring together local authorities? How would you bring together the National Health Service and the HSE? They're big questions. But they're doable [...]. I'll tell you what the result of the election will be now, and I won't charge anything for the advice. It wouldn't have a hope in hell of passing (Devane 2022).

Sinn Féin has argued that more than 50 % plus one is desirable, however that is all that is required to maintain Northern Ireland within the U.K. and therefore it is all that is required for Irish unity, as agreed in 1998.

Seamus Mallon was a member of the SDLP negotiating team in 1998, Deputy Leader of the SDLP (1979–2001) and deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland (1998–2001). Mallon voiced his scepticism of 50 % plus one and has even gone so far as to suggest change. It is interesting that one of the key architects of the Agreement has advocated altering this mechanism; a point that is sure to provoke backlash from elements within nationalism and republicanism, particularly Sinn Féin. In his memoir with Andy Pollak, Seamus Mallon stated:

Some mechanism needs to be devised that would ensure the support of what I will call a 'sufficient plurality' of both communities, unionist, and nationalist, for a united Ireland. My goal is to see if a way can be found to measure the support for unity in both communities that is more facilitative and generous than the simple 50 percent plus one majority vote currently required by that Agreement (Mallon & Pollak 2019, 167).

Interestingly, Mark Durkan, SDLP Good Friday negotiator, deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland (2001–2002), and leader of the SDLP (2001–2010) has articulated a different view to Seamus Mallon’s on a referendum. Whilst Durkan stated: “The Good Friday Agreement shouldn’t just be looked at as a treasure to be protected” (Durkan 2018) he has been clear on the consent principle and what it means:

The consent principle has to be equal. If you have parity of esteem in the Agreement there on the basis of democratic equality all votes have to be equal in a referendum. Under the Agreement consent has to be exercised by Agreement North and South, so it’s not just the people of the North have to vote for it, the people of the South as well. So, it needs a majority North and South, but it only needs a majority. I don’t want to achieve Irish unity on the basis of mere 50 % plus one but if it was 50 % plus one for staying in the United Kingdom we stay in the United Kingdom and if its 50 % plus one for a united Ireland then we have a united Ireland. That’s what the Agreement provides. You can’t have a weighed majority required in a referendum like that because then the votes are not equal, and you do not have parity of esteem in that situation (Interview 1).

Durkan continued: “People forget that the principle of consent is itself a compromise you know and now people are looking for a compromise on a compromise so that people are now trying to adulterate the terms of the principle of consent” (Interview 1). Coulter et al. (2021, 20) have observed: “Even the fact that it had to be revised and amended on five separate occasions seems to have been unable to persuade most politicians and commentators to regard the peace accord as something other than a sacred text that brooks no alteration.” Legitimate questions have been raised about the viability, and ethics, of changing the terms of the Agreement 25 years after its inception, and when it appears that the nationalist position may prevail in a vote. It is likely that debate within nationalism and republicanism will increasingly focus on the terms of a border-poll, what questions should be asked, and whether 50 % plus one should be maintained.

5. Dissident Irish Republicanism and the GFA

When expressing their opposition to the GFA, and the consent principle in particular, dissident republicans argued that the goalposts would inevitably change and that 50 % plus one, as a requirement for Irish unity, would be altered (McGlinchey 2019b). Recent calls from figures such as Ahern or Mallon appears to confirm to dissidents that their predictions were correct. Geraldine Taylor (Belfast) is a founder member of Republican Sinn Féin (RSF) (McGlinchey 2019a; 2019b; White 2006) and was Vice-President of the organisation from 2009–2013. When asked about the GFA and the fact that it was endorsed in a referendum by most people in the North of Ireland, Taylor responded:

The right question wasn't asked, and the question should've been do you want the Brits to go home, and do you want a 32-county united Republic and that would have been a yes. I don't think anybody would deny that would have been a yes' (Interview 6).

Taylor reflects a common criticism of the referendum throughout the dissident base regarding the options that were put to the voter. Concerning mandates and the fact that Sinn Féin, a supporter of the GFA, commands most of the nationalist support in the North, a spokesperson for the alleged military wing of RSE, the Continuity IRA in North Armagh has said:

Votes isn't gonna drive the Brits out you know. I don't believe a mandate does matter. No, I would argue with them that the voting is just propping up the British government. It's just propping up the puppet Parliament here. The only thing we need to make clear is that an armed campaign will continue until the withdrawal (Interview 2).

Fifteen years after the Agreement, during a focus group in Derry comprising dissident republicans, a well-known independent dissident republican, Councillor Gary Donnelly,⁹ stated:

My view is that the Good Friday Agreement has made the union with Great Britain, it's concreted it. It's made it safe. And the unionists will say that, and I believe their analysis is right, that British rule has never been stronger and more cemented. And yet the Provisionals are telling their people that it's a steppingstone to a united Ireland (Interview 4).

Donnelly does not support an armed campaign at present in the pursuit of Irish unity. Similarly, former Provisional IRA prisoner Anthony McIntyre (Drogheda/from Belfast) does not support the campaign of the armed republican groups but is critical of the GFA and Sinn Féin's support for it. Regarding his departure from the Provisional Movement, McIntyre stated:

I left because I felt the Good Friday Agreement was a major capitulation of republicanism. That it would necessarily involve the acceptance of the partition principle, which is the consent principle, and it certainly wasn't what any volunteer had died for. The Provisionals, in my view stood poised to becoming incorporated into the structures of the state, rather than being in opposition to that state (Interview 5).

Danny Morrison, the former Director of Publicity for Sinn Féin has countered dissident arguments by stating that:

The bulk of prisoners supported the change [...]. I know for a fact, because I was in jail with hundreds of people, that 80 plus percent of the former prisoners support the change and what a minority are saying is, 'You don't have a right to change, you are sell-out bastards' (Interview 3).

Many dissidents do not describe themselves as anti-GFA as dissident republicanism was not formed in response to the Agreement but existed prior to 1998. However, the dissident base collectively opposes the Agreement, regardless of their opinion on the PIRA ceasefires. The main points of opposition to the Agreement (and consent), to emerge in interviews within the dissident base were: 1) the inalienable right of Ireland to be united and free. A vote is not needed to determine this right; 2) the traditional republican rejection of a unionist veto over Irish unity; 3) a border-poll will be called by the British Secretary of State who will decide when the time is right; 4) the fact that a border-poll will take place solely in the six counties of Northern Ireland, rather than the 32 counties; and 5) distrust that a referendum on unity would be a fair process and that 50 % plus one will remain sufficient (McGlinchey 2019b). In this context, independent dissidents, such as McIntyre, continue to argue their anti-GFA (and anti-political process) position, and the armed dissident groups, namely the Continuity and New IRAs, continue with their campaigns (McGlinchey 2019a).

6. Repression Breeds Resistance: Republican Armed Struggle

Sociologist Donatella Della Porta has described a repertoire of repression regarding social movements, stating:

Political violence throughout the world is intertwined with state responses to social movements in a sort of macabre dance [...]. Policing was in fact perceived as tough and, especially, indiscriminate, and unjust; transformative repressive events contributed to justifying violence and pushing militant groups toward clandestinity (Della Porta 2013, 33).¹⁰

In the Irish republican context, highlighting and challenging state repression has remained a constant. Regarding the PIRA, Richard English has noted: “State repression through military force was, for some, the crucial dynamic behind their involvement” (English 2012, 123). It has been widely acknowledged that for many, the catalyst for them joining the PIRA was in reaction to the activity of the British army and security services (English 2012; Bowyer Bell 2000). Historically, state repression against Irish republicans has inevitably increased support for republican organisations. Following the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, support for the Rising soared after it was suppressed, and the rebels were executed (Laffan 1995; Lee 2014). In the post-1969 period in the North of Ireland support for the PIRA grew (as did membership) after internment (1971), the Falls Curfew (1971), the Ballymurphy massacre (1971), and Bloody Sunday in January 1972.

Today, a critical discourse analysis of the main messages from the dissident groups, Republican Sinn Féin and Saoradh, reveals a heavy emphasis on repres-

sion against group members from the security services, including house raids, stop and searches, and arrests, particularly in social media.¹¹ Highlighting and emphasising security activity experienced by members and supporters, enhances comradeship amongst dissident republicans across the base, regardless of organisational affiliation or attitudes to a current armed campaign. Opposing the targeting of republicans by the security services forms part of the tradition of resistance in Irish republicanism. Robert W. White has commented on the importance of events such as commemorations in this tradition of resistance and has argued: “The state’s response to dissident events reinforces commitment and solidarity” (White 2021, 87). Today, emphasising attention from the security services, appears to be an important bonding mechanism between dissident republicans, but is also important regarding efforts to mobilise support for the groups.

But the landscape has altered and whilst dissident republicans continue to emphasise their imprisonment (on occasion without charges), it is largely failing to gain traction amongst the wider nationalist or republican community. This may be in part due to the perception that dissident republicans have not articulated a viable strategy for going forward. In the past, Irish republicans have combined their ideology, message, and strategy, alongside criticism of the state response. It appears that the main message from dissident republican groups is regarding their treatment by the security services, rather than articulation of a vision or strategy for going forward (as relevant to the contemporary context in which they are operating).

However, in the contemporary sense, armed dissident republican groups (The Continuity and New IRAs) are regarded as posing the biggest threat to peace in Ireland today. Drew Harris, Commissioner of An Garda Síochána (Police service of the Republic of Ireland), said in his first press conference: “‘Dissident’ republicanism remains ‘the biggest threat on the island of Ireland’” (BBC News 2018). Mainstream political actors are united throughout the spectrum in Northern Ireland against dissident republicans, mainly the New IRA and Continuity IRA. After the killing of two British soldiers at Massereene barracks in 2009 by the Real IRA,¹² Sinn Féin’s Martin McGuinness, then deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland came out very strongly against the dissident republicans who undertook the attacks, calling them traitors to Ireland whilst standing alongside then PSNI Chief Constable Hugh Orde on the steps of Stormont. After the killing of journalist Lyra McKee by the New IRA in Derry in 2019, Sinn Féin was united alongside all other mainstream political actors in Northern Ireland in their condemnation of the killing and of the people behind it. Criticism of the New IRA and Continuity IRA’s armed actions has also come from within the dissident republican base, mainly from independent dissidents (McGlinchey 2021).

Condemnation of dissident actions appears to be the one thing that strongly unites actors across the political spectrum, and Sinn Féin has played a leading

role in that. Sinn Féin's condemnation of dissident republicans has been viewed as of particular significance in combating support for the dissident organisations. Therefore, while the constitutional nationalist SDLP has been consistently and vociferously vocal in its opposition to political violence, and to the dissident groups, Sinn Féin's opposition has been viewed as more impactful on a traditionally republican base who may have some sympathy for the reasons behind the dissident campaign. Within this context, the SDLP once again appear sidelined, as was the case with PIRA decommissioning when Sinn Féin was seen as the party that could deliver, or act as a persuader for, decommissioning, not the SDLP.

7. The SDLP: As Distinct from Sinn Féin?

As documented by Murray and Tonge (2005), since the PIRA ceasefires and Sinn Féin's transformation into a constitutional party, the SDLP has struggled to retain voters and emphasize its unique selling point. One significant point of difference between the two parties is that Sinn Féin continue to refuse to take their seats in Westminster, whilst the SDLP take their seats. Twenty years after the GFA was reached, SDLP leader Colum Eastwood, whilst addressing a Féile event on the Falls Road in the republican heartland of West Belfast, stated: "My strong view is that nationalism needs to be represented in Westminster."¹³ Whilst Sinn Féin has undertaken various changes along its journey (such as entering Stormont or acceptance of the police in Northern Ireland) taking seats in Westminster has not been on the agenda. Despite calls from nationalist leaders, such as Eastwood, Sinn Féin has continued to argue that it will remain abstentionist in Westminster; and in some respects, it may be benefitting from this policy (particularly amongst its more hard-line base) by appearing greener by refusing to sit in Westminster. Sinn Féin continues to receive most nationalist votes in the North of Ireland, over its rival the SDLP; therefore, Sinn Féin can rightly claim that people are voting for them in the full knowledge that they are abstentionist.

At the 2018 debate in St Mary's College in West Belfast, the SDLP also suggested that a key difference between Sinn Féin and the SDLP concerns the parties' relationship with unionists. Sinn Féin's strategy of persuading unionists of the merits of a united Ireland is evident in the recent Ireland's Future events. However, unionism has not appeared particularly receptive to this message. In fact, unionist leaders have refused to engage in debate about what a united Ireland would look like. Irish government Senator Mark Daly addressed this 2018 debate and spoke about the report which he had been tasked with producing on unionist concerns and fears over a united Ireland. After consultation with representatives from the unionist and loyalist communities Senator Daly concluded that their fears of a united Ireland include a loss of identity; triumphalism; retribution on members of the police, British army and prison officers; that land

would be taken off unionist farmers; a return to violence; concerns around the E.U.; health; welfare and the economy (Daly 2019).¹⁴ At various points in the process, such as the flags protests, loyalists and unionists have claimed that their British identity is being undermined/eroded in Northern Ireland; with some loyalists believing that this is the ultimate design of the political process in place since the GFA. In this context Eastwood and SDLP representatives have argued that the SDLP, rather than Sinn Féin, are better placed to lead the process of persuading unionists of the merits of Irish unity. However, this argument from the SDLP doesn't appear to be winning over the nationalist electorate, the majority of which continue to vote for Sinn Féin; with Sinn Féin receiving 29 % of the votes (27 seats) in the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections, in comparison to the SDLP's 9.1 % (8 seats).

8. Conclusion

Sinn Féin's acceptance of the 1998 GFA, and in particular the principle of consent, shifted the political landscape within which nationalism and republicanism were operating. The traditional republican position that consent constituted a unionist veto, was overturned in favour of support for consent as a democratic way forward that could herald constitutional change through a referendum (border-poll). Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams (1983–2018) has argued:

Armed struggle was always only viable and defensible, and that isn't to say that every part of it was defensible or justifiable, but in terms of the broad principle it was always only viable if there was no alternative. Once there is an alternative anybody sensible would have to embrace the alternative (Interview 7).

Armed dissident republican groups (and their alleged political wings) have vehemently rejected the Sinn Féin position and have continued to argue that as long as Ireland is partitioned, the fight for Irish freedom will continue and the use of armed actions remains justified.¹⁵ However, dissident republican groups are failing to gain traction amongst the wider nationalist population in the North and South of Ireland, whilst Sinn Féin continues to command a majority of support from nationalist communities.

It took only 3 years after Sinn Féin's acceptance of consent for the party to overtake its nationalist rival, the SDLP, as the largest representative of the nationalist constituency in Northern Ireland. A pertinent question twenty-five years on is, does the Agreement mean the same thing to nationalism today that it did in 1998? Sinn Féin remains steadfast in its support for the Agreement and continues to call for its full implementation; rejecting calls to alter the 50 % plus one vote required for Irish unity. Fifty percent plus one has been adequate to maintain Northern Ireland's position within the union, therefore Sinn Féin re-

representatives have argued that it is also adequate to affect constitutional change and herald a united Ireland.

Interestingly, some key architects of the Agreement, including the SDLP's Seamus Mallon, have called for revision of the 50 % plus one mechanism, instead advocating parallel consent, arguing that it is less divisive. However, former and current SDLP leaders, Mark Durkan and Colum Eastwood, have expressed a different opinion, supporting maintaining 50 % plus one. Therefore, no consensus has emerged within nationalism regarding the terms of a border-poll, even at a party level within the SDLP (a key architect of the Agreement). There does appear to be growing momentum around calls for a Citizen's Assembly, most notably from Sinn Féin, particularly at the Ireland's Future events which have been held in the North and South of Ireland, comprising a variety of speakers including politicians, academics, individuals in the arts (notably actor James Nesbitt) and those from a Protestant background who are now open to Irish unity (Ireland's Future, N/D).

It is clear that in the post-Brexit context, the constitutional winds have shifted, and momentum has built around demographic change in the North and a potential border-poll. Post Brexit, the term Irish unity has entered the public discourse in a way that wasn't anticipated before the 2016 referendum. The Irish nationalist message has shifted from emphasising equality, to talking more readily about Irish unity. Twenty-five years after the GFA was reached, the conversation in Irish nationalism/republicanism is likely to be dominated by 1) attempts to open up broader conversations amongst all stakeholders regarding potential unity, and 2) discussions around what form a united Ireland will take, including the role of the existing institutions of Stormont and Leinster House.

Interviews

Interview 1 – Mark Durkan, Derry, April 24, 2018.

Interview 2 – Continuity IRA, North Armagh, January 2014.

Interview 3 – Danny Morrison, Belfast, May 7, 2014.

Interview 4 – Dissident focus group, Derry, August 21, 2013.

Interview 5 – Anthony McIntyre, Drogheda, April 3, 2013.

Interview 6 – Geraldine Taylor, Belfast, October 14, 2012.

Interview 7 – Gerry Adams, Belfast, March 5, 2009.

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Notes

- ¹ Simultaneous referenda were held in the North and South of Ireland. The North voted on the GFA whilst the South voted on the removal of articles 2 and 3 from the Irish Constitution, which claimed territorial sovereignty over the whole island of Ireland.
- ² Similarly in 2003 the UUP was electorally overtaken by the DUP (Hennessey et al. 2019).
- ³ Throughout the article interview denotes an interview with the author.
- ⁴ Correspondence during the Hume-Adams talks 1998–1992 reveals Sinn Féin’s complete rejection of consent. See an exchange of letters between Sinn Féin and the SDLP.

- ⁵ Nationalists and republicans generally refer to the Good Friday Agreement, whilst unionists and loyalists refer to the Belfast Agreement.
- ⁶ The 32CSM is believed to be the political wing of the REAL IRA, although it denies this.
- ⁷ Conor Murphy at the Panel discussion Building Peace: The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement – Designing the Agreement, Queen’s University Belfast, 10 April 2018. (Author’s notes).
- ⁸ Colum Eastwood at a debate in St Mary’s University College in West Belfast, 2018. (Author’s notes).
- ⁹ In 2019 Donnelly topped the poll in the Moor District electoral area in Derry and Strabane District Council.
- ¹⁰ The case studies examined in Della Porta’s *Clandestine Political violence* include the following social movements: left-wing in Italy and Germany, ethno-nationalist in Spain and religious fundamentalist (in Islamist clandestine organisations).
- ¹¹ For levels of armed activity in Northern Ireland annually, as well as arrests, see the Police Service of Northern Ireland Security Situation Statistics.
- ¹² A significant portion of the Real IRA moved into the New IRA, formed in 2012.
- ¹³ Authors notes, St Mary’s University College, August 7, 2018.
- ¹⁴ This report made 17 recommendations and was adopted unanimously by the all-party Joint Oireachtas Committee on the implementation of the GFA.
- ¹⁵ There are several independent dissident republicans who are opposed to the campaign by the Continuity and New IRAs. Also, see the 32CSM New Year’s Statement (32CSM.org 2021).