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Northern Ireland: Is the Peace Process Really Under Threat?

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Northern Ireland: Is the Peace Process Really Under Threat?

Irlande du Nord: un processus de paix menacé ?

Michel Savaric

Introduction

- 1 In April 2017, when Theresa May called for a general election, the BBC interviewed Brenda, an elderly resident from Bristol who seemed to sum up the general mood of British people: “You’re joking. Not another one!” she exclaimed.¹ The video became viral. In Northern Ireland, this feeling of exasperation could have been even more pronounced since this was the fourth election in just over a year. However, the impact of the Brexit vote should not be neglected. Election fatigue was counter-balanced by the issues at stake: the prospect of a ‘hard border’ between both parts of Ireland, calls for a border poll, hopes for a united Ireland, the fear of a break-up of the United Kingdom. This could explain why there seemed to be a renewed interest in politics, marked first by the high turnout at the 2nd March local assembly election. This renewed interest was expressed through the traditional sectarian divide: people voted either for the Democratic Unionist Party or for Sinn Féin.
- 2 In June, the DUP attracted an unprecedented amount of media attention in Britain and even worldwide. While the locally published *Irish News* revealed that “‘who are the DUP?’ was the most asked question on Google”,² *Le Monde* took an interest, even translating its acronym into French: “*Le PUD, le petit parti nord-irlandais qui permet à Theresa May d’avoir une majorité absolue*”.³ For the *Huffington Post*, the DUP was “[un] petit parti sulfureux”.⁴ *The Guardian* informed its readers about “Six DUP Stances You Should Know About”.⁵ *The Independent*, highlighting the same contentious topics as *The Guardian* (abortion, gay marriage, climate change), wondered “Why is the DUP so controversial?”⁶ *The Telegraph* went as far as presenting each of the ten newly elected (or re-elected) DUP Members of Parliament, emphasizing their support for the death penalty, creationism and their

opposition to abortion rights.⁷ *The Daily Mail* voiced its concerns over “whether Mrs May should be striking a deal with a party whose former leaders flirted with loyalist paramilitaries”.⁸

Nothing new about the DUP

- 3 For people in Northern Ireland, the fact that the British and international press suddenly discovered the party which had been in power for ten years seemed strange. It all but confirmed their position as the most peripheral part of the United Kingdom. There is indeed nothing new about the Democratic Unionist Party. Historically, this party cannot be separated from the personality of Ian Paisley who founded it in 1971 when the Troubles were still in their infancy. Paisley himself had one of the longest careers among European politicians. He gained notoriety during the 1964 general election campaign when he led a march, which turned into a riot, to have an Irish tricolour removed from the window of an independent republican candidate office in West Belfast (Sinn Féin was banned at the time). When Terence O'Neill, the Northern Ireland Prime Minister of the time who was deemed too liberal and lenient towards Catholics, invited *Taoiseach* Sean Lemass, a former IRA veteran, in January 1965, Paisley threw snowballs at his car. Then of course he played a prominent role leading counter-demonstrations during the civil rights campaign. At the time, in the 1960s, this fire-brand preacher with a booming voice who equated anarchism, communism, republicanism with Catholicism did seem like an oddity.
- 4 But over the years, Paisley became a permanent fixture of Northern Ireland, an archetypal figure. People used to tell “Paisley jokes”, references to him abound in literature. For example, John Hewitt dedicated a poem entitled “Demagogue” to him which contained these verses:

Compulsive preacher, large, and loud of voice
in octaves of abuse, invective, hate;
a Samson self-ordained, his strength destroys
whatever justified our canting state,
since his chief skill is to articulate
the smouldering terrors and the prejudice
that makes our heritage a dubious freight
which, now exposed, is seen for what it is.⁹
- 5 Ian Paisley has also inspired characters or appeared under his real name in many novels. He died in 2014 at the age of 88 but his image had undergone a major change. In 2006, he agreed to share power with *Sinn Féin*, formerly the political wing of the IRA, his most reviled enemies. From troublemaker, Paisley became a peacemaker.¹⁰ He even struck up a friendship with his Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness, which earned them the nickname ‘Chuckle Brothers’.¹¹
- 6 In 1998, when the Belfast (or Good Friday) agreement was negotiated, the DUP refused to sign it. But in 2006, they signed the Saint Andrews agreement whereby they agreed to share power with Sinn Féin in return for them recognising the legitimacy of the police. Ever since the (Northern) Irish question resurfaced at the end of the 1960s, finding an internal solution to it had been the ultimate goal of successive British governments. Initially, the 1998 Belfast agreement was designed, like all previous attempts, to work with the middle-ground of Northern Irish politics: the ‘moderate’ unionists of the UUP (Ulster Unionist Party) and the ‘constitutional’¹² nationalists of the SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party). But from 2003 onward, support for the moderates began to

wane. The DUP and Sinn Féin became the two dominant parties. Several prominent members of the UUP defected to the DUP, including Jeffrey Donaldson who, on the night of 8 June, was jubilant (*"This is perfect territory for the DUP obviously because if the Conservatives are just short of an overall majority, it puts us in a very, very strong negotiating position and it is one we would take up with relish"* he told the BBC)¹³ and current First Minister Arlene Foster. The DUP and Sinn Féin were re-elected to the devolved assembly in 2007, 2011, 2016 and 2017. In the House of Commons, the UUP lost all of its seats in 2010, regained two in 2015, lost them again in 2017. The SDLP found itself without seats in 2017.

Paradoxes of the DUP-SF partnership

- 7 Paradoxically the institutions put in place in 1998 only began to effectively function under the DUP-Sinn Féin coalition. The parties seen as extremist brought stability to Northern Ireland. Between 1998 and 2007, the Northern Ireland assembly had been suspended several times: it first met on 1 July 1998 but only existed in shadow form until 2 December 1999. Direct rule was reintroduced from 11 February to 30 May 2000, on 10 August and 22 September 2001 for 24 hours only, then between 14 October 2002 and 7 May 2007. Certainly, Northern Ireland continued to be rocked by major controversies, political crises and scandals after 2007 but the assembly and the executive worked uninterrupted for 10 years until Martin McGuinness's resignation on 10 January 2017.
- 8 Among the many political scandals that have punctuated the last ten years, a number of them involved the DUP, contradicting its stance as the most puritan political party in Northern Ireland. Yet, the party retained its strident opposition to the secularisation of society, such as same-sex marriages or the right to abortion and even promoted the teaching of creationism. These positions probably have to be seen as the ultimate remnants of its uncompromising past, for it has given up on what mattered most: its absolute refusal to negotiate anything with Catholics, with nationalists and republicans. The DUP's electoral successes are then paradoxical in many respects. The gradual shift of Protestant voters towards the DUP showed growing disaffection for the Belfast agreement. Yet, the DUP helped secure the Northern Ireland assembly and the power-sharing executive. Voters should logically have spurned it but it has managed to remain at the top of every poll since 2003. However, in 2011, turnout was low: 55.71%, which may be read as an expression of defiance at the DUP-Sinn Féin partnership from the electorate. The May 2016 local assembly election showed little change but turnout was even lower, the lowest ever since 1998: 54.91%. All of the main parties lost votes but nationalists' disaffection seemed more pronounced than unionists'. Sinn Féin's share of the vote was down 2.9% and the SDLP lost 2.2%. The two main unionist parties retained the same number of seats with 54 (38 for the DUP and 16 for the UUP) while the nationalists were down three seats with 28 for Sinn Féin (-1) and 12 for the SDLP (-2). Two small parties, further to the left of the political spectrum, made gains: People Before Profit, which won two seats for the first time, even topping the poll in the Belfast West constituency, and the Green Party.

Table 1: Northern Ireland Assembly election (5 May 2016) overall results¹⁴

Affiliation	Votes (1 st pref.)	Share	+/- % (from 2011)	Seats	Gain/Loss
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DUP	202,567	29.2	−0.8	38	-
SF	166,785	24.0	−2.9	28	−1
UUP	87,302	12.6	−0.7	16	-
SDLP	83,638	12.0	−2.2	12	−2
APNI	48,447	7.0	−0.7	8	-
TUV	23,776	3.4	+0.9	1	-
Green	18,718	2.7	+1.8	2	+1
PBPA	13,761	2.0	+1.2	2	+2
UKIP	10,109	1.5	+0.8	0	-
PUP	5,955	0.9	+0.6	0	-
Conservative	2,554	0.4	+0.4	0	-
Independent	22,650	3.3	+0.9	1	-
Others	8,322	1.2		0	-
Total	694,314	100.0		108	

Source: *Irish Political Studies*, "Data Yearbook 2017", Vol. 32, Issue 4, Dec. 2017, p. 529.

- 9 At the same time as the Stormont election campaign was taking place, political parties were also preparing for the EU referendum. On 20th February, the DUP decided to campaign for a Leave vote. It had chosen to align itself with UKIP. It was the only major Northern Ireland party to do so. The UUP had decided to back the Remain campaign, along with the two main nationalist parties. On 11th March, Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness called for a border poll if the UK voted to leave the EU.¹⁵ Such a position could be seen as strange since, by campaigning for a Remain vote, it was actually campaigning against a referendum on Irish unity. But this was the same position as the one taken by the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP).
- 10 The border issue was the main focus of concern during this campaign. The checkpoints between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland used to be part of the most militarised zone in Europe. With the peace process, controls were gradually suppressed so that today, travellers move from one jurisdiction to the next without almost realising it. The border issue is linked to the partition of Ireland, a topic which used to be hotly debated and contested but had seemed to become less relevant in recent times. On 10th February, Irish Ambassador to the UK Dan Mulhall was invited to address the House of Commons' Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. He argued that if Britain voted to leave the EU, it would create uncertainty about the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic.¹⁶ On 6th June, Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne came to Belfast to campaign for a Remain vote. He stated that should the UK leave the EU, border checks

would become inevitable. Then on 9th June, former Prime Ministers Tony Blair and John Major made a joint appearance at the University of Ulster and warned that Brexit could lead to the disintegration of the United Kingdom.

- 11 The vote took place on 23rd June. The gap was narrower than the 70/30 which polls had predicted at the start, but Northern Ireland voted by 55.8% to remain in the European Union. We can try and analyse voters' behaviour by comparing the election and referendum results in every constituency. For Assembly elections, Northern Ireland uses the single transferable vote system whereby voters rank candidates. This system which is designed to achieve proportional representation enables tactical voting. In order to take account of the general outlook of each constituency (whether it is more unionist or nationalist), we need to consider the first preference votes but also the total number of unionist, nationalist or other Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) elected.

Table 2: Comparison between the 5th May 2016 Assembly election and the 23rd June EU referendum in Northern Ireland

Constituency	5 May 2016 NI Assembly election			23 June 2016 EU referendum		
	Turnout	1 st preference vote	MLAs	Turnout	Remain	Leave
Belfast East	57.23%	DUP 14.8%	DUP 3 APNI 2 UUP 1	66.17%	48.6%	51.4%
Belfast North	52.48%	SF 15.57%	DUP 3 SF 2 SDLP 1	57.39%	50.4%	49.6%
Belfast South	54.25%	SF 14.17%	DUP 2 SF 1 APNI 1 SDLP 1 Green 1	66.88%	69.5%	30.5%
Belfast West	57.80%	PBPA 22.88%	SF 4 PBPA 1 SDLP 1	48.85%	74.1%	25.9%
Lagan Valley	53.19%	DUP 13.8%	DUP 3 UUP 2 APNI 1	66.25%	46.9%	53.1%

South Down	53.80%	SDLP 12.31%	SDLP 2 SF 2 DUP 1 UUP 1	62.22%	67.2%	32.8%
Mid-Ulster	58.75%	SDLP 15.23%	SF 3 SDLP 1 UUP 1 DUP 1	61.56%	60.4%	39.6%
North Antrim	52.93%	DUP 13.24%	DUP 3 TUV 1 UUP 1 SF 1	64.67%	37.7%	60.3%
East Antrim	51.01%	DUP 18.22%	DUP 3 UUP 1 APNI 1 SF 1	64.95%	44.8%	55.2%
North Down	49.57%	DUP 19.72%	DUP 3 UUP 1 Green 1 APNI 1	67.33%	52.4%	47.6%
South Antrim	51.01%	DUP 14.27%	DUP 3 UUP 1 APNI 1 SF 1	63.12%	49.4%	50.6%
Strangford	50.25%	UUP 14.31%	DUP 3 UUP 2 APNI 1	64.17%	44.4%	55.6%
East Londonderry	50.79%	DUP 13.46%	DUP 3 Ind 1 SDLP 1 SF 1	59.69%	52.0%	48.0%
Foyle	56%	SF 12.68%	SF 2 SDLP 2 PBPA 1 DUP 1	57.18%	78.2%	21.8%

Fermanagh and South Tyrone	64.55%	DUP 18.65%	DUP 2 UUP 1 SF 2 SDLP 1	67.82%	58.6%	41.4%
West Tyrone	59.86%	DUP 11.98%	SF 3 SDLP 1 DUP 1 UUP 1	61.69%	66.8%	33.2%
Upper Bann	54.44%	DUP 17.49%	DUP 2 UUP 2 SF 2	63.64%	47.4%	52.6%
Newry and Armagh	59.32%	SF 14.29%	SF 3 SDLP 1 DUP 1 UUP 1	63.94%	63.1%	36.9%

Source: the electoral office for Northern Ireland¹⁷

- 12 It then appears that the turnout was generally higher in June than in May, Northern Ireland voters felt more concerned by the referendum than by the Assembly election. The Leave vote tended to be victorious in unionist-dominated constituencies but sometimes with a small majority: 50.6% in South Antrim, 51.4% in Belfast East. Nationalist constituencies tended to vote Remain in a much higher proportion than unionist ones voted Leave. However, two exceptions need to be noticed. In May, West Belfast voters clearly spurned Sinn Féin and gave the People Before Profit candidate the best score of all candidates in that election (22.88% first preference). This party campaigned for leaving the EU from a left-wing perspective. In June, the Remain vote had its second highest score with 74.1% but the turnout was significantly down 8.95 percentage points. So it seems that PBPA supporters chose to stay at home rather than vote Leave along with DUP followers. In Foyle, where a People Before Profit MLA had also been elected, a similar but less pronounced trend could be noticed: with 78.2%, the Remain vote had its best score, but the turnout had only marginally increased (from 56% to 57.18%).
- 13 Once the votes were counted, Sinn Féin responded by a call for a border poll. Its relatively poor showing in the Assembly election the previous month and what, by contrast, had been described as “*Arlene’s triumph*”¹⁸ seemed counter-balanced. But if the DUP appeared out of touch with the unionist population, nationwide it was vindicated: “*only one party (except UKIP with 1 seat) in Westminster solidly supported what has now been shown to be the majority will of the British people: that party is the DUP. Maybe middle England is much more akin to the views of the DUP than many might like to think*”.¹⁹

From one snap election to the next

- ¹⁴ A few months later, while Arlene Foster had become First Minister, a major controversy developed, which turned into a full-blown political crisis. By the time she took office, an investigation was already under way into the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI). Modelled on a similar scheme in England designed to encourage the shift to renewable energy sources such as wood pellets, it had one major flaw: payments made exceeded the money spent by 12%.²⁰ So property owners were actually getting paid for heating their premises. The scheme had been in place since 2012, when Arlene Foster was the minister for trade, enterprise and investment. It soon became dubbed the “cash for ash” scandal when it transpired that whistle-blowers had tried to alert Arlene Foster about frauds on several occasions. One farmer was reported to be poised to earn £1m over a 20-year period just for heating an empty shed. Before Christmas 2016, it was announced that the total bill of the RHI scheme would amount to £490m, to be repaid entirely on Northern Ireland’s budget while public services were already struggling with austerity measures imposed by Westminster.
- ¹⁵ Sinn Féin’s initial reaction to the mounting criticism of Arlene Foster was surprised and confused. The party first asked her to step aside while an investigation took place. Then, “*with deep regret and reluctance*”, Martin McGuinness announced his resignation on 9 January, making a new election to the assembly inevitable.²¹ He blamed the First Minister’s obstinacy, but he would have resigned in any case as he had been diagnosed with a rare genetic disease that proved to be fatal. He was hospitalised in Derry on 6 March and died on the 21st. McGuinness was succeeded by Michelle O’Neill on 23 January.
- ¹⁶ The snap election to the devolved assembly was held on 2 March 2017. Coming a mere 10 months after the previous one, a low turnout could have been expected. Exactly the opposite happened: at 64.8%, it was the highest since 1998. Undoubtedly, the Brexit vote and the border issue influenced voters’ behaviour. The overall results show that Sinn Féin mostly benefited from this increased turnout at the polls.
- ¹⁷ Table 3: Northern Ireland Assembly election (2nd March 2017) overall results

Affiliation	Votes (1 st pref.)	Share	+/- % (from 2016)	Seats
DUP	225,413	28.1%	-1.1	28
SF	224,245	27.9%	+3.9	27
SDLP	95,958	11.9%	-0.1	12
UUP	103,314	12.9%	+0.3	10
APNI	72,717	9.1%	+2.1	8
Green	18,527	2.3%	-0.4	2
TUV	20,523	2.6%	-0.9	1
PBPA	14,100	1.8%	-0.2	1

PUP	5,590	0.7%	−0.2	0
Conservative	2,399	0.3%	−0.1	0
Labour alternative	2,009	0.3%	-	0
UKIP	1,579	0.2%	−1.3	0
CISTA ²²	1,273	0.2%	-	0
WP ²³	1,261	0.2%	-	0
Independent	14,407	1.8%	−1.5	1
Total	803,315	100.0		90

Source: Wikipedia²⁴

- 18 During the campaign, the SDLP and the UUP had tried to work out a pact which would have appealed to middle-ground voters.²⁵ By so doing, they were calling to transgress the sectarian divide. This strategy failed, prompting the immediate resignation of the UUP leader Mike Nesbitt. In West-Belfast, the People Before Profit candidate lost his seat, even if his total number of first preference votes had increased slightly. In an assembly reduced from 108 to 90 members, the DUP got 28 seats, Sinn Féin 27, the SDLP 12 and the UUP 10. For the first time ever, with 39 to 38, nationalist parties had a majority over unionist ones, while the DUP had one more seat than Sinn Féin. Some celebrated this election result as the awakening of nationalism: *“Nationalism has awakened from its slumber, and in the process it has delivered the first electoral results that are reflective of the sharply changing demographic realities of the northern state”*.²⁶ It is debatable whether the demographic realities of Northern Ireland had changed in the space of 10 months. What happened between the two elections was the unexpected referendum result which brought back to the fore old constitutional issues. Nationalists felt reinvigorated by the Remain victory in Northern Ireland which gave a sense of credibility to talks of a united Ireland while unionists were demoralised.
- 19 Then ensued a long stalemate which is still going on to this day: no executive has been formed. As in previous periods of suspension, the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) are still getting paid. At first, the main issues blocking the return of devolution were not the inquiry into the RHI fiasco, nor the prospect of a hard border with the Republic when the UK leaves the EU, but the demands set by Sinn Féin which the DUP refused to accept: an Irish Language Act, a bill of rights and same-sex marriage.
- 20 On 18 April, Theresa May took the world by surprise by announcing a snap general election for 8 June. Once again, the DUP and Sinn Féin were vindicated by the electorate. Out of 18 seats, the former won 10 and the latter 7. One independent unionist was also elected. The total share of seats between unionists and nationalists remained unchanged but the other two parties, the UUP and the SDLP, were out of the picture. A comparison between the two election results, three months apart, reveals that the duality nationalist vs unionist had been reinforced after the Brexit referendum.

Table 4: Comparison between the 2nd March 2017 Assembly election and the 8th June general election in Northern Ireland

Constituency	2 March 2017 NI Assembly election			8 June 2017 general election	
	Turnout	1 st preference vote	MLAs	Turnout	MPs
Belfast East	63.02%	DUP 14.88%	DUP 2 UUP 1 APNI 2	67.71%	DUP 55.76%
Belfast North	61.77%	SF 15.12%	SF 2 SDLP 1 DUP 2	67.56%	DUP 46.23%
Belfast South	63.96%	SF 17.67%	SF 1 SDLP 1 APNI 1 DUP 1 Green 1	66.31%	DUP 30.42%
Belfast West	66.76%	SF 17.14%	SF 4 PBPA 1	65.41%	SF 66.71%
Lagan Valley	62.57%	DUP 17.82%	DUP 2 UUP 1 APNI 1 SDLP 1	62.23%	DUP 59.56%
South Down	66.21%	SF 21.3%	SF 2 SDLP 2 DUP 1	67.49%	SF 39.94%
Mid-Ulster	72.38%	SF 21.19%	SF 3 SDLP 1 DUP 1	68.59%	SF 54.51%
North Antrim	63.22%	SF 15.8%	DUP 2 TUV 1 UUP 1 SF 1	64.21%	DUP 58.85%

East Antrim	60.12%	DUP 16.03%	DUP 2 UUP 2 APNI 1	60.83%	DUP 57.34%
North Down	60.12%	DUP 21.28%	DUP 2 UUP 2 APNI 1	61.04%	Ind. 41.21%
South Antrim	62.40%	SF 16.27%	DUP 2 UUP 1 APNI 1 SF 1	63.44%	DUP 38.24%
Strangford	60.94%	DUP 16.04%	DUP 3 UUP 1 APNI 1	60.36%	DUP 62.03%
East Londonderry	62.69%	SF 13.97%	DUP 2 Ind. 1 SDLP 1 SF 1	61.57%	DUP 48.07%
Foyle	65%	SF 20.63%	SF 2 SDLP 2 DUP 1	65.6%	SF 39.71%
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	72.61%	DUP 16.22%	SF 3 UUP 1 DUP 1	76.08%	SF 47.17%
West Tyrone	69.89%	SF 17.4%	SF 3 SDLP 1 DUP 1	68.23%	SF 50.72%
Upper Bann	62.54%	SF 15.94%	DUP 2 UUP 1 SDLP 1 SF 1	64.15%	DUP 43.53%
Newry and Armagh	69.41%	DUP 17.77%	SF 3 SDLP 1 DUP 1	68.87%	SF 46.97%

Source: the electoral office for Northern Ireland²⁷

- 21 We may note the distortion effect caused by the first-past-the-post voting system which mainly benefited the DUP. Constituencies like Belfast North and Belfast South do not have

a unionist majority yet returned DUP MPs to Westminster. In any case, the fact that the border had become the most talked about issue did not ease off the polarisation of the Northern Ireland electorate. Theresa May's difficulties became the DUP's opportunity: suddenly, its 10 Members of Parliament mattered. They were Kingmakers. Finding itself catapulted from the outer fringes to the centre of British power, the Northern Irish party saw a way to redress its previous misfortunes with the unplanned RHI scandal in December and its relative loss of influence on its electorate in March.

- 22 When Arlene Foster negotiated a £1bn deal with Theresa May,²⁸ Sinn Féin reacted angrily. Gerry Adams, who had taken back a front-stage role since the death of Martin McGuinness, called it a “*blank cheque for a Tory Brexit which threatens the Good Friday Agreement*”.²⁹ The threat to the peace process and/or the Good Friday Agreement, is an argument that he has used on many occasions, for example when he was questioned by the police in May 2014 about his alleged involvement in the 1972 murder of a widow, mother of 10 children, accused by the IRA of being an informer.³⁰ It seems that these communication tools used by Sinn Féin at regular intervals were adopted unquestioningly by the international press, for instance *Le Monde*:

Si le Royaume-Uni choisit de sortir du marché unique européen – l'option privilégiée jusqu'à présent par Mme May –, le rétablissement d'une frontière entre l'Ulster et la République d'Irlande pourrait être nécessaire, afin de contrôler l'immigration et le commerce. Les républicains n'apprécieraient alors pas du tout de voir leur île à nouveau morcelée, alors que les signes visibles d'une frontière ont aujourd'hui complètement disparu.³¹

- 23 Or *L'Humanité*: « *En cherchant à constituer une alliance avec les extrémistes unionistes, Theresa May risque de rouvrir les plaies de la guerre civile* ».³² »

The Conservative and Unionist Party

- 24 But this is not the first time the Conservatives have had to make deals with unionist MPs. On 13 June, John Major warned Theresa May that a deal with the DUP could put peace in Northern Ireland at risk:

A fundamental part of that peace process is that the UK government needs to be impartial between all the competing interests in Northern Ireland,” he said. “The danger is that however much any government tries, they will not be seen to be impartial if they are locked into a parliamentary deal, at Westminster, with one of the Northern Ireland parties.”³³

- 25 Yet when he was Prime Minister, from 1993 on, a series of by-election defeats rendered his political survival reliant on support from the nine Ulster Unionist MPs in Parliament. He struck up a £10m deal with them to subsidise heavy electricity users and promised them an electricity inter-connector cable to Scottish Power³⁴. In his 1995 Conservative Party Conference speech, he reminded: “*We are the Conservative and Unionist Party*”³⁵.
- 26 The press also lambasted Theresa May for striking a deal with a party linked to loyalist terrorism and to the bigoted Orange Order. Even if those links are not to be denied, it has to be stressed that the supposedly middle-of-the-road UUP has had a much more ancient and established relationship with paramilitaries and the Orange brotherhoods than the DUP, if only because the DUP is more recent. Without going into the details of the creation of the UVF by Sir Edward Carson in 1912, we can point to the fact that the setting up of the current UVF in 1965 is supposed to have taken place during a meeting at the

UUP headquarters in Glengall Street in Belfast, organised by members of the Northern Ireland cabinet who wanted to undermine O'Neill³⁶. As for the Orange Order, the links with the UUP are also very old³⁷.

- 27 So, when Gerry Adams says that the DUP-Tory deal puts the Good Friday Agreement in danger, he seems to be implying that if Sinn Féin does not get its way, the IRA will go back on a war footing. This could be seen as a form of blackmail but perhaps efficiency matters more than morals in politics. We may then want to ascertain the plausibility of this veiled threat, perhaps it is pure rhetoric. In October 2015, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), together with the MI5, published a report on paramilitary groups at the demand of the Northern Ireland Secretary. This report settled a serious political crisis provoked by a series of murders. On 5 May 2015, IRA commander Gerard 'Jock' Davison was shot and killed in front of his house in the republican Markets area of Belfast. In the neighbourhood, it was rumoured that the perpetrator was a former IRA member named Kevin McGuigan. He was killed by two masked men on 12 August. A crisis developed when the police claimed that McGuigan's assassination had been sanctioned by the IRA at the highest level, implying that the IRA was still in existence, a suspicion confirmed in the report published in October. In fact, the report issued that *"All of the main paramilitary groups operating during the period of the Troubles remain[ed] in existence"*.³⁸ However, these groups did not really represent a threat to peace as the report stated: *"It is our firm assessment that, to different degrees, the leaderships of the main paramilitary groups are committed to peaceful means to achieve their political objectives"*.³⁹
- 28 In any case, we may seriously doubt the Provisional IRA's capacity to resume its activities, even to the level of 1996-1997. It would take extraordinary circumstances, far beyond a pact between the DUP and the Conservative Party. We should perhaps be warier of the UDA, the UVF, the Red Hand Commando and the myriad of offshoots and splinter groups who are constantly in the news, organising bonfires and parades, putting up flags on lamp-posts, painting murals, rioting, selling drugs and carrying out punishment beatings on drug dealers, intimidating foreigners and doing voluntary community work, racketeering businesses and canvassing government officials for subsidies. If a referendum on Irish unity were to be carried out, those loyalist paramilitary groups could very well find their real purpose, should the results not be to their liking. However, even if the people of Northern Ireland wanted to stay in the EU, even if nationalists have now a majority over unionists in the temporarily out-of-order Northern Ireland Assembly, we should not jump to conclusions regarding the result of such a referendum.
- 29 Since 1998, the Queen's University of Belfast and Ulster University have carried out surveys, called 'Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys', covering a wide range of issues on a yearly basis. On the question of what the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be, the results have always shown remarkable consistency.⁴⁰ In 2016, 54% of respondents thought it should remain part of the UK with a devolved government, 19% thought it should reunify with the rest of Ireland, 12% opted for remaining part of the UK with direct rule. In 2015, the answers to the same question were 51%, 14% and 19%. In 2014, they were 50%, 17% and 16%. On a TV program shown in April 2018, academic Dr Paul Nolan said that a catholic majority in Northern Ireland was possible by 2021.⁴¹ But a catholic majority does not necessarily mean that a majority would vote for a united Ireland.

Conclusion

- 30 The DUP-Conservative deal has then to be replaced in a general picture of micro-struggles for the balance of power between the two main political parties of Northern Ireland. In May 2016, Sinn Féin seemed in a difficult situation, having lost votes and seats in the local assembly. Then the victory of the Remain vote locally was seen as a defeat for the DUP. In March 2017, nationalists gained a majority over unionists at Stormont for the first time. But in June, the DUP regained a semblance of control by offering their backing to the Prime Minister. These small changes must not hide the fact that the political landscape of Northern Ireland if at all shows very little evolution.
- 31 It is a truism to say that this is a deeply divided society. Constant bickering over the display of flags and emblems, parades, marching bands and bonfires, commemorations of all kinds, is but a reflection of social structures dominated by socio-religious segregation. Northern Ireland is political and cultural world of its own. Its dual educational system, its political life, the visible signs of its conflictual past (wall murals, painted kerb-stones, peace-lines and physical separations) do not exist anywhere else in the British Isles. Yet, if unionists and nationalists generally agree that Northern Ireland should for the foreseeable future remain part of the UK with a devolved government, we may wonder what really separates them. This is one first paradox.
- 32 The second paradox is that Northern Ireland is remarkably stable and that instability comes from the outer world. The Brexit vote went against all the stereotypes: the English are supposed to be pragmatic and rational, the Irish are supposed to be passionate and disorderly. By voting for leaving the European Union, English voters have shown that constitutional change is possible, or is it? The conundrum of the border issue has highlighted the fact that Ireland was partitioned nearly one hundred years ago. The question of Irish reunification has come back to haunt British politics, it attracts attention European-wide. Nationalist expectations are then raised and unionist fears are heightened. If Scottish nationalists get their way and achieve independence, this will also have a strong impact on the Irish situation. In a nutshell, there is no internal threat to the peace process in Northern Ireland but external factors have the potential to upset it.
- 33 Michel Savaric has been a lecturer at the University of Franche-Comté since 2002 where he is a member of the *Centre de Recherches Interdisciplinaires et Transculturelles* (CRIT). He recently collaborated to *Sociétés face à la terreur*, edited by Nicolas Bonnet, Pierre-Paul Grégorio, Nathalie Le Bouëdec, Alexandra Palau, Marc Smith, and published by Orbis Tertius, 2017. His current research focuses on the history of Northern Ireland.

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ABSTRACTS

Following in the wake of the Brexit vote when a majority of Northern Ireland electors voted to remain after the DUP had campaigned for leaving the EU, it really did seem that the hardline unionist party was gradually losing its grip on local politics. The prospect of a united Ireland was immediately seized upon by Sinn Féin as a way to solve the border issue created by the Brexit vote. Then Theresa May unexpectedly decided to call for a snap general election on 8th June. Once again, Sinn Féin and the DUP increased their share of the vote. But the DUP reversed its gradual loss of influence while suddenly becoming central to British politics when it brokered a deal with the Prime Minister. The dominant view in the British and international media was then that the deal put the Northern Ireland peace process at risk. The point of this paper is to question this assumption which seems to imply that simply because Sinn Féin does not get its way, the IRA will revert back to an armed campaign. The question would rather be whether the IRA is still in a capacity to do so. It may also be argued that the increased feeling of insecurity among the loyalist community represents an equal threat to the stability of the region. At the same time, we will explore all the apparent paradoxes revealed by the Northern Ireland elections since June 2016.

S'inscrivant dans la foulée du référendum sur le Brexit où la majorité des électeurs nord-irlandais avaient voté pour rester alors que le DUP avait fait campagne pour quitter l'UE, il semblait bien que le parti unioniste extrémiste était en train de perdre de son influence sur la politique locale. La perspective d'une Irlande unie a été immédiatement brandie par le Sinn Féin comme solution possible au problème de la frontière posé par le vote pour le Brexit. Puis Theresa May a décidé, à la surprise générale, de provoquer des législatives anticipées pour le 8 juin. Une fois de plus, le Sinn Féin et le DUP ont augmenté leur score. Mais le DUP a regagné l'influence perdue en devenant un élément central de la vie politique britannique lorsqu'il a négocié un accord avec la première ministre. Le point de vue dominant dans les médias britanniques et internationaux était alors que cet accord mettait en danger le processus de paix. Le but de cet article sera de questionner cette assertion qui semble signifier que si le Sinn Féin n'obtient pas ce qu'il désire, l'IRA retournera à la violence politique. La question serait plutôt de savoir si l'IRA est toujours en capacité de reprendre les armes. On peut également avancer qu'un sentiment accru d'insécurité parmi la communauté loyaliste représente tout autant une menace pour la stabilité de la région. En même temps, nous explorerons tous les apparents paradoxes révélés par les élections en Irlande du Nord depuis juin 2016.

INDEX

Mots-clés: processus de paix, Irlande du Nord, Brexit

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