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'AN UNCONVENTIONAL MP': NANCY ASTOR, PUBLIC WOMEN AND GENDERED POLITICAL CULTURE

Women MPs from Northern Ireland: Challenges and Contributions, 1953–2020

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This article investigates women's representation as Northern Ireland (NI) MPs in the House of Commons since 1953. The central argument of the study is that the political and cultural positions dominant at the formation of NI in the early 20th century reverberate through the generations and continue to inform women's political under-representation today. The article provides an historical context for women's political and public participation from the 1950s, highlighting the gendered political culture in which this engagement took place. It examines the additional freezing effect of the ethno-national conflict on women's civic and political involvement from the 1970s–1990s. In terms of women's Westminster contributions, the article focuses on the period following the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast agreement and details the extent of women's candidacies in general elections. It highlights their participation in parliamentary voting, and some of the issues to which they have contributed. The study shows the influence of a conservative, gendered political culture on the issues that have engaged women MPs from Northern Ireland. The article concludes that Northern Ireland's privileging of male power continues to frame the political agendas and work of women MPs.

Introduction: A summary history of Northern Ireland

The establishment of Northern Ireland 1914–1921

Historically, Northern Ireland (NI) is the most contested part of the United Kingdom. While the origins of this contestation rest in the British state's colonial legacy in Ireland, the 20th century political and social cleavages in Northern Ireland have roots in the 19th and early 20th century conflict over the nationalist quest for self-determination and the unionist resistance to weakening ties with Britain (Mansergh, 1936: 79–81). Most Irish Protestants, on the other hand, mobilized to maintain the political union of Ireland with Britain, and began to channel their political efforts through the Orange Order.¹ The Ulster Unionist Council, coordinating unionist political strategy, for example, began to plan to assume control of Ulster if Home Rule became law, and initially made provision for the inclusion of women in this government. It later went back on this promise (McKane, 2018: 329). Although most Irish Catholics and their political representatives in Westminster, the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), supported Irish self-government (Home Rule), they were also in favour of retaining a constitutional link with the United Kingdom (UK). In parallel, Sinn Féin (meaning 'Ourselves'), founded in 1905, harnessed a growing nationalist separatist sentiment.

These broad political alignments underpinned and motivated the creation of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in 1912, an armed loyalist militia under the leadership of Edward Carson and James Craig that was opposed to home rule for Ireland.² The militarization of the Protestant community was countered in 1913 by the formation of a nationalist military force, the Irish Volunteers, in support of home rule.³ By 1914, with tensions between both groups on the island growing, the Government of Ireland

¹ See the Irish History Live resources on the Queens's University Belfast website, available at <https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/irishhistorylive/IrishHistoryResources/Articlesandlecturesbyourteachingstaff/ThedevelopmentofUnionismbefore1912/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

² See Timothy Bowman's article 'The Ulster Volunteers 1913–1914: force or farce?' (2002) at *History Ireland* online, available at <https://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/the-ulster-volunteers-1913-1914-force-or-farce/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

³ See 'History of The Irish Volunteers' at *Irishvolunteers.org*, available at <https://irishvolunteers.org/pages/history-of-the-irish-volunteers/> [accessed 25 June 2020].

Act was passed, providing for devolved government and parliaments in Belfast and Dublin. However, the outbreak of World War 1 led to the temporary suspension of its implementation (Mansergh, 1936: 57–58).

During the 1914–18 period, attitudes towards Home Rule further polarized in Ireland. There was a rise in support for militant republicanism, Sinn Féin and independence from British rule following the inept handling of the 1916 Easter Rising aftermath by the Liberal government. Unionist leaders continued to press their case for the exemption of Ulster from Home Rule measures. Furthermore, there was a serious erosion of trust between the moderate nationalist IPP, led by John Redmond MP, and the Asquith government over the Liberal party's plan to exclude Ulster from the Irish self-government provisions (Jackson, 2004: 183–187). The enfranchisement of women over 30 and all adult men increased the 1918 general election electorate on the island from 700,000 to over 2 million voters. The unfolding political events mobilized this new cadre of voters, and turnout averaged 68% in contested constituencies. The IPP was roundly defeated by the radical republican Sinn Féin party, whose candidates won 73 of the 105 parliamentary seats. The IPP, who went into the election with 63 Westminster seats, emerged from the election with only six MPs. Carson's Unionists dominated in Ulster, winning 23 of the 38 seats in the nine counties (Macardle, [1937] 1968: 243–247; Coakley, 2018). As the illustration shows, Ireland was partitioned electorally, if not politically (**Figure 1**).

In the aftermath of the 1918 election, the issue of British rule in Ireland once again came to the fore. Prime Minister Lloyd George introduced the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, designed to bring a limited form of self-government to both parts of the island and to which each administration could send representatives to a Council of Ireland, designed as a vehicle for enabling Irish unity. The Act received royal assent on 23 December 1920. It partitioned the island into Northern Ireland, comprising six north-east counties, and Southern Ireland, comprising the remainder of the island.⁴

⁴ See the Government of Ireland Act, 1920, available from the *Legislation.gov.uk* website at http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1920/67/pdfs/ukpga_19200067_en.pdf [accessed 17 April 2020]. The six north-east counties were Antrim, Armagh, Londonderry, Down, Fermanagh, Tyrone.

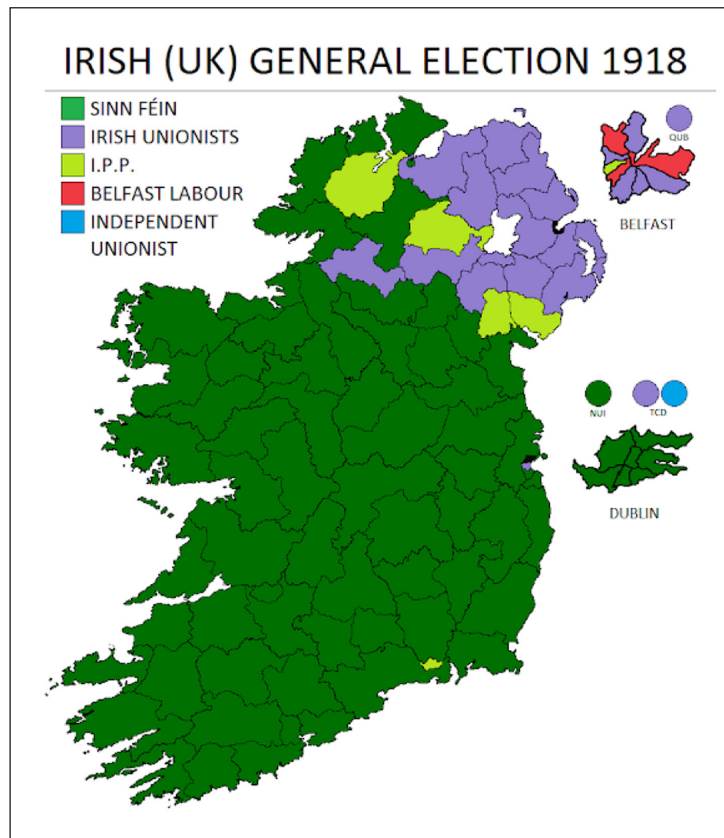


Figure 1: Irish (UK) General Election results by party, 1918.

Source: Irish (UK) general election 2018 at Irish Political Maps, available at <http://irishpoliticalmaps.blogspot.com/2012/05/irish-uk-general-election-1918.html> [accessed 25 June 2020].

Following this Act, on 3 May 1921 Northern Ireland came into legal effect as a self-governing region of the United Kingdom with a parliament at Stormont in Belfast. The devolution of government to Northern Ireland was given a mixed reception by unionists. Indeed, in a grudging acceptance of the self-rule it bestowed, James Craig remarked, 'as a final settlement and supreme sacrifice in the interest of a peace the Act of 1920 was accepted by Northern Ireland' (quoted in Mansergh, 1936: 17). Yet, on the opening of the new parliament on 22 June 1921, the occasion was presented as a loyalist victory, a due compensation for years of patriotism and sacrifice in the name of the Union (Jackson, 2004: 232).

In Southern Ireland, Sinn Féin pursued independence and embarked on a guerilla war against British representatives and forces. The conflict was suspended in June 1921 to enable negotiations between Sinn Féin representatives and the British government. The Anglo-Irish Treaty, finally agreed on 6 December 1921 between Sinn Féin and the Liberal government of Lloyd George, led to the 26 Southern counties becoming an independent self-governing entity with Dominion status, known as the Irish Free State (Mansergh, 1934: 30–42, 45–46). On 18 April 1949, the state was declared a republic following the enactment of the Republic of Ireland Act 1948 by the Irish Parliament (Oireachtas).

The developments between 1920–1922 offered a political resolution to the divergent identity-based demands of nationalists and unionists in Ireland. However, in both cases, internal violence ensued over these new political arrangements. Over 1500 people were killed in the course of the Irish Civil War (June 1922–May 1923) after the Anglo-Irish Treaty, while in Northern Ireland violent conflicts took the lives of over 600 people (Walker, 2012: 7). The issues involved in this period, and the legacy of violence, continued to dominate electoral politics in both parts of Ireland in the following decades, with a consequent sidelining of gender issues.

Northern Ireland: a sectarian state 1922–1970

From the outset, Northern Ireland's political institutions were designed to facilitate unionist interests. An early casualty of the representative democratic function was the abandonment of proportional representation (PR) as an electoral system. Mindful of the need to include minority communities in the governance process, the 1920 Act had provided for PR, in single transferable vote form (STV) and multi-member constituencies. PR was opposed by unionists during negotiations on the 1920 Act and repeatedly thereafter on the grounds of cost, unwieldy constituency size and its facilitation of multiple party representation. Of these, the point on multiplicity of parties was closest to unionist fears, as a result of which 'the stability of the Government would be threatened, and that ultimately the traditional divisions in Ulster politics would disappear' (Mansergh, 1936: 136). Unionists also distrusted the Boundary Commission, which was provided for in the Anglo-Irish Treaty in order to

decide on the precise delineation of the border between the two states. Unionists feared that this provision was a ruse to make Northern Ireland unviable. Their response was to ensure a unionist hold on power so as to control the fate of the new political entity. In 1922, the Northern Ireland government abolished PR for local government, and reverted to the simple majority system in single member constituencies. This consequently necessitated a restructuring of the constituencies: in nationalist-dominated districts, such as Derry/Londonderry, Omagh and Enniskillen, the local government boundaries were redrawn to ensure unionist electoral victory (Mansergh, 1936: 138–139; Jackson, 2004: 259–260). In 1929, PR was abolished for elections to the Northern Ireland parliament. The motivation for this move, according to Walker (2012: 21), was to prevent the election of independents, temperance candidates and members of minor parties from the unionist family that threatened the dominance of Craig's Ulster Unionist Party. Interestingly, Westminster elections continued using the majoritarian, or first-past-the-post, system (**Figure 2**). Unlike local government

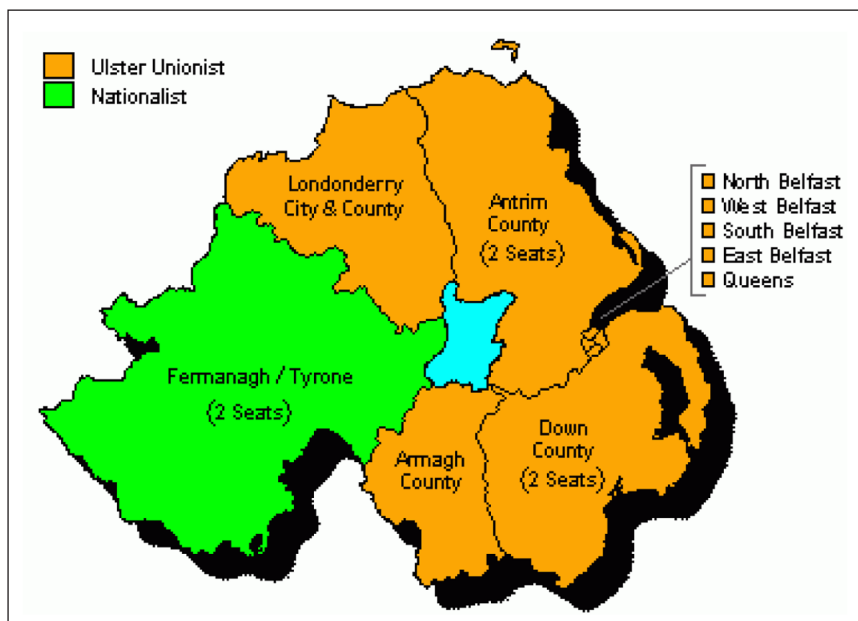


Figure 2: Distribution of MP seats by party, 1922.

Source: 'The 1922 Westminster elections in Northern Ireland', available on the ARK Elections website at <https://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/fw22.htm> [accessed 25 June 2020].

elections, there were no complaints about constituency boundaries, which changed little over time, and there were only rare calls for the introduction of a proportional representation system.

Deep political divisions were reinforced by equally ingrained economic and social divisions. Unionist control of local government meant that in some councils, and especially in the western part of Northern Ireland, public-funded housing was allocated preferentially to Protestant families. This became a controversial matter by the 1960s, when nationalists in Dungannon, Omagh and especially Derry complained strongly about public housing allocations. In these councils, unionist councillors controlled housing policy to bolster their political position. Yet, not all local authorities behaved in this manner. Walker (2012: 72–73) also points to fair allocation practices in councils in Belfast and east Northern Ireland, along with the impartiality of the post-war independent Northern Ireland Housing Trust.

Employment was subject to similar patterns and motivations for allocation: local government jobs were disproportionately distributed towards Protestant applicants, and unionist workers were given preference over nationalist workers in the flourishing heavy industrial sector. Unionist landowners held the largest share of productive land. Without rebuke from Westminster, Basil Brooke, Minister for Agriculture in the Craig government, felt compelled to advise his Protestant/unionist supporters in 1933 to 'employ Protestant lads and lassies...[Catholics] had got too many appointments for men who were really out to cut their throats if opportunity arose' (quoted in Jackson, 2004: 268). Yet, that Brooke felt compelled to make this statement points to the fact that many Protestants employed, and continued to employ, Catholic workers.

With only rare exception, Catholics were excluded from positions of power and influence in the civil service, the judiciary, and the police. Given the higher family size of Catholics in the region at that time (the mean family size ranged from 4-6 children, compared with the 2-4 for Protestant families), many Catholics emigrated to find employment. In the 1950s, one-third of school leavers – the majority of which were Catholic – emigrated to find work (Rowthorn, 1981: 3–5; Jackson, 2004: 265). By 1971, Catholic unemployment was at 14%, over twice the rate of Protestant unemployment (Rowthorn, 1981: 6–8). West Belfast MP Patricia McLaughlin was

conscious of the economic and social disadvantage in Northern Ireland, and sought employment-generating initiatives such as the introduction of slum clearance programmes, and preferential tax treatment for NI business owners to encourage re-investment in their companies (McLaughlin, 1959: 32). The Northern Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) was predominantly a Protestant police force seen by many nationalists as partisan and repressive. The tipping-point in the alienation of majority support among the nationalist community for the RUC came on 5 October 1968, with the police taking heavy-handed action against a peaceful civil rights demonstration organized by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) on the outskirts of Derry city (Jackson, 2004: 263; Cochrane, 1999: 22–23).

Challenge, accommodation and peace 1969–2020

On 22 November 1969, the Northern Ireland government reluctantly adopted a reform programme that addressed the main demands of NICRA. A period of fragile calm ensued as public protest was suspended to give the O'Neill government the opportunity to implement the promised reforms. However, on 1 January 1969, the radical student-based, socialist-leaning People's Democracy (PD, an out-growth of NICRA) set out to march the 75 miles from Belfast to Derry in support of NICRA demands. The 40-person group, which included Bernadette Devlin, was sporadically attacked by loyalist counter-demonstrators along the route of the four-day march. At Burntollet Bridge on the outskirts of Derry, the marchers were ambushed by over 200 unionist supporters, among whom were off-duty police, wielding a range of implements and weapons. The RUC stood by and did not come to the defence of the marchers. This attack was widely condemned, and further polarized community opinion. Nationalists interpreted the government's reluctance to protect the peaceful marchers as an indication that the reforms were merely tokenist gestures. Unionists interpreted the PD march as an attack on the state and the Protestant community (Cochrane, 1999: 24; Tonge, 2002: 38–39).

Sectarian animosity turned to sectarian violence in the following months, and the O'Neill government was forced to request support from the UK government to maintain law and order. On 14 August 1969, the British Army arrived in Northern Ireland. Initially accepted by nationalists and the Catholic community

as peace-keepers, the perception of the Army's role changed due to a number of insensitive actions including imposing a curfew in the nationalist Falls Road in West Belfast, and house raids in nationalist areas. The army was no longer perceived as a protector of the nationalist community from loyalist violence. Thereafter the region spiraled into ethnic and anti-state violence for the following three decades, with the loss of over 3,200 lives and many more injured (Guelke, 1999: 33). The death of fourteen citizens, shot by British paratroopers as they took part in an anti-internment march in Derry/Londonderry on 30 January 1972, brought devolved government to an end and introduced direct rule from London on 1 April 1972 (Birrell, 2009: 6–7).

Following twenty-five years of continuous conflict, a tenuous peace process was boosted by the Irish Republican Army's announcement of a ceasefire on 31 August 1994 (Mitchell, 1999: 111–112). The subsequent path to peace was a rocky one and the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland challenged the talents of British, Irish and American political leaders. On 22 May 1998, 71 percent of the electorate in Northern Ireland endorsed the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement blueprint for peaceful power-sharing. The 25 June 1998 election to the Northern Ireland Assembly was conducted under the rules of proportional representation. Nationalist parties (the Social Democratic and Labour Party-SDLP, and Sinn Féin) won 42 seats in the new 108-seat Assembly, unionist parties (among them the Ulster Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party) gained 58 seats, while the centrist Alliance Party won six seats, and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition succeeded in gaining two seats (Wilford 1999: 285–303). This election marked the beginning of a new era of peaceful democratic governance of Northern Ireland that has continued, albeit with complications and interruptions, to the present day (Coakley and Todd, 2020: 453–460, 533–538).

A gendered political culture

The momentous events leading to the establishment of Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State as separate political entities mobilized women, as well as men, into supporting state-creating activities. In the north-east of Ireland, unionist women supported the Ulster Unionist Council's resistance to Home Rule. Their long informal backing of the male-led Ulster resistance took a more organized form with

the establishment of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council (UWUC) on 23 January 1911, with the sole aim of defeating Home Rule (McKane, 2018: 336). This grouping joined other unionist women's groups, such as the Women's Orange Order, in providing a supportive and motivated auxiliary labour force to the male-dominated unionist parties and organisations (Urquhart, 2018: 468–469). This was as much a strategic decision as it was an acceptance of gendered norms of behaviour. As Diane Urquhart (2018: 469–470) observes, '...the UWUC, keen to make unionism relevant to women's lives, developed a gendered argument where the sanctity of the home featured strongly and women's political action was portrayed as an extension of their maternal and protective instincts'. This focus on family and local community activism was an outgrowth of the UWUC founding motion that stressed the central tenets of unionist identity – Ulster was British (though part of Ireland), loyal to the Crown, and Protestant (McKane, 2018: 337). Nonetheless, women remained marginalized in unionist politics (Urquhart, 2018: 470). This expression of Ulster nationhood, and women's subsidiary place within it, was to shape the parameter of women's political participation in the century to follow.

In parallel to the forging of an Ulster identity, the formation of an Irish separatist identity was underway, characterized as a Gaelic, Catholic and independent Ireland. On 2 April 1914, Cumann na mBan (the Women's Council) was established by a group of women nationalists to support the exclusively male Irish Volunteer Force. Although women in the Irish revolution appeared to have a more agentic role than that of their unionist sisters, the founding sentiments of Cumann na mBan reinforced gender norms. As Margaret Ward observed '...it was acceptable for the male organization [Irish Volunteers] to enter into debate, but not for their female counterpart in case this led to "disunion". The political arena was to be reserved for men, while women's role was to "put Ireland first" by helping to arm the men' (Ward, 1995: 93). This template for women's political role, as supporters rather than as leaders, held fast thereafter (Ward, 1995: 248).

Thus, as the identity of the emerging nations Ulster and Ireland, formed at the turn of the 20th century, the 'rigid masculine tradition' (Ward, 1995: 248) of politics

on the island precluded women's full and equal participation in public life. As both parts of the island diverged in the 1920s, the gendered nature of political and public life was reinforced – unionist politics accorded women a highly regulated subsidiary role; nationalist political discourse while valorizing women combatants remained equally patriarchal in expectation and practice.

Not surprisingly, women's forays into electoral politics were limited. Finally granted the vote in 1918, only two women contested the last all-Ireland 1918 general election – Countess Markievicz stood for Sinn Féin in the Dublin constituency of St. Patricks, and Winifred Carney stood for Sinn Féin in the Belfast constituency of Victoria. Markievicz became the first woman in Ireland elected to the House of Commons prior to partition of the island. As a Sinn Féin representative, she adhered to the party's abstentionist policy and did not take her seat (Thane, 2020: 3). Over the nine general elections held between 1921 and 1951, no woman stood as an election candidate in Northern Ireland. In the eight general elections between 1951 and 1979, only one or two women stood for election on each occasion. One was Bernadette Devlin (later McAliskey), who became the only female MP from Northern Ireland in this period, first returned in a by-election in 1969, and re-elected at the 1970 general election. Devlin argued for Stormont to be prorogued and for London to assume direct rule of the region, along with economic sanctions against the unionist devolved government if it failed to introduce meaningful social and economic reforms.⁵ She lost her Westminster seat in 1974. It was to be another three decades before a woman from Northern Ireland rose to speak in the House of Commons.

Two women were elected to the 52-member Northern Ireland House of Commons on its establishment in 1921: Dehra Parker and Julie McMordie, under the banner of the Ulster Unionist Party. Women's record of electoral participation in the devolved parliament at Stormont did not improve thereafter: in the 12 Stormont elections between 1921 and 1969, women comprised 37 (4%) of the 1008

⁵ See the Hansard transcript of Devlin's speech from 22 April 1969, available at https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1969/apr/22/northern-ireland#S5CV0782P0_19690422_HOC_271, col. 323 [accessed 13 April 2020].

candidates, of whom nine were returned as Stormont MPs (Wilford, 1999: 199). All were from unionist or liberal political traditions. None came from the nationalist/Catholic community, even though nationalists held about one-fifth of the seats. The exclusion of women from political life in Northern Ireland had deep roots in the political and social conservatism shared by both communities. As Wilford notes: 'When sectarian tension and conflict escalated, as was the case at both Stormont's birth and its eventual demise, the virtual male monopoly of the Northern Ireland parliament was all the more apparent' (Wilford, 1999: 199).

Women in social and public life, 1953–1997

On 15 April 1953, almost four decades after Markievicz became an MP, Patricia Ford (UUP, North Down) became the first female MP from Northern Ireland to be returned to Westminster (**Table 1**).⁶ This moment did not herald a new dawn for women's representation. Indeed, as the daughter of Walter Smiles, the popular MP from the constituency who tragically died the previous January, Ford was presented as a substitute for her father. In his study of women MPs from 1919-1945, Brian Harrison (1986: 625) observes that 'A woman could enter parliament more easily if it could plausibly be claimed that she represented a man'. Ford fitted this profile and she was returned unopposed to her father's seat in the by-election of April 1953. In this regard, she was following the pattern of 'male equivalence' as an already well established route to politics for women: of the total of 38 female MPs elected prior to the 1945 general election, ten owed their position, at least in part, to being a substitute for a former male MP (Harrison, 1986: 626).

In the ten general elections held between 1955 and 1987, women's candidacies in Northern Ireland remained in single-digit numbers and percentages (**Table 2**). In the two subsequent general elections, women's candidacies increased to 15 (15%) in 1992 and 26 (21%) in 1997. Nonetheless, over the period from 1950-1997, of the 763 candidates selected by parties, only 64 (8%) were women. The question to consider is

⁶ This article discusses only the careers of women who were elected from a constituency in Northern Ireland to the House of Commons. It does not include women from Northern Ireland who were elected by other UK constituencies, such as Kate Hoey (Labour, Vauxhall).

Table 1: Northern Ireland Westminster MPs, 1950–2019.

Election	Total MPs	Male (n)	Female (n)	Male (%)	Female (%)
1950	13	13	0	100	0
1951	12	12	0	100.0	0.0
1955	12	11	1	91.7	8.3
1959	12	11	1	91.7	8.3
1964	12	11	1	91.7	8.3
1966	12	12	0	100.0	0.0
1970	12	11	1	91.7	8.3
1974 (Feb)	12	12	0	100.0	0.0
1974 (Oct)	12	12	0	100.0	0.0
1979	12	12	0	100.0	0.0
1983	17	17	0	100.0	0.0
1987	17	17	0	100.0	0.0
1992	17	17	0	100.0	0.0
1997	18	18	0	100.0	0.0
2001	18	15	3	83.3	16.7
2005	18	15	3	83.3	16.7
2010	18	14	4	77.8	22.2
2015	18	16	2	88.9	11.1
2019	18	14	4	77.8	22.2
TOTAL	18	14	4	77.8	22.2

Source: Author calculations based on data from the ARK Northern Ireland Elections website available at <https://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/>; and the CAIN webservice Results of elections held in Northern Ireland since 1968, available at <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/election/elect.htm> [accessed 12 September 2020].

why there were so few women? The answer lies in the interaction of cultural norms and ethno-national conflict that combined to restrict the political space for women during the second half of the twentieth century.

Religious beliefs and women's role

Northern Ireland was a deeply religious society throughout the 20th century, even as religiosity was declining elsewhere in Britain. This attachment to religion is a way of fostering public and political identity in a divided society (Mitchell, 2017: 94).

Table 2: Northern Ireland Westminster Election candidates, 1950–2019.

Election	Total Candidates	Male (n)	Female (n)	Male (%)	Female (%)
1950	23	23	0	100.0	0.0
1951	20	20	0	100.0	0.0
1955	28	27	1	96.4	3.6
1959	29	27	2	93.1	6.9
1964	39	38	1	97.4	2.6
1966	27	26	1	96.3	3.7
1970	40	39	1	97.5	2.5
1974 (Feb)	48	46	2	95.8	4.2
1974 (Oct)	44	42	2	95.5	4.5
1979	67	66	1	98.5	1.5
1983	96	91	5	94.8	5.2
1987	77	70	7	90.9	9.1
1992	100	85	15	85.0	15.0
1997	125	99	26	79.2	20.8
2001	100	89	19	89.0	19.0
2005	104	82	22	78.8	21.2
2010	109	89	20	81.7	18.3
2015	138	104	34	75.4	24.6
2019	102	76	26	74.5	25.5
TOTAL	1316	1139	185	86.6	14.1

Source: Author calculations based on data from the ARK Northern Ireland Elections website, available at <https://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/>; and the CAIN webservice 'Results of elections held in Northern Ireland since 1968', available at <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/election/elect.htm> [accessed 12 September 2020].

Both Catholic/nationalist and Protestant/unionist communities drew on religious beliefs and their accompanying gendered values to emphasize a special role for women in home, family and communal life (Devine, 2013: 478, Ward, 2002: 167). Morgan (1996), in summarizing Northern Ireland social attitudes surveys since the 1970s, concludes that 'throughout the community women's roles are still frequently defined in terms [of] responsibilities to home, family and church'.

This normative social consensus on the role of women was reinforced through the religious iconography employed by both unionist and nationalist communities to shape a communally-endorsed idealized femininity (McGivern, 1980; Deiana, 2013). Ward and McGivern (1980: 69) powerfully describe these images: 'the chaste, pure imagery of Mary with her passive, unquestioning role has been a model for all young Catholic girls', while the Calvinistic form of Protestantism prevalent in Northern Ireland 'is a patriarchal religion where the image of woman is invisible'. This gendered imagery is repeated in the political culture – nationalists represent Ireland as a Celtic female warrior or an old woman; unionists draw on biblical tropes of selfless women, devoted to their families and the union of the British state, or as a woman in need of male protection and defence (Morgan, 1996; McKane, 2018: 334).⁷ These tropes of female purity (Catholic) and self-subordination (Protestant) had a political purpose: they represented group identity and marked the difference between the two communities. They also served a cultural identity purpose: the social control on women acted to regulate female sexuality and preserve communal identity (McCormick, 2014: 207–208).

The highly gendered framing of women's public participation, fashioned during the early decades of the century, endured into modern times (Gilmartin, 2018; Braniff and Whiting, 2016). In the words of a feminist community activist from Derry: 'The traditional link between Nationalism (both Orange and Green) and their respective churches has ensured that the ultra-conservative view of women as both the property of, and the inferior of, men remains strongly entrenched in Irish society' (Harkin and Kilmurray, 1985, quoted in Bourke et al., 2002: 386). For women to step outside these roles, and outside the family, was an almost unconscionable transgression of the gender norms dominant in both communities in Northern Ireland (Ward and McGivern, 1980: 71). This patriarchal attitude persists, especially among unionism. In 2012, speaking on women's role in politics, a male DUP councillor observed: '...the

⁷ See 'Peacemakers? Peacekeepers? – Women in Northern Ireland 1969-1995' by Valerie Morgan (1996), available at <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/women/paper3.htm> [accessed 22 June 2020].

old tradition is that the women back up the man and that's especially in rural areas and Northern Ireland is largely a rural area so what else can you expect?' (quoted in Braniff and Whiting, 2015: 12).

Not surprisingly, women's participation in electoral politics was low, despite their high involvement in local issues. In 1972, women constituted only 8% of local councillors. By 1997, women's representation in local councils had increased to a mere 14%. The bedding down of the peace process, and a reorganization of local government, yielded a gradual increase in women's local council seat-holding to 26% in 2019, though lower than in England (34%) and the European average (33%).⁸

Following the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, which brought three decades of ethno-national conflict to an end, women took 14 seats (13%) in the new 108-seat Northern Ireland Assembly. This result was far from the explicit commitment to gender equality in political and public life enshrined in the Agreement (Cracknell, 2016: 8). By 2017, women's seat-share increased to 27 (30%) (Russell, 2017: 14). Also, by 2017 party leadership roles had been handed to another generation of leaders, yielding a gender change at the top: Margaret Ritchie assumed the leadership of the SDLP from 2010-11, Arlene Foster assumed control of the Democratic Unionist Party in 2015, Naomi Long succeeded David Ford in 2016 to lead the Northern Ireland Alliance Party, and Michelle O'Neill became leader of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland in 2018. The challenges of governing a divided society were no easier with women in these roles. The Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended from January 2017 until January 2020 due to policy disagreements between the two main power-sharing parties, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (Torrance, 2020).

Gender, work and welfare

The welfare state contract in the post-war years also reinforced traditional gender roles: men were family breadwinners, women left paid employment on marriage to care for the family. Indeed, Beveridge's oft-quoted view of married women's

⁸ See 'The Northern Ireland local elections May 2019 – a gender analysis...' by Yvonne Galligan (2019), available at <https://sluggerotoole.com/2019/05/21/the-northern-ireland-local-elections-may-2019-a-gender-analysis/> [accessed 4 September 2020].

societal role fitted the conservatism of the society: the work of married women was 'vital though unpaid, without which their husbands could not do their paid work and without which the nation could not continue' (Wilson, 1977: 150, quoted in Blackburn, 1995: 373). Nonetheless, the expansion of the welfare state during the 1950s, intended to bring Northern Ireland's crumbling services into line with those in Britain, led to a rapid increase in public sector employment: between 1954 and 1970, there was a three-fold increase in second level teachers, and a doubling of nursing, medical and dental staff (Rowthorn, 1981: 5). The growth in the services sector created opportunities for women's employment, with married women's workforce participation expanding from 21 percent of the female workforce in 1951 to 46 percent in 1971. This was a significant increase, given that women's overall workforce rate, at 32 percent, had not grown over that period (Northern Ireland General Register Office (NIGRO), 1951; 1971). Even with the growth in job opportunities, women's employment rates in Northern Ireland remained significantly below that of the rest of the UK in 1971, which was at 53 percent.⁹ Although attitudes to women's (and especially married women's) participation in paid work had begun to liberalise from the 1970s onwards, traditional conceptions of women's roles in other spheres, such as politics and public life, proved resistant to change (Kremer and Curry, 1987; Wilford et al., 1993: 341). Nonetheless, the rising tide of social protest – mirroring social activism in other societies – brought the issue of gender inequality to the fore.

Challenging the 'armed patriarchy'

The women's movement emerged in 1975, after a period of localized mobilization on specific issues (Connolly, 1999; Roulston, 1989). It expressed demands similar to those of other feminist movements of the time – equal opportunities in work, education and training, equal pay, family planning services, childcare and maternity leave. Access to reproductive control was more limited in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the UK (McCormick, 2014: 180–189). The abortion rate for the period

⁹ See 'Female employment rate (aged 16 to 64, seasonally adjusted)' (2020) on the Office for National Statistics website, available at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/timeseries/lf25/lms> [accessed 6 July 2020].

1917–1967 is unknown, though there is evidence that it was more likely to be used as a method of birth control by married and single Protestant women, than by their Catholic counterparts (McCormick, 2015: 140–141). Even though abortion was a contentious issue within the women's movement, activists came to agree on the need for the extension of the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland. Decades of activism followed to make abortion services available, countered by determined resistance from Northern Ireland's politicians even as public support slowly moved in favour of the measure (McNeilly et al., 2018: 5, 9).

Abortion was not the only point of contention in the nascent women's movement. Given that feminist activism took place in a time of high ethno-national conflict, it was not surprising to find tensions within the women's movement regarding a common stance towards the civic unrest, in addition to the more typical ideological splits that attended contemporaneous women's movements in Britain and Ireland. The question of supporting Republican women interned in Armagh prison divided opinion among movement adherents from 1979 onwards (Loughran, 1986). Similarly, there were divisions on supporting the Peace People, co-founded by two women to bring the violence to an end (Roulston, 1989: 232–233). Ultimately, due largely to a significant divergence of views on the conflict, the movement was unable to unite women in a cross-community focus on women's rights (Breitenbach, 2003: 90). In the 1980s, many feminists became involved in single-issue groups, such as Women's Aid, others joined Sinn Féin (the political wing of republicanism), while still others re-embedded themselves in trade union activity, devoted their energies to establishing women's centres, focused on promoting integrated education, or entered the burgeoning field of state-sponsored activity on equal rights in employment (McWilliams, 2002: 374–377). Over the course of the following decade, feminists became fluent in articulating an inclusive discourse that spanned the fissures of sectarianism and focused on securing rights for all women.

The experience of communal activism from the 1960s through to the 1990s prepared a generation of politicized feminists to take advantage of the emerging peace process and establish the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) in 1996

(Fearon, 1999; Cowell-Meyers, 2014). Despite the predictably misogynistic response of some party leaders to the arrival of the Women's Coalition – similar to that meted out to Nancy Astor in the House of Commons – the party offered an alternative to the dominant sectarian mode of politics (Thane, 2020: 5; Kilmurray and McWilliams, 2011; Hinds, 1999; Nolan-Haley and Hinds, 2003: 397–398). The existence of the women's party also prompted other parties to attend to the representation of women among their ranks and pay some attention to women's policy issues (Cowell-Meyers, 2014: 70–72). However, the cross-community nature of its politics sat uneasily within the power-sharing structures. In the years that followed, the NIWC found itself marginalized as party competition for dominance in the Assembly became more intense (Murtagh, 2008: 30). In the 2003 Assembly election, the party lost both its seats, with voters supporting the two 'extreme' parties – Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party – as a way of securing maximum benefit for their community (McGing, 2013: 323). The NIWC dissolved in 2006, and its leaders and supporters returned to civil society campaigning.

In sum, sectarian politics combined with a conservative religiosity and patriarchal social norms shaped women's scope to partake in Northern Ireland's public sphere. At local level, women in nationalist and unionist communities shaped their political activism within this framework (Ward and McGivern, 1980: 68–69; McMinn and Ward, 1985). It did not extend to their inclusion in political life, however. For nationalist and republican women, their ambivalent – if not outright contested – relationship with the UK state further constrained their engagement in politics. For unionist women, a defence of the UK, and Northern Ireland's place within it, was important. However, the culture of female subservience to men in the unionist tradition limited their electoral opportunities. These long historical and cultural contexts, along with three decades of intercommunal violence that reinforced male dominance, led feminist activist Cathy Harkin to describe Northern Ireland's politics and society as an 'armed patriarchy' (Harkin and Kilmurray, 1985). These conditions formed the backdrop to women's contestation of general elections and participation in Westminster from the 1950s onwards.

Northern Ireland Women in Westminster

While Patricia Ford could claim in 1953 to be the first woman to represent a Northern Ireland constituency in Westminster, she was not the first woman MP to be returned at a general election. This distinction fell to Florence Patricia McLaughlin (UUP, West Belfast, 1955–1964). A further 11 women have held seats in the House of Commons as of 2020 (**Table 3**).

Their political affiliations reflect the divided politics of Northern Ireland: unionist and nationalist representation has been equal with six MPs from each community. Bernadette Devlin's political position was more complex – a voice for anti-capitalist, working class and civil rights politics, in a constitutionalist tradition. Naomi Long, too, eschewed the ethno-national divide, identifying with conventional liberal and non-sectarian politics.

Table 3: Northern Ireland Women MPs 1952–2019.

Name	Constituency	Party	Term of office
Ford, Patricia	North Down	UUP	1953–1955
McLaughlin, Patricia	Belfast West	UUP	1955–1969
Devlin, Bernadette	Mid Ulster	Unity	1969–1974
Gildernew, Michelle	Fermanagh and South Tyrone	SF	2001–2015; 2017*
Hermon, Sylvia	North Down	UUP	2001–2019
Robinson, Iris	Strangford	DUP	2001–2010
Long, Naomi	Belfast East	Alliance	2010–2015
Ritchie, Margaret	South Down	SDLP	2010–2017
Little-Pengelly, Emma	Belfast South	Democratic Unionist	2017–2019
McCallion, Elisha	Foyle	Sinn Féin	2017–2019
Begley, Órfhlaith	West Tyrone	Sinn Féin	2018*
Hanna, Claire	Belfast South	SDLP	2019*
Lockhart, Carla	Upper Bann	Democratic Unionist	2019*

* Denotes sitting MPs in 2020.

Source: Author collation of data from the ARK Northern Ireland Elections website available at <https://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/> and the CAIN webservice Results of elections held in Northern Ireland since 1968, available at <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/election/elect.htm> [accessed 25 June 2020].

Contextual factors and selection experiences

Although the 13 female MPs from Northern Ireland have had their own unique political journeys, some patterns can be discerned that link to more general patterns of women's representation. Before the women's liberation movement of the 1970s, women's political fortunes in Ireland were largely dependent on family connections to politics, specifically being related to a former male politician (Carty, 1980: 94, Harrison 1986). This observation clearly applies in the case of Patricia Ford, who was elected unopposed to her father's Westminster seat in a by-election, as previously mentioned. It does not reflect Patricia McLaughlin's background, as her ties were to the unionist middle-class economic establishment and the Unionist Party. Nor does it correspond to Bernadette Devlin's trajectory from a working-class Catholic background to civil rights leadership and then political life. However, because women were absent from an entire generation of politics from 1974–2001, patterns cannot be deduced from these three MPs. More solid ground for testing this assumption is available from 1998 onwards, in the post-Agreement era. Of the ten women MPs elected since 1998, five had family or other close connections to public and political figures that brought the advantage of name recognition and ready-made political networks: Michelle Gildernew, Sylvia Hermon, Iris Robinson, Margaret Ritchie, Emma Pengelly, and Claire Hanna.

Local government service is of relevance in shaping their electoral opportunities. Eight of the 13 women MPs, all elected in the post-1998 period, served as local councillors and/or Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) prior to taking their seats in the House of Commons. This is an established pattern of political service in Northern Ireland, as in the Republic of Ireland (Buckley et al., 2015; Galligan, 2017). Only two of the post-1998 group – Sylvia Hermon (UUP; Independent) and Órfhlaith Begley (Sinn Féin) contested Westminster seats without serving in Northern Ireland's political institutions. The three pre-1974 MPs – Patricia Ford, Patricia McLaughlin and Bernadette Devlin – had no local electoral experience.

Some diversity is also evident in the class background of women MPs. In the 1950s, the two Unionist women MPs were representative of the middle-class Protestant,

unionist hegemony in Northern Ireland's economy and politics. Bernadette Devlin broke this mould, coming from a working class Catholic background. In the post-1998 era, four female MPs came from working class backgrounds, four from rural and farming backgrounds and two from urban middle-class backgrounds. These family backgrounds spanned all parties. A common feature is the high level of education of this cohort, with nine MPs holding degree qualifications. Again, being educated to degree level and having a professional background is more common among women politicians, and can be drawn upon as a credibility factor when seeking to convince party selectors of their suitability to run for political office (White and McGing, 2012).

Northern Ireland's gendered political culture has long suppressed women's political ambitions (Matthews, 2014; Galligan, 2013). The general election contests, conducted under the rules of a single-seat plurality electoral system, accentuate the tendency for parties to select male candidates. Furthermore, as women were absent from electoral politics during the years of the Troubles, male politicians in the post-1998 period had already built up many years of incumbency experience. These combined factors put male MPs in a strong position to seek party selection in the post-1998 period, limiting the opportunity for open seat selection contests. The party selection experiences of women seeking to run for election in the post 1998 Agreement period varied. One group of women were unopposed during the selection process – Sylvia Hermon (UUP; Independent), Emma Pengelly (DUP), Naomi Long (Alliance), and Margaret Ritchie (SDLP) did not face male challengers. Instead, party management of the process ensured that any potential contenders were discouraged before their challenge came to the selection table. In contrast, there were some very visible contestations in the post-1998 period: the rivalry between Clare Hanna MLA and former MP Alasdair McDonnell for the SDLP candidacy in 2019 is one case (Breen, 2019). Michelle Gildernew (SF) was no stranger to selection convention contests, but in her case these focused on elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly (as in 2016) and not for Westminster (Moriarty, 2016). In between acclamation and contestation are the selections arising from unexpected opportunity. In 2001 Sylvia Hermon replaced Peter Weir MLA as the UUP candidate in North Down when Weir

was expelled from the party over his repeated criticisms of the 1998 Agreement and his opposition to party leader David Trimble's re-nomination as First Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive. In 2019 Carla Lockhart was a late selection to contest the Upper Bann constituency after incumbent MP and party colleague David Simpson withdrew as the DUP candidate following revelations of an extra-marital affair (McClements, 2019).

Of the 10 female MPs elected from 2001 onwards, nine can claim to be the first female MP in their constituency. The exception is Belfast South, where in 2019 Clare Hanna (SDLP) succeeded Emma Pengelly (DUP) to the House of Commons. The 2019 election was also notable for having brought about some turn-over and consolidation among Northern Ireland's women MPs: Clare Hanna regained a seat for the SDLP, Carla Lockhart replaced Emma Pengelly as the Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) sole female MP. Órfhlaith Begley (SF, West Tyrone) held on to the seat she first won at a by-election in May 2018, while Michelle Gildernew (SF) was returned for the fifth time to represent the highly marginal seat of Fermanagh-South Tyrone. Overall, the election results show a marked contrast to the 1922 results, with nationalists (SF and SDLP) taking nine seats, unionists (DUP) holding eight seats, and the centrist Alliance Party taking Sylvia Hermon's seat in North Down. For the first time in Northern Ireland's political history, unionist parties held fewer seats than nationalists in Westminster (**Figure 3**).

Since 2001, women's political under-representation has been a matter of concern for women's groups in Northern Ireland. Successive feminist manifestos for Assembly and Westminster elections have focused on the issue.¹⁰ Despite the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2001 and its application to Northern Ireland, parties did not use its provisions to boost female representation. In 2015, the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) issued a report on women in politics. The report made 29 recommendations for increasing

¹⁰ See 'Northern Ireland Women's Manifesto 2019 Launched' on the Women's Resource and Development Agency website, available at <https://wrda.net/2019/11/27/northern-ireland-womens-manifesto-2019-launched/> [accessed 17 July 2020].

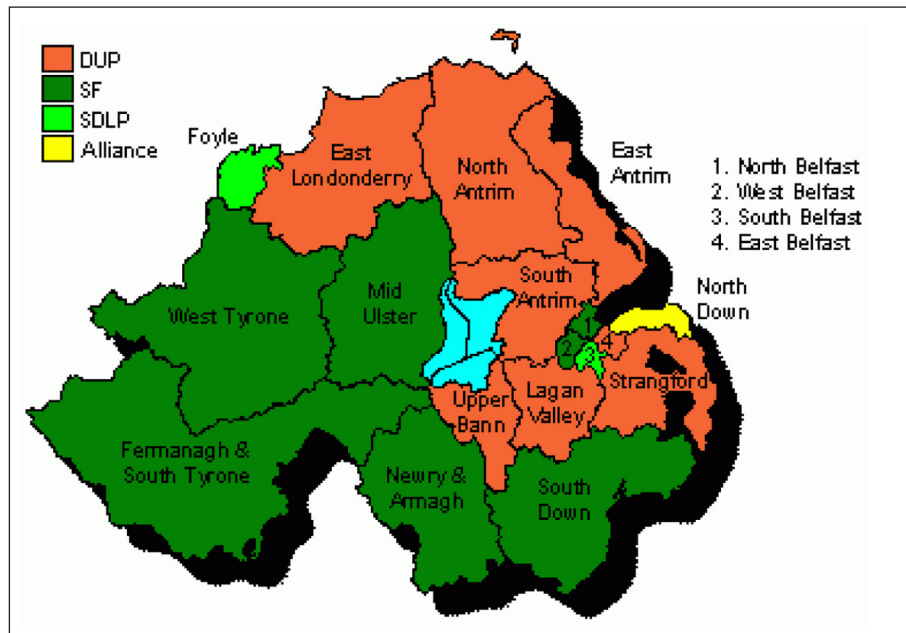


Figure 3: Distribution of MP seats by party, 2019.

Source: 'The 2019 Westminster elections in Northern Ireland', available on the ARK Elections website at <https://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/fw19> [accessed 12 September 2020].

women's political presence but stopped short of promoting candidate gender quotas as a mechanism for increasing women's political representation (AERC, 2015). Indeed, the modest action points in the report are symptomatic of party resistance to women's political representation that continues to be a feature of Northern Ireland's political culture.

Women MPs Parliamentary Record since 1998

In the post-1998 period, seven of the 13 women MPs from Northern Ireland have taken their seats in the House of Commons. Two were elected in 2019 (Claire Hanna, SDLP and Carla Lockart, DUP) and have not completed a full parliamentary term. In this section, we explore the contribution of the five female MPs with completed parliamentary terms to the working of the House of Commons. In addition to examining their expressed political interests and voting record, we will consider

the extent to which the political divisions of a century ago, and the gendered political culture that followed, is evident in the contributions of these five female MPs. As previously mentioned, the six women Sinn Féin MPs observed the party's abstentionist policy and are not available for inclusion in this analysis.

One measure of attachment to Westminster is frequency of attendance in the House. In the case of Northern Ireland, parties historically indicated deep affirmation (unionist) or rejection (republican nationalist) of Westminster rule. The vote attendance record of the five female MPs and all male MPs who take their seats is shown in **Table 4**. This shows a reasonable engagement in plenary House of Commons debates. However, it is not outstanding, and only Emma Pengelly and Paul Girvan – both elected in 2017- match the 80 percent average voting record of all MPs. Of relevance on attendance is the existence of the dual mandate which meant that MPs divided their time between Westminster and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Sixteen of the 18 Northern Ireland MPs also sat in the Assembly up to 2010, including two women, Michelle Gildernew (SF) and Iris Robinson (DUP). The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014 prohibited the holding of a dual mandate between the House of Commons and the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the practice had ceased by the 2016 Assembly election (Goldberg, 2017: 2–4).

This comparatively modest voting record closely matches the voting records of MPs from the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) who do not vote in Westminster on matters pertaining to Scotland, and refrain from voting on matters that are relevant to England only. A regional identity with specific interests is clear, with MP engagement on UK-wide issues as and when they have consequences for Northern Ireland.

When the relationship between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom, and particularly the link between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK is at issue, women MPs from Northern Ireland are present in the vote alongside their male colleagues, united across party lines. During the debate on English devolution in 2013, for example, Northern Ireland's MPs expressed concern that this innovation would weaken the Union; in the words of Nigel Dodds MP (DUP): 'Our profound

Table 4: Northern Ireland MPs voting record in House of Commons, 2001–2019.

MP Name	Party	Parliamentary	Total Votes	Votes	%
		Service	Called	Attended	Attended
Hume, John	SDLP	<i>2001–05</i>	1246	39	3.1
Mallon, Seamus	SDLP	<i>2001–05</i>	1246	47	3.8
McGrady, Eddie	SDLP	<i>2001–10</i>	2534	297	11.7
Paisley, Ian	DUP	<i>2001–10</i>	2534	503	19.9
McDonnell, Alasdair	SDLP	<i>2005–17</i>	2994	760	25.4
Trimble, David	UUP	<i>2001–05</i>	1246	328	26.3
Robinson, Iris	DUP	2001–10	2438	830	34.0
Campbell, Gregory	DUP	2001–19*	4703	1944	41.3
Robinson, Peter	DUP	<i>2001–10</i>	2534	1057	41.7
Donaldson, Jeffrey	DUP	<i>2001–19*</i>	4703	1975	42.0
Paisley Jr, Ian	DUP	2010–19*	2169	950	43.8
Wilson, Sammy	DUP	2005–19*	3457	1606	46.5
McCrae, William	DUP	<i>2005–15</i>	2527	1185	46.9
Hermon, Sylvia	UUP/IND	2001–19	4703	2301	48.9
Simpson, David	DUP	2005–19	3457	1702	49.2
Ritchie, Margaret	SDLP	2010–17	1706	861	50.5
Long, Naomi	APNI	2010–15	1239	628	50.7
Dodds, Nigel	DUP	2001–19	4703	2397	51.0
Durkan, Mark	SDLP	2005–17	2994	1572	52.5
Beggs, Roy	UUP	<i>2001–05</i>	1246	686	55.1
Burnside, David	DUP	2001–05	1246	742	59.6
Elliott, Tom	UUP	2015–17	467	287	61.5
Kinahan, Danny	UUP	2015–17	467	310	66.4
Shannon, Jim	DUP	2010–19*	2169	1532	70.6
Robinson, Gavin	DUP	2015–19*	930	696	74.8
Little-Pengelly, Emma	DUP	2017–19	453	377	83.2
Smyth, Martyn	UUP	<i>2001–05</i>	1246	1076	86.4
Girvan, Paul	DUP	2017–19*	463	411	88.8

Source: Author collation of data from individual records on the public whip website, available at <https://www.publicwhip.org.uk/index.php> [accessed 12 September 2020]. Note: Dates in italics (*2001*) indicate that the MP has a record of parliamentary service before 2001. Dates with an asterisk (eg, '2017–19*') indicate that the MP was re-elected in 2019. Hume was a Member of the European Parliament from 1979–2004; Mallon was Deputy First Minister of the Northern Ireland Executive from 1998–2001; Paisley was a Member of the European Parliament from 1979–2004 and First Minister of the Northern Ireland Executive from 2007–2008; and David Trimble was First Minister of the Northern Ireland Executive from 1998–2002.

fear is not what this does to or for England, which in truth is very little, but what it potentially does to the fabric of our Union'.¹¹ Sylvia Hermon (Independent) and Margaret Ritchie (SDLP) voted with their unionist and party colleagues against the Conservative government's introduction of standing orders giving English MPs a veto on English-only (or English and Welsh-only) laws.¹²

A relatively light voting record in the House of Commons should not be interpreted as lack of engagement with the work of parliament as the plenary sessions constitute only a fraction of law-making work. Select committees carry out the bulk of legislative and policy-making activities and are an area where many MPs make a distinctive contribution. The post-1998 female MPs were members of such committees. Three – Iris Robinson, Sylvia Hermon and Naomi Long – served on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee during their parliamentary tenure, and in March 2020 Claire Hanna took up membership of this body. Margaret Ritchie focused on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee as an MP, while Emma Pengelly sat on the International Trade Committee and the Committee on Arms Experts Controls. Sylvia Hermon and Naomi Long also served on the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission – a statutory body (**Table 5**).

This data suggests that, aside from Pengelly who followed a more internationalist agenda, women MPs from Northern Ireland pursued the interests of the region in Westminster.

The constitutional issue

Representatives from Northern Ireland engaged closely with the parliamentary debate on English Votes for English Laws (EVEL), as the above discussion shows. Sylvia Hermon consistently raised the constitutional position of Northern Ireland. In addition to her interest in EVEL, she sought to tease out the constitutional implications for Northern Ireland of Britain's withdrawal from the European Union.

¹¹ See the Hansard transcript, available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm151022/debtext/151022-0003.htm#15102253003256>, vol. 600, col. 1208-9 [accessed 16 July 2020].

¹² See the Hansard transcript, Division no. 84, available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm151022/debtext/151022-0004.htm>, vol. 600, col. 1239 [accessed 15 July 2020].

Table 5: Committee Membership of Women MPs from Northern Ireland, 2001–2020.

MP	Committee Membership	From	To
Sylvia Hermon	Northern Ireland Affairs	12 Jul 05	06 Nov 19
	Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission	01 Jan 03	12 May 10
Iris Robinson	Northern Ireland Affairs	11 Nov 08	14 Jan 10
Naomi Long	Northern Ireland Affairs	26 Jul 10	30 Mar 15
	Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission	11 Oct 10	30 Mar 15
Margaret Ritchie	Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	23 Jan 12	03 May 17
Emma Little-Pengelly	International Trade	11 Sep 17	06 Nov 19
	Arms Exports Controls	10 Oct 17	06 Nov 19
Claire Hanna	Northern Ireland Affairs	02 Mar 20	Present

Source: Author collation of data from individual records on the following websites: TheyWorkForYou, available at <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/>; and UK Parliament Committees website at the Speakers Committee on the Electoral Commission site, available at <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/other-committees/speakers-committee-on-the-electoral-commission/> [accessed 12 September 2020].

Her forensic scrutiny of government on this matter led to her posing some pointed questions. On 19 October 2019 she asked Prime Minister Boris Johnston in the House of Commons 'to reassure the people in Northern Ireland that there is nothing in his deal that undermines the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, as guaranteed by the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and the consent principle.'¹³ She repeated this question to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Julian Smith MP, on 23 October 2019 during a meeting of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. Her criticism of the Prime Minister and senior colleagues was forthright:

Could we focus on the fact that the Prime Minister was not able to give any reassurance or even quote what you have just put on the record? The Brexit Secretary was not able to do so. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster

¹³ See the Hansard transcript Prime Minister's Statement from 19 October 2019, available at <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2019-10-19/debates/8C3F5267-8186-4536-83EC-56E3C88DCC8E/PrimeMinister%E2%80%99SStatement>, vol. 666, col. 589 [accessed 22 September 2020].

was not able to do so in the windup on Saturday. That was deeply unhelpful to the unionist community, who needed reassurance at that stage, not now, almost a week later after the Brexit deal has been brought back from Brussels.¹⁴

This questioning was typical of Lady Hermon's robust manner in calling government to account over the status of Northern Ireland within the UK and the position of the unionist community in relation to it. Her encounter on 11 May 2016 with Chris Grayling MP, when he was Leader of the House of Commons, on discussion of the consequences for Northern Ireland of English Votes for English Laws was similarly direct and to the point.¹⁵

Lady Hermon: I am sorry to repeat the question, but was there any reference at all to English votes for English laws in the manifesto that the Conservative party used in Northern Ireland?

Chris Grayling: Well, in the manifesto that we produced for the United Kingdom, of which Northern Ireland is part, there was a reference to it. I can't remember what page it was on now, but it was clearly stated that our intention was to introduce English votes for English laws.

Lady Hermon: As you know, Leader, there was a separate manifesto published in Northern Ireland. The answer is that there is no reference that I can find to EVEL in the manifesto in Northern Ireland.

¹⁴ See House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee: Oral Evidence – Work of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland 2019-20, HC 193; transcript available at <http://data.parliament.uk/WrittenEvidence/CommitteeEvidence.svc/EvidenceDocument/northern-ireland-affairs/work-of-the-secretary-of-state-for-northern-ireland-2019-20/oral/106667.pdf>, Q 29 [accessed 22 September 2020].

¹⁵ See House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee: Oral Evidence – Implementation of English Votes for English Laws, HC 985; transcript available at <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/northern-ireland-affairs-committee/implementation-of-english-votes-for-english-laws/oral/33271.html>, Q 6, Q7 [accessed 22 September 2020].

In 2013, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee considered the draft Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill that sought to introduce reforms such as transparency in donor identity for political donations of over £7500, prohibition of dual mandates, and conditions on the appointment of the Northern Ireland Justice minister. Over four days of public scrutiny in Committee, Lady Hermon contributed more extensively than other members. Another significant inquiry undertaken by this Committee was the Implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant in Northern Ireland – a sensitive issue given the presence and role of the British Armed Forces in Northern Ireland between 1969 and 1998. Again, Sylvia Hermon contributed more frequently than other members, including others from Northern Ireland (**Figure 4**).

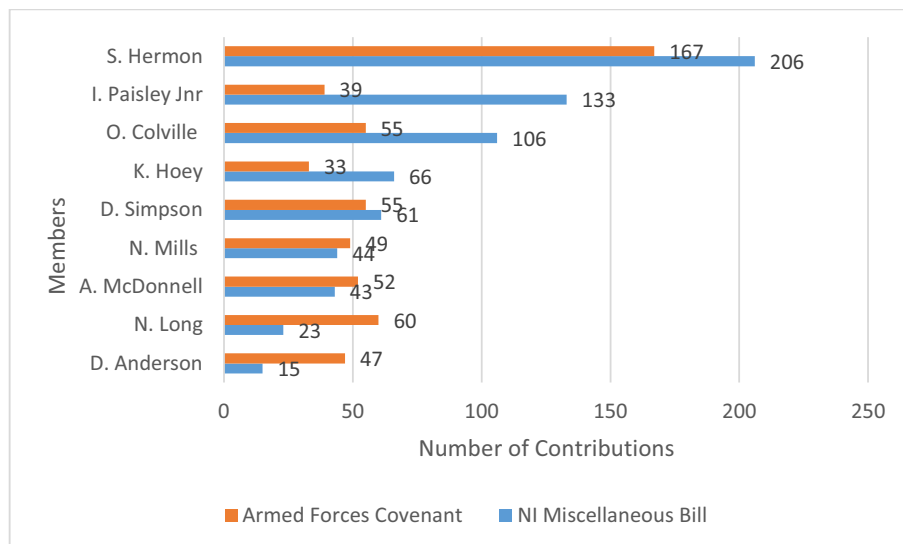


Figure 4: Northern Ireland Affairs Committee member contributions, 2012–2014.

Source: Collated from MP data on the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Draft Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, Second Report of Session 2012–2013, available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmniaf/1003/1003.pdf> and House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant in Northern Ireland, First Report of Session 2013–2014, available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmniaf/51/51.pdf> [accessed 12 September 2020].

Loyalty to the Union and identification as an Ulsterwoman was a common theme among women MPs from Northern Ireland. In 1953, Patricia Ford declared that she was 'proud to call myself an Ulster woman and proud also to say that nowhere in the United Kingdom will be found a people more loyal or more sincere in their feelings for the British Crown and Monarchy than in our province of Ulster'.¹⁶ These sentiments were echoed in 2017 by Emma Pengelly:

I stand here not just in my own stead, but in the stead of so many generations of loyal Ulstermen and women who loved the Union... So many of my relatives fought for this country as proud Ulstermen—for freedom and democracy. Those are the very same freedoms and country that I will fight and defend with all that I have... Let us build on the strong foundations of the Union, of duty, sacrifice and service, to celebrate and grow our great and glorious Union.¹⁷

Thus, the cleavages of the early 20th century resonate through the decades in the identities of unionist MPs. Their pre-occupation with Northern Ireland's link to the Union expresses an insecurity for the unionist position in Northern Ireland and in the UK that shapes their political views (Murphy and Evershed, 2019).

Conservatism among Northern Ireland's female MPs

Earlier sections of this article discussed Northern Ireland's conservative politics and political culture. This conservatism has endured through the decades, especially in relation to gender roles and norms. Of interest in this study is the extent to which women MPs from Northern Ireland have brought that conservative disposition to bear on issues considered in the House of Commons. The ideological position of

¹⁶ See the Hansard transcript on Defence debate, 25 July 1953, available at https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1953/jul/29/defence#S5CV0518P0_19530729_HOC_344, vol. 518, col. 1351–1354 [accessed 22 September 2020].

¹⁷ See the Hansard transcript on Education and Local Services debate, 27 June 2017, available at <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2017-06-27/debates/ACC3BDDE-6E2A-444B-9C6A-EA71C0530F77/EducationAndLocalServices>, vol. 626, col. 528–529 [accessed 22 September 2020].

Northern Ireland's female MPs can be tracked through examining the issues that they have fully supported or opposed in plenary sessions of the House. For this study, we first examined the policy areas which more than one woman MP either fully supported (100% on the rating) or opposed (0%). These policy areas aggregated multiple legislative proposals over three decades, providing a dataset of individual votes relevant to the policy field. A first step was to isolate the policy fields of common interest to two or more women MPs from Northern Ireland. This yielded ten separate legislative proposals, covering abortion (3 bills), higher education (2 bills), welfare (1 bill), housing (1 bill), withdrawal from the European Union (2 bills), and military action against ISIL (1 bill). The bills spanned the time period 2004–2019. The voting record of the female MPs was noted, as was the voting record on the same issues by the male MPs from Northern Ireland.

Women MPs from Northern Ireland adopted remarkably similar policy positions, as **Table 6** shows. Of the ten House of Commons votes, they took the same position on eight occasions, opposing the proposal tabled by Government. They showed a similarity of position in the areas of higher education (opposing the imposition or increase in tuition fees), housing (opposing social rent increases), and social welfare (opposing caps on welfare payment increases). These views were also evident in their contributions to the House. Margaret Ritchie (SDLP) commented on 8 June 2010:

I share the Government's desire to help more people enjoy the dignity and self-sufficiency that comes from gainful employment but, in Northern Ireland, a policy of hounding people away from benefits when there are few new opportunities for employment will cause only hardship and resentment.¹⁸

Naomi Long (APNI), on the same day, also drew attention to welfare cuts, and the economic effects of conflict on Northern Ireland:

¹⁸ See the Hansard transcript on the Economic Affairs and Work and Pensions debate, 8 June 2010, available at <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2010-06-08/debates/10060836000001/details#contribution-10060863000012>, vol. 511, col. 254-255 [accessed 22 September 2020].

Table 6: NI Women MPs positions on legislative proposals 2004–2019.

Date	Summary	Female MPs Voting Position	For/Against Government proposal
31 Mar 04	To allow University tuition fees to increase from the fixed £1125 per year to up to £3000 per year.	Sylvia Hermon (UUP)- NO Iris Robinson (DUP)- NO	Against
9 Dec 10	To raise the UK undergraduate tuition fee cap to £9,000 per year.	Sylvia Hermon (UUP)- NO Margaret Ritchie (SDLP)- NO Naomi Long (APNI)- NO	Against
8 Jan 13	To cap any increase in discretionary working age benefits and tax credits at 1% in 2014-15 and 2015-16.	Sylvia Hermon (IND)- NO Margaret Ritchie (SDLP)- NO Naomi Long (APNI)- NO	Against
26 Sep 14	To vote for UK air strikes in Iraq to support Iraqi forces' efforts against 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant' (ISIL).	Sylvia Hermon (IND)- ABSENT Margaret Ritchie (SDLP)- NO Naomi Long (APNI)- AYE	Divided positions
12 Jan 16	To require those on high incomes living in social housing to pay market rents and related matters.	Sylvia Hermon (IND)- NO Margaret Ritchie (SDLP)- NO	Against
14 Sept 16	Motion to bring in a bill to implement the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from membership of the European Union.	Sylvia Hermon (IND)- NO Margaret Ritchie (SDLP)- NO	Against

(Contd.)

Date	Summary	Female MPs Voting Position	For/Against Government proposal
13 Mar 17	To regulate the termination of pregnancies by medical practitioners and to repeal certain criminal offences relating to such terminations.	Sylvia Hermon (IND)- NO Margaret Ritchie (SDLP)- NO	Against
17 Jan 18	For the United Kingdom to leave the European Union.	Sylvia Hermon (IND)- NO Emma Little-Pengelly (DUP)- AYE	Divided positions
23 Oct 18	To regulate the termination of pregnancies by medical practitioners and to repeal certain criminal offences relating to such terminations.	Sylvia Hermon (IND)- ABSENT Emma Little-Pengelly (DUP)- NO	Against
9 Jul 19	To give effect to the recommendations of the Report of the Inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.	Sylvia Hermon (IND)- NO Emma Little-Pengelly (DUP)- NO	Against

Source: Author collation of data from voting record of MPs on individual policy debates held on the public whip website, policies section, available at <https://www.publicwhip.org.uk/policies> [accessed 12 September 2020].

The Government have indicated that they do not want to divide the country or to target the most vulnerable with the cuts that are ahead. However, to a degree the country is already divided economically, with regions such as Northern Ireland lagging behind others, despite our best efforts. To avoid widening that gap, we must be sensitive to regional differences, and to the particular challenges faced by Northern Ireland as we emerge from years of conflict.¹⁹... If the proposed cuts are too deep and too swift, and are not balanced by job creation, there is a serious risk of simply moving many of my constituents out of productive public sector employment into the welfare system, which will do nothing to protect public services for the vulnerable, to generate growth in the private sector or to raise aspirations, dignity and confidence.

On the controversial issue of abortion, they were also in broad and consistent agreement that it should not be introduced in Northern Ireland, or alternatively that the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly should legislate on the issue given that health is a devolved matter. Carla Lockhart (DUP) strongly put forward this view on 8 January 2020:

I feel it is imperative that I speak on this to attempt again to highlight the anger, disappointment and frustration concerning the change in abortion laws that have been foisted upon the people of Northern Ireland. These changes came in the most roughshod way, with complete contempt for the devolved Administration and the views of the people of Northern Ireland. I want today to make the point to this House, on behalf of the many thousands of people across Northern Ireland who take a pro-life stance, that we want to repeal section 9 with immediate effect and allow the Northern Ireland Assembly to debate, discuss and evidence-gather on this emotive issue.²⁰

¹⁹ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2010-06-08/debates/10060836000001/details#contribution-10060863000012>, col. 261 [accessed 22 September 2020].

²⁰ See the Hansard transcript on the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 debate, 8 January 2020, available at <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-01-08/debates/D39FF539-120C->

Thus, on matters pertaining to education, social housing and welfare, female MPs in Northern Ireland adopted a protectionist view, and opposed the placing of additional financial burdens on people in Northern Ireland. However, on the contentious issue of abortion, all bar Sylvia Hermon upheld the conservative political consensus in Northern Ireland. Only Hermon expressed recognition of the pro-choice position,²¹ while seven DUP representatives including Emma Pengelly articulated the politically-dominant view that women's access to such services should be prohibited (McNeilly et al., 2018). Carla Lockhart continues to actively advocate an anti-abortion agenda, being primary sponsor of an Early Day Motion on 2 June 2020 to restrict the disability grounds for abortion provided for in the 1967 Abortion Act.²² She vehemently opposed the legalization of abortion in Northern Ireland when the measure came into effect in June 2020, describing it as 'one of the darkest days in Northern Ireland's history'.²³

On two issues – UK military intervention to stop ISIL and withdrawal from the European Union – the female MPs disagreed, and aligned their views to the main ideological positions in the House of Commons. Margaret Ritchie (SDLP) voted along with the Labour Party to oppose UK air strikes, while the centrist Naomi Long (APNI) supported the Conservative government position. On the fundamental constitutional issue of UK withdrawal from the EU, the women MPs from Northern Ireland also split along ideological lines. Margaret Ritchie (SDLP) opposed UK withdrawal from the EU, and joined Labour in the division lobbies. Later, her party successor in Westminster, Clare Hanna (SDLP) spoke against the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill 2019 as follows:

46F0-B2F6-43C9FA17F394/details#contribution-92A40ED1-E207-42DD-AE37-342690177771, vol. 669, cols. 552–553 [accessed 22 September 2020].

²¹ See the Hansard transcript on Offences Against the Person Act 1861 debate, 06 June 2018 available at <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2018-06-05/debates/440FFC61-87D6-49AA-8758-91398C56BA0E/OffencesAgainstThePersonAct1861>, vol. 642, col. 220 [accessed 22 September 2020].

²² See the Hansard Early Day Motion on the UK law on disability-selective abortion, tabled on 02 June 2020, available at <https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/57041/uk-law-on-disabilityselective-abortion>, EDM#521 [accessed 22 September 2020].

²³ Belfast Telegraph, 18 June 2020, 'Parliament's approval of NI abortion laws "one of the darkest days in NI"', available at <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/parliaments-approval-of-ni-abortion-laws-one-of-the-darkest-days-in-ni-39294506.html>, [accessed 11 September 2020].

Make no mistake about it: there is no good way to do Brexit. But this version is markedly worse than its previous iterations. It creates barriers to trade and introduces new levels of bureaucratic complexity. It is silent on workers' rights, and on social justice and the rebalancing of the global economy. It will damage Britain's economy. It will cause significant collateral damage to Ireland—north and south. It will further erode the resources available to public services, which are already reeling from a decade of austerity that has—certainly where I live, and I suspect here too—decimated the health service, gripped working families and emboldened inequality.²⁴

Sylvia Hermon (Independent) also consistently held an opposing position, even though her former colleagues in the Ulster Unionist Party supported the Conservative government's withdrawal measure. Emma Little-Pengelly (DUP) aligned with the Conservatives, in keeping with her party's agreement to support the minority government on the issue.

Conclusion

This article sought to present an analysis of the contribution that women MPs representing Northern Ireland have made to parliamentary politics in Westminster. It set this discussion in context by charting, in brief, the foundation of Northern Ireland and the emergence of opposing political traditions – unionism and nationalism. It examined the place of women in these political formations, and highlighted the subsidiary role accorded to women at the founding of Northern Ireland. This ancillary position has endured, as has the incomplete citizenship thereby accorded to women. For unionist women, commitment to family, religion and the Union defined their public and private contexts. For nationalist women, commitment to family, religion, and independence from the UK characterized their lived experiences. Both forms of nationalism had the effect of crippling women's political opportunities while providing each cultural identity with a biological female boundary that distinguished

²⁴ See Hansard transcript on the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill, 20 December 2019, available at [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-12-20/debates/FE5B9762-F298-457B-8306-98D2D1D3519B/EuropeanUnion\(WithdrawalAgreement\)Bill#contribution-922A56EC-EDBF-4B53-8609-7A6FE4A2F41A](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-12-20/debates/FE5B9762-F298-457B-8306-98D2D1D3519B/EuropeanUnion(WithdrawalAgreement)Bill#contribution-922A56EC-EDBF-4B53-8609-7A6FE4A2F41A), vol. 669, col. 167–168 [accessed 22 September 2020].

the traditions from one another. The women's movement became caught in this sectarian division, unable to unite on a common feminist agenda until the peace-making process came about in the 1990s.

Women's political representation was limited at all levels until the post-1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. Since then, there have been modest advances, though representation in Westminster remains very weak. Only 13 women were returned to the House of Commons since 1921, ten of them elected after 1998. For those women who have taken their seats – four unionists, one liberal and two moderate nationalists – the legacy of past norms, values and political positions still resonate. Unionist female MPs echo concern about the strength of Northern Ireland's link to the Union, espouse protectionist positions on social policy matters, and oppose the feminist agenda of abortion provision. Nationalist female MPs, although not as exercised by Northern Ireland's place in the Union, share with their unionist counterparts a conservative positioning on other issues, including abortion. In the House of Commons, all female MPs articulate Northern Irish interests and seek to influence policy to take account of the special circumstances of the region. Aside from Sylvia Hermon, they have not sought to specifically represent the women of Northern Ireland, or gave recognition to the women's manifesto issues put forward by women's groups at successive local and general elections. In all, while women MPs from Northern Ireland articulated the constitutional, economic and social needs of the region with vigour, they worked within the male-gendered parameters of establishment politics. The dominance of male power since the foundation of Northern Ireland has cast a long, gendered shadow on the views and work of Northern Ireland's women MPs in the House of Commons.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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