

**Democratic Renewal in Fragmental Communities:  
The Northern Ireland Case**

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## Introduction

Northern Ireland is perhaps the *locus extremis* of fragmental communities in the United Kingdom. The ethno-national tensions and political violence that have ravaged the Province for over 30 years continue unabated at a number of interface areas where single identity Catholic and Protestant communities live cheek by jowl. Intimidation, threats, rioting and naked sectarianism in the form of pickets mounted to protest against Catholic primary school children walking through 'a Protestant estate' (the so called 'Holy Cross' dispute) testify to increasing territorialism and community segregation. All of this continues despite the historic constitutional settlement in the form of the Belfast Agreement in which signatories affirmed their 'total and absolute commitment to exclusively democratic and peaceful means of resolving differences on political issues, and opposition to any use or threat of force by others for any political purpose' (Belfast Agreement, 1998: 1). This demonstrates, however, that the long-term 'cohesive, inclusive and just society' promised in the constitutional agreement cannot be delivered solely through a consensus amongst the political elite at Stormont, but must be grounded in work undertaken within communities who must endorse and see the tangible benefits of the peace dividend. Residents of North Belfast, for example, would need much convincing that the Belfast Agreement has delivered peaceful community co-existence<sup>1</sup>.

This paper examines local governance and the role of the active community in the democratic renewal of Northern Ireland. It considers this in 3 phases. The first phase (1921–1972) might be described as a period of disrepute, during which local government was discredited as an elected forum and used to consolidate Unionist hegemony. The second phase could be styled the emasculation of local government and the emergence of a strong voluntary and community sector to fill the vacuum left by the democratic deficit of Direct Rule from Westminster (1972-1999). The final and current phase might be characterised as a period of democratic renewal (1999 onwards) or what Carmichael (1999) has described as 'devolution-*plus*'. This period involves a twin track approach. One element includes a review of public administration arrangements in Northern Ireland incorporating local government, quangos and agencies (but importantly not the 11 government departments). The second element has three aims: firstly, to develop more formal arrangements with the voluntary and community sector in the decision making processes of government departments; secondly, the institutionalisation of social partnership through the Civic Forum, established under the Belfast Agreement; and finally, the emergence of local partnership arrangements in a number of important functional areas (health, community safety and 'well-being'). The dilemma facing Members of the Legislative Assembly, who have been bereft of electoral power for nearly 30 years, is how to balance the need to involve an active community alongside rebuilding a local democratic base. This poses particular questions about the future role of local government in Northern Ireland under a reformed system of public administration. The fact that these three temporal phases correspond to key political milestones in the political chronology of Northern Ireland should not be surprising. The focus of this

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 'community' or 'two communities' in Northern Ireland present conceptual difficulties of interpretation. Although a convenient short-hand, the descriptions suggest homogeneity which does not exist in practice. The Catholic 'community' includes Nationalists and Republicans. Unionists are much more factional, particularly the various guises of paramilitary Loyalists. These terms also ignore people from ethnic minority groups in Northern Ireland, for example, Chinese, Indian and Pakistani.

paper will necessarily be on the final phase although a short summary of the first two stages should provide a context for discussions which follow.

## **Disrepute and emasculation**

Local government in Northern Ireland is the product of the Local Government (Ireland) Act 1898 which created an administrative framework similar to Great Britain at the time – a two-tier system of county councils and urban & rural district councils, and in the case of the six largest towns, county boroughs. Birrell and Murie note that local government was ‘based on the somewhat dubious assumption that the system devised for nineteenth-century England was also appropriate for Ireland’ (Birrell and Murie, 1980: 155). This structure remained in place at the time of the establishment of the Irish Free State and devolved government in Northern Ireland following the Government of Ireland Act 1920. With devolution, Unionists consolidated their majority status in a number of ways, particularly through local government. The 1922 Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act replaced proportional representation by majority voting, redrew electoral boundaries and altered the franchise by incorporating property ownership as a qualification for the vote (O’Dowd, Rolston and Tomlinson, 1980). As a result, local government became an instrument of Unionist ascendancy. The limited nature of the franchise, gerrymandering of electoral boundaries and discrimination in service provision (particularly housing allocation for political advantage) ensured Unionist dominance. In short, local government was discredited as a political forum although it survived unscathed until the late 1960’s.

Criticisms of local government were a core tenet of the civil rights protests in 1968. At the same time, the Stormont Government considered proposals for reform on the grounds that many councils were neither administratively or financially viable. In 1969, housing was removed as a local government function and a review body set up to examine the distribution of functions at central and local levels. The ensuing *Macrory Report* stripped local government of its key functions, proposed district councils with minor powers, and envisaged a regional tier of administration with substantial public services responsible to the Northern Ireland Parliament. The pace of political development, civil unrest and the prorogation of Stormont superseded the process of reform and prospects of a regional government disappeared with the introduction of Direct Rule from Westminster. The British Government proceeded with Macrory’s suggestions for local government in the form of the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act 1972, but responsibility for regional services rested with British ministers working through the Northern Ireland Office. The outcome was the emasculated local government structure which exists today. There are 26 single tier district councils responsible for a limited range of local services (largely – refuse collection and disposal, leisure and community services, street cleaning, environment and building control). Total council spending in 2001/2002 amounted to £291m out of a devolved government budget of £5.9b, or 4.9% of the public expenditure in Northern Ireland (Department of the Environment, 2002). Councillors have a representative role on services provided by central government, such as education boards and the fire service. They must also be consulted about local planning, housing and roads by government departments which are directly responsible for their provision (largely the Department for Regional Development, Department for Social Development and the Department of the Environment).

In a discussion of local government in Great Britain, Wilson and Game argue that 'there has always been a tension between local authorities' service and political functions – between their role as service deliverers and a potentially much wider role as the elected governments of their particular areas and communities'. They suggest that 'the whole organisation and operation of local authorities have been driven by their service-providing responsibilities' (Wilson and Game, 2002: 366). Given the small scale and functional unimportance of local government in Northern Ireland, the opposite is true. In the absence of a regionally elected forum (save for the short-lived Northern Ireland Assembly of 1982-86), council chambers became the political forum for constitutional debates which had nothing to do with their executive functions. The election of Sinn Féin to councils in 1985, for example, was anathema to Unionists who demanded their proscription. Unionists' tactics, such as excluding Sinn Féin from committees and preventing them from speaking at council meetings resulted in numerous, sometimes violent, disturbances. Republicans mounted a successful legal challenge against this ploy. The Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 ushered in a new wave of protest in councils. Unionist controlled councils adopted a policy of adjourning all meetings and refusing to strike a district rate. They argued that to administer local government was to give tacit support to the London-Dublin inspired Agreement. Once again this was successfully challenged in the courts and the protest withered away to an inauspicious end.

Direct Rule therefore witnessed the demise of local government and the absence of political accountability for public services. British ministers had no local electoral base and were preoccupied with constitutional and security matters – this vested significant powers in the hands of civil servants who paid scant regard to local councillors. This democratic deficit stirred the first signs of self-help in the community. A number of community action groups emerged in response to the trauma of political violence but without government support. As Nolan described it:

All over Northern Ireland there were people trying to help the families that had been burnt out, or establishing food co-operatives, or taking kids from the frontline areas off on holiday, or setting up peoples' assemblies, or trying to get dialogue going between Catholics and Protestants. There was prodigious energy, and an optimism that this ragbag of people could create a sort of counter-culture that would not only challenge the rising sectarianism, but would give expression to a new radical politics (Nolan, 2000: 29).

Increasingly, Northern Ireland Office ministers and senior civil servants recognised the contribution which these groups could make to a wide spectrum of government programmes in health and social services, urban renewal, economic development, poverty initiatives and, most importantly, community relations. This, in turn, led to a more professionalised voluntary and community sector that worked with, and accepted more resources from, government in the eighties and was well placed to support efforts to build a peace process in the nineties. Self-help and community activism, however, were more evident in Nationalist areas whose history reinforced the state as Unionist oppressor. Fearon (2000: 26) observes that 'groups were more likely to be found in areas of high economic deprivation and Nationalist in hue. Unionist groups still saw community development as a rebellious activity, something that sought to subvert and undermine the state'. By 1993, the Government published a *Strategy for the Support of the Voluntary Sector and for Community Development in Northern Ireland* which stressed the importance of partnership arrangements with the

voluntary sector and acknowledged in particular the role of community groups in helping to formulate social policies. The development of civil society from its origins of grassroots community activism and volunteerism was described thus:

In comparison with the 1970's, the funding and policy environment for the voluntary and community sector is unrecognisable. The sector has demonstrated maturity and effectiveness in helping to tackle social and economic needs and in fostering peace and reconciliation. This element of civil society in Northern Ireland has been pivotal in keeping hope alive in very difficult circumstances (Sweeney, 1997: 61).

In summary, the first period of devolution in Northern Ireland (1921–72) witnessed local government discredited as a political entity and its emergence as a denuded forum with limited executive powers. The political vacuum and sectarian violence during Direct Rule mobilised community activists in a new phase, largely characterised by self-help (1972-99). Increasingly the voluntary and community sector became valued by government as potential partners in the formulation and delivery of social policies. As various attempts to break the constitutional impasse foundered, the voluntary and community sector became a stronger stakeholder. This was their status as they entered the next phase, described here as democratic renewal (1999 – onwards).

## **Democratic renewal**

‘Democratic renewal’ is seen as a core element in the series of reforms which constitute the Labour Government’s modernisation agenda. This wider modernising brief asserts that ‘government matters’ – its role should be to improve the quality of our lives through the provision of policies, programmes and services. ‘People want effective government, both where it responds directly to their needs (health, education, social services)... and where it acts for society as a whole (environment, crime)’ (Cabinet Office, 1999:10). Specifically, democratic renewal refers to a number of measures required if councils are to respond to, and provide leadership for, local communities. These include modernising local electoral arrangements, listening to and involving people in the decision-making process, developing clearer political management structures and strengthening councils as leaders of their local communities (DETR, 1998: 2.3).

An emphasis on these specific measures to address democratic renewal is, however, considered limiting. Pratchett (1999), for example, defines democratic renewal in three ways:

- A set of practical responses to clearly identifiable problems with local democracy (as described in the modernising agenda).
- More systemic failings in the practice of local democracy and attempts to instigate broader political, cultural and constitutional change across society. This will necessarily question our understanding of the role and purpose of local government and the nature of democracy as a core component of modern government.
- Normative proposals for a new mode of democracy in which different components of representative, deliberative and direct democracy are combined to create a more open, participative and responsive polity at the local level (Pratchett, 1999:2)

This offers a useful benchmarking framework for examining the progress of democratic renewal in Northern Ireland. Has renewal, for example, meant the implementation of specific measures to address problems with local democracy or a more radical response?

Considering initiatives to address the failings in existing democratic practice first, the 'visionary leadership' role which these changes are intended to produce has limited 'read across' to local government in Northern Ireland. For example, council elections are held under the PR (STV) voting system and turnout at the 2001 local government elections was 68%. Accepting that all elections in Northern Ireland are significantly influenced by the constitutional agenda, there is no evidence of the voter apathy experienced in Great Britain where local elections produce turnouts of less than 40%. Similarly, there is no appetite for changes leading to new political management structures. The prospect of a directly elected Mayor would only lead to divisive sectarian voting (witnessed in the election of Northern Ireland's 3 Members of the European Parliament) and harden public opinion around councils perceived as Nationalist, Republican, Unionist or Loyalist controlled. This would do little to assist the process of involving citizens in the decision making process and would more likely alienate minority communities in council areas. Moreover, changing political management structures has the potential to negate what is prosaically referred to as 'responsibility sharing' arrangements that operate in local councils. From the late 1980's, a number of councils have been engaged in 'power-sharing' (Unionists object to this pejorative descriptor) where mayors and council chairs rotate between political parties and committee chairs are selected on a proportional basis. This practice is now widespread in all but the most hard-line councils. In 2002/03, eighteen councils are currently operating some form of power-sharing arrangements. Inter-party collaboration at the local government level heralded similar provisions contained in the Belfast Agreement. The power-sharing arrangements in the Stormont Assembly formalised what had been happening in local government for some years, but without the fanfare.

One of the core components of democratic renewal, however, community leadership and the promotion of well-being, has particular significance for local government in the Province. The new discretionary power for principal local authorities in England and Wales 'to do anything they consider likely to promote the economic, social or environmental well-being of their area' under Part I of the Local Government Act 2000 does not apply to Northern Ireland (DETR, 2001(a): 4). Although there is no definition of what actions constitute the promotion of well-being, guidance to local authorities highlights the need for an integrated approach to tackling social exclusion, reducing health inequalities, promoting neighbourhood renewal and improving local environmental quality. Given the absence of key functional responsibilities for councils in Northern Ireland, this power has even greater significance if local authorities are to have oversight of the many central government and quango service providers in their areas. Has modernisation and the democratic renewal agenda therefore been passed Northern Ireland?

The most obvious manifestation of the Labour Government's modernisation agenda in Northern Ireland was the devolution of power to the elected Assembly with full legislative and executive authority in December 1999. A cross-community Executive

of Ministers presides over 11 departments responsible for key public service functions. Statutory committees, constituted using the proportional d'Hondt system, have a statutory, policy development and consultation role in relation to the departments and can initiate legislation (Osborne, 2002). The democratic renewal strategy adapted for Northern Ireland amounts to two core components contained within the Executive's first *Programme for Government*. The first is a comprehensive review of public administration, key to which is relocating public services within an accountable and democratic framework, following years of Direct Rule (representative democracy). The second is a series of measures to strengthen participative democracy by building on the involvement of the voluntary and community sector. These are considered in turn.

## **Reforming the public sector - representative democracy**

The review of public administration was first heralded in the *Programme for Government* as follows:

We have inherited from the last 30 years a wide range of public bodies. Their organisation and structure reflected the needs of those times. They helped maintain services at a time of very limited public accountability. But now that devolution has been achieved, there is a need for change that will provide not only greater accountability, but should ensure that organisations that deliver many key services throughout Northern Ireland are more coherently organised. It is therefore important that we set about a major process of reform in central government (Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government, 2001: 7.1.1).

The central theme of the review, launched in June 2002, is, according to the First Minister 'to put in place a modern, accountable, effective system of public administration that can deliver a high quality set of public services to citizens' (Trimble, 2002). The prevailing argument is that Northern Ireland has moved from a position of 'democratic deficit' to surfeit mode, with 18 Westminster MPs, 108 members of the legislative assembly, 582 councillors and 3 MEPs, all for a population of 1.6m people. Aside from considerations of political representation, the focus is on ways to rationalise public service provision as the Assembly struggles (without the benefit of tax-raising powers) to meet the ever increasing demands of public service provision. They have inherited a system of non-departmental public bodies responsible for major functions such as health, education and housing which consume half of their devolved budget (£6.1b in 2002/03). To satisfy the exigencies of a power-sharing executive, the Assembly has superimposed a cumbersome system of 11 government departments (to replace six). This complex mosaic now represents the structure of public administration in Northern Ireland (Knox, 1999). In short, the Province appears both over-governed and over-administered.

Democratic renewal is therefore central to reforming a system of public administration whose principal functions are controlled by appointees in non-departmental public bodies. Whilst this satisfied the requirements of Direct Rule government and allowed British ministers to dispense patronage to compliant selectees, this is now regarded by local politicians as unacceptable under devolution. What is significant, however, is that the 11 central government departments have been

ruled out of the review's remit. There is an oblique reference to examining the functions of central government as opposed to departmental structures. In other words, the review is likely to have implications for functions exercised by the Executive, but the institutions established by the Belfast Agreement and the division of functions between 11 government departments will not be part of the review's remit. Caution is being exercised lest anti-Agreement parties hijack the review to unpick the Belfast Agreement by the back door.

With government departments now outside the review, attention is focussed on reforming local government. Although the review team, led by officials from the Office of the Minister and Deputy First Minister (and advised by a panel of independent experts), must have regard for principles such as democratic accountability, community responsiveness, subsidiarity, efficiency and effectiveness and the scope of the public sector (in the review's terms of reference), the process could become highly politicised. Speculation about reducing the number of councils has politicians already redrawing notional political boundaries to ensure Unionist or Nationalist strongholds under any reconfigured structural arrangements. Unionists in particular, wary of an inexorable drift towards a United Ireland, are keen to establish political clusters in the event of any future constitutional change. Not that Northern Ireland has a monopoly on discounting considerations of administrative rationality in undertaking reforms. Observers of local government reform in Scotland and Wales in 1995/1996 pointed out that 'local government reorganisations in the United Kingdom have not been undertaken on the basis of any comprehensive theories of structural change. Instead, policy makers have worked on the basis of a few vague ideas which owe more to political sloganising than policy strategies. Conceptual links between structure and performance are not well developed' (Boyne, Jordan and McVicar (1995: 79).

The democratic renewal agenda in Northern Ireland has therefore a different emphasis than the rest of the United Kingdom. Clearly there are the more obvious democratic deficiencies associated with the legacy of Direct Rule, notably the emasculation of local government and proliferation of non-departmental public bodies. The review of public administration is charged with tackling these deficiencies. More fundamentally, however, democratic renewal is 'an agenda for new politics that seeks to redefine the relationship between the citizen and the state through the renovation of political institutions and processes at central and community levels' (Gray and Jenkins, 1999: 33). In Northern Ireland this will not be achieved solely through structural changes in the architecture of public administration. The relationship between citizen and state is problematic. The British State is perceived by Nationalists as the guarantor of Unionist demands to remain part of the United Kingdom, and by Republicans as repressive and complicit in this political goal. The Belfast Agreement and its legal enactment in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, although reaffirming the status of the Province as part of the United Kingdom based on the principle of consent, allows for a United Ireland, should the majority vote for this option. This, along with the human rights and equality provisions in the Agreement, has created a new confidence amongst Nationalists and Republicans in the political institutions.

It is possible to undertake an 'audit' of democratic renewal, drawing on data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2001. This is a probability sample of 1,800 adults (age 18 or over) carried out via face-to-face interviews to monitor the attitudes

and behaviour of people in Northern Ireland on a range of issues (education, political attitudes, health issues, community relations and social networks). From these data a number of observations can be made about the status of democratic renewal:

- There is a high level of democratic engagement if measured by the barometer of electoral participation - turnouts at the 2001 Local Government and Westminster elections were 67.9% and 68.6% respectively.
- Patterns of traditional voting remain firmly entrenched in Northern Ireland (see table 1 - appendix 1). There is a need to find ways to actively engage people beyond the confines of orange/green issues which will make those elected more responsive and accountable for public services. Attempts to do this include parallel measures to strengthen participative democracy.
- Given the absence of significant executive powers in local government, participation can only be to reaffirm ethno-national cleavages on constitutional issues. People do not feel empowered at the local government level (see table 2 - appendix 1).
- Devolved institutions have created a new but differentiated electoral empowerment with signs of alienation amongst the Protestant population (see table 3 - appendix 1).

Having considered the first component of democratic renewal - devolved government and its efforts to create more accountable public services, we now turn to the second element of renewal – participative democracy.

## **Participative democracy**

What makes the potential reform of local government highly speculative is the role now ascribed by the Northern Ireland Executive to other social partners, in particular the voluntary and community sector under devolved government arrangements. Here again the *Programme for Government* sets out the Executive's vision:

Regeneration of our society – in the fullest sense means that we have to tackle issues of equality and human rights, poverty and social disadvantage, renewal of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, sustaining and enhancing local communities and improving community relations... In tackling these issues we have the advantage of a vibrant and extensive community and voluntary sector which already makes significant and critical contributions to many areas of life. A key challenge will be to build on this community capacity and to involve it in policies and programmes aimed at strengthening our community well-being (Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government, 2001: 2.1.1).

Three examples which testify to the involvement of an active community in democratic renewal are the Executive's efforts at formally engaging with the voluntary and community sector, the establishment and working of the Civic Forum, and the sector's role in the evolving local strategy partnerships.

## *Engaging the Voluntary and Community Sector*

The pre-existing working relationship between the voluntary sector and senior officials under Direct Rule had been instrumental in the production of the 1993 *Strategy for the Support of the Voluntary Sector and for Community Development in Northern Ireland*. This, in turn, helped lay the foundations for developing a ‘compact’ or a framework to guide relationships between Government and the sector<sup>2</sup>. Compacts evolved from the recommendations of the Deakin Commission (The Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector, 1996) and the policy document *Building the Future Together* (1997) published by the Labour Party in opposition. The Deakin Commission proposed a ‘concordat’ of principles to inform the relationship between Government and the sector. The Labour Government adapted these proposals in the form of compacts. Hence, Northern Ireland (as in England, Scotland and Wales) formally launched its compact *Building Real Partnership* (1998). The aims of this compact are to clarify respective roles in the relationship between Government and the voluntary and community sector, establish shared values and principles that underpin the partnership, and identify commitments to ensure these values and principles govern future relationships (Northern Ireland Office, 1998: 8).

In reviewing the substance of compacts throughout the United Kingdom, Morison (2000: 113) whilst acknowledging that they represented an important statement about a new relationship, argued that ‘they appear as genuinely baffling documents and seem to be made up of mainly warm words, platitudes and generalities’. The Northern Ireland Office however, was not at all confounded. It viewed the compact as a partnership with the voluntary and community sector based on shared values and mutual respect working with Government ‘to identify and tackle social needs, strengthen communities, and build a more tolerant, participative, inclusive and peaceful society’ (Northern Ireland Office, 1998: 4). A Joint Government/Voluntary and Community Sector Forum was set up following the publication of the compact to discuss issues of mutual interest and to monitor its operation in practice. The forum comprises officials from each government department and fifteen representatives from the voluntary and community sector. However, the compact’s timing (December 1998) was such that it remained in abeyance until devolution happened one year later, and as the *Programme for Government* (quoted above) made clear, the new administration not only embraced the spirit of the compact but also sought to operationalise it.

The Department for Social Development’s Voluntary and Community Unit<sup>3</sup> launched its strategy document *Partners for Change* (2001 - in draft form) for the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. The 3-year strategy sets out specific priorities and actions which all government departments will take to enable the voluntary and

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<sup>2</sup> There are 4,500 - 5,000 voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland. The voluntary and community sector paid workforce numbered 29,168 in 2001, accounting for 4.5% of the Northern Ireland workforce. The gross income for the voluntary and community sector in the financial year 2000/01 was £657.1m and total current expenditure £640.8m. Source: *State of the Sector III* (2002). Belfast: Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action.

<sup>3</sup> The Department for Social Development changed the name of its Voluntary Activity Unit to the Voluntary and Community Unit in May 2002. This signalled a shift in emphasis in the work of the Unit which now assumes lead responsibility for voluntary and community sector development across government and promotes inter-departmental debate on key issues in the field with a particular focus on addressing social need and social exclusion.

community sector ‘to contribute more fully to their areas of business and subsequently the social, environmental and cultural life of Northern Ireland’ (Department for Social Development, 2001: 9). There are also responsibilities on the voluntary and community sector to take actions to support the implementation of the strategy. Each government department describes its current relationship with the voluntary and community sector in the strategy and then sets out its priorities and actions under 3 broad headings: capacity building, working together and resourcing the sector. Considering just one of these headings – ‘Working Together’ – illustrates the extent of engagement envisaged between Government and the sector:

Working together will entail 3 dimensions:

- Working together to ensure that the voluntary and community sector are actively involved, and afforded the opportunity to contribute to the development, implementation and monitoring of policy developments in order that their expertise might inform policy making processes.
- Working together to share good practice, to build on the experience of Government and the sector, in addressing need and effecting change and to develop and maintain mechanisms enabling greater communication between Government and the sector.
- Working together to deliver services.

(Department for Social Development, 2001: 15)

Although this is a Government strategy it was developed collaboratively with the Joint Government/Voluntary and Community Sector Forum. Each department will prepare an annual progress report on the *Partners for Change* strategy which the Minister must endorse prior to its submission for consideration by the Joint Forum. The strategy will also be independently evaluated after 3 years.

*Partners for Change* undoubtedly gives a very firm commitment to collaborative working between the devolved administration and the voluntary and community sector. This compares with local compact partnerships in England where researchers have found ‘a gap between language and action... The voluntary sector may be spoken of as an ‘essential’ but is then not mentioned in corporate plans, and is not involved in strategic planning’ (Gaster and Deakin, 1998: 191). The language used by the Department for Social Development to describe the Northern Ireland strategy is bold by any standards – ‘with over 5,000 voluntary and community groups in Northern Ireland, creation of this strategy is an ambitious and innovative exercise that is without precedent in the United Kingdom’ (Department for Social Development, 2001: 10). The Voluntary and Community Unit (within the Department for Social Development) describes how the voluntary and community sector has become a key social partner in the processes of government. That involvement, it argues, ‘reflects a more developed and mature relationship and role within Government than anywhere else in the United Kingdom, Ireland or indeed Europe’ (Voluntary and Community Unit, 2002: 1). Even after stripping away the departmental rhetoric, the strategy suggests a significant role for the voluntary and community sector in the decision-making process of every government department. Its strict monitoring arrangements, overseen by the Joint Forum which will scrutinise annual progress reports that must be signed-off by ministers, implies departments cannot afford to pay lip-service to partnering the sector. The co-chair of the Joint Forum commented:

Five years ago it was almost inconceivable that representatives from government departments would be meeting regularly with representatives of community groups and voluntary organisations to discuss issues of concern in a Joint Forum. The most significant area that has engaged the Joint Forum over the past two years has been the development of the Government's strategy to support the community and voluntary sector – *Partners for Change*. This is a unique document. It is the first time that a devolved administration in the United Kingdom has published a document that brings together departmental strategies for the support of the community and voluntary sector. It is unique in the way in which it has brought together representatives from the community and voluntary sector and departmental officials in jointly working to develop the strategy. It is unique in the way in which the ongoing monitoring arrangements for the strategy will include the community and voluntary sector (Graham, 2002: 20).

Perhaps because of the extent of the voluntary and community sector's involvement at central government level and the paucity of local authorities' powers in Northern Ireland, there has not been the development of local compact arrangements as in other parts of the United Kingdom (Craig *et al*, 1999; Ross and Osborne, 1999). But there are important general lessons to be learned from that experience. Osborne and McLaughlin (2002), for example, chart the relationships between local government and the voluntary sector in England between 1979-2000 and examine the implementation of compacts at both national and local levels. They conclude that the voluntary sector compact 'has the potential to give substance to the rhetoric of community governance, by providing explicit processes for the community to impact upon policy formulation and service management at the local level' (Osborne and McLaughlin, 2002: 61). They highlight, however, some of the attendant threats - potential participative challenges to the tradition of representative democracy, and the loss of voluntary sector independence as an advocate for the marginalised and socially excluded through its incorporation into the machinery of the state. These threats are all the more real given the size of Northern Ireland, the scale of the voluntary and community sector and its close working relationship with senior officials.

### ***The Civic Forum***

Another example of the potential role played by an active community in democratic renewal is the Civic Forum in Northern Ireland. The Forum was established under the terms of the Belfast Agreement as a 'consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues' (Belfast Agreement, 1998: 9). Beyond this, the Agreement is not specific, other than to say that it will receive administrative support from the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister. It comprises representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors and 'such other sectors as agreed' by the two ministers. It is widely acknowledged that the Forum was the brainchild of the Women's Coalition Party which pressed for a civil society contribution to any new political dispensation as part of the negotiations which led to the Agreement. Arrangements for the Forum were formalised in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 which requires the First and Deputy First Ministers, acting jointly, to make arrangements for obtaining from the Forum its views on social, economic and cultural matters. It is made up of 60 members drawn from a variety of sectors, all of whom are appointed, following a selection process, by

the First and Deputy First Minister<sup>4</sup>. Its informational literature describes it as representing a ‘broad cut of civic society in Northern Ireland’. The Forum held its inaugural meeting in October 2000. Its work programme falls into 3 broad categories: responding to major consultation exercises; research and analysis of key social, economic and cultural issues; and business improvement measures. Significantly, its views were sought on the Executive’s Programme for Government and the budget for 2002/03. The Forum has also made submissions on a number of current policy debates – ‘Investing for Health Strategy’, the ‘Review of Post Primary Education’ and ‘Priorities for Social Inclusion’. Its research and analysis team is considering a number of projects including work on: life-long learning, entrepreneurship and creativity; combating poverty; inclusiveness and a plural society; and creating a sustainable Northern Ireland. Business improvement measures are concerned with how the Forum can improve its effectiveness as an organisation (communication strategy, Civic Forum procedures and monitoring the impact of its work).

Although early days, reactions to the Civic Forum thus far have been mixed. McCall and Williamson argue that the Forum ‘has the potential to offer civil society in Northern Ireland, particularly the voluntary and community sector, the opportunity to engage formally with the new democracy in a participative, consultative, and perhaps even deliberative capacity’ (McCall and Williamson, 2001: 369). They suggest that the attitude of MLA’s and the inclusiveness and sectoral representation of the Forum will determine whether it ultimately enhances democracy in Northern Ireland. Broadly, pro-Agreement parties are supportive, or in the case of the UUP, prepared to delay judgement on its performance. Anti-Agreement parties, such as the DUP, are highly critical – describing it variously as ‘an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy’ or more scathingly ‘a monster quango’ (*Hansard* 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2000 and 14<sup>th</sup> September, 1998 respectively). The Party attempted to veto the operation of the Forum by insisting that the Assembly approve any matters which it sought to address, in effect to control its agenda. The Forum itself does not want to be seen as an organisation which simply reacts to issues as they arise through government consultation processes, or as Woods has pointed out:

The value and success of the Forum will depend on rising to the challenge of doing something different, and going well beyond commenting on proposals drawn up by others. Offering opinions is not participation in governance. Rather, offering solutions to problems, together with a commitment to help deliver those solutions, is what ministers should reasonably expect in return for putting their faith in a Civic Forum (Woods, 2001: 84).

Thus far, however, it has failed to capture public interest. One Forum member has argued that it has not addressed the hard political and social issues, claiming it is overrun by enthusiasts of the Belfast Agreement. At its launch he suggests ‘the Civic Forum was accused of being a talking shop. It is in grave danger of becoming less than that’ (McConaghie, 2001: 4). Anti-Agreement MLA Peter Weir has cited resignations from the Forum and poor attendance by its participants (around 50%) as

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<sup>4</sup> The Forum comprises members from: business (7); agriculture & fisheries (3); trade unions (7); voluntary and community sector (18); churches (5); culture (4); arts and sport (4); victims (2); community relations (2); education (2); appointees of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (6); and an independent chair.

evidence of its moribund status (Hansard 9<sup>th</sup> August 2002). This type of political criticism however, is described as 'residual jealousy towards the Forum on the part of some Assembly members which ignores, the very significant contributions made to the Executive's Programme for Government' (Wilford and Wilson, 2001: 59). Thus far, there appears to be limited interaction and exchange with other civic fora – the Scottish Civic Forum, the London Civic Forum and the long-standing Republic of Ireland's National Economic and Social Forum.

### ***Local Strategy Partnerships***

Northern Ireland, like other parts of Europe, has embraced partnership arrangements mainly in areas of economic development, health, urban regeneration and peace and reconciliation. Initiatives such as 'Making Belfast Work', the 'Derry/Londonderry Initiative' were launched in the late 1980's in response to problems of multiple deprivation – physical dereliction, social deprivation, high long-term unemployment and difficulties attracting private sector investment into the cities. Partnership working through voluntary/community organisations, the private sector and Government became the norm as an integrated strategy evolved to tackle these deep-rooted problems. European funds, however, institutionalised the model of partnership working in Northern Ireland. EU Community Initiatives such as URBAN have assisted local partnerships in deprived urban areas to support schemes for economic, social revitalisation and environmental protection. The INTERREG cross-border programme has funded projects aimed at strengthening economic and social cohesion by promoting cross-border transnational and interregional co-operation and balanced development – local authority cross-border (between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland) partnerships have been central to this Community Initiative.

The European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation launched in 1995 (PEACE I: 1995-99), however, promoted partnership working to a new level. The aim of the programme was to support social inclusion of those at the margins of economic and social life, and exploit opportunities arising from the peace process in order to stimulate social and economic regeneration. One of the most innovative aspects of the programme was the development of 26 district partnerships coterminous with local authorities with responsibility for some 15% of the total funding package (£375m). Partnership boards were established from 3 sectors – one-third councillors, one-third voluntary and community sector representatives, and one-third made up from other partners – business, trade unions and statutory organisations (in equal numbers). Williamson *et al* (2000: 61) argued that district peace partnerships have given the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland 'a more central role in regard to issues of local development and regeneration than any of the European Union's partnership initiatives in other countries'. The partnership approach was considered important beyond the confines of the individual funded projects. The process of partnership working cut across traditional political cleavages and fostered cross-sectoral working relations. Commenting on their effectiveness in this regard, Hughes *et al* note:

The European Peace and Reconciliation Initiative has opened up participation and partnership in a way that has recast democracy towards a model that brings together participatory and representative models. Their lead role confirms the value of local partnerships as a permanent feature of civic culture in the region, not least because of their enormous potential to make a lasting

contribution to peace and reconciliation in a divided society (Hughes *et al*, 1998: 232).

PEACE II (2000 – 2004) carries forward the overall aim of its predecessor but with a new economic focus. District partnerships have been replaced by Local Strategy Partnerships which are responsible for locally based regeneration and development strategies, addressing grassroots needs with local delivery mechanisms. The partnerships (again based on the 26 council areas) have been reconfigured and comprise two equal strands: local government and the main statutory bodies; and the four pillars of the social partners – private sector, trade unions, voluntary and community sector, and agricultural and rural development. They have been allocated 20% of a €595m funding package (under Priority 3 – PEACE II) to deliver local economic initiatives for developing the social economy, and human resources, training and development strategies.

Beyond their role in delivering PEACE II, however, local strategy partnerships are expected to engage in integrated planning within district council areas. In other words, they must ensure that services provided to the public are better integrated across administrative boundaries and more responsive to the needs of local communities. Guidelines for the partnerships suggest ‘this is a process for agencies, stakeholders, communities, local councillors and individuals to engage in collaborative decision making about tackling key issues – jobs, education, health, crime and so on – for local people’ (Special EU Programmes Body, 2001: 6). To do this, the partnerships have been tasked to develop a local area strategy and action plan that will become the framework for sustainable regeneration and development in each district council area beyond the lifetime of PEACE II. This local integrated strategy ‘will seek to improve the economic, social and environmental conditions in a local area and contribute to sustainable development’ (Special EU Programme Body, 2001: 8).

The obvious comparison here is with local strategic partnerships in England and Wales which provide a co-ordination framework to: prepare and implement a community strategy for the area; bring together local plans, partnerships and initiatives; work with local authorities that are developing a local public service agreement; and develop and deliver a local neighbourhood renewal strategy (DETR: 2001(b): 5-6). In England and Wales there is now a statutory duty on local authorities to prepare community strategies to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area and its inhabitants. Local strategic partnerships will be involved as part of the community planning process in their preparation, but the ultimate statutory responsibility (under the Local Government Act 2000) rests with councils. This is not the case in Northern Ireland where this role has been assumed by local partnerships in a non-statutory capacity.

There is also enthusiasm from some influential figures to embed partnerships in the long-term governance of Northern Ireland. The Deputy First Minister (Mark Durkan) suggested in an Assembly debate:

Partnerships will have a vision and purpose which will last well beyond the horizons of the PEACE II programme.... In the context of the new institutions, I see an opportunity for the partnership process to be widened and deepened at both regional and local level. We do not want the partnership approach to be

confined to European funding, nor do we want it to wither away when that source of income has ceased. The whole purpose of our approach is to increase the scope and significance of decision-making at the local level (Durkan: 2001: 16).

Interestingly, Taylor (1997) in her earlier work on partnerships in Great Britain argued that they were 'not a quick fix but had potential to be the basis for new forms of local governance that will last into the next century'. To do this, she argued that partnerships 'cannot be tacked onto the edges of existing systems'. The Deputy First Minister seems intent on mainstreaming partnership governance in Northern Ireland and, as a result, challenges the future role of local government.

### **The twin track approach - tensions**

The devolved government's strategy for democratic renewal in Northern Ireland has been examined through two key approaches contained within the Executive's *Programme for Government*: the recently launched review of public administration aimed at rejuvenating representative democracy weakened by Direct Rule, and a series of measures to strengthen participative democracy by collaborating with the voluntary and community sector. A number of tensions are apparent in this quest for democratic renewal. Given the exclusion of government departments from the review of public administration, the focus of political and media attention thus far is on reducing the number of councils, democratising existing quangos or centralising their functions within the purview of the Assembly. Notwithstanding reference in the review to principles such as subsidiarity and community responsiveness, senior officials in the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister do not appear predisposed to a stronger local government in Northern Ireland under a reformed system. Similarly, although there is a significant local government presence in the Assembly (55% of Assembly members are local councillors: n = 60), MLA's have thus far appeared, at best, ambivalent towards local government. Even the most resolute anti-Agreement MLA's have experienced the political clout they can exercise in discharge of major public services, denied for almost 30 years, and the trappings of power associated with holding office. This is more likely to result in centripetal tendencies than subsidiarity. The lavish surrounds of Parliament Buildings, a full-time salary and administrative support compare favourably to administering minor town hall functions on a voluntary basis.

The debate on the distribution of powers is also informed by a long-standing distrust of local government by Nationalist and Republican politicians. The legacy of abuses by councils and the voluntary commitment to power-sharing at local level do not equate to statutory consociational arrangements at central government level established in the Belfast Agreement - coalition executive, proportionality in committees and cross-community voting arrangements for key decisions (O'Leary, 1999). These safeguards are more likely to result in Nationalists and Republicans favouring services delivered by Stormont departments. Edwards *et al* (2001: 307) describe the potential of partnerships to break 'the centrifugally powerful association of local government and territory and impose a scalar and spatial division of government more consistent with the interests of the central state', or, in this case, Nationalist and Republican interests at the centre (Stormont). The 'well-being' role

with which local strategy partnerships have been tasked and the strong support for their continuance beyond PEACE II, from the SDLP Deputy First Minister, institutionalises this more inclusive forum at the expense of local government. Democratic renewal in this case means increasing support at the local level for participative over representative forms of governance.

Similar political tensions are evident in the devolved government's relationship with the voluntary and community sector. On the one hand the *Partners for Change* strategy provides the sector with, according to civil servants, 'unprecedented' access and influence over departmental policy-making and accountability arrangements back to Joint Forum (comprising officials and voluntary and community sector representatives). On the other hand, the formal institutional arrangements for consulting social partners (the Civic Forum – on which the voluntary and community sector has 30% membership) is castigated by some political parties (in particular the DUP). Ironically, the Minister for the department which has championed the *Partners for Change Strategy* (Department for Social Development) is Nigel Dodds (Democratic Unionist Party, MP MLA). This may well be an objection based on principle. The Civic Forum is a construct of the Belfast Agreement which is strenuously opposed by the DUP. In the wider Unionist 'family', however, there are long-held suspicions of the voluntary and community sector. The hegemonic Unionist State (1921-72) produced a self-help culture amongst Nationalist and Republicans and a corresponding reliance by Unionists and Loyalists on a benevolent public sector. Things have changed significantly since the 1970's. A highly mobilised voluntary and community sector in Republican areas has led to accusations that Catholics secure a disproportionate amount of grant-aid (particularly from European funding) compared to Protestant areas lacking in social capital. Even where community 'leaders' emerge in Protestant areas, there is a lack of mutual trust at the grassroots level and a perceived inability in their capacity to represent the disparate factions within Unionism/Loyalism (Purdue, 2001). Sinn Féin's community politics has been influential in the sector's development and hence Unionists are wary of what they would see as an assertive Republican element with political aspirations well beyond their nominal brief.

## Conclusions

Returning to Pratchett's (1999) framework offers a means of evaluating the extent of democratic renewal in Northern Ireland. He suggested three components ranging from practical responses to address problems of local democracy, to a reassessment of the role and purpose of local government, through to a more radical mode of democracy. The latter involves:

A new democratic polity which not only improves the effectiveness of existing practices but also draws upon different components of direct, consultative, deliberative and representative democracy to create a new democratic order. The point is not that some of these components contribute more to democracy than others. Rather, it is the successful combination of them that makes for the new mode of democracy which the renewal process offers (Pratchett, 1999:9).

In the case of Northern Ireland, the review of the role of local government, enhanced long-term involvement of local strategy partnerships, and the direct participation of

the voluntary and community sector in departmental decision-making across Government would suggest a 'new democratic polity', although the tensions are clearly showing.

In general terms, some politicians are envious of the privileged access which the voluntary and community sector had to senior civil servants during the period of Direct Rule – as one Ulster Unionist MLA put it 'it is time for the sector to stand aside' (Cobain, quoted in McCall and Williamson, 2001). Yet at the same time, there is an acknowledgement of the valuable contribution which the sector can make to democratic renewal. Elite political consensus in the form of the Belfast Agreement cannot, of itself, deliver stability on the ground and requires active engagement with civil society as key stakeholders in the community (Byrne, 2001). Where that engagement can take place at the level of a departmental strategy for collaboration (e.g. *Partners for Change*), it offers the potential for a constructive working relationship. When it enters the arena of 'high politics' and the mechanism for engagement is part of the architecture of the Belfast Agreement (e.g. the Civic Forum), then support is partial. Democratic renewal in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the United Kingdom, is about responding to, and providing leadership for, local communities. The fact that those communities are fractured and increasingly polarised means that progress on renewal may be differential, given their starting positions. There is also a balance to be achieved in ensuring accountable forms of representative government sit alongside participative mechanisms for civic engagement. In a society still deeply divided along traditional ethno-national cleavages, cross-cutting sectoral contributions from social partners can act as an effective counterbalance. Achieving the optimal balance between participative and representative democracy is the task which faces the Northern Ireland Executive as it reviews the future role of local government and the relationship with its 'partners' in the form of the voluntary and community sector.

## APPENDIX 1

**TABLE 1: PARTY VOTING IN ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS BY RELIGION**

Voting in the Assembly elections	Religion		
	Catholic %	Protestant %	No religion %
Unionists and Loyalists	2	91	41
Nationalists and Republicans	92	2	32
Other Parties	6	7	27
N = 1046 <sup>5</sup>	452	538	56

Chi Square:  $\chi^2 = 885.6$

Significance:  $p < .01$

Correlation: Cramer's V = 0.65

**TABLE 2: LIKELIHOOD OF INFLUENCING LOCAL GOVT. BY RELIGION**

Able to influence local government <sup>6</sup>	Religion		
	Catholic %	Protestant %	No religion %
Very & somewhat likely	22	20	18
Not & not at all likely	78	80	82
N = 1142 <sup>7</sup>	444	578	120

Chi Square:  $\chi^2 = 0.90$

Significance:  $p > .05$

Correlation: Cramer's V = .03

**TABLE 3: PUBLIC VOICE VIA THE ASSEMBLY BY RELIGION**

Impact of Northern Ireland Assembly <sup>8</sup>	Religion		
	Catholic %	Protestant %	No Religion %
More say in how NI is governed	54	33	43
Less say	4	13	9
Is making no difference	42	54	48
N = 1583 <sup>9</sup>	626	811	146

Chi Square:  $\chi^2 = 82.2$

Significance:  $p < .01$

Correlation: Cramer's V = 0.16

<sup>5</sup> Excludes 'don't knows, did not vote and refused to disclose'.

<sup>6</sup> Question posed in survey: 'Suppose you wanted the local government to bring about some improvement in your local community. How likely is it that you would be able to do something about it?'

<sup>7</sup> Excludes 'don't knows'.

<sup>8</sup> Question posed in survey: 'From what you have seen and heard so far, do you think that having a Northern Ireland Assembly is giving ordinary people more say in how Northern Ireland is governed, less say or is it making no difference?'

<sup>9</sup> Excludes 'don't knows'.

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