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The 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly election

Article publié le 18 juin 2013.

Michel Savaric

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Introduction

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Introduction

- 1 Among the many jokes that people in Northern Ireland like to share via e-mail, here is a particularly popular one:

A Political Guide for Tourists to Ireland

Ireland is an island to the west of Britain but Northern Ireland is just off the mainland not the Irish mainland, the British mainland.

The capital of Ireland is Dublin. It has a population of a million people, all of whom will be shopping in Newry this afternoon. They

travel to Newry because it is in the North, which is not part of Ireland, but still pay in Euros.

Under the Irish constitution, the North used to be in Ireland, but a successful 30-year campaign of violence for Irish unity ensured that it is now definitely in the UK. Had the campaign lasted longer the North might now be in France.

[...] There are two parliaments in Ireland. The Dublin parliament is called the Dáil, (pronounced “Doyle”), an Irish word meaning a place where banks receive taxpayers’ money. The one in Belfast is called Stormont, an Anglo-Saxon word meaning placebo, or deliberately ineffective drug.

Their respective jurisdictions are defined by the border, an imaginary line on the map to show fuel launderers where to dump chemical waste.

Protestants are in favour of the border which generates millions of pounds in smuggling for Catholics, who are opposed to it.

[...] We have two types of democracy in Ireland. Dublin democracy works by holding a referendum and then allowing the government to judge the result. If the government thinks the result is wrong, the referendum is held again. Twice in recent years the government decided the people’s choice was wrong and ordered a new referendum.

Belfast democracy works differently. It has a parliament with no opposition, so the government is always right. This system generates envy in many world capitals, especially Dublin.

Ireland has three economies – northern, southern and black. Only the black economy is in the black. The other two are in the red.

- 2 The popularity of this joke may be explained by the fact that it goes beyond the somewhat hackneyed and stereotypical celebration of ‘peace’ and normality to pinpoint some of the strange paradoxes that characterise Northern Ireland 17 years after the Irish Republican Army (IRA) ceasefire of August, 31st 1994.

- 3 The 2011 Assembly elections will enable us to reflect on the recent evolution of Northern Irish society. Prior to 2007, the institutions defined by the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement of 10 April 1998 had only been able to function intermittently for a few months at a time between long periods of suspension. Devolution was only effective from December 1999 to February 2000, then from May 2000 to October 2001, and from November 2001 to October 2002. Elections were held on 26 November 2003 and 7 March 2007. However, when the two arch-enemies of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin agreed to share power in 2007, they remarkably ushered Northern Ireland into a new period of stability.
- 4 The DUP is intimately linked to the character of Ian Paisley who founded it in 1971 from the 'Protestant Unionist Party' he had led since 1966. Paisley himself had been politically active since the early 1950's but rose to prominence in the second half of the 1960's when he organised counter-demonstrations during the civil rights campaign. Ian Paisley and the DUP have consistently claimed to speak for the loyalist working-class. They have battled Catholicism and all forms of Irish nationalism, as well as all moderate Protestants whom they have always accused of treachery. As for Sinn Féin, it is the oldest political party in Ireland today as well as the only one in existence on both sides of the Irish border. It was founded in 1905 by Arthur Griffith but has undergone many transformations. Its aim was originally to set up an independent Irish republic then, after partition, to re-unite Ireland. The current political party using that name really emerged in 1970 after a split in the IRA. In the 1970's, Sinn Féin was tightly controlled by the IRA; it progressively became the driving force of Irish republicanism after the 1981 hunger strikes.
- 5 This article will show that this most unlikely coalition between the DUP and Sinn Féin works because it rests on the following compromise: Sinn Féin has renounced nearly everything it once stood for while the DUP accepts the presence of these once reviled terrorists in government.

1. Devolution in Northern Ireland

- 6 The origins of devolution in Northern Ireland can be traced back to the controversy over Home Rule which dominated British politics

between 1885 and 1914. Originally, self-government was meant for Ireland as a whole. It was supported by constitutional nationalists, led by John Redmond in the Irish Nationalist Party, and was implacably opposed by the unionists, led by Edward Carson and James Craig. Irish republicans were also opposed to Home Rule and went on to form the Irish Republican Army in 1916. After World War One, Ulster Unionists who had stood against Home Rule, quickly appropriated it for themselves and went on effectively to rule the devolved Stormont parliament from 1921 to 1972. After the suspension of Stormont, the British government negotiated the Sunningdale agreement in 1973, whereby a power-sharing executive, together with a cross-border Council of Ireland, would be set up. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), and the Alliance Party (APNI) agreed to govern Northern Ireland together. The initiative proved short lived: the executive was brought down in two weeks, on 28 May 1974, by a general strike of the Protestant working-class led by the Ulster Workers Council (UWC), involving loyalist paramilitaries from the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and Ulster Defence Association (UDA). The IRA at the time was also opposed to Sunningdale.

- 7 In a jibe aimed at poking fun at Sinn Féin who had negotiated and signed it, former deputy head of the SDLP Seamus Mallon once described the Good Friday agreement as “Sunningdale for slow learners”. There are indeed many similarities between the two peace processes but one notable difference is the use of the d’Hondt formula in the allocation of ministerial positions in the current Assembly. With this type of proportional system, all political parties are guaranteed a share of executive power, provided they have enough support among the electorate. That is why there is currently no opposition to speak of within the Assembly as nearly all the political parties share ministerial portfolios within the executive.
- 8 This situation can be contrasted with the first 8 years or so of the assembly when the DUP *was* effectively in opposition since it had refused to sign the Good Friday agreement. In fact, over the period 1999–2001, the UUP’s David Trimble who was governing Northern Ireland with Seamus Mallon met with fierce opposition from anti-agreement unionists while Sinn Féin remained highly critical of the police force and the IRA held to its arsenal. It was not until July 2005, when the IRA ordered an end to the armed campaign, that things

began to change. In 2006, the DUP negotiated the St Andrews' agreement whereby Sinn Féin finally endorsed the newly formed Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) which had replaced the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) in 2001. Both parties then entered into government on 8 May 2007. The two moderate parties who are now a minority may be seen to some extent as fulfilling the role of an opposition but they are also in government.

- 9 Support for the UUP and SDLP was beginning to wane as early as the 2003 Assembly election: “Sinn Féin’s vote increased by 5.9 per cent (+6 seats) to 23.5 percent, while the SDLP languished on 17 per cent (-6 seats). The DUP increased its vote by 7.5 per cent to 25.6 per cent (+10 seats), mopping up a lot of the votes and seats of independent, anti-agreement unionists” (Dixon 2008: 303). The turnout was lower than usual: 64% against 69.9% in 1998. The election to the so-called ‘ghost assembly’ was greeted with a general sense of gloom and pessimism by all commentators. Rather than pointing towards compromise and the search for an accommodation, those election results meant political deadlock and a hardening of attitudes:

“les artisans du compromis de 1998 avaient compté sur la pérennité de l’ancien système partisan nord-irlandais, caractérisé par la domination des unionistes modérés de la communauté protestante et des nationalistes constitutionnels de la communauté catholique. Or les résultats des élections de novembre 2003 ont invalidé ces présupposés” (Féron 2004: 18).

- 10 But, the reasons for the parallel successes of the DUP and Sinn Féin were probably very different. Among Sinn Féin voters, there was very clearly an endorsement of the peace strategy the party had been pursuing by standing by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and an encouragement towards a complete cessation of the armed struggle. By contrast, the DUP’s success pointed to increasing disillusionment on the part of Protestant voters with the peace process and the lack of progress regarding the decommissioning of IRA weapons.
- 11 With hindsight however, it is possible to see the 2003 election results as expressing a desire from within the electorate to push the two most diametrically opposed politically parties into some form of settlement. Be that as it may, the third elections to the Northern Ireland

Assembly, held on 7 March 2007, confirmed the erosion of the two moderate parties: the DUP vote was up by 4.4%, the UUP down by 7.7%, the Sinn Féin vote was up by 2.6%, the SDLP down by 1.8%; and while it is hard to determine whether Northern Ireland voters have become more hard-line, or more uncompromising with the peace process, what is undeniable however is that the two extremist parties have become more moderate – notably so from 2007 on for the DUP. The start of this unforeseen turnaround can be dated to 26 March 2007. That day, at a televised press conference, Ian Paisley appeared all smiles next to a beaming Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams to announce that an agreement had been reached. A mere eight months earlier, at the end of an Independent Orange Order parade, the same Ian Paisley had uttered the words: “No unionist who is a unionist will go into partnership with IRA/Sinn Féin. They are not fit to be in partnership with decent people (Moriarty 2006).” On 7 May 2007, Paisley became Northern Ireland’s First Minister, with Martin McGuinness as Deputy First Minister. A jocular atmosphere became the hallmark of Paisley’s 10 months in office with McGuinness.

2. Sinn Féin and the DUP in government

- 12 On every joint public outing, such as the launch of the Ikea store in Belfast, the two politicians appeared delighted to be in each other’s company, sharing jokes and laughing out loud at every opportunity (*Belfast Telegraph* 2007a). This double-act quickly earned them the nickname of the ‘Chuckle Brothers’ in the press as well as on the street (*BBC News* 2007). It is difficult to say what they were really laughing at but a real friendship seems to have developed between the two men. Ian Paisley has even revealed that he visited McGuinness as the republican leader’s mother was dying and they both prayed together:

I did the praying and he did the listening, but he wanted me to do it. I said I can do nothing but the God that we believe in can do something. “And I would suggest we pray. He said ‘yes, do pray’. “I offered prayer for him and I think that was the right thing to do, I don’t care what people say (O’Hara 2010).

- 13 Cases of genuine friendship between hard-line loyalists and hard-line republicans are not unheard of in Northern Ireland of course. Many of them have occurred in prison where a real opportunity of getting to know each other exists, unlike 'normal life' in the outside world. Thus Brendan Hughes, who was Officer Commanding of the IRA prisoners during the dirty protest in the Maze prison between 1978 and 1980, described in his testimony to Ed Moloney (2010: 258-60) how he struck up a friendship with Robert 'Basher' Bates, a member of the notorious Shankill Butchers who in the mid-1970's not only killed Catholics chosen at random but also tortured them.
- 14 Paisley's change of attitude towards "IRA/Sinn Féin" did not go down well with his most faithful supporters. Journalist David Gordon has described how some of them reacted, for example veteran Larne councillor Jack McKee:
- I thought there was a bond there, that there was a personal relationship that had been built over the years. I saw the DUP as a family and in the early days, it certainly was that. The bit that galls me is that through all those years of barnstorming and table thumping, what was it all for? Why had all those people to die? Why did that have to happen? Logic has gone out the window (Gordon 2010: 12).
- 15 The feeling of betrayal of these supporters was intense. It seemed that the man who had been their champion had suddenly turned into one of the 'Lundies' he had been denouncing for all these years. Within the Free Presbyterian Church, the very Church he had founded in 1951, feelings were high. In May 2007, Paisley went as far as publishing an article in the Church magazine, *The Revivalist*, in which he denounced those who were criticising him as doing Satan's work (Gordon 2010: 104). But, on 7 September 2007, Paisley had no other choice but to step down from his position as moderator of the Church. Outside the building where the meeting was taking place, protesters were handing out leaflets proclaiming: "Ian Paisley's own words stand as a condemnation to him. He is guilty of all that he accused others of being guilty of. There's only one thing for Ian Paisley left to do: repent" (Gordon 2010: 101).
- 16 Then, on 30 May 2008, Paisley resigned as First Minister of Northern Ireland and as leader of the DUP. This decision followed his son Ian

Paisley Junior's resignation as Junior Minister on 18 February. Paisle Jr. had been specifically appointed to the Northern Ireland executive with the task of assisting his father who was aged 82 in 2008. A series of political scandals and accusations of cronyism had been pursuing him since September 2007. First, Junior was at the centre of a controversy with the National Trust and UNESCO about a proposed visitor centre at the Giant's Causeway, Northern Ireland's top tourist attraction (*Ballymoney Times* 2007). It was revealed in the press that he in fact had been lobbying for a property developer called Seymour Sweeney who also happened to be a DUP member and a close friend of the Paisley family. Then another scandal emerged concerning premises which the DUP had just moved into in Ballymena. The owner was none other than Sweeney himself. Not only was the rent paid by the central government extortionate but it furthermore came out that thanks in part to the Paisleys, the developer had also secured a very good price when he acquired the building! Those scandals undoubtedly irked DUP voters. On 14 February, a local by-election in Dromore, Co. Down, which was expected to be a walkover for Ian Paisley's party went over to the rival UUP. This led to Paisley Jr's resignation four days later with Paisley Senior following suit. The following year, the June 2009 European Parliament election proved another *débat* for the DUP: it came second to Sinn Féin with just 18.2% of the vote, as opposed to 31.9% in 2004 while the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), formed by ex-DUP members who rejected the Saint Andrews agreement, received 13.6% of the vote. European elections are often an opportunity for electors to express a 'protest vote'. For a Paisley used to topping the polls, – in 1989 he got 29.9% of the total vote, 57.4% of the Unionist vote – this was a slap in the face. After his resignation, he was succeeded by his sidekick Peter Robinson who was much less amiable to Martin McGuinness. In the press, the 'Chuckle Brothers' were replaced by the 'Brothers Grimm'.

- 17 The transformation of Rev. Ian Paisley seems radical and unpredictable. Some of the declarations he made in the past are now so at odds with the final outcome that they are hard to comprehend:

In the early seventies his Protestant Telegraph described Catholics as 'two-legged rats'; in 1992 he told his supporters that in talks with the SDLP and the Irish government his party's delegation had taken

care never to 'sit with these people or sup with them and nor did we enter their habitation' (O Connor, 1993: 177).

- 18 One possible explanation was perhaps provided by David Trimble in June 2007:

Dr Paisley hasn't made it clear why Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness is his number two – a man with a terrorist past – yet he criticised me for working alongside people like constitutional nationalist Seamus Mallon, my extremely able Deputy First Minister. "It has been suggested that Ian Paisley and his colleagues found themselves in power after 40 years on the sidelines, and embraced it with both arms. "Perhaps he always wanted to be Prime Minister of Northern Ireland at whatever cost – I pose the question which only he can answer. (Belfast Telegraph 2007b).

- 19 The fact that Trimble felt the need to speak positively about Seamus Mallon is in itself quite noteworthy. Trimble had built himself a solid unionist reputation in July 1995 when, alongside Ian Paisley, he had appeared triumphant after an Orange parade had been allowed through the strongly republican Garvaghy Road, on the outskirts of Portadown, Co. Armagh. It was actions such as this which enabled him to become leader of the UUP the following month and First Minister of Northern Ireland from 1998 to 2002.

3. Sinn Féin's gradual transformation

- 20 Remarkable though it may seem, the transformation of Paisley and the DUP is perhaps more superficial than the one Sinn Féin has been going through. It is now generally accepted that as early as 1981 a profound change in strategy and direction was being brought about by today's party leaders (McKittrick, McVea 2001: 145). After the 'dirty protest' and the first hunger-strike led by Brendan Hughes, Bobby Sands started a second hunger-strike in the Maze prison on 1 March 1981. Five days later, independent nationalist MP Frank Maguire unexpectedly died, thus creating a by-election in the Fermanagh-South Tyrone Westminster constituency. Sinn Féin managed to impose Bobby Sands as the sole nationalist candidate. Sands won the seat,

thereby offering his party a huge propaganda victory: there was the proof that the IRA objectives and struggle had popular support. Priority then gradually shifted to Sinn Féin and no longer the IRA. That same year, the new strategy was defined by Danny Morrison at the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis (annual conference) : “Who here really believes we can win the war through the ballot box? But will anyone here object if, with a ballot paper in this hand and an Armalite in the other, we take power in Ireland?”¹ Eventually, the ‘Armalite and ballot box strategy’ would give way to the ‘ballot box strategy’ alone.

- 21 In the process, Sinn Féin abandoned most of the basic tenets of republican ideology on which its legitimacy since the 1918 Irish general election had been founded. After the partition of Ireland in 1921, the republican movement went underground, refused to recognise the ‘partitionist’ institutions and adopted abstentionism as a rule. Its members were forbidden from taking their seats in the parliaments of London, Dublin and Belfast. However, in 1986, Sinn Féin decided to take their seats in Dáil Eireann. Then, after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, an exception also applied to the proposed Assembly at Stormont so that abstentionism now only concerns the British parliament at Westminster. The Agreement also led to a referendum about a change in the Irish constitution which ceased to identify the whole of the island as the ‘national territory’. Last but not least, Sinn Féin accepted the ‘principle of consent’ according to which it is up to the people of Northern Ireland to decide to which state they belong. According to former IRA prisoner Anthony McIntyre, the consent principle amounts to nothing less than the ‘Unionist veto’ which republicans used to reject so forcefully:

Adams signed up to everything he tried to overthrow. The key dividing line here is the consent principle, which is the partition principle. If Paisley was to have accepted terms similar to Adams, what he would have accepted was a British declaration to withdraw, a Dublin declaration to overtake the north, and a United Ireland at some stage in the future. That would have been a major disaster for unionism, yet when republicans go for something of the same scale in reverse, it’s considered a compromise (Gordon 2010: 212).

- 22 Yet, it is worth remembering that the current generation of republican leaders were once dissidents themselves. By 1962, the IRA lead-

ership had drawn its conclusion from the failure of the 'Border campaign'. It changed tactics, decided to phase out the armed campaign (not drop it completely) and to become more political. By 1969, the general context had changed beyond all recognition and the IRA was largely unprepared and unable to face the ferocious loyalist onslaught against Catholic neighbourhoods. At the 1970 Sinn Féin Ard Fheis, a major rift on the issue of abstentionism split the organisation in two. Those who left in disgust against taking seats in the Dáil went on to form Provisional Sinn Féin, in support of the Provisional IRA which had been created a few months earlier. The new recruits were younger, more militaristic and less political. It is therefore tempting to think that the wheel has come full circle: the Provisional IRA has finally replaced the Official IRA it fought against in the early 70's. In fact, Sinn Féin today seems more moderate than the SDLP in the 70's which counted socialist trade unionist leaders like Gerry Fitt and Paddy Devlin. In 2000, Suzanne Breen wrote that British 'counter-insurgents' could not have wished for a better outcome:

Unionists naturally resent SF's trappings of success. What they should remember, and what is far more important, is that republican goals have not been achieved. In fact the personal and electoral success of Provo leaders has been secured specifically at the price of abandonment of those goals. The foremost aim of the British establishment - to neutralise the Provos - has been achieved (Breen 2000).

- 23 The argument that people like Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness or Danny Morrison are traitors who have forsaken the cause and principles that generations of republicans have died for is undoubtedly shared by all the so-called 'dissident' groups that have become increasingly active in recent years. Those groups are called: the Continuity Irish Republican Army (CIRA), allegedly formed in 1986 after a split on the issue of abstentionism and linked to Republican Sinn Féin, the Irish Republican Liberation Army and Óglaigh na hÉirann which both split from the Continuity IRA in 1986, and the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA) allegedly linked to the 32 County Sovereignty Movement, which split from the Provisional movement in 1997 over the peace process (*Fortnight* 2009). Óglaigh na hÉireann is also the name of a splinter group from the Real IRA with alleged links to the

Republican Network for Unity, formed in 2007 after Sinn Féin officially decided to back the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Another political organisations, with no official paramilitary links is Éirígí, a political party formed in 2006 which has managed to attract a number of former local Sinn Féin councillors. Of all these factions, the Real IRA is certainly the one with the deadliest record since it was responsible for the Omagh bomb of 15 August 1998 which killed 29 people and injured 220. It also claimed responsibility for the murder of informer Denis Donaldson in 2006, and the killing of two British soldiers in the Massareene Barracks shooting of 7 March 2009. As for the Continuity IRA, it claimed responsibility for the murder of PSNI officer Stephen Carroll in Craigavon on 9 March 2009. And, on 2 April 2011, a young Catholic police officer named Ronan Kerr, a member of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and from solid republican stock, was killed near Omagh when a bomb exploded under his car. No organisation has claimed the latter murder but it bears striking similarities to the attack on Constable Peadar Heffron of 8 January 2010. This policeman was “*an Irish language specialist for the PSNI and captain of the PSNI GAA team*” and “*related to a senior Sinn Fein member*” (BBC News, 2010). As in Kerr’s case, a bomb was detonated under Heffron’s car for which no one has claimed responsibility. The Constable did not die but had a leg amputated.

- 24 It is tempting to equate present-day ‘dissident republicans’ with the Provisional IRA of the early 70’s and present-day Sinn Féin with the old Official IRA which had decided to get rid of its weapons and ‘go political’. There is, however, one marked difference between the two eras. In 1970-72, the Provisional IRA enjoyed massive popular support among the Catholic population. In the working-class districts where they operated, and from whence they came, IRA volunteers were fed and sheltered by ordinary residents. If the police or army were after them, they could enter virtually any household and hide there. At the time, Catholics had very real and specific grievances which the Unionist-dominated government had proved unable to address. The PIRA stepped in to offer protection against attacks from loyalist mobs who often had support from the forces of the state, while the old-standing republican argument that the Northern ‘statelet’ was unreformable seemed validated. The presence of British troops on Irish soil later reinforced the republican interpretation of the conflict as a

'colonial' one. In 2011, no such support exists for dissident republicans and Northern Ireland Catholics cannot really claim to have 2nd class status any more.

4. Dissidents and 'hoods'

- 25 Dissident involvement gains momentum when riots caused by Orange parades occur in the July marching season however. This was the case in the republican area of Ardoyne in North-Belfast in 2009 when three nights of rioting, including shots fired at the police, were said to have been orchestrated by members of dissident organisations (McAleese, 2009). In July 2010, near-identical scenes reoccurred: fierce riots erupted in Ardoyne and lasted another three nights. This time, prominent Sinn Féin representatives, like Gerry Kelly or Bobby Storey, one of the 38 IRA prisoners who broke out from the Maze prison in 1983, were present at the scene to try and stop the young rioters, to no avail (Simpson 2010). But the influence of dissidents over disenfranchised youths in poor working-class areas should not be overestimated. Apart from the summer months, when the opportunity arises to confront the police with stones, bottles, petrol bombs and firework displays owing to Orange marches coming close to their areas, those young people seem to have a defiant attitude towards all strands of republicanism, be they 'mainstream' or 'dissident'. This is a phenomenon called 'hoods': teenagers in poor neighbourhoods engage in all kinds of anti-social activities, including drinking, taking drugs, recreational rioting, 'joyriding' cars and uploading the videos of their exploits on the internet. Dissident republicans carry out numerous punishment beatings throughout the year against the same 'hoods' they encourage to riot in July. Interestingly, some of these hoods seem to have developed a form of political awareness. In the summer of 2010, a West-Belfast gang attracted media attention by labelling itself derisively 'IBA' (for 'I'd Buck Anything'). They used a social network on the internet on which they posted pictures of some of their graffiti. One of them displayed the coded message: "F.T.RA [Fuck the RA] U.T.H. [Up The Hoods] I.B.A."
- 26 The *Oglaigh Na hÉireann* group took a young IBA man off to be knee-capped but their gun jammed. Worse, the four volunteers were then picked up by the PSNI as they attempted to drive out of the area.

Gloating in the IBA camp did not last long as visits to individual homes forced a large numbers of the young hoods to flee. The problem that remains for Sinn Féin is that they appeared toothless in West Belfast in July, just as they appeared toothless in Ardoyne in the same month, when young rioters were prepared to cheek Bobby Storey and Gerry Kelly in the street. No-one in the Patten commission saw any of this coming (Fortnight 2010).

5. Sectarianism on the wane?

- 27 The case of Ardoyne excepted, disputes over parades and the display of symbols no longer occupy centre-stage like they did in the period 1995-1998 with the 'Drumcree crises'. But it would be mistaken to conclude that sectarianism is about to disappear from Northern Ireland. Some events are brought to the fore by the media to show that times have changed. For example, the murder of Michaela Harte, the daughter of Tyrone's Gaelic football team manager, while on honeymoon on Mauritius on 10 January 2011 caused a lot of sadness throughout Ireland and attracted a lot of media attention. A former Ulster Rose of Tralee and Irish language teacher in Dungannon, Harte had just married John McAreavey, a Gaelic football player and nephew of the Bishop of Dromore. Her funeral was attended by thousands of mourners, including Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness and Peter Robinson. Among the mourners, there was also Winston 'Winkie' Churchill Rea the former chief of the Red Hand Commando, a loyalist paramilitary group responsible for the deaths of dozens of ordinary Catholics. He attended on behalf of the 1st Shankill Northern Ireland Supporters Club (*Belfast Telegraph* 2011). Former paramilitaries and politicians from the two radically opposed sides attending the funeral of a beautiful bride, murdered by burglars on a faraway, alien island, was a potent symbol used by the media to show how far Northern Ireland had come. Yet, news items notwithstanding, Northern Irish society cannot be considered in any way to be evolving towards more integration. In 1993, it was calculated that over 50% of the Northern Irish population lived in areas that were more than 90% composed of their co-religionists (Bew, Gillespie 1993: 293). In 2006, statistics showed that over two-thirds of Catholics and Protestants in Belfast lived in an area where 81% of the total population were of the same faith (Shirlow, Murtagh 2006). Residential segregation is most acutely

materialised by the so-called ‘peacelines’ which separate the two communities in the main cities of Belfast, Derry and Portadown. Their number, height and length have continued to grow during the peace process. Therefore, a vast number of communal activities associated with one’s place of residence, including religious worship, education, the practice of sports, and shopping remain segregated for a substantial proportion of the Northern Irish population, particularly the young.

- 28 Sectarianism shows no sign of abating in Northern Ireland. One of the paradoxes of the DUP/Sinn Féin-led administration is that low level political tension seems to exist on the ground together with increased segregation. The conflict is indeed socially structured in the form of segregation. Segregation identifies the two politico-religious communities opposed to each other on the very existence of Northern Ireland as a separate political entity, distinct from the rest of the island. In any case, Northern Ireland remains a polarised society and it should not be assumed that old divisions have been assuaged with the peace process. The constitutional issue has not ceased to be what it has always been: an issue, but for the time being, a general consensus on the idea that it must be sidelined seems to be holding. So the current phase of the peace process enables us to consider the achievements and failures of Northern Ireland political parties when they are not dealing with the constitutional issue. In other words, the DUP and Sinn Féin have had an opportunity to tackle the ‘bread-and-butter issues’ that many outside observers hoped would take precedence in Northern Ireland one day. In that respect, one of the first decisions made by the coalition was to stop the introduction of water charges planned by the Labour government. There was no disagreement on this issue: nearly all of the Northern Ireland parties were against these charges. As David Gordon noted “The government was more than happy to ‘listen to the voice of the people of Northern Ireland’. What they didn’t do was provide £3 billion to sort out the infrastructure crisis” (Gordon 2010: 9). And indeed, the “infrastructure crisis” came to a head in December 2010/January 2011. A huge water crisis was sparked by a sudden thaw in temperatures following days of freezing weather. Burst mains and low reservoirs meant that around 40,000 houses were left without water, some for up to a fortnight over the holiday period. Hospitals even had to call the fire ser-

vice to provide water. This crisis prompted some commentators to call for the introduction of water charges (Clarke 2011). But opponents to the charges claim that the “the roots of the crisis are in decades of underinvestment by the British and Northern Ireland authorities, and in moves towards privatisation” (James 2011).

- 29 Opposition to the water charges is one of the non-contentious issues between the DUP and Sinn Féin. But on many other policy issues, there were deep tensions within the Executive. A crisis that had developed right from the start concerned the future of the ‘Eleven Plus’ examination. Its abolition was defended by Sinn Féin Minister of Education Caitríona Ruane. This examination taken towards the end of primary education had been suppressed almost everywhere in Great Britain but, in Northern Ireland, it still determined whether a child could be accepted into a prestigious grammar school, and from then on go to university, or to an under-valued and under-funded secondary school. Ruane abolished it and the last 11-Plus examination was held in November 2007. But the Minister was unable to impose an alternative system in its place due to fierce opposition from the DUP. Grammar school heads from the (Protestant) state sector seized the opportunity and created the ‘Association for Quality Education’ which set up their own exams (BBC News 2008). Unusually, Catholic grammar schools chose to brave recommendations from the Catholic hierarchy, who backed Ruane’s decision to do away with the 11-Plus, and chose to use the Granada Learning (GL) assessment tests. By the end of the legislature, the issue was still unresolved. Instead of one state-run system of academic selection, Northern Ireland had ended up with two selective procedures, both organised on a private basis.
- 30 Other tensions developed after Peter Robinson took over as First Minister on 5 June 2008. Immediately, Sinn Féin put a block on meetings with their DUP counterparts to protest at the lack of progress on the devolution of police and justice powers. It took five months for the situation to be finally resolved.

6. Northern Irish sleaze

- 31 In January 2010, Northern Ireland was rocked by a sexual, financial and political scandal that made international headlines. The local press dubbed it *Irisgate* but outside the region, the media plumped

for the ‘Mrs Robinson’ affair. The starting point was an investigation by journalists from the *Spotlight* programme on BBC Northern Ireland which prompted Peter Robinson to reveal that his wife had been unfaithful to him and had tried to commit suicide in March 2009. Iris Robinson was a successful politician, being both an MP at Westminster and an MLA at Stormont for the DUP. She was also a born-again Christian, a stern fundamentalist who had called homosexuality an ‘abomination’. When the media revealed that she had had an affair with a young man 39 years younger than her, a parallel was instantly drawn with the characters in Mike Nicholl’s 1967 movie, *The Graduate*. But the scandal was also financial – Iris Robinson had used her influence to get two property developers linked to the DUP to invest £50,000 in a business she had set up for her young lover. Then the illicit lovers fell out with each other and Iris asked for the money back. The program stated that the politician initially planned to keep £25,000 for herself and donate £25,000 to the evangelical church she attended but Peter who then knew of the affair convinced her to give the money back to the investors. Peter Robinson had to vacate his post as First Minister for three weeks while Iris resigned from all her assignments and underwent ‘therapy’ somewhere in London. The affair incidentally brought to light the very lavish lifestyle of the ostensibly puritanical Robinson couple, leading to them being nicknamed the ‘Swish family Robinson’ in the papers.

- 32 In the 2010 general election, the DUP managed to retain all its seats except one: the one occupied by Peter Robinson, who had held it since 1979 (*Guardian* 2010). Voters in his East-Belfast constituency ousted him in favour of Naomi Long from the Alliance Party who thereby became the party's first MP elected to Westminster. One famous blogger has compared Peter Robinson to Admiral Nelson:

When the dust settled on the Battle of Trafalgar the Royal Navy had destroyed its major enemies, beginning a rule at sea which was to last almost unchallenged for 100 years. However, in the process the admiral who had brought them the victory of Trafalgar was fatally wounded. Like Nelson before him Peter Robinson has seen his party destroy its unionist opponents and leave itself the only unionist party at Westminster; yet in the process Robinson himself has been severely, maybe fatally politically wounded (Slugger O’Toole 2010).

7. Consolidation of the DUP/Sinn Féin partnership

- 33 This election was indeed marked by the complete disappearance of the UUP. Sinn Féin retained its 5 seats and the SDLP still had 3. Unionists obtained 9 seats altogether (8 DUP and 1 independent unionist). Questions were raised over the resignation of Peter Robinson as First Minister following his crushing defeat in the poll but he chose to stay on. The DUP/Sinn Féin coalition then entered its final year in power before the May 2011 election with a new government in Whitehall bent on imposing a radical plan of budget cuts and austerity measures.
- 34 For Sinn Féin particularly the main problem became the junction between two antinomian positions, both inside and outside government. Sinn Féin is indeed the only political party to be organised on both sides of the Irish border. In the south, it saw the general mood of anger against politicians and austerity measures as an opportunity to modernise its image and reverse the losses it had incurred in the 2007 Dáil election. On 22 November 2010, it staged a protest in Dublin against the government's handling of the economy. Then, on 25 November Sinn Féin won one seat in the Donegal South West by-election. Two days later, a massive demonstration was organised in Dublin by the trade-unions. During the campaign, Sinn Féin played down the reunification question and focused mainly on economic matters, thereby presenting itself as the only true opposition to the corrupt and discredited Fianna Fáil government. On 25 February, Sinn Féin had a resounding victory in the general election with 14 seats won – its best performance since 1918! In the meantime, Gerry Adams had decided to leave his West-Belfast constituency, which he had held for 28 years, and stand for elections to the Dáil in Dundalk, Co. Louth. So the Sinn Féin president won two elections in 9 months, receiving 71.1% of the vote in May and 21.7% of first-preference votes in February. In the north however, Sinn Féin is not in the opposition but in government. Ultimately, it has to apply austerity measures and justify its choices. In May 2010, McGuinness warned: "There is going to be more pain ahead and what we have to do is prepare for it" (McDonald 2010). In September, David Cameron announced a 25% budget

cut for Northern Ireland (Keenan, 2010). Sinn Féin then tried to delay its agreement for as long as possible, creating more tensions with the DUP. Then, on 14 December, Robinson and McGuinness declared a deal had been struck, much to their own satisfaction. Robinson went as far as calling it “a first-class budget” while McGuinness said: “The Executive has shown decisive leadership and has faced up to these very difficult challenges” (*Belfast Telegraph* 2010b). In October, economists had worked out that up to 20,000 public sector jobs and 16,000 private sector posts could be lost (*Belfast Telegraph* 2010a). In the 80’s, Gaffikin and Morrissey (1990) had shown that Northern Ireland’s public sector had been left largely unaffected by the extent of Thatcherite job cuts because of an underlying fear of making the security situation even worse. In 2011, the pacified situation seems to have suppressed all scruples among Conservative politicians. And if Republican and Loyalist politicians, all professing to have working-class interests at heart, can be made to swallow the bitter pill, British Conservatives could not have hoped for a better outcome.

8. 2011: more of the same?

35 Then, after an unusually low-key campaign dominated by universal condemnation of the murder of Catholic police officer Ronan Kerr, came the Northern Ireland Assembly election on 5 May 2011. While some had speculated on a possible Sinn Féin victory, i.e. a repeat of the 2009 European parliament election, nothing of the sort actually happened. The DUP won 38 of the 108 seats while Sinn Féin won 29. Then came the UUP with 16 seats, the SDLP with 14, Alliance with 8. The TUV, the Green Party won one seat each, as well as one independent candidate. Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness were reinstated as First Minister and Deputy First Minister respectively. At first sight, Northern Ireland voters were satisfied with their coalition in power and felt no need to change it. However, the turnout was lower than usual: 54.5% – 8 percentage points down from the 2007 election and 15 from the first Assembly election (1998). Turnout is always high in Northern Ireland because of what is called the ‘sectarian headcount’. Elections there inevitably concern the one and only issue, the constitutional issue. They are used both as an affirmation of identity and a referendum on the future of Northern Ireland. A low turnout is then significant, it may mean that the constitutional issue

is less pressing than usual. It may also point to dissatisfaction towards the choice on offer.

36 Once again, the parallel successes of the DUP and Sinn Féin probably have very different meanings. Sinn Féin's good results came on the back of its good fortunes in the Republic. Much to the dismay of hard-liners and supporters of the dissidents, the more Sinn Féin condemns violence and the murder of policemen, the better its standing in the polls. There were many reasons not to be supportive of Sinn Féin – the botched 11-Plus reform, embarrassing revelations concerning its past, notably that of Gerry Adams... But the fact that the party itself has changed is probably the main reason why Catholic voters choose to vote for it. So Sinn Féin finds itself vindicated in its peace strategy. There were also many good reasons for unionists not to vote for the DUP. The DUP leaders have been involved in many scandals, have acted in a way that seemed completely at odds with what they had always stood for. In every intermediary election since 2007 – the Dromore by-election in 2008, the 2009 European election, the 2010 general election – protestant voters chose to spurn the DUP. But the DUP remains the last bastion against Sinn Féin. Protestant voters expected Catholics to vote Sinn Féin, so they voted DUP in 2011. It would then probably be erroneous to assume that the rift between the two communities is narrowing. The conflict may not have disappeared after all. The irony of the peace process is that the rift pitches former foes against one another, yet it is precisely their cold embrace at the top which is making the peace process work for the moment.

37 Northern Ireland Assembly election results

38 1998:

	Sinn Féin	SDLP	Alliance	UUP	DUP	Others
Vote share	17.63%	21.97%	6.5%	21.25%	18.14%	14.51%
Seats won	18	24	6	28	20	12

39 Turnout: 69.88%

40 2003:

	Sinn Féin	SDLP	Alliance	UUP	DUP	Others
Vote share	23.25%	17.00%	3.7%	22.7%	25.6%	7.75%

Seats won	24	18	6	27	30	3
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41 Turnout: 63.05%

42 2007:

	Sinn Féin	SDLP	Alliance	UUP	DUP	Others
Vote share	26.2%	15.2%	5.2%	14.9%	30.1%	8.4%
Seats won	28	16	7	18	36	3

43 Turnout: 62.31%

44 2011:

	Sinn Féin	SDLP	Alliance	UUP	DUP	Others
Vote share	26.9%	14.2%	7.7%	13.2%	30.0%	7.9%
Seats won	29	14	8	16	38	3

45 Turnout: 54.5%

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1 1 C'est une citation très connue, que l'on retrouve dans tous les ouvrages consacrés à l'IRA ou aux Troubles. Par exemple : David McKittrick, David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles*, London: Penguin, 2000, p. 148. Ou encore: http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/in_depth/northern_ireland/2001/provisional_ira/1981.stm

English

The 2003 Northern Ireland assembly election was greeted with a general mood of pessimism. The victory of the two most diametrically opposed

parties in the Unionist and Nationalist camps, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin, was not supposed to augur well for the peace process and the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. But the opposite happened. The complete disarmament of the IRA in July 2005 paved the way for the signing of the Saint Andrew's Agreement of October 2006. New elections in March 2007 confirmed that the moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) were relegated to the sidelines. From May 2007 onwards, the bewildered Northern Irish could witness surreal scenes with Rev. Ian Paisley, an implacable opponent to republicanism for over 30 years, laughing out loud with Martin McGuinness, the former IRA chief of staff.

Then Ian Paisley had to vacate his place as First Minister to his Party's deputy leader, Peter Robinson. The odd Sinn Féin/DUP coalition had to run current affairs. The incomplete abolition of the 11+ examination conducted by the Sinn Féin ministers has left pupils and their parents in a state of great confusion. In January 2010, the Robinson couple was engulfed in a moral and financial scandal which cost Peter his seat in the May Westminster election. In December 2010/January 2011, the ruling coalition had to face the disaster of thousands of families deprived of water due to a particularly harsh winter. The 2011 Assembly election gives us an opportunity to assess the work of this unforeseen experiment and to ponder the future of Northern Ireland.

Français

Les élections en Irlande du Nord de 2003 avaient été accueillies par un sentiment général de pessimisme. La victoire du DUP et du Sinn Féin, les deux partis les plus éloignés dans les camps unioniste et nationaliste, augurait la fin du « processus de paix » de par l'impossibilité de mettre en œuvre les institutions prévues par l'Accord du Vendredi Saint du 10 avril 1998. En fait, c'est le contraire qui s'est produit. Le désarmement définitif de l'IRA en juillet 2005 a ouvert la voie à l'Accord de Saint Andrews d'octobre 2006. De nouvelles élections en mars 2007 ont confirmé que les deux partis plus « modérés », le SDLP et l'UUP, étaient relégués sur la touche. À partir de mai 2007, la population d'Irlande du Nord, médusée, a pu assister aux scènes surréalistes du vieux pasteur Ian Paisley, opposant implacable du républicanisme et du catholicisme depuis plus de 30 ans, riant à gorge déployée avec Martin McGuinness, ancien chef d'Etat-major de l'IRA dans les années 70 !

Puis, Ian Paisley a dû laisser la place à son second, Peter Robinson. L'étrange coalition DUP/Sinn Féin a dû se confronter à la gestion des affaires courantes. L'abolition incomplète de l'examen de fin d'école primaire, le « 11 plus », voulue par la ministre Sinn Féin a laissé une situation de grande confusion pour les familles et les élèves. Un scandale de mœurs et financiers a éclaboussé le couple Robinson en janvier 2010 et a coûté au Premier Ministre d'Irlande du Nord son siège à Westminster en mai. En décembre 2010 et janvier 2011, la coalition a été confrontée au scandale de milliers de familles et de particuliers privés d'eau en raison d'un hiver particulièrement rude. Le renouvellement de l'Assemblée en mai 2011 permet de dresser un

bilan de cette expérience inédite et de s'interroger sur l'avenir de l'Irlande du Nord.

Mots-clés

Irlande du Nord, DUP, Sinn Féin, élections, expérience inédite

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