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The “crisis of political parties” in the British & Irish Isles

The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland: has its day come?

Le Parti de l’Alliance d’Irlande du Nord : son heure a-t-elle sonné ?

15 December 2023.

Christophe Gillissen

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2. 'The centre cannot hold'
3. A slow decline
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1 During much of the Northern Irish conflict (1968-98), the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI) was considered as a somewhat irrelevant political force. Its attempt to occupy the centre of the political system met limited success, as that space was squeezed between the Catholic-nationalist and Protestant-unionist blocs. With an average 8% share of the vote, the party had limited leverage in the political system, and its participation in various power-sharing initiatives failed to produce any lasting results. It was thus largely neglected by researchers (Tonge, 2020: 464). In recent years, however, the British exit from the European Union has created circumstances in which the APNI has become a force to be counted with. It might even become a major actor in post-conflict Northern Ireland, if enough voters are attracted by its ambition to normalise the political system

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and culture, a task that would also require significant constitutional changes.

1. The centrist tradition in Northern Irish politics

2 Northern Irish politics are generally described as being polarised between the Protestant and Catholic communities. Unionist and nationalist parties have certainly dominated the political landscape since the foundation of the Northern Ireland statelet in 1921, with each election being promoted by those parties as a referendum on the partition of the island of Ireland: unionists are determined to remain within the UK, while nationalists advocate the reunification of Ireland. Nonetheless, beyond that central divide, "a centrist tradition [...] of parties which gain substantial support from both sides of the community divide" has also characterised the political history of the region, albeit to a lesser extent (Whyte, 1990: 73).

3 Prior to the conflict, the centre was mainly represented by the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP). It emerged from the trade union movement in the early 1920s and was initially neutral as far as the constitutional status of Northern Ireland was concerned, a position that allowed it to accommodate both Protestant and Catholic members.

4 It enjoyed a modicum of electoral success in the wake of the 1929 Wall Street crash, and even overtook the Nationalist Party at the end of the Second World War in terms of votes. However, in 1929 the governing Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) had jettisoned proportional representation in favour of first-past-the-post for Northern Irish elections, a change that allowed it to shore up its parliamentary majority at the expense of other parties. As a result, the NILP never won more than four seats in the Stormont 52-seat House of Commons (Whyte, 2000).

	UUP	**NILP**	**Nationalist Party**
1925	55.0%	4.7%	23.8%
1929	50.8%	8.0%	11.7%
1933	43.5%	8.5%	13.2%

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1938	56.8%	5.7%	4.9%
1945	50.4%	18.5%	9.1%
1949	62.7%	7.1%	26.8%
1953	48.6%	5.1%	10.8%
1958	44.0%	15.8%	14.9%
1962	48.8%	25.4%	15.1%
1965	59.1%	20.4%	8.2%

(Source: Boothroyd)

5 After the 1948 proclamation of the Republic of Ireland, the British Labour government passed the Ireland Act of 1949, affirming the constitutional position of Northern Ireland in the UK and excluding the Irish Republic from the Commonwealth. It was in that context that the NILP held a special conference during which it passed a motion committing it to "maintain unbroken the connection between Great Britain and Northern Ireland as part of the Commonwealth" and to seek "the closest possible means of cooperation with the British Labour Party" (Edwards, 2011: 30). The abandonment of neutrality on partition precipitated a split within the Party, and the subsequent departure of many Catholic members led to a collapse in the NILP's share of the vote in the 1949 and 1953 elections.

6 Yet from the late 1950s onwards the NILP's unionist position allowed it to win over Protestant working-class voters. Increasingly threatened by unemployment, they were attracted by the party's opposition to the UUP over economic issues (McAllister, 1983: 68), an opposition that was also endorsed by many Catholic workers. In the 1962 Stormont election, the NILP secured over 25% of the votes.

7 The centre of Northern Irish politics was also represented by other, smaller forces at the time, such as the Ulster Liberal Party (ULP) and the liberal unionist wing within the UUP. Indeed, although the UUP had dominated the Northern Irish political landscape for over half a century, winning an absolute parliamentary majority at every election, it was not as monolithic as those electoral results suggest. The Party had been led by hard-line unionists during its first decades – notably James Craig (1921-40) and Basil Brooke (1943-63) –, but the appointment of Terence O'Neill as leader in 1963 facilitated the growth of a moderate branch of unionism, which may be described as embodying non-sectarian unionism.

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8 O'Neill was indeed keen to build bridges, both with the Republic of Ireland and with Northern Catholics. He considered that sectarian politics impeded Northern Ireland's economic development, and his proposals to modernise the region's industrial base and envisage reform of the political system were welcomed by moderate unionist opinion. Within his Party "there began to emerge a more self-consciously O'Neillite faction" (Mulholland, 2009). Strongly encouraged by London, O'Neill launched a reform programme which partially met some of the demands of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (Brennan, 1991: 39-42).

9 Following the riots of October 1968, this liberal unionist wing came under growing strain as William Craig, the minister of home affairs, and Brian Faulkner, the minister of commerce, pushed back against several of the prime minister's reforms. They eventually resigned, in a plot to overthrow him. O'Neill confronted them by calling a general election for 24 February 1969, and several of his allies – such as Bob Cooper, who later became the Alliance's deputy leader – formed the New Ulster Movement (NUM) with the aim of canvassing support for O'Neill's reform programme (Maume, 2010).

10 Oliver Napier, a liberal Catholic from the ULP who became leader of the Alliance Party (1973-1984), also joined the NUM at that time. He has explained his approach in the following way:

11 I believed then and I still do that the only hope for a peaceful and happy Northern Ireland was to have cooperation between different sections of the population. In other words people had to work together, not against each other. I joined the Ulster Liberal Party, then four Liberals formed the New Ulster Movement, putting forward the idea that the people of Northern Ireland have far more in common with each other than with anybody in the South or in Great Britain. In due course the Alliance Party was formed. My views were that any party which did not accept the constitutional position in Northern Ireland was not going to be listened to by anybody in the majority – if you were threatening their identity, that's what it amounted to. If you threaten the Protestant population with an eventual united Ireland you bring up the laager mentality and that is going to resist all change, good and bad. (O Connor, 1999: 47)

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12 That approach corresponded closely to what O'Neill's was trying to achieve: a major restructuring of Northern Irish politics around a centre of moderate Protestants and Catholics. As underlined by Denis Loretto, one of the APNI's founding members:

13 O'Neill's strategy […] was unprecedented. He was the first unionist leader deliberately to seek to split the movement. His hope was that a crushing blow against the right would decisively rebrand unionism and allow moderate middle-class catholics [sic], whom he believed were already moving from traditional nationalism, to come out openly in favour of the union. He was attempting to end unionist reliance on protestant solidarity. (Loretto, 2001-02: 33)

14 If the 1969 snap election allowed O'Neill to remain in office, the depth of the opposition within his Party left him little choice but to resign two months later, in April. As violence steadily increased in the region, the NUM joined forces with pro-O'Neill MPs to form the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland on 21 April 1970. Its ambition was to bring together moderate Catholics and Protestants willing to work towards establishing equality and ending discrimination (Eggins, 2015: 36-8). The aim was to heal divisions and to bring about British standards of democracy in the region.

2. 'The centre cannot hold'

15 The introduction of proportional representation in Northern Ireland in 1973 widened the fault lines within the UUP. The Party retained a majority of unionist voters, but the APNI enjoyed the support of reformist unionists in addition to that of liberal nationalists, while the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) founded by Ian Paisley in 1971 embodied hard-line unionism (Arthur / Jeffery, 1996: 6-8).

16 The parties had different positions on Northern Ireland's constitutional future. The UUP wavered between devolved power-sharing and the full integration of Northern Ireland into the UK, while the two other parties were constant in their commitment to devolution, though with a major difference: the DUP wanted to restore the Stormont system – devolved majority rule by Protestants –, where the APNI advocated devolved power-sharing between both communities (Maguire, 1992: 16).

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17 Alliance's ambition was endorsed by London in its 1972 green paper, *The Future of Northern Ireland*: an Assembly was duly elected in 1973, in which three moderate parties – the UUP, the APNI and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), a nationalist party founded in 1970 – won over 60% of the vote and 51 seats out of a total 78. They then formed a power-sharing coalition executive, in which Oliver Napier held the office of minister for law reform.

	DUP	**UUP**	**APNI**	**SDLP**
1973 NI Assembly election	10.8%	29.3%	9.2%	22.1%
1974 Westminster election	8.2%	32.3%	8.0%	22.4%
1974 Westminster election	8.5%	36.5%	6.3%	22.0%
1975 NI Convention election	14.8%	25.8%	9.8%	23.7%
1979 Westminster election	10.2%	36.6%	11.8%	19.9%
1979 European election	29.8%	21.9%	6.7%	24.6%
1982 NI Assembly election	23.0%	29.7%	9.3%	18.8%
1983 Westminster election	20.0%	34.0%	8.0%	17.9%

(Source: Melaugh / McKenna,)

18 But the signing of the Sunningdale Agreement a few months later, in December 1973, split the UUP: the provisions for a cross-border Council of Ireland proved unacceptable to many unionists, who perceived it as a threat to the Union. Brian Faulkner, then both prime minister and UUP leader, was disavowed by his party.

19 As to the DUP, it was determined to bring down the power-sharing executive by any means. In May 1974, it supported a strike organised by a Protestant trade union, the Ulster Workers' Council (UWC), and enforced by loyalist paramilitaries, which resulted in the resignation of the power-sharing executive when the British government refused to send in the army to break the strike (Brennan, 1991: 108-109).

20 The APNI remained faithful to its objective of promoting power-sharing, however, and in 1975 it participated in the election to the Constitutional Convention. The Convention's remit, as defined by London, was to devise a blueprint for a new regional power-sharing Assembly. The refusal of both the UUP and the DUP to countenance power-sharing led to an impasse (Eggins, 2015: 62-63). In the context

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of growing violence, moderate parties proved unable to sustain a cross-community platform.

21 In the late 1970s the APNI was still able to attract voters from both communities, with a proportion of about five Protestants for four Catholics among its members (Whyte, 1990: 21). At the time, it enjoyed an average support of 10% of the electorate, a relatively high level resulting from the "electoral implosion" of the APNI's rivals for the centre vote (Maume, 2017): the moderate unionists led by Faulkner and the NILP both disappeared from the political scene.

22 If European elections, held from 1979 on a region-wide basis, proved challenging for the APNI, the party did relatively well at local elections. In 1977 for instance, an Alliance councillor, David Cook, became the first non-Unionist Lord Mayor of Belfast (Eggins, 2015: 62). The Party also enjoyed significant electoral success at regional elections. In 1973, 1975 and 1982, voters approved its commitment to constitutional reforms aimed at ending the conflict through cross-community dialogue.

23 The 1982 Assembly was based on the principle of "rolling devolution": whenever parties reached intercommunity agreement in a given field, competence for that field would be devolved from London to the Northern Ireland Assembly. The boycott of the Assembly by nationalist parties, however, prevented any powers from being transferred, and the Assembly was eventually wound up in 1986 (Brennan, 1991: 111).

3. A slow decline

24 The failure of those successive constitutional initiatives, combined with the increasing polarisation of Northern Irish politics after the 1981 hunger strikes, affected the APNI's political relevance, notably among middle-class Catholics. Many who had initially been attracted to the Alliance switched to the SDLP, whose commitment to Irish reunification by consent, in addition to power-sharing, better reflected "their aspirations" (O Connor, 1999: 48).

25 Indeed, if the focus of the APNI has always been on devolved power-sharing in Northern Ireland, it was long an unambiguously unionist

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party as well. In 1970, the first of its four founding principles had expressed a clear commitment to the Union:

26 We support the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom. We know that this belief is shared by the overwhelming majority of our people and that provocative debate about it has been a primary cause of our most fundamental troubles. The Union is in the best economic and social interests of all citizens of the state. (quoted in Eggins, 2015: 171-2)

27 During the 1990s, however, as the prospect of a negotiated peace settlement approached, the APNI gradually shifted towards a neutral stance on Northern Ireland's constitutional status. In 1991, on the opening day of interparty talks, the Alliance leader, John Alderdice (1987-98), commented on his Party's principles as formulated in its 1970 manifesto, stating: "Alliance sees the people of Northern Ireland as a community, however divided, and like any other such community our people have the right to determine their own future" (Alliance Party, 1991). Instead of pre-empting the right to self-determination of Northern Irish voters by asserting what it believed to be their wish, the Alliance leadership accepted that the issue of partition could be a legitimate object of political debate. The inflexion created a political space that was to be enshrined in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

28 The Party's evolving position on Northern Ireland's constitutional status did not translate into immediate electoral gains, however. On the contrary, its electoral support continued to dwindle, to an average 6% during the 1990s. By 1996 the only future that two seasoned observers of Northern Irish politics could see for the Party was that it would become "no more than a small liberal ginger group" (Arthur / Jeffery, 1996: 52).

	DUP	**UUP**	**APNI**	**SDLP**	**SF**
1984 European election	10.8%	29.3%	5.0%	22.1%	13.3%
1987 Westminster election	8.2%	32.3%	10.0%	22.4%	11.4%
1989 European election	8.5%	36.5%	5.2%	22.0%	9.2%
1992 Westminster election	14.8%	25.8%	8.7%	23.7%	10.0%
1994 European election	10.2%	36.6%	4.1%	19.9%	9.9%
1996 NI Forum election	29.8%	21.9%	6.5%	24.6%	15.5%
1997 Westminster election	23.0%	29.7%	8.0%	18.8%	16.1%

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1998 NI Assembly election	20.0%	34.0%	6.5%	17.9%	17.7%
1999 European election	28.3%	17.6%	2.1%	28.1%	17.4%
2001 Westminster election	26.8%	22.5%	3.6%	21.0%	21.7%
2003 Assembly election	25.7%	22.7%	3.7%	17.0%	23.5%
2004 European election	32.0%	16.6%	-	15.9%	26.3%
2005 Westminster election	33.7%	17.7%	3.9%	17.5%	24.3%

(Source: Melaugh / McKenna)

29 One of its difficulties was that it was increasingly perceived as a unionist party rather than a bi-confessional one. In the run-up to the Good Friday Agreement, Tony Blair met John Alderdice to ascertain his view of the state of the talks, considering that he was "a good bellwether of unionist opinion" (Powell, 2008: 92-93).

30 In an attempt to demonstrate its relevance, Alliance defined three "core values" that could attract voters from both sides of the community divide: (1) a "commitment to exclusively democratic and non-violent principles"; (2) "opposition to sectarianism, racism and other forms of arbitrary division"; and (3) a "commitment to human rights, fair play and social justice" (Alliance Party, 2003: 3). The Party manifesto for the 2003 Assembly election explained the APNI's neutrality on the constitutional position of Northern Ireland in the following words: "The 'constitutional issue' is not a defining issue that preoccupies the Alliance Party. In keeping with the three core values the party's main concern is that the people's consent is paramount and that the legitimate interests of all are safeguarded" (Alliance Party, 2003: 3).

31 Nonetheless, once the principle of devolved power-sharing was established by the Good Friday Agreement, the APNI lost some of its *raison d'être*, since that had been its main objective since its foundation. In addition, the new constitutional system requires all parties to identify as "Unionist" or "Nationalist" so that power-sharing can be effectively implemented: the support of a majority of members of the legislative Assembly (MLAs) within each community is necessary to approve important decisions, and they must thus self-designate as belonging to one of those groups. From the Alliance's point of view, however, this consociational framework has proved problematic for several reasons. In the short term, it has provided a way to bring former enemies to cooperate, which is no mean achievement; but it

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offers limited perspectives in the long term as it "entrenches ethnic bloc politics" (Evans / Tonge, 2003: 26). In fact, as two Alliance leaders predicted as soon as 1998, the system has led to the decline of moderate parties, the UUP and the SDLP, which have been overtaken respectively by the radical DUP and Sinn Féin (SF) (Farry / Neeson, 1998: 1244).

32 As to parties of the centre that choose to designate themselves as "Other", they can only have limited influence on decision-making in this system. Logically enough, many voters, notably among Catholics, preferred to support a party able to defend the interests of their community, like the SDLP or SF. By the early 2000s, the APNI only included 20% of Catholics, and the Party's membership was often derided by nationalists as "unionists without the sashes" according to Jonathan Tonge, a leading specialist of Northern Irish politics (2005: 88-9).

33 During the Westminster 2001 general election, Alliance candidates withdrew in some constituencies to help the pro-Agreement UUP against the DUP, which had not yet approved the terms of the peace settlement. The decision, made by the Party leadership, undid much of the work carried out since the 1990s to convince voters that the APNI was neutral on the constitutional issue. It may have helped to shore up the UUP, and thus the Northern Ireland Assembly, but it came at the cost of a poor electoral performance for Alliance, which only won 3.6% of the vote, compared to 8% in the previous Westminster election. The Party leader, Séan Neeson (1998-2001), duly resigned.

34 Immediately afterwards, his successor, David Ford (2001-16), decided to briefly designate Alliance MLAs as "Unionist" rather than "Other" during the election of the First Minister of Northern Ireland; this allowed them to vote for the UUP leader, David Trimble, who was increasingly challenged within his own Party (Evans / Tonge, 2003: 27). Once again, the move aimed at maintaining devolved power-sharing, but it came at the expense of the APNI whose image as a vehicle of "soft unionism" was confirmed.

35 Under those circumstances, the Party's future seemed bleak. Jonathan Tonge considered that the most likely outcome would be the "collapse of the traditional centre" embodied by Alliance, though

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he also identified another, admittedly "remote", possibility: the party might experience a "revival" of its "fortunes, with its radical, post-nationalist, post-unionist concept of one-community Northern Irishness being endorsed by the electorate in post-conflict Northern Ireland" (Tonge, 2005: 90).

4. Post-conflict politics

36 Unlikely as it seemed at the time, that "remote" possibility has slowly taken shape. In a political landscape transformed by the emergence of the DUP and SF as the two dominant forces in the region, the APNI was instrumental in facilitating the devolution of policing and justice arrangements to Northern Ireland, in conformity with the provisions of the 2006 St Andrews Agreement. In 2010, David Ford, the Party leader, was chosen as the first justice minister of the region (2010-16), an office that was too controversial to be given to a unionist or nationalist MLA (Eggins, 2015: 147).

37 Another major sign of improvement in Alliance's fortunes came with its first ever victory in a Westminster election constituency in 2010, and one that attracted much attention: Naomi Long defeated Peter Robinson, the DUP leader and First Minister of Northern Ireland, in East Belfast, a seat he had held since 1979. She had represented East Belfast in the Northern Ireland Assembly since 2003, had become deputy leader of the APNI in 2006, then Lord Mayor of Belfast in 2009-10.

38 The following year, Belfast City Council decided to limit the number of days on which the Union Jack would fly from City Hall. This was proposed by Alliance members as a compromise between the positions of SF, who wanted to remove the flag altogether (or have it fly alongside the Irish tricolour), and of the DUP, who insisted it should fly every day. A long-lasting dispute followed, with loyalist protesters issuing threats against Alliance representatives (Eggins, 2015: 155-57).

39 Those events demonstrated that the APNI was not just another unionist party, but that it had a distinctive contribution to make to Northern Irish politics. It made some, admittedly modest, electoral gains.

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	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF
2007 Assembly election	30.1%	14.9%	5.2%	15.2%	26.2%
2009 European election	18.2%	17.1%	5.5%	16.2%	26.0%
2010 Westminster election	25.0%	15.2%	6.4%	16.5%	25.5%
2011 Assembly election	30.6%	13.5%	7.8%	14.5%	27.5%
2014 European election	21.0%	13.3%	7.1%	13.0%	25.5%
2015 Westminster election	25.7%	16.1%	8.6%	13.9%	24.5%
2016 Assembly election	29.2%	12.6%	7.0%	12.0%	24.0%

(Source: Melaugh / McKenna)

40 The party's breakthrough occurred in the years following the 2016 Brexit referendum. All parties except the DUP had campaigned in favour of "Remain", a position endorsed by 56% of Northern Irish votes. Across the UK, however, 52% of votes were cast for "Leave", and Northern Ireland had to contemplate a future outside the European Union. The Alliance Party supported "the softest possible form of Brexit plus special arrangements for Northern Ireland", thus finding itself "loosely aligned with the nationalist SDLP and Sinn Féin", while the DUP and the UUP opposed any arrangement that might seem to weaken Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom, be it Theresa May's "backstop" or Boris Johnson's Northern Ireland protocol (Murphy, 2022: 3).

41 Alliance's position won approval among voters: its share of the vote at Assembly elections increased from 7.0% in 2016 (before the referendum) to 9.1% in 2017 and 13.5% in 2022, while its share at European elections – where the party has traditionally underperformed – increased from 7.1% in 2014 to an impressive 18.5% in 2019, securing for the first time in its history one of Northern Ireland's three seats in the European Parliament. At Westminster elections, the party's score rose from 8.0% in 2017 to 16.8% in 2019.

	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF
2017 Assembly election	28.1%	12.9%	9.1%	11.0%	27.9%
2017 Westminster election	36.0%	10.3%	8.0%	11.8%	29.4%
2019 European election	21.8%	9.3%	18.5%	13.7%	22.2%
2019 Westminster election	30.6%	11.7%	16.8%	14.9%	22.8%
2022 Assembly election	21.3%	11.2%	13.5%	9.1%	29.0%

(Source: Whyte, 2020)

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42 The profile of Alliance's new voters may be established in several ways. Politically, a quarter of all voters who had not cast a vote in the 2017 Westminster election but who turned out in 2019 opted to support the APNI, which demonstrated the party's "capacity to mobilise the previously disenchanted or disenfranchised" (Tonge, 2020: 462).

43 Two other significant groups were composed of electors who had voted in 2017 for the DUP (18%) or for SF (12%); their switch to the APNI reflected growing impatience with two parties held responsible for a suspension of the region's institutions for over three years (2017-20). Those parties' inability or unwillingness to get the power-sharing Assembly and executive running again meant that many problems in Northern Ireland, like the crisis in the health system, could not be addressed, to the growing anger of many voters.

44 There was much resentment against the DUP in particular. Between 2017 and 2019, it had enjoyed great influence in London through its confidence-and-supply agreement with Prime Minister Theresa May who had lost her parliamentary majority in Westminster in 2017. The DUP rejected several of her solutions negotiated with the European Commission, like the "backstop", in the hope that she would be replaced by Boris Johnson. He was actively courting the DUP, but once he became prime minister in 2019, he betrayed them by negotiating a Northern Ireland protocol largely rejected by unionists.

45 After such an egregious failure on the part of the DUP leadership, many unionist voters found it easy in 2019 to switch to the APNI, whose leader Naomi Long, "a formidable and strategically smart leader", had grown up in "a staunch, unionist, working-class area" (McKay, 2021: 6). A survey carried out at the time of the 2019 Westminster election showed she was perceived "as the most popular – or least unpopular – leader of the five main parties" in Northern Ireland, thus facilitating transfers of votes to her party from all parts of the political spectrum (Tonge, 2020: 464).

46 More significantly in the long term, the rise of Alliance is linked to a growing middle ground in Northern Ireland, composed notably of young people who do not identify with the unionist or nationalist groups and who tend to have progressive views (Social Market Research, 2020: 4). According to the 2021 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey, this middle ground has in fact become the largest cat-

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egory in the region, with 38% of voters, followed by unionists at 32% and nationalists at 26% (Tonge, 2022: 528). However, it only accounts for 15 to 20% of the overall vote, partly because the turn-out in that group is significantly lower than among voters who identify as unionists or nationalists (Murphy, 2022: 4).

Conclusion

47 The Brexit referendum has destabilised the Northern Irish political system, yet at the same time it has created circumstances in which the Alliance Party has been able to gain influence, notably by attracting disgruntled DUP supporters, pro-Remain voters, and abstentionists from the middle ground. The party's objective is to bring about a normalised, functional political system able to deal on a non-sectarian basis with issues of relevance to voters.

48 Nonetheless, the rules of the current system, in which a head count of nationalists and unionists remains central, constitute a major obstacle to that objective. Alliance has argued in favour of reforming the constitutional framework of Northern Ireland, but the dominant parties hold a power of veto and are reluctant to modify a system that works to their advantage. That constitutes a significant limit to the APNI's potential electoral gains in the future.

49 The main challenge on the horizon for the party, however, will be that of a future referendum on Irish reunification. At present, there are no grounds for the British government to hold one: opinion polls show a majority in Northern Ireland still favour the status quo. Yet since 2016 those polls have also revealed growing support for reunification. If that support were to become dominant, a referendum would have to take place, creating a conundrum for Alliance: it would be both untenable for the party to remain neutral on an issue of such importance and politically fatal to choose one side against another.

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Alliance Party leaders, 1970-2023

Oliver Napier and Bob Cooper, 1970-72

Phelim O'Neill, 1972

Oliver Napier, 1972-84

John Cushnahan, 1984-87

John Alderdice, 1987-98

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Sean Neeson, 1998-2001

David Ford, 2001-2016

Naomi Long, 2016-

English
The Alliance Party played a minor role during the Northern Ireland conflict, but since Brexit it has become a significant political force, rallying voters disappointed by dominant parties or not identifying with the traditional divide between unionists and nationalists. Nonetheless, the Northern Irish institutional framework and the perspective of a referendum on Irish reunification constitute major obstacles for this party of the centre seeking to promote power-sharing in a deeply divided region.

Français
Si le Parti de l'Alliance n'a joué qu'un rôle mineur pendant les années du conflit nord-irlandais, depuis le Brexit il s'est imposé comme une force politique significative, à laquelle se sont ralliés de nombreux électeurs déçus par les formations dominantes ou ne s'identifiant pas au clivage traditionnel entre unionistes et nationalistes. Cela étant, le fonctionnement des institutions et la perspective d'un référendum sur la réunification irlandaise ne jouent pas en faveur d'une formation centriste qui cherche à promouvoir la coopération intercommunautaire dans une région profondément divisée.

Mots-clés
Irlande du Nord, partis politique, Parti de l'Alliance, Brexit, élection

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