End of Award Report:

Representing a New Northern Ireland: Sites of Creation and Contest in Devolved Governance

Background

The 1998 Multi-Party Agreement set a new political context by affirming the current position of Northern Ireland as part of the new devolved context within the UK and, at the same time, recognising the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland within the island of Ireland. It did this by creating a unique set of political institutions governing power-sharing within Northern Ireland and the relationship between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

The participants … will:

. . . (v) affirm that whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, the power of the sovereign government with jurisdiction there shall be exercised with rigorous impartiality on behalf of all the people in the diversity of their identities and traditions and shall be founded on the principles of full respect for, and equality of, civil, political, social and cultural rights, of freedom from discrimination for all citizens, and of parity of esteem and of just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos, and aspirations of both communities; . . . (Multi-Party Agreement 1998 p.2, our italics)

Whilst the Agreement uses the language of plurality it is essentially a political agreement designed to regulate two political blocks, unionism and nationalism, which broadly represent the Protestant and Catholic communities. There are provisions within the Agreement for an Assembly to be run using a system of weighted voting, requiring consent from 'both communities'. This intended to ensure "that all sections of the community are protected," although only two communities are named thus replicating communal politics in Northern Ireland.

Within the Agreement there is a double-bind. The concept of 'parity of esteem' involves the recognition of two cultural blocks and the Agreement suggests that the survival of these cultural blocks should be recognised through the development of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland (Bryan 2004, 2006a). Yet it also looks to plurality in the hope that more inclusive forms of belonging can be found, possibly a hyphenated British-Irish form around a common Northern Irishness.

Our interest in this project was 'the culture stuff'. In particular the way that rituals and symbols are dealt with in order to develop identities within the new context. To do this our research explored the management of this inter-group conflict through symbols and rituals. The Agreement refers to this area:

All participants acknowledge the sensitivity of the use of symbols and emblems for public purposes, and the need in particular in creating new institutions to ensure that such symbols and emblems are used in a manner which promotes mutual respect rather than division. Arrangements will be made to monitor this issue and consider what action might be required. (p.20)
The broad objective of this project was to analyse the role played by official bodies at a range of sites where attempts are made, through the use of symbols and rituals, to 'imagine' Northern Ireland, and to explore assumptions made about ethnic conflict and identity through the strategies that the public bodies use. Analysis of this material was guided by a model developed by Harrison (1995) that explores how symbols are used as part of proprietary contests, and which argues that symbols can be invented, ranked, appropriated and destroyed or suppressed.

The context in which the project took place was significantly altered by the instability of the political institutions throughout the period. The assembly operated for a period totalling less than two and a half years, this in an eight year period since the signing of the Agreement. This, and the general political conditions, clearly influenced the likelihood of local political actors undertaking new symbolic strategies. That said, new strategies were developed by the British government and by local policy makers. In addition, legislation introduced at Westminster as part of the Agreement also influenced a range of public agencies and local councils.

**Objectives**

This project explored the role played by official bodies in the development of symbolic meaning. The objective was to:

1. examine the dynamic political force
2. look at the strategies and policies developed by public bodies;
3. analyse how this reflects different models of ethnicity and multi-ethnic states;
4. map the development of any sense of a common identity for Northern Ireland; and
5. make some policy recommendations.

Under each of these objectives attention was paid to:

1. the use of history;
2. the strategy used regarding symbols;
3. the official, and alternative, discourses associated with the symbols; and
4. the practice which develops.

**Methods**

The project took a series of case studies and, using historical and anthropological approaches, explored the role of public bodies in changes taking place in the labour of representation. It used both diachronic and synchronic research methods to look at the struggles to attach meaning to each ritual and symbol. Some areas, such as our work on flags, proved richer and were therefore covered in more detail than others. The case studies were:

1. The use of Stormont as an icon and symbol of government.
2. Royal Visits.
3. The use of flags.
4. The use of emblems, specifically the Police badge.
5. St Patrick’s Day (Belfast and Downpatrick)
6. War commemoration
Results

Our case studies reveal contrasting policy strategies resulting from the Agreement. Policy areas within the remit of the British Government have attempted to negotiate the development of shared space (for example, Stormont, flags, the removing of crown imagery from courts and the police badge) either through direct policy and legal intervention or by indirect pressure through legislation and policy guidance. This move has been replicated in the broad thrust of the new community relations strategy *A Shared Future* (2005). These policies have been negotiated in the midst of demands from political actors within the dominant ethnic groups, unionism and nationalism. So, for example, royal visits such as that of the Queen to recognise the role of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, were quite pragmatically used to try to balance the scales measuring parity of esteem.

Importantly, the context in which policies were being developed was not one that was conducive to any of the four major political parties promoting strategies that might develop new or shared symbolic space. While there are exceptions, mostly promoted by the SDLP and Sinn Féin (war commemoration), by far the most common strategy was to call for higher valuation to be placed upon symbols representing one or other political block (flags, St Patrick’s Day) or strategies to appropriate particular events in specific ways (flags, St Patrick’s Day, and Royal Visits). While new emblems were developed to represent the new Assembly (flax plant) and the ministerial departments (hexagonal pattern inspired by the Giant’s Causeway), the only controversial symbol to come out of an agreed process was the emblem for the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

1. Parliament Buildings, Stormont

In post-devolution Northern Ireland public space, buildings and events offered the opportunity of sites that could provide for a shared sense of local identity in Northern Ireland. One such opportunity was provided by the decision to keep Parliament Buildings, Stormont as the home of the new Assembly, this in the context of an assessment of the building’s history. Northern Ireland’s first Prime Minister, Lord Craigavon, at its opening in 1932 expressed what it represented then: ‘It is indeed a noble building, and will stand on its base of granite from the Mountains of Mourne, as a symbol of the link between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.’ For Irish nationalists the name Stormont quickly became synonymous with Unionist majoritarian rule in Northern Ireland. A building redolent of unionist supremacy its reputation from the early years of the recent Troubles in the nineteen seventies was as a heavily protected site, within which British ministers took shelter. As such, Parliament Buildings, Stormont was a problematic site as the home of the new Assembly, and was identified as such at an early stage by senior politicians.

The decision to keep it as the location of the Assembly was both pragmatic and symbolic; the prohibitive cost of commissioning a new building combined with the fact that, following a fire there in 1995 (and the subsequent refitting), Parliament Buildings was a suitable and ready-made option. Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1997-2000), Mo Mowlam, was the chief instigator of attempts to ‘re-brand’ the Stormont site. For Linda Brown, in 1997 head of the government’s ‘Developing Stormont’ committee, the symbolic importance of the site was even more basic; if Northern Ireland’s politicians could not deal with the past and work together in Stormont, then it did not bode well for the future success of devolution.
Mowlam was drawn to the concept of Stormont as a venue for popular concerts. Elton John performed at Stormont days after the passing of the referendum on the Agreement. It was described in the following celebratory terms in the Irish Times:

For the best part of a century, Sir Edward Carson, has ruled the roost at Stormont Castle. A huge statue of the former Unionist leader, fist raised in the air, sits defiantly at the top of the hill. But last night, Stormont belonged to everyone. ... There wasn't a politician, flag or sectarian banner in sight.

This was a carefully managed media event, which placed Parliament Buildings centre stage for the world's press. Indeed, this is literally true; members of the 'Developing Stormont' committee walked the grounds of the estate prior to the concert to work out logistically the optimum position for the stage, in order that the building would dominate any photographs or camera shots.

Through a series of concerts, exhibitions, redevelopment of the estate and creation of an educational resource centre Parliament Buildings and the estate were effectively re-branded. What is particularly interesting is that retaining Stormont allowed for the reinvention of a symbol associated with unionist power and for a re-appropriation of the site by nationalists (McIntosh and Bryan 2005e).

2. Royal Visits

In the twentieth century royal visits to Northern Ireland have followed clear symbolic strategies. Public attitudes to royal visits to Northern Ireland over the twentieth century followed a distinct pattern but have never been consensual. One could generalise that northern nationalists associated the monarchy with the British state, and resented their visits on the basis that they underlined Northern Ireland's separation from the rest of Ireland, and emphasised the link to Britain through the Union. Unionists on the other hand found security in the visits of monarchy to the state, and reassurance from the presence of royals, seeing them as a symbol of unity and stability. Of course there was no such simple opposition, and all sections of the community found the pageantry and ritual associated with royal visits, with the novelty and excitement they generated, entertaining, particularly at times of social austerity and political stress. This was as much an all-Ireland phenomenon as it was a Northern Ireland one.

In terms of ceremony, contemporary royal visits have taken place on a more restricted scale, but by examining these events retrospectively it is clear that the symbolic importance of a royal visit has remained constant. For instance, when Elizabeth II visited Northern Ireland in April 2000, she did so to present the (soon to be disbanded) Royal Ulster Constabulary with the George Cross at Hillsborough. The use of royalty in this politically symbolic way has a long, often troubled history in the state. As the historian David Cannadine has argued, the need for 'tradition and order, as met by ceremonials such as these, actually increased [sic] as the stability of the state became ever more uncertain.' In 1971, for example, the Northern Ireland government was very anxious that Elizabeth II come to open the parliament as the highlight of their state's jubilee celebrations, symbolically reinacting her grandfather's actions in 1921. However, given the high level of civil disturbance the British Home Secretary advised against it and there was no royal presence (McIntosh 2005f). Indeed, although the Queen paid a brief and tense one day visit to Northern Ireland for her silver jubilee in 1977 (her first since 1966), she was not to return to Northern Ireland until 1993.
The visit of George V in 1921 set the tone for royal visits to the state in the twentieth century and established the template which subsequent visits followed. Visits during the Second World War, and Elizabeth II's coronation visit of 1953 had morale boosting effects and reinforced the state and its government as part of the Union although issues arising from the 1953 visit led both to parades disputes and to conflict over flags contributing, some have argued, to the 1954 Flags and Emblems Act. Elizabeth II also visited Northern Ireland in 1966, a year rich with symbolism being both the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme, key sacred dates for nationalism and unionism respectively. On this occasion, Northern Ireland's Prime Minister hoped that the Queen would use her speech for the opening of the 'Queen Elizabeth II' bridge as an opportunity to endorse his policy of 'bridge building' across the community in Northern Ireland. The Queen however did not and her visit, was marred by the controversy over the naming of the new Lagan bridge and two incidents when missiles were thrown at the royal cavalcade. (McIntosh 2005f, 2005g, 2007).

3. Flags

Conflict over flags and other emblems are common throughout the world. They are a part of modern politics. But for Northern Ireland they are associated with particular issues that necessitate a search for clear policy responses. Identity politics has manifested itself both in the use of official and popular flag displays. In 1954 the Unionist government of Northern Ireland introduced a Flags and Emblems Act in order to place public order controls on the popular use of flags, particularly of course displays of the Tricolour. In addition Nationalists have long complained at the over use of the Union Flag on government and local council buildings.

The Agreement has not heralded a reduction in this area of symbolic conflict, indeed it may have intensified, however it has provided a new legal context. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act imposes duties upon public authorities to carry out their functions with due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial groups. Additionally, fair employment legislation makes discrimination on the grounds of religious belief and political opinion unlawful both in the work place and in the provision of goods, facilities and services.

Once the Assembly was up and running the flying of flags on Government buildings became an immediate issue. Unionists demanded that the Union Flag be flown at all times. Sinn Féin called for both Union Flag and Tricolour to be flown, but in practice their Ministers permitted no flags to be flown outside departmental buildings. Such was the contention that the then Secretary of State, Peter Mandelson, introduced The Flags (Northern Ireland) Order 2000. This designated particular days on which the Union Flag should fly on government buildings. In October 2001, Sinn Féin took a judicial review arguing the legislation was 'not in keeping with the Good Friday Agreement'. The judgement found for the Secretary of State and argued that restricting the flying days to those practised in the rest of the United Kingdom struck a balance between acknowledging the constitutional position of Northern Ireland and those who opposed it (Bryan and Gillespie 2005:18).

A range of practices in relation to the flying of flags are followed by District Councils around Northern Ireland. These vary from the flying of the Union Flag on a number of Council buildings every day of the year, to flying no flags on any building or simply flying the Council flag. Some Council's have chosen to follow the legislation for government buildings and fly flags on designated days. Section 75 of the Northern
Ireland Act has made local Councils take a closer look at their policies. Equality Impact Assessments have been undertaken by a number of Councils but this has yet to dramatically change any policies. Legal advice and advice from the Equality Commission advocates taking account of each particular context, and that flying no flag, a Council flag or the Union Flag on designated flag days at the headquarters of the local council's head office may be legally defensible (Bryan and Gillespie 2005:35-43).

The popular flying of flags, on lampposts and buildings, has also been a difficult policy issue for a range of agencies. There is an ongoing debate as to whether these should be seen as a part of local community tradition or territorial marking devices. There is also reluctance amongst relevant agencies (the police, the Roads Service, District Councils and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive) to take responsibility for dealing with conflict over the popular flying of flags. There have been a range of projects funded that attempt to take an environmental approach to 'cleaning-up' estates and thus reducing territorial marking (Bryan and Gillespie 2005:44-51).

Research conducted within the remit of this ESRC project has played an important role in developing a new policy approach, mapped out in the Government's *A Shared Future* report (pp.23-27), and in the development of a more co-ordinated approach between agencies leading to a new protocol released by the PSNI in 2005. The key policy objective for the government is now stated as 'freeing the public realm (including public property) from displays of sectarian expression' (*A Shared Future* p.23) and the 'reclaiming of shared space' (p.28) which includes suggesting 'the display of any flags on lamp-posts should be off limits' (p.29).

4. St. Patrick's Day

For many people St Patrick's Day (17 March) represents the quintessential expression of what it means to be Irish. It is perhaps the world's most promiscuous national day with celebrations in many parts of the world extolling that 'on St Patrick's Day everyone can be Irish'. In Belfast, however, where national identity, control of territory, symbolism and even the future of the state remain contested issues the celebration of St Patrick's Day has become an arena for communal antagonism rather than one of mutual celebration. The period after 1998 witnessed the growth of self-confidence among nationalists and republicans but conversely increasing disillusionment among unionists and loyalists about the Agreement in general, as well as the perception that aspects of their culture were not being given due respect (NILT survey 1998-2003).

The first St Patrick's Day celebration in the city centre, in 1998, organised through the Féile an Phobail (West Belfast Festival), contained a range of republican symbolism. Subsequent organisers of the St Patrick's Day Carnival have been more sensitive to issues of symbolism that the event has raised by, for example, attempting to utilise the flag of St Patrick in celebrations. However, organisers were not able to regain funding from Belfast City Council. Relations with the Council have improved, leading to a Council funded celebration being planned for 2006; although not at the politically sensitive site of the City Hall.

By way of contrast, in Downpatrick the Council-organised celebrations prohibits the carrying of any flag in the parade other than the St Patrick's cross or the flag of Down District Council. While this rule was objected to by republicans on the grounds that it banned their national flag the Downpatrick celebration has prospered and grown (an estimated 20,000 people attended the Downpatrick celebration in 2005 compared to 4,500 in Belfast). The differences between the Belfast event and that organised by Downpatrick can, in part, be put down to 'ownership'. Down District Council are at the
centre of arrangements for the Downpatrick event, whereas, the Belfast event was originally organised, and is still closely associated with, republican oriented groups.

5. The Police Badge

The issue of policing and security has long been a controversial one in Northern Ireland. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that police reform was one of the most controversial aspects of the Agreement. For unionists the Patten report (A New Beginning: Policing in Northern Ireland 1999) was seen as a negation of Prime Minister Tony Blair’s promise that the RUC would not be abolished. For nationalists the proposed reforms did not go far enough. Implicit in both attitudes were the conflicting unionist and nationalist views of the role of the RUC in the Troubles. The badge which finally emerged was, in many ways, a reflection of the wider Agreement; compromise was initially difficult to achieve, alternative proposals produced by the government in November 2001 were rejected but nevertheless worked to help bring Police Board members towards agreement while a deadline (new police uniforms were being manufactured) helped to concentrate minds. The PSNI badge itself contained a laurel leaf, a torch, a crown, a shamrock, a harp and scales surrounding the cross of St Patrick all set on a six-pointed star. The greatest point of controversy surrounded the use of the crown, the shamrock and the harp with the crown. The Patten report had recommended that the new badge contain no symbol connected with the British or Irish states in order to make it neutral, however, this view was over-ridden by Secretary of State Peter Mandelson so that the new badge could include symbols which made it inclusive as opposed to neutral (Police (NI) Act 2000). As a result the design of the new badge largely became one of horse-trading between the UUP and SDLP. Ultimately, the badge itself has been successful in terms of the lack of controversy which has surrounded it. Ironically, there are so many symbols on the badge that the individual components are difficult to discern, having the end effect of producing the neutral emblem originally envisaged by Patten.

6. War Commemoration

At the beginning of the 1990s Remembrance Day in Northern Ireland was marked publicly largely by unionist politicians and Protestant clergy even though many members of the Catholic community had served in the forces in both World Wars. In the early 1990s a number of SDLP representatives began to attend Remembrance Day ceremonies in Belfast for the first time. In 1997 Alban Maginess became the first SDLP mayor to officially place a wreath at the Belfast cenotaph. After significant engagement between key individuals over a number of years Queen Elizabeth and President Mary McAleese, in September 1999, together opened a peace park at Messines in Belgium, built by groups from the north and south of Ireland in memory of all the Irish who died in World War I. During the 1990s a new appreciation of those Irish who had fought in both world wars also developed in the Irish republic, which served to encourage changes in Northern Ireland.

Sinn Fein representatives played no part in such events although in 1995 Councillor Tom Hartley had represented the party in Dublin at a ceremony to mark the end of World War II. In July 2002, however, Sinn Féin Lord Mayor of Belfast, Alex Maskey, laid a wreath at Belfast Cenotaph in memory of WWI dead in a special act of remembrance. In April 2003 a cross community service of remembrance for all those from Belfast who had died in World War I was held in St Anne's cathedral in Belfast. Present were British crown and army representatives and republicans such as Alex Maskey. In 2004, however, Sinn Féin decided to ban its members from attending these events because they were criticised within the party as being linked to British
interests. In late 2004 a number of Sinn Féin mayors organised a day of remembrance in December to remember those Irish dead in all war situations, but this event won little support.

Conclusions

The Agreement has not heralded a reduction in symbolic conflict. Had the Assembly remained active it would have been interesting to see whether more imaginative symbolic strategies would have been used. We have some evidence that this can take place, with the development of new symbols for the Assembly and Government departments and also the behaviour of some political parties in local government. Notable, were the actions of Alex Maskey described above. The holding of office offers opportunities as well as demanding different behaviour from the office holder. Had David Trimble been First Minister in October 2003 would he have hosted a reception at Stormont for All Ireland GAA finalists Armagh and Tyrone as Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister, Angela Smith did? In the main, however, it has been British government Ministers, and their departments, who have grappled with different strategies over symbols. Since their electoral interests are not tied to Northern Ireland it has been arguably easier for them to do so.

From a policy perspective a range of agencies have attempted to modify the use of symbols either by drawing upon the 'two traditions model' and 'parity of esteem' or by promoting neutral or shared space through the exclusion of symbols or the invention of new symbols. For example, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has produced a draft Bill of Rights which, following on from the consociational nature of the Agreement, provides the two communities with particular recognition (see Bryan 2004) whilst *A Shared Future* concentrates on the shared and the neutral. Section 75 of the 1998 Northern Ireland Act and the 1998 Fair Employment and Treatment Order have provided the major legislative context for the symbolic strategies that have placed some pressure on local Councils to modify policies. In the end, the pressure upon symbolic strategies has come from above rather than from within political interest groups in Northern Ireland.

Consequently, with minimal involvement of local political parties, we have seen very little evidence of the development of a new symbolic sense of Northern Irish identity despite some evidence of people ascribing to other than unionist and nationalist identities (see NILT). Rather, a range of legislative and policy developments have attempted to manage the relationship between unionism and nationalism, directed by a battery of public bodies. After an unsure start to devolution, the return of a power sharing Northern Ireland government would place local political parties in political offices that would demand more imaginative approaches to the strategic use of symbols than has been evident in recent years.

Activities

The flags case studies developed into a major project with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister resulting in the report *Transforming conflict: Flags and Emblems*. This required a series of five round-table meetings with all the relevant Government agencies. Additional seminars were held at the Community Relations Council (7/6/2005) and the Equality Commission (20/9/05). Presentations were made at CRC conferences on Policy Development (28/5/04) and a Shared Future (20/6/05) and at a public event at the Linen Hall Library (16/11/04).
Academic Presentations:


24/2/05 D. Bryan 'Popular Flags in Northern Ireland' Swarthmore College, Philadelphia.


8/2/05 D. Bryan 'The Politics of the Belfast landscape' UCD Dept. of Archaeology.

15/4/05 D. Bryan 'Flagging Peace' ACIS Conference, Notre Dame, Chicago.

9/6/05 D. Bryan and G. McIntosh 'Symbols: Sites of Creation and Contest in Northern Ireland' Unionism and Orangeism in Northern Ireland: Past, Present and Future ESRC Conference, University of Ulster

6/9/05 D. Bryan 'Flagging Peace in Northern Ireland' The British Association for the Advancement of Science, The Peace Process in Northern Ireland

30/11/05 'Flagging Peace' Flags and Symbols Conference, University of Oslo.

Outputs

Walker, B (2003) 'Everyone is Irish on St Patrick's Day as both Traditions Share Saint' Irish Times 17.3.03


Bryan, D (2005d) 'Flag Changes' CRC News, Issue 45


McIntosh, G (forthcoming 2005f) "'Ulster '71': Ritual and commemoration in Northern Ireland,' New Hibernia Review

McIntosh, G (forthcoming 2005g) 'The Royal Visit to Belfast, June 1921,' in D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day (eds) The Ulster Crisis 1885-1921 London: Palgrave Macmillan

Bryan, D (forthcoming 2006b) 'New Colours for the Orange State?: Finding Symbolic Space in a Devolved Northern Ireland' Devolution and Identity ed Wilson and Stapleton, Ashgate.

Bryan, D and G McIntosh (forthcoming 2006/7) 'Changing Political Symbols?' Devolution and Constitutional Change in Northern Ireland ed. Charmichael, Knox and Osborn. Manchester: MUP

McIntosh, G (2007) 'The Governors of Northern Ireland. From development to decay.' Submitted to Irish Historical Studies.

Impacts

The project has had a significant policy impact the Transforming Conflict extensively used in the Government’s A Shared Future document (pp.23-29). The process of meetings with OFMDFM also played a role in policy development within DRD, NIHE, CRC and the PSNI.

Two international collaborations have also developed. D. Bryan spoke at a major conference on the use of symbols at Bryn Mawr College, Philadelphia. A publication is forthcoming. Also the work is feeding into a project on nationalism being hosted by Prof. Thomas Hylland Erikson at the University of Oslo.

Future Research Activities

Dr Gillian McIntosh's forthcoming book on Belfast City Hall (Blackstaff Press, 2006) has grown out of work done on the significance of Stormont.

Dr Gillian McIntosh and Dr Dominic Bryan are part of an ESRC funded project (Identity and Social Action) exploring the changes in the use of social space in Belfast.

Dr Dominic Bryan and Dr Gordon Gillespie have continued research on the use of flags.

An application has been made to the AHRC to develop a project on a global comparison of St Patrick's Day.