Non-Technical Summary:

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

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

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. 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.

Changes of identity are often indicated through the use of new symbols and changes in the use of existing symbols. Northern Ireland has a long history of conflicts over symbols. The broad objective of this project was to analyse the role played by official bodies at a variety of sites where attempts are made, through the use of symbols, to imagine the new Northern Ireland.

The project examined a range of symbols: the use of Stormont as an icon and symbol of government; royal visits; the use of flags; the use of emblems, specifically the Police badge, St Patrick's Day (Belfast and Downpatrick) and war commemorations. Our case studies reveal contrasting policy strategies resulting from the Agreement. Policy areas covered by the British Government have attempted to negotiate the development of shared space (for example, the use of Stormont, flags, law courts and the new police badge) either through direct policy and legal intervention or by the 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. 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 and balance the scales measuring parity of esteem.

The assembly operated for periods totalling less than two and a half years of the eight years since the Agreement was signed. The context in which policies were being developed was therefore not one which was conducive to any of the four major political parties promoting strategies that might develop new or shared symbolic space. Whilst there are exceptions, mostly promoted by the SDLP and Sinn Féin (flags and war commemorations), by far the most common symbolic 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). Whilst new emblems were developed to represent the new Assembly (flax plant) and the ministerial departments
The Agreement has not heralded a reduction in symbolic conflict. Had the Assembly remained active it would have been interesting to see whether greater agreement over symbols and more imaginative strategies would have been used. We have some evidence in the behaviour of some political parties in local government. Most notable, was Alex Maskey, Sinn Féin Mayor of Belfast (2002-03), who attended events that remembered the dead of two World Wars. As such, 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 it has been British government Ministers, and their departments, who have been grappling with different strategies over symbols. Arguably their political interests are less affected by doing 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' thus demanding equal funding and the use of the symbols of both communities, 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 that, following on from the consociational nature of the Agreement, provides the two communities with particular recognition whilst A Shared Future concentrates on the shared and the neutral. Section 75 of the 1998 Northern Ireland Act and the 1998 Fair Employment Order has provided the major legislative context for their symbolic strategies that has placed some pressure on local Councils to modify policies. Ultimately, the pressure upon symbolic strategies has come from above rather than from local 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 a Northern Irish identity despite some evidence (see NILT) of people ascribing to other than unionist and nationalist identities. Rather, a range of legislative and policy developments have attempted to mediate the relationship between unionism and nationalism, managed by a battery of public bodies. After an unsure new start to devolution, the return of a power sharing Northern Ireland government would place local political parties in political offices that would inevitably demand more imaginative approaches to the strategic use of symbols than has been evident in recent years.