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The Role of Government

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Northern Ireland: A form of government rejected by Government

Any discussion of the role of government in Northern Ireland must address the fact that the very form of government is a hotly contested political issue. Virtually all political parties in Northern Ireland have regarded the system of government by direct rule from London since 1972, (with the addition of some involvement by the Irish Government since 1985) as unsatisfactory. This negative political consensus has extended from the advocates of full integration into the UK, through the mainstream unionist advocates of a devolved administration of one kind or another, to nationalists and republicans who have questioned the basic legitimacy of government in Northern Ireland. There has been deep disagreement on the appropriate form of government but there has nonetheless been a consensus among the political parties that the *status quo* was unacceptable. This consensus has also extended to those responsible for government in Northern Ireland over the past decades. While certain British administrations tacitly regarded direct rule as the best option for governing Northern Ireland because it at least provided stability, virtually all British administrations have made some attempts to change the form of government in Northern Ireland. The plethora of initiatives which have been launched since 1972, if they demonstrate nothing else, demonstrate that in Northern Ireland Government itself sees the current form of government as fundamentally unsatisfactory.

Despite this, the business of governing Northern Ireland has been conducted by successive direct rule administrations for the past quarter of a century. This form of government has brought a degree of political stability and, unsatisfactory though it may be, has been the *status quo* for a quarter of a century and derives immense authority from

that fact alone. The legitimacy of government is contested but a large proportion of the institutions of the state are accepted unproblematically by, and enjoy substantial loyalty from, even the most disaffected sections of the population, not least those institutions associated with health, education and social welfare. The workings and institutions of the modern state are so extensive and fundamental to human existence that it is unrealistic for a population of even the most disaffected to reject the state in all or even most of its forms.

Throughout this survey a number of patterns in attitudes to government are visible: the differences between men and women, between Catholics and Protestants and between groups in Northern Ireland and the sample in Great Britain. It is the differences which I linger over. This should not be allowed to obscure the fact that on a wide range of issues the divergences are absolutely minimal and there are large areas where the attitudes of the different groups converge. In some areas however the gaps are wide and the differences are sharp and clear.

Before looking directly at attitudes to government and the role of government in Northern Ireland I wish to frame it the context of attitudes to politics in general in Northern Ireland and attitudes to Northern Ireland itself, the political framework within which government operates.

Attitudes to Politics: lack of interest and bewilderment

How interested would you say you personally are in politics? (by gender)

	<i>NI Men</i>	<i>NI Women</i>	<i>GB Men</i>	<i>GB Women</i>
Not very interested	24.9	30.6	19.8	27.1
Not at all interested	13.9	16.2	7.0	15.3
Total not	38.8	46.8	26.8	42.4

· Note: all figures in tables are percentages

interested

How interested would you say you personally are in politics? (by religion)			
	<i>NI Prot</i>	<i>NI Cath</i>	<i>NI Others</i>
Not very interested	26.7	29.7	28.3
Not at all interested	12.4	15.7	21.8
Total not interested	39.1	45.4	50.1

Given Northern Ireland’s reputation for political passion and intransigence it is more than a little ironic that a higher proportion of both men and women in Northern Ireland should declare themselves uninterested in politics than their counterparts in Great Britain. In both Great Britain and Northern Ireland women declare considerably less interest in politics than men. In Great Britain the gap is striking, with 42.4% of women declaring themselves not very or not at all interested in politics compared to 26.8% of men. The gap between men and women is far narrower in Northern Ireland but this is only because there are such low levels of interest among both sexes. The gap between men in Great Britain and men in Northern Ireland is wide. 38.8% of men in Northern Ireland say they are not very or not at all interested compared to 26.8% of men in Great Britain.

There is also a small but noticeable gap in attitudes between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland with Catholics being more likely to be uninterested while the ‘others’ (those who have no religion, did not declare their religion or are members of small non-Christian minorities) are the least interested of all.

Thus, while women in Great Britain are far less interested in politics than men in Great Britain, revealing a worrying gender gap, they are still not as uninterested as Northern Irish Catholics are. These figures should at least unsettle the assumption that the population of Northern Ireland are obsessed with politics and that such obsession has been a major source of the conflict.

Part of the explanation for this lack of interest lies with the nature of politics in Northern Ireland in recent decades. Politics has been so mixed up with destruction and death that there has been a depoliticisation of large sections of the population - not least in areas with high levels of violence. For many people 'politics' has been a choice between the unacceptable and the unrealistic. Many people in Northern Ireland are also perhaps reluctant to express 'interest' in politics, as though it was a sport. In addition there has often been danger associated not only with active political participation, but even with the expression of political opinions. For a long time, in certain situations, it could be physically dangerous to be 'interested' in politics.

The generally high levels of voting at elections in Northern Ireland suggests that, while people may not express interest in politics they participate in the political process nonetheless and at one of the highest rates in western Europe.

Nonetheless the low levels of interest point to an extensive depoliticisation of the population (while of course certain sections have become very highly politicised). Contrary to some of the stereotypes, people in Northern Ireland tend to be that little bit less interested in politics than their counterparts in Great Britain.

It's worth noting at this stage that the relatively lower levels of interest in politics among women are reflected in other areas of the survey where there is a marked tendency for women to cluster in the moderate middle. That is, while equally as likely to take sides as men, they are often less likely than men to 'strongly' agree or disagree on any given topic and more likely to simply agree or disagree.

Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on

	<i>NI</i>	<i>NI</i>	<i>NI</i>	<i>NI</i>	<i>NI</i>	<i>NI</i>	<i>GB</i>	<i>GB</i>	<i>GB</i>
		<i>women</i>	<i>men</i>	<i>Prot</i>	<i>Cath</i>	<i>Other</i>		<i>women</i>	<i>men</i>
agree strongly	26.6	29.5	23.0	25.8	27.1	27.2	22.0	26.7	15.9

I take the figures above as a measure of general ‘bewilderment’ with politics and government. The table shows only those who ‘agree strongly’ with the proposition and shows that if lack of interest is high bewilderment is far higher. The most significant gap is the gender gap. In both Northern Ireland and Great Britain, but particularly in Great Britain, women feel considerably more bewildered than men. Once again, the gender gap is narrower in Northern Ireland only because of the generally high levels of confusion. People feel less bewildered in Great Britain than in Northern Ireland, while British men are far and away the least bewildered. And while British women are far more bewildered than British men Northern Irish Catholics as a group are more bewildered still.

The results of these two questions on attitudes to politics in general provide the context within which to assess the results outlined below. They suggest a lack of direction and a lack of interest among large sections of the population and a population more detached from and confused by politics than those in Great Britain.

The Constitution of the State

The fact that there are surprisingly low levels of interest in and understanding of politics and government in Northern Ireland does not detract from the fact that there is fundamental disagreement on the existence of the state itself and substantial opposition to any government of Northern Ireland, no matter what form it takes.

The table below shows answers to a question which asked people how much they agreed or disagreed with the phrase ‘I would like the future of Northern Ireland to be within a United Ireland’. It provides a very soft measure of support for a united Ireland measuring the outer limits of that support and corresponding to ‘aspiration’ rather than ‘demand’ or ‘conviction’. It also provides a negative measure of support for the *status quo* by measuring opposition to a united Ireland. I take these figures as a crude and unsatisfactory but still useful measurement of fundamental attitudes to the existence of

the state. It is not a very demanding question: people can support a united Ireland in theory without ruling out any other option and without considering a time frame apart from the dim and distant future. It shows that Catholic support for or ‘aspiration’ to a united Ireland is substantial and strong, but far from overwhelming even by this softest of measures. Only a slight majority of Catholics say they would like to see the future of Northern Ireland in a united Ireland. By contrast Protestants are far more united on this issue with three quarters of Protestants opposing a united Ireland even by this soft measure.

‘I would like the future of Northern Ireland to be within a United Ireland’

	<i>NI</i>	<i>NI Cath</i>	<i>NI Prot</i>	<i>NI Others</i>
Strongly agree	10.6	23.4	3.7	5.4
agree	13.6	29.8	2.5	13.0
neither	25.2	33.2	16.2	36.5
disagree	20.1	9.3	26.9	22.6
strongly disagree	30.4	4.3	50.8	22.5

This question provides a means of tentatively quantifying two much talked about groups - Catholic unionists (13.6% of Catholics - those who disagree or strongly disagree with the statement) and Protestant nationalists (6.2% of Protestants - those who agree or strongly agree with the statement). Even by this soft measure there are more of the former but they tend to be less intense in their beliefs. The proportion of Protestants strongly favouring a United Ireland (3.7%) is not much lower than the proportion of Catholics strongly opposed to it (4.3%).

One of the oddities of these figures is that, when cross-referenced with national identity, these figures show that those who strongly favour a united Ireland are more likely to identify themselves as Northern Irish than the population at large, and much more likely than those who oppose a United Ireland. This suggests that the development of a ‘Northern Irish’ identity, often seen as one building block of a settlement within Northern Ireland, does not mark a shift to acceptance or support for Northern Ireland as a state.

There is a further oddity about these figures and one that suggests a great deal of caution must be used when dealing with the figures. Of those who agreed that they would like the future of Northern Ireland to be within a United Ireland fully 4.4% described themselves as unionists while of those who agreed strongly 12.4% described themselves as unionists. This suggests strongly that significant numbers of people did not treat this question in the way that we might have expected them to. One possible explanation for this oddity is that some older unionists might hanker after a reunification of Ireland within the UK, a return to the days before an independent Irish state, in a sense the ultimate unionist ‘aspiration’.

Perhaps the most important thing about these figures is that they show that Catholic opposition to a United Ireland, a key test of loyalty to the constitutional *status quo*, is extremely weak. Those Catholics not supportive of a united Ireland and by implication not opposed to Northern Ireland remaining in the UK, show minimal levels of loyalty to the constitutional *status quo*. The foundations of any form of Northern Ireland government are shaky not merely because of the number of Catholics who support a united Ireland but above all because the lack of support for a united Ireland by large number of Catholics shows no sign of converting to loyalty to or support for Northern Ireland staying within the UK.

Attitudes to government: a deep distrust

Under direct rule from Britain, as now, how much do you generally trust British governments of any party to act in the best interests of Northern Ireland?

	<i>NI</i>	<i>NI Prot.</i>	<i>NI Cath.</i>	<i>NI Other</i>	<i>GB</i>
Rarely	26.9	20.9	31.4	33.8	10.3
Never	14.4	11.2	18.0	15.3	3.3
Total not trusting	41.3	32.1	49.4	49.1	13.6

The figures above should be understood in the light of widespread bewilderment, lack of interest and a basic constitutional framework for government which has a weak support base and thus an uncertain future. There are low levels of trust in Northern Ireland that any British government will act in the best interests of Northern Ireland. In fact a greater

proportion of the population of Northern Ireland distrust the British government than distrust a putative united Ireland government to act in the best interests of Northern Ireland. Of course this question doesn't relate to trust in the institutions of the state or trust in its ability to deal with day to day matters and undoubtedly it measures very different views of the best interests of Northern Ireland dominant in the Protestant and Catholic communities. It has to be noted also that as the actual, rather than potential governing agency in Northern Ireland the British government is much more open to distrust than putative united Ireland or Stormont governments as it actually makes the decisions in Northern Ireland (albeit since 1985 in some sort of consultation with an Irish government which might be seen to represent a potential united Ireland government). Having said all that, the levels of trust for the direct rule government seem disastrously low and highlight the problematic relationship between ruler and ruled under direct rule. It suggests fairly low levels of identification with government by either Catholics or Protestants.

If there was self-rule, how much do you think you would generally trust a Stormont government to act in the best interests of Northern Ireland?

	<i>NI</i>	<i>NI Prot.</i>	<i>NI Cath.</i>	<i>NI Other</i>	<i>GB</i>
Rarely	13.8	6.8	22.7	13.1	8.1
Never	15.4	6.6	26.5	14.9	3.2
Total not trusting	29.2	13.4	49.2	28.0	11.3

And if there was a united Ireland, how much do you think you would generally trust an Irish government to act in the best interests of Northern Ireland?

	<i>NI</i>	<i>NI Prot.</i>	<i>NI Cath.</i>	<i>NI Other</i>	<i>GB</i>
Rarely	21.4	27.5	14.7	19.2	7.1
Never	17.2	26.9	6.1	15.6	2.3
Total not trusting	38.6	54.4	20.8	34.8	9.4

Catholics are far less distrustful of a potential united Ireland government than of the British government while Protestants are far less distrustful of a potential Stormont government than of the British government. On the other hand Protestants are significantly more distrusting of a united Ireland government than they are of the British

government. While a potential Stormont government is usually seen as the Catholic community's nightmare scenario, Catholics are almost exactly as distrusting of the British government as of a potential Stormont government. The British government may be distrusted by both Catholics and Protestants but it is by no means situated half way between the affections (or disaffections) of the two communities. While there are high levels of distrust by both communities, Catholics are notably more likely than Protestants to distrust the British government.

The Great Britain sample showed extraordinarily low levels of distrust of either British or prospective Stormont or all-Ireland governments. It is probably fair to say that this is less illustrative of deep trust than it is of lack of interest.

The question below measures trust of government in a more general sense, not just as it relates to the uncertain future of Northern Ireland as a unit. I take it as a measure of trust of government and the state in general that people are quite content for government to hold large amounts of information about citizens. It measures the extent to which the institutions of the state and, implicitly, the security apparatus of the state are trusted to use their powers wisely and in the interests of the average citizen.

The government has a lot of different pieces of information about people which computers can bring together very quickly. [How much of a threat to individual privacy] is this ...

	<i>NI Prot</i>	<i>NI Cath</i>	<i>NI Other</i>	<i>GB</i>
very serious	20.7	41.5	29.7	27.6
fairly serious	31.5	34.6	36.8	36.8
not serious	38.5	18.9	32.6	30.2
not a threat at all	9.3	5.1	.9	5.3
Total saying it's not a serious threat or not a threat at all				
	47.8	24.0	33.5	35.5

By this measure Northern Irish Protestants are notably more trusting of government than the sample in Great Britain while Catholics are notably less trusting than the British sample and far less trusting than Northern Irish Protestants. The attitudes of the two

communities are far apart in this area. While almost half of Protestants think computers are not a serious threat or not at all a threat to privacy, only about a quarter of Catholics hold the same view. This provides a corrective to the figures showing low levels of trust that the British government will act in the best interests of Northern Ireland. People in the sample clearly distinguish between the different arms and functions of government and while they may distrust government on the whole this can coexist with trust in, and loyalty to, particular arms of the state.

The relatively high levels of trust by Protestants in this area probably reflects the fact that computer data and sophisticated intelligence information on individuals are perceived as key items in the arsenal of the state's campaign to preserve the existence of Northern Ireland, its 'war against terrorism', a campaign supported overwhelmingly by Protestants and not supported overwhelmingly by Catholics.

Government and dissent

Public attitudes to protest and to defying the law in varying degrees are often taken as providing a clear measure of more general attitudes to democracy and government. Opposition to public protest is often taken as a measure of authoritarian attitudes and of support for a strong repressive state. Attitudes to public protest also provide another measure of the level of trust in government. Support for a government's right to repress dissent implies a certain faith in the judgement of government and an acceptance of the authority of government. In the light of this, answers to questions on public protest in Northern Ireland are most interesting for the contradictions which they illuminate and for the questions they raise about the motivations which underly these attitudes to protest. For each question I look first at responses in Northern Ireland according to religion and contrasted with attitudes in Great Britain. I then look at responses according to attitudes to a united Ireland, taking attitudes to a united Ireland as an unsatisfactory but nonetheless useful surrogate for political identification.

In general would you say that people should obey the law without exception, or are there exceptional occasions on which people should follow their consciences even if it means breaking the law

	<i>NI Prot</i>	<i>NI Cath</i>	<i>NI Other</i>	<i>GB</i>
Obey the law	56.0	41.7	42.5	38.0
Follow conscience	44.0	58.3	57.5	62.0

... according to responses to the statement

I would like the future of Northern Ireland to be within a United Ireland

<i>Want a United Ireland</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>neither</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>strongly disagree</i>
Obey the law	44.2	40.6	40.1	56.3	55.3
Follow conscience	55.8	59.4	59.9	43.7	44.7

There is a gap in attitudes between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Catholics being notably more likely to agree that there are occasions on which people should follow their consciences even if it means breaking the law. Even so, Catholics are less likely to favour conscience over law than people in Great Britain. The figures in this table would suggest that Northern Ireland in general is a more authoritarian society than Great Britain. When broken down according to attitudes to a united Ireland we get the somewhat surprising result that those most strongly in favour of a united Ireland (a group I will loosely call ‘republicans’) are a little less likely to favour conscience over law than those who merely support a united Ireland (a group I’ll loosely call ‘moderate nationalists’) or those who don’t care. This should remind us that the aspiration to a united Ireland is not necessarily a radical aspiration but can also spring from deeply conservative sentiments. In the light of the figures which follow, which show enthusiasm for public protest among those who strongly favour a united Ireland, the figures on ‘conscience’ suggest that favourable attitudes to protest in Northern Ireland should not be read automatically as evidence of anti-authoritarianism. Those most in favour of protest in Northern Ireland could easily become those most opposed to protest in another constitutional framework. When it comes to specific examples of public protest Northern

Irish Catholics show themselves on balance a little less in favour of permitting protest than those in Great Britain but often far more in favour than Northern Irish Protestants.

There are many ways people or organisations can protest against a government action they strongly oppose.

Should the following be allowed ...

Organising public meetings to protest against the government

	<i>NI Cath</i>	<i>NI Prot</i>	<i>NI Others</i>	<i>GB</i>
Definitely	47.1	47.9	53.1	57.4
Probably	43.8	36.8	33.2	32.6
Probably not	3.3	6.6	6.2	4.7
Definitely not	5.8	8.6	7.6	5.3

According to responses to the question

I would like the future of Northern Ireland to be within a United Ireland

<i>Want a United Ireland</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>neither</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>strongly disagree</i>
Definitely	65.6	53.7	48.2	45.6	50.1
Probably	24.3	34.3	43.3	41.4	36.2
Probably not	2.3	6.3	3.7	5.0	5.5
Definitely not	7.7	5.8	4.7	8.0	8.1

These figures show that both Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland are somewhat less likely than people in Great Britain to say public protest meetings should **definitely** be allowed. They suggest that the direct experience of civil unrest has contributed to hostile attitudes to public protest in Northern Irish and show only marginal differences in attitudes between Catholics and Protestants.

When analysed according to attitudes to a United Ireland however, certain gaps open up. Those strongly in favour of a united Ireland, the ‘republicans’, are the only group in Northern Ireland more in favour of allowing protest meetings than the British sample. As we move along the spectrum of attitudes to a united Ireland we see that the less people agree with a united Ireland the less likely they are to support protest, with a slight tilt up

at the other end of the spectrum. Those most strongly opposed to a united Ireland, a group I will loosely call ‘loyalists’ are slightly more in favour of protest than those who simply oppose a united Ireland, a group I will loosely call ‘moderate unionists’. This pattern, of decreasing tolerance of protest as there is decreasing support for a united Ireland, with the tilt up at the end, remains consistent over attitudes to several different forms of protest. The relatively high support for protest among those most strongly supportive of a united Ireland and those most strongly opposed as compared to their ‘moderate’ fellows is best explained not by a general acceptance of protest in principle but by the experience of its recent application as a practical political tool.

Allow . . . Organising protest marches and demonstrations

	<i>NI Cath</i>	<i>NI Prot</i>	<i>NI Others</i>	<i>GB</i>
Definitely	32.0	22.3	27.0	34.4
Probably	34.7	38.4	31.9	40.3
Probably not	16.1	16.3	19.9	13.3
Definitely not	17.2	23.0	21.2	12.0
Total Not allow	33.3	39.3	41.1	25.3

According to responses to the statement

‘I would like the future of Northern Ireland to be within a United Ireland’

<i>Want a United Ireland</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>neither</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>strongly disagree</i>
Definitely	52.4	33.5	30.3	15.2	22.8
Probably	20.6	36.2	35.3	37.7	41.7
Probably not	14.4	10.9	22.4	16.5	15.9
Definitely not	12.5	19.4	12.1	30.5	19.6
Total Not Allow	26.9	30.3	34.5	47.0	35.5

The differences which were visible in the question on meetings are more pronounced when marches and demonstrations are at issue. The total who say they would probably and definitely not allow the organising of protest marches and demonstrations is far higher in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain. Catholics are more supportive than Protestants of the right to march and demonstrate, but not as supportive as people in Great Britain. Only the strong supporters of a united Ireland are more likely to say they would **definitely** allow marches and demonstrations than are people in Great Britain. Analysed according to attitudes to a united Ireland we once again see a pattern of decreasing support for protest according to decreasing support for a united Ireland with a tilt upwards at the end. However here the tilt at the ‘loyalist’ end of the scale is more dramatic. There are some massive gaps in attitudes, with over half of ‘republicans’ backing the right to protest ‘definitely’ compared to 15% of ‘moderate unionists’. Again the gap here is best explained not as a manifestation of a general authoritarianism or anti-authoritarianism but of approaches to very specific issues.

There are some people whose views are considered extreme by the majority. Consider people who want to overthrow the government by revolution. Do you think such people should be allowed to hold public meetings to express their views?

	<i>NI Cath</i>	<i>NI Prot</i>	<i>NI Others</i>	<i>GB</i>
Definitely	17.3	9.8	17.4	24.0
Probably	36.2	27.3	42.1	40.0
Probably not	23.4	23.0	9.1	23.1
Definitely not	23.1	39.9	31.4	12.9
Total Not allow	46.5	62.9	40.4	36.0

According to responses to the statement ‘I would like the future of Northern Ireland to be within a United Ireland’

<i>Want a United Ireland</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>neither</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>strongly disagree</i>
Definitely	28.2	23.9	10.1	10.4	10.1
Probably	36.5	42.7	41.1	28.4	23.6
Probably not	21.0	17.1	20.3	16.1	27.2
Definitely not	14.3	16.4	28.6	45.1	39.1

Total Not Allow	35.3	33.5	48.9	61.2	66.3
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The final question I look at in this area, and the first to explicitly mention revolutionaries, reveals even wider gaps in attitudes. While just over one third of the British sample would not allow revolutionaries to hold public meetings and about a third of ‘republicans’ and ‘nationalists’ feel the same, about two thirds of ‘unionists’ and ‘loyalists’ would not allow such meetings. There is no tilt at the end in this question. ‘Loyalists’ are more likely than ‘moderate unionists’ to oppose this particular right. It is clear that the revolutionaries many of those in the Northern Ireland sample have in mind are republican paramilitary groups.

Conclusion

Attitudes to government and politics in Northern Ireland exist in a context of fundamental uncertainty about the future form and framework of government. To both communities it appears that their repeatedly expressed democratic preferences on the fundamentals of government (which are of course at direct odds) have little political impact. It is easy for people to feel that their vote has little real impact. The low levels of interest in politics compared to GB may in part reflect the fact that people feel powerless to effect political change and see politics much more as something out of their control and government as something beyond their ability to influence. The fact that the conflict which began in 1969 has seemed to be more or less stalemated since the early 1970s has probably contributed to the low levels of interest and high levels of bewilderment.

The form of government which NI has experienced for over a quarter of a century is a form of government rejected to one degree or another by every significant political force in NI, including government itself. In the circumstances a lack of interest in and understanding of politics and high levels of distrust of government on the basic issue of whether government will act in the best interests of NI are entirely understandable.