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Double Issue

The Electoral Commission and the Referendum
Emerging Democracies
Northern Ireland
Debate and Comment

The following article presents polling evidence on the attitudes of Northern Ireland's unionist and nationalist communities to options for a political settlement.

Intransigence and Flexibility on the Way to Two Forums: The Northern Ireland Elections of 30 May 1996 and Public Opinion

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At a joint prime-ministerial summit on 28 February 1996, the British and Irish governments committed themselves to convening all-party and inter-governmental negotiations on the future of Northern Ireland on 10 June. The presence of political parties at the negotiations was to be decided by an election which John Major later declared, in a statement to the House of Commons, would be held on 30 May. As specified in the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc.) Act the election would determine parties' shares of delegates for a peace forum, and their rights to nominate delegates to participate in separate and substantive multi-party negotiations. The ten best placed parties would have their rights to participate guaranteed.

The two governments made their announcement within 20 days of an IRA bomb in London's Docklands that had terminated the IRA's cease-fire of August 1994. Sinn Féin's participation in the negotiations to begin on 10 June was made conditional upon a renewal of the IRA's cease-fire. The end of that cease-fire reflected republicans' impatience with the UK government's failure to convene and specify a date for all-party talks despite 18 months of calm, and their belief that Major's government had played fast and loose with the report of the International Body chaired by former US Senator George Mitchell, published on 24 January. Established to mediate a dispute about whether republican and loyalist paramilitaries should 'decommission' their weapons before or after their party-political representatives engaged in negotiations, the International Body had split the differences. Decommissioning, it declared, should occur during, rather than before or after, the negotiations, and the process 'should suggest neither victory nor defeat' (Mitchell et al 1996: pars. 33-50). The International Body also remarked that 'If it were broadly acceptable, with an appropriate mandate, and within the three-strand structure, an elective process could contribute to the building of confidence' (par. 56). John Major seized on this paragraph to call for elections to a peace forum. He thereby, unknowingly, helped send the IRA back to war.

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Calling an election was not authorised by the Mitchell Report because the elective process was not 'broadly acceptable', i.e. acceptable to both nationalists and unionists, let alone both governments. Nationalists in Northern Ireland, in the SDLP and Sinn Féin, opposed any elective process because they believed that it would (i) further delay inclusive and substantive negotiations made possible by the republican and loyalist cease-fires; (ii) spoil the atmosphere by enabling unionist leaders to seek mandates opposing any meaningful concessions during negotiations; and (iii) merely demonstrate what is well known – that unionists presently have a demographic and electoral majority in the region. Elections to a forum presented a further problem for Sinn Féin. As an abstentionist party it did not want to recognise any Northern assembly unless it had consented to its existence during negotiations. Consequently Sinn Féin immediately declared it would boycott the forum – though it made it plain that abstentionism would not apply to the election or the substantive negotiations. The opposition of northern nationalists to an elective process was supported by the Irish government, but to no avail.

Increasingly dependent upon the Ulster Unionists in critical parliamentary votes at Westminster John Major had bowed to the demands for an election from the new leader of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), David Trimble, and from the Reverend Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Trimble sought an election to strengthen his hands in any new negotiations; Paisley to help prevent any 'sell-out'. Elections were not, however, unanimously sought amongst unionists. The smaller loyalist parties, the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP), the political fronts for the Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Defence Association respectively, had feared elections, because they were ill-prepared for them, and because they wanted to negotiate early rather than later on issues affecting loyalist prisoners.

The elections duly took place. Ironically they provided Sinn Féin with its most successful performance in its modern incarnation at the ballot box in Northern Ireland – the party sought and won a 'vote for peace' amongst nationalist voters. The election simultaneously resulted in the lowest share of the vote obtained by the UUP in a comparable election – it has performed worse in European parliamentary elections. The relatively poor performance of the UUP was more surprising because the electoral process and formula were partly designed to address its concerns. The UUP and the Alliance party had sought a formula similar to previous elections to a Northern Ireland Assembly, i.e. election by the single transferable vote, using the Droop quota, in five-seat districts based on Westminster constituencies. The UUP wanted to prevent Paisley's DUP benefiting from the Reverend's larger than life charisma in an at-large election, such as that used to elect Northern Irish MEPs.

1. The chosen method was in fact identical to pure d'Hondt: full quota allocation followed by a switch to d'Hondt in the same district is exactly equivalent to straight d'Hondt allocation. provided that the quota is not smaller than the Droop quota. Electoral systems (for example, France 1986) which follow the above procedure are often erroneously described as using quota allocation or a 'mixed formula' (Taagepera and Shugart, 1989, p. 275). Shortly after the system for the Forum was announced O'Leary rang the NIO's relevant officials to enquire whether this fact was known. It became plain that it was not.

The SDLP and the DUP, by contrast, wanted a party-list system, with the d'Hondt divisor. They hoped to do well from lists headed by John Hume and Ian Paisley respectively. The Alliance wanted to avoid being squeezed by the two ethno-national blocs, and thought its chances would be served better in 18 districts rather than one. The DUP and the UDP thought they would do best from a list system, provided that the district magnitude was large enough. Sinn Féin was not permitted to, and did not express, a view on the electoral formula.

When pushed into a corner John Major habitually splir the differences. He did in this case, to almost comic effect. The chosen formula is unique in the UK's electoral history. Its novel complexity represented a compromise, or as some styled it, a dog's breakfast.

It was based on the 18 newly created Westminster constituencies, each of which would elect five members by party list. Independents had to stand as 'parties' and voters had one 'X' vote. In the first stage of counting the Droop quota was deployed ($(M + 1)$ to allocate seats to parties achieving a quota or multiple quota. In the second stage the d'Hondt divisor was used to allocate the remaining seats.¹ In total 90 seats were allocated in this way. Lastly, the ten parties receiving most votes across Northern Ireland as a whole received two members each from a regional list, creating in total a 110 seat forum. The latter provision ensured the inclusion in the negotiations of the smaller loyalist parties whom it was correctly thought might not win places in the five-seat constituencies (each with an effective quota of 16.7%), and who were incapable of creating an electoral alliance.

The results of the elections are presented in Table 1. (See page 211).

The novel system produced a rather wide deviation from proportionality in certain constituencies – e.g. no unionists were returned in Foyle or West Belfast (where Sinn Féin took four of the five seats with 53.4% of the vote). It also reversed the appropriate number of seats won by the second and third largest parties: the SDLP with a regional total of 160,000 votes won three seats less than the DUP with 141,000 votes. The overall regional deviation from proportionality (7.85) was not too bad, though not impressive. The principal impact of the election was to highlight the greater fragmentation within the unionist bloc (UUP, DUP, UKUP, DUP, Con) compared with the nationalist bloc (SDLP and SF).

One of the two ostensible functions of the election, creating a Peace Forum, rapidly proved redundant. The SDLP withdrew from it in protest at unionist support for marches by the Orange Order through nationalist districts, making the Forum a hollow if noisy irrelevance. The other function was to (re)start constitutional negotiations. They began, but without Sinn Féin, and were soon entrapped in proceduralism at the expense of meaningful dialogue. Whether the talks will be made meaningful by Sinn Féin's entry after a renewed IRA cease-fire, or whether that will simply occasion a unionist walk-out, remains to be seen.

Table 1: The results of the election to the Northern Ireland Forum, May 1996.

Party	seats won	votes	% seats (S)	% votes (V)	S - V
UUP	30	181829	27.3	24.2	3.1
DUP	24	141413	21.8	18.8	3
SDLP	21	160786	19.1	21.4	-2.3
SF	17	116377	15.5	15.5	0
APNI	7	49176	6.4	6.5	-0.1
UKUP	3	27774	2.7	3.7	-1
PUP	2	26082	1.8	3.5	-1.7
UDP	2	16715	1.8	2.2	-0.4
MWC	2	7731	1.8	1	0.8
Labour	2	6425	1.8	0.8	1
GP	0	3650	0	0.5	-0.5
Con	0	3595	0	0.5	-0.5
WP	0	3530	0	0.5	-0.5
UIM	0	2125	0	0.3	-0.3
DL	0	1215	0	0.2	-0.2
DP	0	1046	0	0.1	-0.1
IMcM	0	927	0	0.1	-0.1
IC	0	567	0	0.1	-0.1
NLP	0	389	0	0	0
IDUP	0	388	0	0	0
ATI	0	350	0	0	0
UW	0	204	0	0	0
CPI	0	66	0	0	0
UCDP	0	31	20	0	0
Total: 24	110	752391	100	100	115.71

Denotation from proportionality: $(D = (1/2) \in |s_i - v_i| = 7.85$ for all parties; for the first ten parties $D = 6.75$.
 Key to Parties: UUP = Ulster Unionist Party; DUP = Democratic Unionist Party; SDLP = Social Democratic and Labour Party; SF = Sinn Féin; APNI = Alliance Party of Northern Ireland; UKUP = United Kingdom Unionist Party; PUP = Progressive Unionist Party; UDP = Ulster Democratic Party; NWC = Northern Ireland Women's Coalition; GP = Green Party; Con = Conservative Party; WP = Workers' Party; UIM = Ulster Independence Movement; DL = Democratic Left; DP = Democratic Partnerships; IMcM = Independent McMillan; IC = Independent Chambers; NLP = Natural Law Party; UW = Ulster Independent Voice; CPI = Communist Party of Ireland; UCDP = Ulster Christian Democratic Party

However, the election, and the survey-opportunity it provided, presented useful information on the likely acceptance by the relevant publics of the negotiation procedures to be pursued, the extent to which mutual compromise is seen as acceptable, and expectations about what negotiations would achieve. To gather information on popular perceptions of the election and the envisaged negotiations the authors commissioned a poll, undertaken by Ulster Marketing Surveys (UMS)

2. The authors thank both broadcasters and Richard Moore of UMS, for showing clarity in facilitating socially relevant research. We are engaged in more detailed analysis of the survey than that presented here. We noted with amusement but reject the allegation made by John Taylor MR, deputy leader of the UUP, on 'Newsnight' (BBC2, 30 May 1996), that the poll was 'rigged'. Our question-design benefited from UMS's internal procedure as well as from appraisal by our academic peers at LSE and Nuffield College.

on 29-30 May 1996. It was a quota sample of 1,000 persons, obtained from 50 sample points, randomly selected from 300 wards, and representative of the population of Northern Ireland in age, sex, class and religion. Field-work was jointly-funded by RTE's 'Prime Time' and BBC's 'Newsnight'.² Given the inevitable sampling variation to which estimates of population parameters derived from all such data are subject, all patterns of association between social groups and the attitudes and perceptions discussed below have been tested for statistical significance at a probability of at least 0.05.

The distribution of intended or reported voting amongst our respondents differed from the votes recorded at the ballot box in, by now, familiar ways. The most noticeable difference was the higher turn-out (or intended turn-out) among our respondents – a common feature of election surveys. Also familiar is the tendency to obtain lower levels of support in surveys for Sinn Féin than would be expected given their support at the ballot box. In this respect, however, our survey performed rather well, recording over 8% support for Sinn Féin compared with the figure of just over 10% of the electorate in the official voting figures. This discrepancy is far less than has been found in other surveys in Northern Ireland (e.g. Evans and Duffy, 1997).

Consider first the responses to the idea of negotiations. The degree to which elite positions mirror those of their supporters, and of nationalist and unionist constituencies more generally, can be seen in Table 2, which displays reactions to the prospective negotiations by several different indicators of respondents' political and social identity. Religion, clearly, is a standard characteristic in any consideration of Northern Ireland's conflicts, but we also consider more discriminating indicators of citizens' political identities, including information on levels of self-professed 'sympathy' with 'nationalism' (17% of the sample) and 'unionism' (28%) – which we take as useful indicators of the more 'hard-line' elements on both sides of the constitutional divide (49% of the sample were unwilling to use either of these labels). Lastly, we describe the reactions of the supporters of the main parties using a measure of 'party identification'.

Table 2:

Q. As things stand, do you think the negotiations which begin on 10 June should take place or not?

	religion											
	Total	Prot	RC	0th	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith
Yes	81	76	89	80	66	79	92	91	92	91	71	83
No	11	14	6	9	24	12	3	5	4	6	17	9
Don't know	9	10	6	11	10	9	4	4	4	4	12	9

N = 1041. All figures in %.

Catholics and nationalists were significantly more likely to support the proposed negotiations than Protestants and unionists. The supporters of the two principal unionist parties stand out: levels of support for negotiations among Alliance supporters are similar to those of Sinn Féin and SDLP. The general impression is that the more unionist (broadly conceived) a respondent is, the more likely he or she is to reject negotiations. The group most clearly antipathetic to negotiations was the DUP's supporters, but supporters of the UUP showed less enthusiasm than nationalists and others. That said, there was still widespread support for negotiations.

Why should moves for discussion be rejected in disproportionate numbers by unionists? The natural answer is that for some unionists negotiations represent a path to compromise, and thus to unwanted concessions. This is clearly indicated, in Table 3, by the greater tendency among Protestants, unionists and, most firmly of all, DUP supporters, to reject compromise on the part of their elected representatives. Even 'hard-line' nationalists express greater willingness to allow compromise by their elected representatives than do any of the categories of unionist respondent. UUP supporters are as hard-line (40% insist that their leaders should stick to their principles) as Sinn Féin supporters on this question. Fear of unwanted compromise would also appear to explain the greater unwillingness of Protestants, unionists and supporters of the two principal unionist parties, by comparison with Catholics, nationalists, and supporters of the SDLP, SF, and APNI, to endorse 'any settlement' made by their preferred representatives at the talks (see Table 4). That said, there was majority support across all the five major parties' supporters for accepting a settlement including things 'strongly disliked' by respondents.

Table 3:

Q. Do you think that the leaders of the political party you support should be willing to compromise, or should they stick to their principles?

	religion											
	Total	Prot	RC	0th	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith
Willing to compromise	61	52	74	70	36	57	88	76	60	69	42	69
Stick to principles	37	46	26	24	63	40	12	23	40	31	57	29
No reply	2	2	1	7	1	3	0	0	0	0	1	2

N = 1041. All figures in %.

3. When asked what the main obstacles to successful negotiations would be, large majorities of both Catholics (68%) and Protestants (74%) chose the decommissioning of paramilitaries' weapons. Views on the second most important obstacle differed in more predictable ways, with 40% of Protestants opting for the Irish state's territorial claim on Northern Ireland, but even here, 20% of Catholics (and 15% of self-declared nationalists) were in agreement. Other preferences of both groups were scattered across options including withdrawal of British troops, the establishment of a North-South body, and power sharing. When questioned about who – as opposed to what – was the biggest obstacle to agreement, 90% of both sides refused to attribute blame in partisan ways – attributing blame to the attitudes of both nationalists and unionists.

4. Similar differences in expectations between nationalists and unionists have been observed in the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes surveys conducted before and during the cease-fire. They find far greater levels of positive appraisals of the prospects for community relations among Catholics than Protestants (Evan, 1996).

Table 4:

Q. Would you be willing to accept any political settlement that the leader of your preferred party agreed to even if it included things that you strongly dislike?

	religion					party support					political sympathy					
	Total	Prot	RC	Oh	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith
Yes	58	56	65	49	59	53	64	69	68	76	56	54				
No	22	24	17	36	26	25	24	18	15	14	27	22				
Don't know	19	20	19	16	15	22	12	13	17	10	17	23				

N = 1041. All figures in %.

The tendency for a more pronounced antagonism to negotiations among unionists was accompanied by greater pessimism regarding the prospects of attaining any agreed settlement arising from the negotiations – only a fifth of them thought agreement could be reached, just more than half of the proportion of nationalists who took such a view (see Table 5).⁵ DUP supporters were not only much more pessimistic, they were also less uncertain than supporters of all the other parties.

Table 5:

Q. Do you think that these talks will lead to agreement between the parties which attend the negotiations?

	religion					party support					political sympathy					
	Total	Prot	RC	Oh	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith
Yes	30	26	38	24	21	24	30	42	39	37	20	34				
No	42	49	31	49	64	49	46	27	42	36	57	37				
Don't know	27	24	31	28	15	28	24	31	19	27	23	29				

N = 1041. All figures in %.

A natural way to interpret this greater pessimism on the part of unionist respondents is to see it as a reflection of their intransigence: if they are less willing to compromise, then they presumably hope and expect their representatives not to compromise. Our data suggest that this is so. Unionists have a greater tendency both to refuse to condone compromise by their representatives, and to reject settlements which they feel may be too compromising.⁴

This fear of compromise helps account for the asymmetry in levels of distrust expressed by unionists and nationalists with respect to the likely conduct of the Irish and British governments in the talks. Although they are a little less distrustful of the British government – 19% of Protestants compared with 31% of Catholics distrust the British government 'a great deal', a gap of 12% – the difference between the groups is far less marked than it is with respect to trust in the Irish government, for whom the equivalent figures are 41% compared to 6%, a gap of 35%. When questioned about which external bodies should be involved in

5. This opposition to involvement is also, unsurprisingly, strongly linked to trust.

negotiations, unionists, especially UUP supporters, warmly accepted British governmental involvement but showed far greater wariness of any other external involvement in the negotiations than did nationalists.⁵ Unionists who opposed compromise show most wariness and were most likely to reject external involvement – e.g. 36% of Protestants who were willing to accept compromise by their elected representatives agreed that Senator George Mitchell should be involved in the negotiations, compared with 19% of those who were not willing to accept such compromise.

Table 6:

Q. Which of these parties or governments, if any, do you think should be involved in the forthcoming negotiations? You may choose as many as you like.

	religion					party support					political sympathy					
	Total	Prot	RC	Oh	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith
Brit Govt	78	88	73	89	71	87	70	82	69	73	78	79				
Irish Govt	38	6	85	48	-31	21	44	91	95	36	-12	48				
EU Govt	-22	-39	2	-17	-64	-32	-16	8	-14	-1	-50	-16				
USA Govt	-36	-57	1	-50	-77	-54	-50	10	5	-4	-64	-32				
G. Mitchell	-7	-31	31	-13	-57	-28	20	38	33	37	-39	-4				

N = 1041

Notes:

(1) In this Table cells record the surplus of 'yes' over 'no' responses for each possible external agent (don't knows are excluded).

(11) Respondents were offered 'The British Government', 'The Irish Government', 'Governments from the European Union', 'The American Government', and 'Former American Senator George Mitchell'.

Data not reported here show that opposition to the involvement of the Irish and British Governments is, unsurprisingly, strongly linked to distrust of their likely conduct. Issues of trust were also tapped with respect to the internal parties involved in the negotiations, and here, once again, the omens for compromise by unionists look grim. Table 7 shows answers to a question on how much respondents trust their preferred party to represent their point of view in the negotiations.

Table 7:

Q. Do you trust the leaders of your preferred party to represent your point of view in the negotiations?

	DUP					UUP					APNI					SDLP					SF					
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	
I strongly trust the leaders of my preferred party						65					37				42					51						73
I trust the leaders of my preferred party						29					52				44					43						21
I distrust the leaders of my preferred party						4					4				6					0						2
I strongly distrust the leaders of my preferred party						1					1				3					1						1
Don't know/No reply						1					6				6					4						2

most recently, the loyalist parties entering the political process (the aggressive Unionist by the Ulster Democratic Party) are regarded by many as having grown to give a voice to a frustrated king class who were being inadequately represented by the two main unionist parties, and such growth is indicative of a greater consciousness among the Protestant king class. The list parties which are some showing in elections: the DUP and the DUP have been seen giving a voice to the larger working class restaurants inadequately represented by the two unionist parties (Fry and Evans, 1997: 5; ch. 10; Price, 2001). Should their wish to prove themselves it will advance prospects of a movement, but it may then votes.

The implications of these patterns need a little unpacking. We have seen that DUP supporters are less compromising – a fair proportion of them would not accept ‘any settlement’ agreed to by their party, and would not want the party to compromise. But they also clearly believe, sensibly, that the DUP is unlikely to compromise, otherwise they would not have expressed faith in the DUP to represent their interests. With the UUP, however, there is a different picture. Once again, a quarter or so of their supporters say they would refuse to back their leaders on an unpopular agreement but, unlike the DUP, only 37% of the UUP’s supporters express strong levels of trust that the party will represent their views in negotiations. With this combination of uncertainty about the party leadership’s trustworthiness, and willingness amongst their supporters to desert it in the face of unpopular outcomes, it is unlikely that the supposedly more moderate UUP leadership could engage in risky compromises without jeopardising its position as the majority unionist party. The implication is that unionist popular opinion provides marked constraints on unionist party involvement in negotiations. If unionist parties want to represent the views of their supporters – and hence keep them as supporters – they have (and probably will have) little choice but to reject significant compromises. Without palpable evidence of considerable change, unionist public opinion is likely to have a stultifying effect on any future cross-communal negotiations. Note that the leadership of the SDLP enjoys greater trust from its supporters than the UUP, but also that the leaderships of the two more moderate parties have less trusting followers than the parties on their flanks, Sinn Féin and the DUP.

We do not wish to overstate the case for pessimism. All of the differences observed are a matter of degree rather than type, but we cannot escape the evidence of considerably greater flexibility among the various groups of nationalists. Whether we consider Catholics as a whole, moderate SDLP supporters, or more significantly, even Sinn Féin partisans and, what we have termed, ‘hard-line nationalists’, there is a greater willingness to accept compromise than there is among any of the equivalent unionist groups. The sources of this inflexibility among Protestants and unionists have been charted and debated by others. In his ethnographic account Steve Bruce comments that ‘for unionists the crucial point of the last twenty years has been loss’ (1994: 53; see also Bruce, 1986). Competition between Protestants and Catholics is seen as a zero-sum game; as one of Bruce’s respondents commented, ‘if we are losing, it must be because Catholics are gaining’ (1994: 61). These sentiments are not easily incorporated into negotiations.⁶

Table 8:

0. Here are a number of different ways in which Northern Ireland might be governed in future. Please state which one you prefer.

	religion			party support				political sympathy				
	Total	Prot	RC	OTH	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	Nat	Uni	Neith
N. Ireland should remain part of the UK	55	80	15	61	85	83	49	15	2	6	86	54
N. Ireland should become part of the Republic of Ireland	13	1	31	12	1	0	9	25	60	50	0	7
N. Ireland should become part of both the UK and the Irish Republic	16	5	34	13	3	3	25	36	25	31	2	18
N. Ireland should become an independent state with its own parliament	10	10	11	8	11	10	13	12	11	11	10	10
Don't know/Can't decide	6	3	10	7	1	3	3	13	2	2	1	9

N = 1041. All figures in %.

Lastly, consider indicators of the intensity of unionist aspirations for continuity in the governing arrangements for the region: Table 8 displays answers to a question about ‘the different ways in which Northern Ireland might be governed in the future’. The question allowed a choice from a wide range of potential arrangements. They were offered four major options: maintenance of the Union; incorporation into the Republic, joint sovereignty, and independence. In a supplementary, respondents had a choice of whether or not to have a Belfast parliament with any of the first three major options. This array completes the feasible set of futures regarding constitutional settlements – repatriation was not considered (McGarry and O’Leary, 1995; O’Leary and McGarry 1996: ch. 8).

On examining the answers we found that even with the inclusion of options which introduce elements of compromise into the choices with which they are confronted, unionists – whether defined as Protestants, unionist party supporters, or as hard-line sympathisers – do not take them up. Protestants opt overwhelmingly for the Union (more often than not with a Belfast parliament) while Catholics are split fairly evenly between the national unification and the joint sovereignty

options, which together account for 65% of their preferences, with smaller, but still noticeable groups of 15% opting for the Union, and 1% for an independent Northern Ireland. Almost no Protestant chose the compromise option of joint sovereignty, whereas more Catholics chose this than any other outcome (for further published examination of these issues see O'Leary [1992] and Evans [1996]).

The commitment of Protestants to the Union contrasts markedly with the wide range of options endorsed by Catholics, a difference in attitudes echoed, although in a somewhat less pronounced way, by the persisting differences between the two communities in openness to integration. To understand this unionist 'intransigence', and its antithesis nationalist 'flexibility', we need only consider the ethnopolitical context. Prospective negotiations all point to one future: one in which the dominant position of the Protestant and unionist community will be 'compromised', if not terminated. In such a future Protestants and unionists have to concede to nationalists; Catholics and nationalists, hitherto, the weaker community, have the 'luxury' of diverse preferences about the present and the future. In a comparative context the intransigence of unionists and the flexibility of nationalists is no surprise: one community presently has acceptable national and state arrangements, the other does not.

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Following the narrow 'yes' vote in the referendum on a Welsh assembly, Russell Deacon examines the electoral system proposals for the assembly.

How the Additional Member System was Buried and then Resurrected in Wales

Russell Deacon

The British parliamentary system had determined that either Labour or the Conservatives would decide the future of governance in Wales. Plaid Cymru, due to its confinement to Wales, and the Liberal Democrats, due to their weakness in the first-past-the-post electoral system were not in a position to determine by themselves Welsh devolution. The Conservatives favoured the status quo so it was left solely to the Labour Party to decide the likely structure and power of any proposed political devolution. Unlike Scotland there was to be no Welsh constitutional convention, which gathered together everyone interested in political devolution. Calls by the trade unions, the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru were politely or sometimes not so politely dismissed by the Wales Labour Party. The official grounds for this dismissal were that the Labour Party had a majority of the parliamentary seats in Wales and therefore had a strong enough mandate to determine Assembly policy by itself. It did not need to consult 'minority interests'. The unofficial reason was that the Labour Party was split between reformers who desired radical change and the old guard that wished to see the status quo maintained.¹ The party had no desire for anybody to expose these splits in the period coming up to a general election. Splits on fundamental issues, as had been seen in the Conservative Party, could be extremely damaging electorally.

In June 1992 the Wales Labour Executive Committee established a Policy Commission 'to re-examine and, if necessary, update the Party's policy in relation to the creation of a directly elected Welsh Assembly'. In 1993 the Commission made no decision and in its interim report: 'The Welsh Assembly: The Way Forward' it committed itself only to further consultation. In July 1994 a consultation paper entitled 'Shaping the Vision' was issued. This provided two criteria for any electoral system:²

1. That its members should retain a constituency link;
2. That the new Assembly reflected more accurately within its membership the gender balance within the Welsh electorate.

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1. Labour Party interview sources to author.
2. Wales Labour Party *Shaping the Vision: A Consultation Paper* (1994), p. 6.