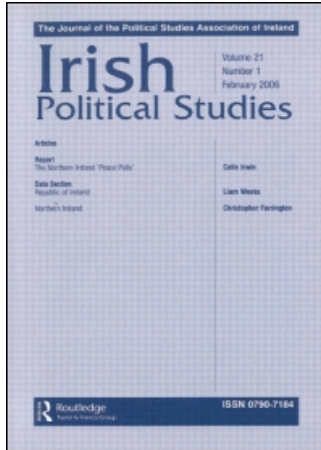


This article was downloaded by:[McEvoy, Joanne]
On: 13 September 2007
Access Details: [subscription number 782012954]
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Irish Political Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713635614>

The Northern Ireland Assembly Election 2007

Joanne McEvoy^a

^a Penn Program in Ethnic Conflict, University of Pennsylvania,

Online Publication Date: 01 September 2007

To cite this Article: McEvoy, Joanne (2007) 'The Northern Ireland Assembly Election 2007', Irish Political Studies, 22:3, 367 - 381

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/07907180701527292

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07907180701527292>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article maybe used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

The Northern Ireland Assembly Election 2007

JOANNE MCEVOY

Penn Program in Ethnic Conflict, University of Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT *The Northern Ireland Assembly Election held on 7 March 2007 was significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, despite the widespread view that the campaign was one of the most low-key in recent memory, the election was hugely important as it signalled a real possibility of delivering restored devolution as the culmination of five years of government initiatives and inter-party talks. Second, the DUP and Sinn Féin further cemented their position as the leading parties of their respective communities with 36 and 28 Assembly seats respectively. Third, the two 'moderate' parties fared badly: the UUP's share of Assembly seats plummeted from 24 to 18 – 18 behind the DUP and the SDLP won just 16 seats, qualifying for only one executive seat. Fourth, the presence of dissidents in opposition to the respective positions of the DUP and Sinn Féin failed to make an impact. Overall, the election created the conditions for a new political landscape in Northern Ireland, leading to the formation of a four-party power sharing executive. Almost five years since the suspension of the institutions in October 2002 the third power sharing government in the history of Northern Ireland was agreed in April and took effect on 8 May 2007.*

Background

With the stop–start experience of power sharing following the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement of 1998, the devolved institutions were suspended for the fourth and final time in October 2002 amid allegations of a republican spy-ring at Stormont. In the ensuing period the British and Irish Governments failed to secure a deal between the UUP and Sinn Féin in October 2003 over the issue of transparency of IRA decommissioning. The November 2003 NI Assembly elections firmly cemented the position of DUP and Sinn Féin as the largest parties of their respective blocs (Farrington, 2004). The 2003 Assembly Elections had changed the political environment as any new executive would have to be agreed by the DUP and Sinn Féin. The two governments attempted to square the circle in 2004, leading to the publication of their *Comprehensive Agreement* proposals in December. The impact of the Northern Bank robbery and the McCartney murder in early 2005, however, meant that agreement between these two highly antagonistic parties appeared a long way away. Indeed, the DUP's position at the 2005 general election was that power sharing with Sinn Féin under d'Hondt 'or any similar mechanism' was 'out of the question' (DUP, 2005).

Correspondence Address: Joanne McEvoy, Penn Program in Ethnic Conflict, University of Pennsylvania, 3819–33 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104. Email: jmcevoy@sas.upenn.edu

The British and Irish Governments continued to make efforts in 2006 to restore the institutions. An incentive for the parties to agree on devolved power sharing was provided with the governments' threat of their 'Plan B' of greater cooperation between London and Dublin to implement the Belfast Agreement in terms of North–South and East–West relations. Despite failure to secure agreement among the parties at St Andrews in Scotland in October, the British and Irish Governments published the *St Andrews Agreement* with a requirement that the parties would come back with approval in November. The document set out a timetable for the restoration of power sharing with nominations for the posts of First Minister (Designate) and Deputy First Minister (Designate) on 24 November 2006. It focused on what Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Peter Hain referred to as the 'twin pillars' of policing and power sharing. It is also of note that the *St Andrews Agreement* made a number of significant amendments to the 1998 Agreement in relation to the operation of the Strand One institutions, particularly with regard to the issue of ministerial accountability. For instance, an amendment to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 was to be made to introduce a statutory Ministerial Code. Where a decision of the executive could not be achieved by consensus and a vote was required any three ministers could trigger a cross-community vote. An amendment to the 1998 Act would provide for 30 MLAs to refer a ministerial decision back to the executive to consider it within seven days. And an amendment to the Pledge of Office would require Ministers to participate fully in the devolved institutions (Northern Ireland Office, 2006).

Following indication from the parties that they were prepared to proceed on the basis of the St Andrews provisions, the two governments announced their decision to hold an Assembly election rather than a referendum on the *St Andrews Agreement*. This decision was arguably significant in itself as important amendments had been made to the 1998 Agreement. With the election set for March 2007, Sinn Féin was required to demonstrate its commitment to the process by supporting the policing structures. After some delay Sinn Féin held its special *ard fheis* on policing on 28 January 2007 where the party's successful motion to change its policy on policing and declare support for the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the criminal justice system received support from more than 90 per cent of delegates. Following this historic change of direction by republicans, the British and Irish Governments hoped that Sinn Féin's move would secure a return to devolution by the deadline of 26 March 2007. Indeed, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Peter Hain continued to make his 'devolution or dissolution' threat. According to the Northern Ireland Office, the alternative to devolution would mean that the Assembly would be dissolved, MLA salaries would stop, and the two governments would progress North–South cooperation under their 'Plan B' with an enhanced role for the Dublin Government. It was later claimed by the DUP that Hain had made this threat more than 50 times (*Independent*, 27 March 2007).

A 'Lacklustre' Campaign?

With polling day set for 7 March 2007, there appeared to be some uncertainty as to what the election was about. It was certainly difficult to predict what would happen

after the election and the burning question whether it would lead to power sharing before the deadline of 26 March was not answered definitively by the parties. Sinn Féin called on the DUP to commit to power sharing and saw the election as the vehicle to end direct rule and ensure full delivery of the Good Friday Agreement, 'increasing all-Ireland cooperation and planning politically, economically and socially' (Sinn Féin, 2007). For the DUP, any delay to power sharing would be due to the failure of Sinn Féin to 'deliver' on policing.

An interesting aspect of the election campaign was the greater discussion on more normal 'bread and butter' issues rather than communal positions on the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement or Northern Ireland's constitutional status. Throughout the campaign the parties focused on policy issues such as water rates, corporation tax, health, education and the cost of housing. The media repeatedly reported that the electorate was concerned first and foremost with the prospect of water charges, which became the number one issue on the doorsteps (*Irish News*, 23 February 2007). The focus on such issues led commentators to pronounce that the campaign was low-key and somewhat 'lacklustre'. For instance, the election was described as 'one of the oddest and strangest elections in the history of Northern Ireland' and a 'sense of political quiet' had taken hold (*Irish News*, 6 March 2007).

An absence of inter-party hostility and a focus on such policy issues does not, however, diminish the broader importance of the election. Indeed, it could be argued that this focus on policy issues illustrated how politics in Northern Ireland is potentially moving out of conflict towards stable democracy. With all main parties supportive of the process as set out in the *St Andrews Agreement* the election was about voting for candidates who would form a likely Assembly and the potential start of more 'normal' politics. It is significant that none of the major parties took an 'anti' position as per the DUP in 1998 and Sinn Féin's successful *ard fheis* motion further shifted that party towards the SDLP's ground of constitutional nationalism. These factors made for a wholly different and potentially more positive political environment.

The DUP campaign was certainly more measured than previous elections. The absence of DUP protest was described as 'boring' by the media where 'an avuncular Ian is reduced to cheery photo opportunities with old ladies and funny props' (*Irish Times*, 21 February 2007). The DUP manifesto, *Getting it Right*, stated that power sharing with Sinn Féin would only be possible 'when there has been delivery by the republican movement, tested and proved over a credible period, in terms of support for the PSNI, the Courts and the rule of law, a complete end to paramilitary and criminal activity and the removal of terrorist structures'. The manifesto set out the DUP's claims to securing amendments to the 1998 Agreement, particularly in relation to ministerial accountability. Securing a substantial financial package was also presented as a precondition for devolution (DUP, 2007). In addition, the manifesto committed to policies such as the extension of free public transport to all people over 60 and the retention of academic selection. At the launch of the manifesto the DUP continued to rebuff the issue of whether the party would signal its intent on entering a power sharing government with Sinn Féin on 26 March. Instead, the DUP

claimed that it was up to republicans whether devolution would be restored (*Irish Times*, 22 February 2007).

During the campaign period there were rumours of a potential 'split' in the DUP ranks. According to media articles there was internal dissension over a contract and resignation letter election candidates had to sign. Reports suggested that for a breach of party discipline candidates would incur a fine of as much as £20,000, a figure dismissed by the DUP as 'wild speculation' (*News Letter*, 6 February 2007). There is no doubt, however, that the DUP's policy was too much for some party members, evidenced by the resignation of Jim Allister MEP who said the party's judgement had been clouded by the 'lure of office' and protested against the continued existence of the IRA Army Council (*Belfast Telegraph*, 27 March 2007). Following Allister's departure from the party some councillors in Ballymena and Banbridge also resigned and even Upper Bann MP David Simpson expressed some anxiety that the deal to go into government with Sinn Féin was 'premature' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 29 March 2007).

Sinn Féin launched its election manifesto, *Delivering for Ireland's Future*, just over a week before polling day. The party pledged to expand areas of all-Ireland cooperation; prepare for a referendum on Irish unity; campaign for a £10bn peace dividend from the British Government over ten years; and ensure transfer of powers on policing and justice by May 2008. Other commitments included tax varying powers for the Assembly; a review of the rates system, opposition to water charges, an end to academic selection, investment in a comprehensive social housing programme, the introduction of an Irish Language Act and a Commissioner for the Irish Language (Sinn Féin, 2007). In the run-up to election day Sinn Féin stressed the party's preference for devolved power sharing as 'Plan A' but suggested that if DUP was not prepared to work the institutions then the British and Irish Governments should move to implement their 'Plan B' with an enhanced role for Dublin in the affairs of Northern Ireland. Looking to the Irish general election later set for 24 May 2007, Gerry Adams made clear his party's electoral ambitions both North and South (*Irish Times*, 1 March 2007). Thus, Sinn Féin was gearing up for two elections and ultimately hoped to win a sufficient number of TDs to influence the composition of the Dublin Government and become a potential coalition partner.

The UUP was the first party to launch its election manifesto, *For All of Us*. The manifesto argued that it was now time for 'normal politics' in Northern Ireland which would, in time, 'allow parties to form genuine political coalitions and move away from the tribal, divisive politics of the past'. The UUP also positioned itself as the only party prepared to commit to taking seats in a new executive. The most notable commitment in the manifesto was to introduce free NHS prescriptions for everyone in Northern Ireland. Among its other commitments, the UUP proposed a guaranteed 20 hours a week pre-school education for all children; the creation of an Environmental Protection Agency; the introduction of free personal care for the elderly; and a Royal Commission to strengthen the Union (UUP, 2007). Similarly, the SDLP's manifesto, *Let's Deliver Real Progress*, stressed that the election should be about Northern Ireland moving forward, not who would be the biggest

party (*Irish News*, 27 February 2007). The manifesto made a number of commitments, including: protection of ratepayers' interests in the form of a revenue regulator on water rates; an all-Ireland Public Safety body; an all-Ireland corporation tax; an all-Ireland economic policy unit; an end to academic selection in favour of a comprehensive system; the scrapping of A levels for a broader sixth form curriculum; the release of more land for social housing; and a referendum on Irish unity (SDLP, 2007).

The Alliance Party used its manifesto, *Alliance Works*, to continue to argue for a coalition formed by inter-party negotiation and approved by a weighted majority in the Assembly as well as the removal of the community designations for a voting system based on a weighted majority. In terms of policy commitments the party proposed the introduction of tax varying powers; a target of 10 per cent of children in integrated schooling by 2010; the abolition of student tuition fees; free personal care for the elderly in residential and nursing homes; the creation of an Environmental Protection Agency; the promotion of an all-island electricity market; and water charges linked to ability to pay and usage. Alliance also set out its critique of the *St Andrews Agreement*, particularly in relation to the removal of a vote on the appointment of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, claiming that some provisions 'are tantamount to the division of power rather than the sharing of power' (Alliance, 2007). With regard to the potential of Sinn Féin and the DUP cementing their position as the two largest parties, Alliance warned of 'government by memorandum, with civil servants acting as messengers between various ministers who are not prepared to talk to one another' (*Irish Times*, 28 February 2007).

In addition to the enhanced focus on policy issues, the election campaign was different from previous polls due to the presence of a number of 'dissident' candidates opposed to the positions of the DUP and Sinn Féin respectively. The UKUP's Robert McCartney put his name forward for candidature in six constituencies, defending his seat in North Down and contesting North Belfast, Lagan Valley, South Antrim, West Tyrone and Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Other UKUP candidates ran in seven other constituencies. For instance, Limavady Councillor Lyle Cubitt left the DUP and joined the UKUP as an Assembly candidate in North Antrim as he felt that Paisley had gone back on the 2005 manifesto that the party would not share power with Sinn Féin under d'Hondt (*Belfast Telegraph*, 13 February 2007). McCartney pledged that he would represent more than one constituency if elected. He wanted to offer voters 'an anti-agreement choice' and prevent the formation of an executive including republicans (*Belfast Telegraph*, 1 March 2007). In response to this perceived threat the DUP manifesto stated that 'Votes for independents or fringe Unionist candidates endanger a Unionist majority on the Executive, regardless of the size of the Unionist majority in the Assembly' (DUP, 2007).

There was also a not inconsiderable opposition to Sinn Féin and the party's policy on policing. It can be argued that the party successfully managed this policy shift with the special *ard fheis* on the issue and dozens of public and private meetings. Nevertheless, a 'dissident' threat came from a number of independents and Republican Sinn Féin who fielded candidates in six constituencies. The party's

candidates were treated as independents since Republican Sinn Féin was not registered as a political party. Republican Sinn Féin launched an abstentionist campaign under the banner 'Smash Stormont'. Cited in the *Irish Times* (14 February 2007), party leader Ruairí ÓBrádaigh argued: 'What the Provisional leadership is doing is in direct conflict with the 1916 proclamation of the Republic and with the declaration of independence of the first (all-Ireland) Dáil. Their recent decisions also conflict with the high ideals for which so many men and women of all creeds have struggled, suffered and died over the centuries.' Sinn Féin also faced challenges from former supporters and independent republicans. For instance, Gerry McGeogh ran in Fermanagh South Tyrone and David Hyland resigned from the party and ran as an independent in Newry and Armagh. Paul McGlinchey, brother of former INLA leader Dominic McGlinchey ran as an independent candidate in North Antrim. As shown in the results section below, the potential threat posed in electoral terms by republican 'dissidents' did not transpire. In total 26 independents contested the election including the six candidates from Republican Sinn Féin. Other notable independents included Paul Berry in Newry and Armagh who had previously left the DUP after allegations concerning his private life in a Sunday newspaper. Raymond McCord Snr, whose campaign concerning the murder of his son sparked a controversial Police Ombudsman report on collusion, ran as an independent in North Belfast.

It is important to consider the extent of inter- and intra-communal party competition in the run-up to the election. In the previous Assembly elections of 1998 and 2003 there was a very evident battle between the parties on the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. This was particularly the case within the unionist camp with the anti-Agreement DUP vowing to destroy both the pro-Agreement UUP and Sinn Féin. This time round, however, the competition both within and between the two blocs was somewhat different as all of the main parties broadly supported the process as set out in the *St Andrews Agreement*. This is not to argue, however, that inter-bloc competition did not occur. There was, of course, vigorous competition between the DUP and Sinn Féin as a higher number of seats would determine which bloc would hold a majority on the executive. There was a clear focus on the part of the DUP to prevent Sinn Féin gains. For instance, Ian Paisley gave a warning to the unionist electorate that votes for parties other than the DUP would risk allowing Martin McGuinness to become First Minister (*Irish Times*, 22 February 2007). The party's manifesto also stated that the DUP is the only unionist party 'realistically capable of winning more seats than Sinn Féin to stop them being nominated for the post of First Minister' (DUP, 2007).

In relation to intra-communal competition, both the DUP and Sinn Féin were intent on wiping out the opposition within their respective blocs as they needed the highest number of votes and seats to secure as many ministerial seats as possible under the d'Hondt procedure. It can be argued, however, that the Northern Ireland Assembly election 2007 changed the dynamics of intra-unionist competition between the DUP and the UUP as the former was now supporting power sharing; it was now a matter of agreeing the schedule of devolution subject to Sinn Féin

'delivery' on policing. In terms of intra-nationalist competition, the battleground between the SDLP and Sinn Féin had changed in the wake of the latter's successful *ard fheis* motion on policing. Thus, both the DUP and Sinn Féin had shifted even more onto the 'moderate' ground, a process which had been taking place for a number of years (see Mitchell *et al.*, 2001). For instance, the respective SDLP and Sinn Féin manifestoes made similar commitments in relation to ending academic selection; a referendum on Irish unity; and accountability on policing. While the DUP campaign sought to maintain that the party had secured a better deal for unionists than the UUP had done under David Trimble and now Sir Reg Empey, the Ulster Unionists called for a focus on more 'normal' politics. Both parties, however, were of a similar position in relation to the acceptance of power sharing with Sinn Féin. The DUP was adamant, however, that this would happen only when the conditions were right. The election was also interesting in that an all-party consensus was formed on certain policies, particularly in relation to the issue of water charges.

In the run-up to the election the media made predictions that the DUP and Sinn Féin would make gains (*Belfast Telegraph*, 1 March 2007). In terms of the opposition to the DUP from the UKUP, it was predicted that Bob McCartney would win in just one of his six constituencies, retaining his seat in North Down (*Irish Times*, 6 March 2007). In relation to the opposition to Sinn Féin from Republican Sinn Féin and other 'republican purist candidates' it was predicted that the party still had the chance to make gains in target constituencies such as Lagan Valley and South Antrim (*Irish Times*, 12 February 2007). Interestingly, the media did not predict that the Ulster Unionists would fare so badly; the *Irish Times* predicted between 20 and 23 seats for the UUP, 25 for Sinn Féin, 18 for the SDLP and one seat for the UKUP (*Irish Times*, 6 March 2007). There was also a prediction that Alliance would fare badly, with one newspaper forecasting that the party's seat share would fall from six to three (*Irish Times*, 6 March 2007). It was also felt that Dawn Purvis would struggle to keep the PUP seat as the DUP could take the PUP seat with stronger vote management (*Irish News*, 19 February 2007).

The Winners and Losers

The main story of the election results was that the DUP and Sinn Féin had made further gains with a further squeeze on the 'moderate' parties of the UUP and SDLP. It was a hugely successful election for the DUP and Sinn Féin who won 36 and 28 seats respectively. The DUP increased its share of the vote and the number of Assembly seats, guaranteeing the post of First Minister and four ministries. Sinn Féin also increased its share of the vote and number of seats, thereby confirming the party's right to the post of Deputy First Minister and three ministries. The Ulster Unionist Party was arguably the biggest loser of the election as the party saw its seat share plummet from 24 to 18 – 18 seats behind the DUP. The UUP's vote was down 11 per cent in East Belfast and party leader Sir Reg Empey was returned on the third count with 14 per cent of the vote, a considerable fall from his 21 per cent of the

vote in the 2003 Assembly election. The SDLP was also disappointed as its seat share fell from 18 to 16 and only one ministry.

It was a good election for the Alliance Party who won an extra seat and an increased share of the vote. Thanks to successful targeting of seats, all seven MLAs were solidly returned and it was notable that Naomi Long received 5,585 first preference votes in East Belfast, elected on the first count and just 50 votes behind DUP deputy leader Peter Robinson. The Alliance vote was up 9.9 per cent in East Belfast and up 6.7 per cent in South Belfast. The party also celebrated the notable success of Anna Lo in South Belfast, the first Chinese person to be elected to a European legislature who will be able to bring to the Assembly the perspective of Northern Ireland's growing ethnic communities. The election was also notable in that it produced a breakthrough for the Green Party who won their first Stormont seat, with Brian Wilson receiving 2,839 first preference votes and the fifth seat in North Down. The election result was an important achievement for the new leader of the Progressive Unionist Party, Dawn Purvis, who retained the party's seat previously held by the recently deceased David Ervine. This was a particularly good achievement as Purvis defied predictions and actually increased the PUP share of the vote in East Belfast.

The election results are interesting in that they point to the failure of both unionist and republican 'dissidents' to take support from their erstwhile colleagues. The election was a massive defeat for the UKUP's Robert McCartney, a former MP for North Down. He polled badly in all of the six constituencies he contested and lost his own Assembly seat. The UKUP managed to attract just over 10,000 voters overall and McCartney polled 1,806 first preference votes in North Down in contrast to the prediction that he would probably make it through (*Irish Times*, 6 March 2007). It could be argued that McCartney's strategy of standing in six constituencies may have alienated voters and he failed to acknowledge the support of the unionist community for a deal to be struck and devolution to return. In the wake of his disastrous electoral performance McCartney opted to leave politics.

Republican dissidents also fared badly and failed to make inroads into Sinn Féin successes. For instance, in Mid-Ulster the Republican Sinn Féin candidate got 437 first preference votes and in North Antrim Paul McGlinchey, opposed to Sinn Féin's policy on policing, obtained only 383 first preference votes in contrast to Sinn Féin's Daithí McKay, who came in on the first count with DUP leader Ian Paisley who topped the poll. In Newry and Armagh sitting Sinn Féin MLA Davy Hyland, who had resigned from the party and ran as an independent candidate in opposition, polled a healthy 2,188 first preference votes. He failed to be elected on transfers, however, and did not have much impact on the Sinn Féin which won three seats – Conor Murphy and Cathal Boylan getting elected on the first count and Mickey Brady on the fourth.

The overall turnout was 62.87 per cent: 696,538 votes polled out of a 1,107,904 eligible electorate (Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, 2007). As per the 2003 Assembly election (Farrington, 2004), turnout for this election was higher in nationalist constituencies in the west than in unionist constituencies in the east. For

Table 1. Summary Northern Ireland Assembly election results: 2007 and 2003

Party	Seats 2007	Vote share 2007 (%)	Seats 2003	Vote share 2003 (%)
DUP	36	30.1	30	25.6
Sinn Féin	28	26.2	24	23.5
UUP	18	14.9	27	22.7
SDLP	16	15.2	18	17.0
Alliance	7	5.2	6	3.7
Others	3	8.0	3	7.5

Source: <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections>.

instance, turnout was 73.06 per cent in Mid-Ulster and 71.68 per cent in West Tyrone compared to 53.77 per cent in North Down and 53.46 per cent in East Antrim. The 108 elected candidates included 30 MLAs who were new to the Assembly and 18 women. Of note is the performance of Arlene Foster (DUP), who topped the poll in Fermanagh and South Tyrone with an increase of more than 2,000 since her defection from the UUP to the DUP. Sinn Féin's Michelle Gildernew was also elected on the first count in that constituency. Naomi Long (Alliance) was elected in the first count in East Belfast, receiving 18.8 per cent of the vote compared to DUP leader Peter Robinson's 19 per cent.

As this was the third Assembly election since the 1998 Agreement, it is interesting to look at whether the parties adopted successful vote management strategies. The most successful and sophisticated vote management was demonstrated by Sinn Féin. In West Belfast the party balanced five candidates and all five were elected. Adams' personal vote was managed down to just over 6,000 and this allowed the four other candidates to come in just under the quota on the first count. Sinn Féin was thus the first party to have five candidates elected in the same constituency. The gain was made by taking Diane Dodds' seat despite the increase in the DUP vote. Here Sinn Féin increased its share of the vote by 5 per cent compared to the SDLP's decline of 7 per cent. Excellent vote management was also demonstrated by Sinn Féin in Mid-Ulster, where the party's three candidates were all elected on the first count (Martin McGuinness, Francie Molloy and Michelle O'Neill). The party had a breakthrough in South Antrim, a traditionally unionist constituency, with the selection of Mitchel McLaughlin, who topped the poll with 6,313 first preference votes. The DUP displayed excellent vote management in Strangford with the election of Iris Robinson and three others (Jim Shannon, Simon Hamilton and Michelle McIlveen). In East Belfast Peter Robinson's vote ensured the election of fellow DUP candidates Wallace Browne and Robin Newton.

In contrast to the victories of Sinn Féin and the DUP, the SDLP and UUP were much less successful at vote management. The SDLP displayed poor vote management in West Tyrone.¹ The party made an error in fielding three candidates where it would have expected to retain its one seat. This was particularly disappointing for

the SDLP as winning one more Assembly seat would have meant that the party would have been guaranteed a second ministerial seat. In contrast to the SDLP's performance in this constituency Sinn Féin won three seats, outpolling the SDLP three to one. Poor vote management was also demonstrated by the UUP. In particular, the Ulster Unionists made a mistake in running three candidates in South Belfast rather than two at most. The party's vote share fell by 8.7 per cent compared to an increase in the Alliance vote by 6.7 per cent. Speaking at the North Down count, the UUP's only MP Lady Sylvia Hermon said her party's vote management had been 'woeful, to put it mildly' (*BBC News Online*, 12 March 2007).

The parties' focus on vote management strategies had an important impact on the vote transfers under the electoral system of proportional representation *via* single transferable vote (STV). As in previous Assembly elections, candidates with fewer first preference votes benefited from transfers of party colleagues already elected. Thus, parties mostly transferred amongst each other rather than across the communal divide. The lack of nationalist–unionist and unionist–nationalist transfers is a recurring theme for Northern Ireland's Assembly elections. In relation to the 1998 election, Reilly (2001: 137) noted that studies 'found striking evidence that the representation of moderate sentiment in the Assembly was greatly assisted by Northern Ireland's electoral system'. It appears, however, that the vote transfers in 1998 largely took place within the nationalist and unionist blocs and from pro-Agreement communal parties to bi-communal parties such as Alliance and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition rather than across blocs (see Sinnott, 1998). The level of cross-communal transfers in the 2003 Assembly election was also low (see Elliott, 2003). Indeed, the lack of cross-communal transfers raises the question whether Proportional Representation (STV) is the most appropriate electoral system for Northern Ireland. Although it is certainly beyond the scope of this report to consider the debates on electoral systems for Northern Ireland and divided societies more generally, it is worth highlighting that suggestions have been advanced in favour of the Additional Member System and an independent commission to investigate the issue (Wilford and Wilson, 2006: 43).

The election results meant that a new power sharing executive would have a unionist majority: 7:5 including First Minister and Deputy First Minister. The ten-member coalition would have four DUP ministers, three Sinn Féin, two UUP and one SDLP. Of note is that had the UUP and SDLP returned the same number of seats, under the d'Hondt system of portfolio allocation the SDLP would have gained an extra ministerial seat at the UUP's expense. The new Assembly would have a combined DUP/UUP unionist total of 54 seats compared to a combined Sinn Féin/SDLP total of 44 seats.

Towards a Power Sharing Deal

Following the election the parties had just two weeks to agree whether they would share power from 26 March. The two governments continued to push for agreement between the DUP and Sinn Féin as set out in a joint statement:

The message of the electorate is clear: after so many years of frustration and disappointment, they want Northern Ireland to move on to build a better future together through the devolved institutions. Restoration of the devolved institutions represents an opportunity of historic proportions. It must not be missed. (*News Letter*, 10 March 2007)

For Secretary of State Peter Hain, the choice for the parties was ‘devolution or dissolution’ and the British Government would not seek to extend the deadline. He set out the options thus: ‘It is either a functioning executive with powers devolved on 26 March or it’s dissolution and the politicians stop getting paid, Stormont closes down and we pack up Northern Ireland politics, maybe for years to come’ (*News Letter*, 10 March 2007). By the end of the month, however, in circumstances where a deal seemed increasingly possible, the Secretary of State had changed his threat to dissolution if parties failed to agree, notably not a requirement for a functioning government. The parties focused on securing a sufficiently substantial financial package in meetings with Tony Blair and the Chancellor Gordon Brown. For the DUP the financial package appeared a ‘deal breaker’. The DUP was also intent on securing a strong commitment from Sinn Féin that republicans would support the PSNI. Some controversy had arisen over comments by Sinn Féin MP Michelle Gildernew that she would not report to the police knowledge of armed dissident republicans. The DUP continued to stress that it was ‘condition-led’ and not ‘calendar-led’, with scepticism mounting that agreement could be secured in advance of Hain’s deadline.

Deadline day, 26 March 2007, passed without the restoration of the devolved institutions. What transpired, however, was an extraordinary agreement between the DUP and Sinn Féin that devolution would be postponed for six weeks until 8 May. The quite remarkable image of Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams sitting side by side in Parliament Buildings, Stormont was broadcast around the world as a milestone in Northern Ireland’s peace process. Paisley commented: ‘We must not allow our justified loathing of the horrors and tragedies of the past to become a barrier to creating a better and more stable future.’ In reply, Adams accepted that ‘the relationships between the people of this island have been marred by centuries of discord, conflict, hurt and tragedy ... The discussions and agreement between our two parties shows the potential of what can now be achieved’ (*Guardian*, 27 March 2007).

The DUP clearly required more time to ensure that the vast majority of members were prepared for the party to go into government with Sinn Féin. For Sinn Féin’s part, it is likely that Adams and his colleagues were happy to agree to the postponement as the deal reflected that the DUP had now committed itself to power sharing with republicans. It is also significant that in the wake of the DUP–Sinn Féin deal to share power from 8 May, the parties began to prepare for government. This preparatory work to be carried out in advance of the transfer of powers included an ‘indicative’ d’Hondt to match departments with ministers, departmental briefings and work on a Programme for Government. This is notably different to the experience post-1998 when executive formation was delayed for almost 18 months after the Assembly

election in June 1998 over the issue of IRA decommissioning. D'Hondt was eventually triggered on 29 November 1999 and the transfer of power from Westminster took place on 2 December.

The 'indicative' d'Hondt was interesting in that it took place behind closed doors rather than during a sitting of the Assembly. It was thus an entirely different event with none of the drama and walk-outs as seen in November 1999. In relation to parties' portfolio preferences, it is interesting that Sinn Féin chose Education as its first pick on the second round. The party had, of course, the Education portfolio during the 1999–2002 administration with Martin McGuinness as minister. There was some speculation, however, that Sinn Féin would choose Enterprise, Trade and Investment which was chosen on the first round in November 1999 by the UUP. A further surprise came with the UUP's confirmation of ministers. Following Sir Reg Empey's preferences, there were some apparently heated exchanges within the UUP over who would be the party's ministers. Despite Alan McFarland's view that Empey should focus on party matters, Empey confirmed he would become Minister for Employment and Learning and Michael McGimpsey would take the Health portfolio (*Irish Times*, 13 April 2007). In addition to the ministers nominated above, Ian Paisley Jnr (DUP) and Gerry Kelly (Sinn Féin) were nominated by their respective parties to become junior ministers in the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

It is worth highlighting that executive formation under the d'Hondt procedure is certainly not akin to what takes place in more 'normal' coalition democracies. Rather than a process of inter-party bargaining on portfolios and policy, d'Hondt guarantees parties ministerial seats in proportion to the share of seats in the Assembly. D'Hondt does not require inter-party bargaining on coalition 'payouts' in terms of who gets

Table 2. Allocation of portfolios under d'Hondt

Round	Party	Portfolio	Minister
1.	DUP	Finance and Personnel	Peter Robinson
2.	Sinn Féin	Education	Caitriona Ruane
3.	DUP	Enterprise, Trade and Investment	Nigel Dodds
4.	UUP	Health, Social Services and Public Safety	Michael McGimpsey
5.	SDLP	Social Development	Margaret Ritchie
6.	Sinn Féin	Regional Development	Conor Murphy
7.	DUP	Environment	Arlene Foster
8.	Sinn Féin	Agriculture and Rural Development	Michelle Gildernew
9.	DUP	Culture, Arts and Leisure	Edwin Poots
10.	UUP	Employment and Learning	Sir Reg Empey

Note: The 'indicative' d'Hondt for the allocation of ministerial portfolios took place on 2 April 2007. At the meeting the parties chose their preferred portfolios in sequence. The matching of portfolios to ministers was announced separately by the parties over the course of the following days.

what. Indeed, in this instance the parties chose their portfolios without matching ministers to departments. Over the course of the following days the parties then made their own announcements on which ministers would get which portfolios. There was therefore no inter-party negotiation on portfolios or ministers. It is important to note, however, that the effect of the 'indicative' d'Hondt allowed for a period of departmental briefings before devolution and the potential for inter-party cooperation in the context of preparatory work for devolution.

As per coalition formation on 29 November 1999, the new executive which took office on 8 May 2007 corresponds to a consociational 'grand coalition' (Lijphart, 1977: 25) whereby society's main segments are represented in government. One of the main critiques of consociational theory is that it leaves an inadequate opposition in the legislature. In this instance, 98 MLAs are members of governing parties with just 10 MLAs from non-governing parties. It is questionable, therefore, to what extent those 10 MLAs can form an effective opposition to the four-party coalition. The opposition this time round has even fewer MLAs than the previous administration, when all but 16 candidates elected in 1998 belonged to the four government parties. In relation to the view that consociationalism prevents an opposition in the legislature O'Leary (2005: 11) writes, 'Nothing precludes intra-bloc democratic competition, or the turnover of political elites, or shifts of support between parties.' One mechanism to improve the accountability of the executive could be found in the committee system. As Wilford and Wilson (2006: 30) comment on the 1999–2002 administration, 'The committees of the assembly were the prime *locus* for bringing the executive to account.' The potential of the committees to take on more of an opposition role, however, is limited as they are almost wholly made up of members from governing parties and 'tend to behave as party animals rather than committee creatures' (Wilford and Wilson, 2006: 30). Certainly, it will be a considerable challenge for Alliance, as the largest party in opposition with seven MLAs, and the committees to check the dominance of the executive.

In advance of the transfer of power there was already some discussion on whether the new administration from 8 May would be prone to gridlock and stalemate or whether the DUP and Sinn Féin would work together. Some signs of cooperation were evident with the joint DUP–Sinn Féin letter that Peter Hain and his officials must vacate Stormont Castle to make way for the new administration; the consensus on the economic package from the British Government; a joint position regarding a cut in corporation tax; and the meeting with European Commission President José Manuel Barroso on 1 May. Of additional note is the remarkable meeting between Ian Paisley and Bertie Ahern in Dublin. In what appeared as an important milestone in the Northern Ireland peace process, Dr Paisley as First Minister (Designate) said that he hoped that 'old suspicions and discords can be buried forever under the prospect of mutual and respectful co-operation' (*Irish Times*, 5 April 2007).

There was some speculation whether the new administration would, as termed by both Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams and DUP deputy leader Peter Robinson, be 'a battle a day' (*BBC News Online*, 3 March 2007). Speaking on the *BBC Radio Ulster* 'Inside Politics' programme on 31 March 2007, Robinson said that power sharing

with republicans would most likely be a ‘tussle’ and he would do his best to secure unionists’ interests. Interestingly, however, he pointed to agreement with Sinn Féin on social and economic issues and said that the important point was that power sharing would be a ‘political battle’. Interviewed on the same programme a week later (*BBC Radio Ulster, Inside Politics*, 7 April 2007), Sinn Féin’s Martin McGuinness claimed that meetings between his party and the DUP had been ‘business-like and serious’. In relation to the contentious issue of academic selection McGuinness suggested that there would have to be a collective effort to move things forward. He said he did not believe in the ‘battle a day’ premonition and he looked forward to putting in place a Programme for Government and getting on with the task of governing. The DUP’s position on power sharing, however, was that the party had been pressurised into government with Sinn Féin by some elements at Westminster who were threatening to implement the British and Irish Governments’ ‘Plan B’. In his first interview since agreeing to power sharing with Sinn Féin, Paisley said, ‘We were told that if we didn’t do this then it was going to be curtains for our country ... How would I have faced my people if I had allowed this country to have the union destroyed and the setting up of a joint government by the south of Ireland?’ (*BBC News Online*, 4 April 2007)

Conclusions

The Assembly election held on 7 March 2007 transformed the political landscape in Northern Ireland. It was a huge success for the DUP and Sinn Féin and enabled both parties to take their respective steps towards forming a power sharing government. The election meant a further squeeze on the ‘moderate’ parties of the SDLP and UUP, triggering an internal debate within the UUP on its strategy. Almost five years since the suspension of the institutions in October 2002 the third power sharing government in the history of Northern Ireland took effect on 8 May 2007. A number of considerable challenges awaited the new executive, many of them controversial, including water charges, post-primary education transfer arrangements, location of the new sports stadium and agreement on a Programme for Government. Significantly, the executive would be subject to institutional reforms under the *St Andrews Agreement* of October 2006. It will be important to determine what impact, if any, these amendments may have on the working of the devolved institutions and what they might mean for consociational power sharing.

Note

1. Incumbent MLA Eugene McMenamin had failed to get reselected by the constituency but was later added by the party headquarters, thereby meaning that the SDLP had three candidates in West Tyrone.

References

Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (2007) *Alliance Works*, Assembly Election Manifesto. Available at <http://www.allianceparty.org> (accessed 5 March 2007).

- Democratic Unionist Party (2005) *Leadership That's Working*, Westminster and Local Government Elections Manifesto. Available at <http://www.dup.org.uk> (accessed 12 March 2007).
- Democratic Unionist Party (2007) *Getting it Right*, Assembly Election Manifesto. Available at <http://www.dup.org.uk> (accessed 24 February 2007).
- Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (2007) Votes polled summary. Available at http://www.eoni.org.uk/votes_polled_summary-2.pdf (accessed 28 April 2007).
- Elliott, S. (2003) North vote sees over 80 per cent of transfers stay within main parties', *Irish Times*, 1 December.
- Farrington, C. (2004) The Northern Ireland Assembly Election 2003, *Irish Political Studies*, 19(1), pp. 74–86.
- Lijphart, A. (1977) *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
- Mitchell, P., O'Leary, B. & Evans, G. (2001) Northern Ireland: flanking extremists bite the moderates and emerge in their clothes, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 54(4), pp. 725–742.
- Northern Ireland Office (2006) *Agreement at St Andrews*. Available at http://www.nio.gov.uk/st_andrews_agreement.pdf.
- O'Leary, B. (2005) Debating consociational politics: normative and explanatory arguments, in S. Noel (Ed.) *From Power Sharing to Democracy: Post-Conflict Institutions in Ethnically Divided Societies* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press).
- Reilly, B. (2001) *Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral Engineering for Conflict Management* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Sinn Féin (2007) *Delivering for Ireland's Future*, Assembly Election Manifesto. Available at <http://www.sinnfeinassembly.com/media/AssemblyManifesto2007small.pdf> (accessed 3 March 2007).
- Sinnott, R. (1998) Centrist politics makes modest but significant progress: cross-community transfers were low, *Irish Times*, 29 June.
- Social Democratic and Labour Party (2007) *Let's Deliver Real Progress*, Assembly Election Manifesto, available at: www.sdlp.ie/docs/SDLP_Manifesto_2007.pdf (accessed 2 March 2007).
- Ulster Unionist Party (2007) *For All of Us*, Assembly Election Manifesto. Available at http://www.uup.org/uup_manifesto2007.pdf (accessed 28 February 2007).
- Wilford, R. & Wilson, R. (2006) *The Trouble with Northern Ireland: The Belfast Agreement and Democratic Governance* (Dublin: Tasc).