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# **Selling the Good Friday Agreement:**

*Developments in Party Political Public Relations  
and the Media in Northern Ireland*

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*A Ph.D. Thesis*

*Submitted in Accordance with the Requirements for Doctorate*

*of Philosophy*

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*March 2005*

05/06

## **ABSTRACT**

This study documents the rise of party political public relations in Northern Ireland and explores its impact on the media and the peace/political process more generally.

While this research primarily charts and describes the chronological development of public relations pertaining to Northern Ireland's four main political parties (the SDLP, Sinn Féin, the DUP and the UUP), it also explores the media-source relations or interactions between journalists and public relations personnel. Significantly, political public relations has expanded considerably in Northern Ireland since the mid-90s, and political parties are increasingly utilising PR to enhance their media relations capabilities and improve their image (or 'brand') with the public. What was once mainly the remit of the British government and its agencies in Northern Ireland (that is, political public relations) has now become an area in which the four main political parties (to varying degrees of success) have become increasingly more professional and well-resourced. The result of this expansion of party political public relations has seen the regional media in Northern Ireland become increasingly more vulnerable to the promotional efforts of 'spin doctors' or media relations personnel from all four parties.

This research, while acknowledging that there are undoubtedly multiple factors involved in how people decide to vote, argues that the 71.12% Yes vote in favour of the Good Friday Agreement can be partly explained by the significant impact of public relations strategies and techniques employed by a number of key behind-the-scenes players and conducted publicly by influential, high-profile figures.

Essentially, it challenges the argument prevalent in the vast majority of literature on elections that public relations campaigns have very little 'effect' on voting behaviour or that those changes of voting behaviour are due either to other factors or to long-term media campaigns and influences.

This research also argues, on the one hand, that the electoral success of both Sinn Féin and the DUP in recent years (the two parties 'hungry' for political power, who became the leading political parties in nationalism and unionism respectively) can be partly explained by their 'courting' of the media and their development of strong and efficient communications structures. On the other hand, the recent electoral failure of both the SDLP and the UUP can be partly explained by their laissez-faire or complacent approach to both public relations and the media, and their weak and inefficient communications structures in comparison to both Sinn Féin and the DUP.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Firstly, I acknowledge and sincerely thank David Miller, Jaquie L'etang, Raymond Boyle, Simon Frith and Brian Mc Nair from Stirling University, for their guidance, critical comment and support throughout the study.

Secondly, I thank also the research participants interviewed, who kindly gave of their time and provided the pivotal information fundamental to the research inquiry.

Finally, I thank two special women, Carol and Eileen for their love, support and patience throughout the years of this study.

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# INTRODUCTION

*It should be borne in mind that there is nothing more difficult to arrange, more doubtful of success, and more dangerous to carry through than initiating changes in a state's constitution. The innovator makes enemies of all those who prospered under the old order, and only lukewarm support is forthcoming from those who would prosper under the new. (Machiavelli; The Prince)<sup>1</sup>*

From both sides of the stage at a peace concert organised in support of the Good Friday Agreement (held in Belfast on Tuesday 19th May 1998) there emerged John Hume and David Trimble, opposition leaders of the nationalist SDLP<sup>2</sup> and unionist UUP<sup>3</sup> respectively. They met centre stage and joined hands with U2's Bono, to a rapturous applause from an audience made up of Northern Ireland's younger generation. They had a common agenda – the pursuit of peace and the promotion of a Yes vote that would positively endorse the Agreement. The coming together of Hume and Trimble at the peace concert was the first time they publicly shook hands, and the event symbolised the possibility of a new beginning between unionism and nationalism. Indeed, this image became the most memorable and important message that could be relayed to a divided people at this juncture in the peace process, and provided a positive 'thumbs up' for the Agreement on which the electorate would vote three days later.

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<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli, N., cited in *The Prince*, p.19, translated with an introduction by George Bull (1995)

<sup>2</sup> Social Democratic and Labour Party

<sup>3</sup> Ulster Unionist Party

Photographs of this ‘coming together’ have been reprinted in newspapers, and footage of the event has been replayed on television in Northern Ireland on anniversaries of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in remembrance of this critical moment in the state’s troubled history, celebrated since (as at the time) as a signifier of hope in a more peaceful future.

Indeed, the inspiration for the following study is borne out of this symbolic rendezvous that occurred in the final days of the 1998 referendum campaign. It was upon watching television footage of this event that conceptualisation began, a thought process that created a great many more questions than could be easily answered at the time. For example, why would two rather old, awkward-looking politicians choose to publicly shake hands for the first time at a *rock concert* in front of Northern Ireland’s *younger generation*? Significantly, was this stage-managed event the most visible and important public appeal by the two leaders in their attempts to sell the Good Friday Agreement, or were there a long list of others, meticulously designed to manufacture consent for the Agreement? Furthermore, who organised this public relations spectacle? Or, more to the point, who exactly are Northern Ireland’s behind-the-scenes party political public relations personnel or ‘spin doctors’, and just how sophisticated have they become in attempting to influence the media and ultimately the public at large in Northern Ireland? These questions, and many others, formed the basis of this study.

## **(i) The Rise of Party Political Public Relations**

The profession of political public relations is not new. For example, in Britain during the late 70's, the Conservative Party initiated a new era in which political public relations became a pivotal dimension of politics and one that was similarly adopted by the Labour Party and others during the 1980's. As studies of British politics have since documented (Negrine 1996, Jones 1997), all of the main British political parties have continually increased their spending on promotional matters and allocated greater control to their professional communicators (for example, Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell in the case of the Labour Party). Significantly, the influence of political public relations has become increasingly apparent in party and personality brand management (most notably with 'New Labour') and, in particular, during British election campaigns.

However, the increasing use of public relations by political parties in Northern Ireland to achieve both short and long-term political objectives, has not, as yet, been properly focused upon. Although there has been much written by way of autobiographies or books that detail Sinn Féin's history (Adams 1995, 2003; O'Brien 1995; Taylor 1998), there is scant reference in such works to the party's public relations developments or key behind-the-scenes communications personnel. With the sole exception of an unpublished doctoral thesis by Lago (2000), in which she examines Sinn Féin's political communications developments up until 1998, there remains a real dearth of material concerning the party's communications developments in the post-Agreement era. Indeed, either published or unpublished material on the SDLP's, or both the UUP's and DUP's communications or public



relations developments in either the pre- or post-Agreement eras are virtually non-existent. Although Fawcett (2001) explored some of the public relations dimensions of the four main political parties during a short research report on post-devolution Northern Ireland, those findings that related to parties' public relations or communications constituted only a matter of a few paragraphs, that is, the research lacked more thorough or detailed analyses.

Furthermore, although there has been some material written concerning the media's role during the Troubles, highlighting their tendency to adopt dominant (that is, British government) explanations of the conflict or to play a supportive role in relation to state propaganda in the war against terrorism (Curtis 1984; Schlesinger 1987; Miller 1994), there is far less material available on the subsequent 'resolution' of the conflict or the emerging 'peace' (Miller and McLaughlin 1996; Spencer 2000). There is also a distinct lack of investigation into the role played by the media during the 1998 referendum campaign, or whether they played a similarly supportive role in adopting dominant explanations in the post-Agreement era.

A central concern of this study then, is to address some of the deficiencies in academic writing on both party political public relations and the media in Northern Ireland. Or to put it another way, this study aims to 'fill a gap' by critically examining an underdeveloped area of research.

While a number of works have emanated from politics (Kavanagh 1995, Scammell 1995) and media studies (Franklin 1994, Negrine 1994, McNair 1995) that

document the ‘Americanisation’/‘professionalisation’ of government and political party communications, the development of the ‘public relations state’, and the conflicts that arise between ‘spin doctors’ and journalists, there are no comprehensive works that specifically document or address these fundamental issues or developments in relation to all of the main political parties and the media in Northern Ireland.

In acknowledging these shortcomings, this study documents the rise of party political public relations in Northern Ireland and explores its impact on the media and the peace/political process more generally. While this research primarily charts and describes the chronological development of public relations pertaining to Northern Ireland’s four main political parties (the SDLP, Sinn Féin, the DUP<sup>4</sup> and the UUP), it also explores the media-source relations or interactions between journalists and public relations personnel. Significantly, political public relations has expanded considerably in Northern Ireland since the mid-90s, and political parties are increasingly utilising PR to enhance their media relations capabilities and improve their image (or ‘brand’) with the public. The result of this expansion has seen the regional media in Northern Ireland become increasingly more vulnerable to the promotional efforts of ‘spin doctors’ or media relations personnel from all four parties.

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4 Democratic Unionist Party

## **(ii) Definitional Problems**

Before progressing, in an attempt to avoid confusion, it seems appropriate at this juncture to 'spell out' some of the terms that are used during the course of this research.

Political public relations has many sub-specialities and overlapping roles. Marketing, advertising, image or brand management and internal staff communications are all variously conducted by in-house political public relations personnel or external communications specialists. At times this research does refer to such activities. However, its principal focus when referring to 'public relations' (or PR) is 'media relations' work – the main activity of the sector.

Confusion also arises because many of those who work in the field of political public relations in Northern Ireland tend to avoid the PR label, preferring titles like 'Director of Communications', 'Director of Publicity', 'Information Officer', 'Media Strategist' etc. Yet, for the purposes of this research, while their preferred title is used throughout this study, for all intensive purposes they essentially all come under the umbrella of party political public relations personnel. In addition, 'communications' and 'public relations' are used interchangeably throughout this research.

Finally, the term 'spin doctor' could do with some further definitional attention. Initially, 'spin' was a term reserved for the practice of putting the best possible gloss on an event breaking in the news, and 'spinning' was simply putting a

particularised perspective or viewpoint on an issue or debate. From ‘spinning’ grew ‘spin doctors’, which is simply another name for media spokespeople. However from there, the term ‘spin doctor’ has suffered a degree of negativism and become synonymous with anyone believed to be involved in the ‘black arts’ of political campaigning (Gould 1998). Yet, in this research, its pejorative connotations are avoided, that is, the term is used in its neutral sense to describe someone who is responsible for media relations for either one of the four main political parties. Indeed, this is a longstanding and completely unexceptional activity. In today’s political environment in which political parties are often under constant attack (not least from the media), it is simply common sense to employ people to put forward the views of the party, and to do it to best effect.

### **(iii) Selling the Good Friday Agreement: the Context**

Significantly, it was the election of a strong Labour government under Tony Blair in May 1997 that helped re-energise the Northern Ireland peace process. Within a matter of months a new IRA ceasefire was announced and Sinn Féin’s conditions for entering talks/negotiations had been met. However, while unionists of all hues had serious concerns about entering into a process that included Sinn Féin, the UUP remained in the talks, whereas Ian Paisley’s DUP subsequently withdrew.

Negotiations between eight political parties and the British and Irish governments continued until agreement was reached on 10th April 1998, that is, Good Friday (see Appendix 1 for a simplified version of the Agreement). Fundamentally, the Agreement represented the first significant opportunity to have an inclusive power-

sharing government in the history of the state. It was envisaged that the four main parties would form a coalition government and that an idealised vision of political accommodation in a peaceful future could at last be realised.

One of the Agreement's stipulations was that its very legitimacy would have to be strengthened by (or founded upon) a positive endorsement by 'the people' of Northern Ireland. In the event, a six-week-long referendum campaign on the Agreement was to become the largest public relations exercise ever to be carried out in Northern Ireland. It included the input of all sections of society, from political parties to religious groups, from business groups to trade unions and from paramilitary groups to peace groups. Significantly, the importance of the Agreement as a framework or model for conflict resolution was also evidenced by the international media attention it received in the run up to its signing, and subsequently during the referendum campaign itself.

The date of separate referendums in Northern and Southern Ireland – the 22nd of May 1998 – was a unique day in the history of politics in Ireland in the 20th century. Not since the general election of 1918 had the people of Ireland voted on an all-island basis. In Northern Ireland, the electorate were asked a simple question on whether or not they supported the Agreement. Of those who voted, 71.12% voted Yes, in favour, and 28.88% voted No, against the Agreement. In the Republic of Ireland, the electorate were asked whether or not they approved of amendments to Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution, which laid territorial claims on Northern Ireland. Of those who voted, 94.4% voted Yes, for amendments that could be construed as support for the Agreement; 5.6% voted No. Significantly, the

referenda were envisaged as an integral part of the peace process and the results a clear indication of the peoples' support for the continuance of that same process.

A key concern of this study is to explore and understand how the Good Friday Agreement was 'sold', specifically to the people of 'Northern Ireland', from a public relations perspective. The term 'sold' infers cynicism. This is intentional. The Agreement was a complex, legal/political document that contained a number of constructive ambiguities. Significantly, the construction of the Agreement by the eight political parties and the British and Irish governments was such that different people and different constituencies could be sold on different parts of it. In a very real sense, historical divisions precluded the Agreement from being constructed and subsequently sold in any other way, whereby different parties, different bodies of people, or different sectional interests would have something to buy into, perceiving that there was something in it for each of them, and believing that they would be able to support the Agreement at the cost of accepting other, more unpalatable aspects of it.

Indeed, it can be contended that there was also insufficient time between the signing of the Agreement and the referendum vote for the electorate to fully dissect and understand the future implications of the complex, 15,000-word Agreement. To compound difficulties for the electorate, there was no simplistic guide available which would aid them in making an informed choice.

Essentially, the majority of people in Northern Ireland had to look to their political leaders to simplify what the complex Agreement would mean for them in the short

to medium-term future. This gave political representatives added weight in selling their interpretations of the Agreement, and as a result, different constituencies were sold different 'lines' by different political parties. Indeed, such disparate interpretations were relayed (for the most part via the media) and successfully sold to two seemingly irreconcilable communities, as evidenced in the 71.12% Yes vote in favour of the Agreement.

The overarching question is: how was this achieved? Specifically, from a public relations perspective, how did the key messages, public relations strategies and techniques employed by Northern Ireland's four main political parties contribute towards the result? In addition, how did the media in Northern Ireland react to the challenges they faced at this critical juncture in the peace process? Or to put it another way, were the media biased or unbiased in their coverage of the referendum campaign? And, were they helpful or unhelpful in relation to concentrated efforts at promoting peace? This research explores and answers these pivotal questions.

#### **(iv) Pre - and Post-Agreement Developments**

Whilst an examination of the 1998 referendum campaign is a central aspect of this research, the study begins by focusing on pre-Agreement developments in party political public relations and the media in Northern Ireland (from the outbreak of 'The Troubles' in 1968-9 up until Good Friday 1998) to better understand the 'state of play' during the referendum campaign. In addition, this research also examines

post-Agreement developments in party political public relations and the media, concluding with an exploration of the November 2003 Assembly election.

Essentially, the fundamental reason for an examination of pre-Agreement developments is that it provides strong foundations upon which a greater understanding of post-Agreement developments can take place.

The Agreement represented the culmination of many years work by the British and Irish governments, not to mention the work of political leaders and parties from Northern Ireland. Given that the peace process had its origins in meetings between the SDLP's John Hume and Sinn Féin's Gerry Adams a decade before Good Friday 1998, it would be difficult to fully understand the trials and tribulations of various key actors during the referendum campaign and subsequently in the post-Agreement era, without first understanding relevant pre-Agreement developments. For example, a crude history of unionism would highlight that (historically) many in the Protestant community have felt (and continue to feel) 'under siege', and as a result, both security and law and order issues are a dominating theme in the psyche of unionists. In the context of the Good Friday Agreement, which envisaged IRA prisoners being released and changes being made to the make-up of the predominantly Protestant police force (the RUC), it becomes easier to comprehend (by understanding historical developments) why some unionists would vote No to the Agreement. Equally, a crude history of republicanism would highlight that generations of republicans have been involved in a struggle for Irish independence. Therefore, the act of voting Yes for an Agreement that effectively represented a partitionist settlement would (in the minds of some republicans) disgrace the



memory of those who made the ultimate sacrifice (died or had been killed) in the pursuit of their ideals or beliefs.

Indeed, other pre-Agreement developments also highlight, for example that Sinn Féin, on the one hand, made consistent attempts to keep their own constituency on-board by informing their supporters of continuing developments in the peace process. On the other hand, pre-Agreement developments would highlight that the UUP's David Trimble did not adequately prepare unionists for prisoner releases, the reality of power-sharing (in particular, the possibility of Sinn Féin becoming key partners in government) and more generally for the leap of faith that would be required by unionists if the Agreement's vision of a peaceful future was to be realised.

Essentially, this research is important for a number of reasons: it investigates and details pre-Agreement developments in party political public relations and the media in Northern Ireland; it comprehensively examines the 1998 referendum campaign; and it details developments in party political public relations and the media in the post-Agreement era.

While primarily focusing on the developments of party political public relations in Northern Ireland over the last three decades, this research is also concerned with the media's ability to fulfil its 'ideal' functions.

With these ideals in mind the research explores the following questions:

1: How much has party political public relations expanded in Northern Ireland over the last three decades?

2: How and in what ways has this expansion influenced the media in Northern Ireland and impacted on the peace/political process more generally?

3: Which political parties are utilising PR most in their attempts to influence media coverage? And, who is being included or excluded from participation in public discourse?

4: What part was played by PR-inspired media coverage during the 1998 referendum campaign in influencing the electorate in Northern Ireland to support the Good Friday Agreement?

In exploring these questions, this study also provides illuminating insights into media-source relations or the interaction between party political public relations personnel and journalists in Northern Ireland.

### **(v) Media Sociology, the Fourth Estate Media, and Media-Source Relations**

The impact (whether positive or negative) of a rise in political public relations on the media naturally follows on from long-running debates between liberal pluralists and their critics over the functioning of the fourth estate media. Liberal pluralist studies of journalists at work have contributed to an account in which the media function as independent 'fourth estate' guardians acting in the public interest; that

the media remain neutrally objective in reporting a plurality of competing interests and opinions; that autonomous journalists have professional values that guide them towards neutral coverage of issues; and that the media tend to act as a check on major concentrations of power (Gans 1979, Harrison 1985, Schudson 1996). While the liberal ideals at the heart of journalism are unlikely to be fully achieved, the media still fulfil vital functions in democracies.

In contrast, radical media sociologists have argued that journalists cannot be independent because powerful interests – namely the state and/or corporate elites – have continually managed, influenced or manipulated the media. As accounts (such as Schlesinger et al. 1983, Glasgow University Media Group 1985) have documented, both states and private owners have frequently abused their power and sought to influence journalists and the political process for their own particular ends. Radicals also argue that independent, autonomous journalism is affected by wider economic conditions that contribute to the reduced ability of journalists to fulfil the media's role as fourth estate guardians to an acceptable level.

Research on media-source relations has been one area of enquiry that radicals have attempted to supplement macro-level arguments about the fourth estate media with arguments at the micro-level. Yet, to date, this work has avoided coming to definitive conclusions on the issue of journalists' autonomy in their relations with sources. Up until the early 1990's, media sociologists who addressed the question (for example, Gans 1979, Tiffen 1989) tended to agree that the attempts of either side to manage the other were often superseded by the benefits of co-operation. For Gans, 'the source-journalist relationship is therefore a tug of war: while sources

attempt to “manage” the news... journalists concurrently “manage” the sources in order to extract the information they want’, but that, more often than not, sources ‘have the edge’ (1979, p.117). Although sources were slightly stronger in this view, neither side dominated for long. While there has been increased interest in the subject during the 1990’s by radical media sociologists (for example, Miller 1994, Schlesinger and Tumber 1994) who have found that there is a greater degree of complexity in the continuing relations between sources and journalists than hitherto acknowledged, the common consensus of much of media sociology still tends to remain wedded to Gans’s earlier ‘tug of war’ assessment.

Essentially, there is ample need for a thorough investigation of the ‘tug of war’ occurring in Northern Ireland. Indeed, an expansion of party political public relations in Northern Ireland has obvious ramifications for the debate on the autonomy of the fourth estate media. If political public relations continue to expand in Northern Ireland, and, according to industry surveys (for example, *PR Week* survey, 20.8.99), ‘media relations’ is the principal activity of its practitioners, then it seems important that the impact of political public relations on journalist autonomy is explored.

## **(vi) Theoretical Influences**

Rather than concentrate on interpreting developments in party political public relations and the media in Northern Ireland within a pre-specified theoretical framework, it seemed more appropriate at the beginning of the research process to generate empirical material for further debate. There are, however, certain theoretical influences that have a bearing on, or guide the research.

One such theoretical influence is that of Habermas (1989) who, in his notion of the 'public sphere', elaborates upon an argument that in an ideal society the media would provide people with access to the broadest possible range of information, interpretation and debate on areas that involve political choices, and enable them to register dissent and propose alternatives.

However, there are clear limitations of the public sphere as envisaged by Habermas. Not only is his historical narrative of the early capitalist period highly idealised but also his original notion of the public sphere was an essentially bourgeois space that was based on mass exclusion – for example, of the working class, women and ethnic minorities. Furthermore, his theory of the public sphere tends to assume that rational debate and rational actions will occur, ideals that for the most part have a history of being 'hard to come by' in Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, the idea of the public sphere is worth retaining, providing that it is acknowledged that it needs to be open enough that all groups in Northern Ireland can recognise themselves and their aspirations as being fairly represented. Indeed, the general ideal of the media helping to engender a public cultural space that is open, diverse, and accessible, remains an important goal that undoubtedly should be strived towards in Northern Ireland.

A second theoretical influence of this research is that of critical political economy. This theory tends to start with sets of social relations and the play of power,

including for example, the way news is structured by the prevailing relations between editors or journalists and their sources.

Although this study does not strictly adhere to a critical political economy theoretical framework, it is nevertheless concerned with questions about the contestation and distribution of resources – that such contestation and distribution, as well as media coverage, remain unequal, which is, they tend to favour particular interests over others.

This study is also concerned with the tendency of a critical political economy perspective to at times sway towards a ‘conspiracy theory’ of an all-powerful ruling directorate of the capitalist class that dictates to editors and reporters what to run in their television programmes or newspapers. One such example, Herman and Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), offers a ‘propaganda model’ of the mass media – a view that the media ‘serve to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity’ (1988, p. xi). For Herman and Chomsky, news serves established power, and the propagandistic character of news has been brought about (amongst other reasons) by the fact that the media industry is dependent on government officials for its sources. This type of dependency has been a criticism levelled at the media in Northern Ireland (by researchers in the past) and throughout the period under consideration in this study. Furthermore, the following research explores a ‘conspiracy theory’ that an ‘all-powerful’ British government dictated to the media in Northern Ireland what to run in their television programmes or newspapers during the 1998 referendum campaign on the Good Friday Agreement.

A final theoretical influence of this research draws upon the theory of interpretive communities, which recognises that different groups (for example in the case of this research, pro- and anti-Agreement unionists or nationalists) have different values and goals and thus attribute meaning to a situation or artefact differently (that is, the Good Friday Agreement) in line with their own particular interpretations (Yanow, 2000).

Interpretive methods are based on the presupposition that we live in a social world characterised by the possibilities of multiple interpretations. Indeed, in the case of this research many unionists interpreted the Good Friday Agreement as a strengthening of the union whereas many nationalists interpreted it as a stepping-stone towards a united Ireland.

In many respects, this research is also influenced by the interpretive approach because it relies less on theory than the meaning of experiences by the people who experience them; and also because the researcher becomes a translator, helping to understand the stories of interviewees and incorporate as many voices as possible into the study. As such, this research relies on multiple stories, testimonies or viewpoints of a variety of relevant actors.

Theories then, are not put forward in the main sections of this research, which focuses on the description of the case and analysis of its issues, yet they are employed at the end of the study. While it is acknowledged that there are theoretical influences that guide the research, there is no positioning of the study

within any particular theoretical camp before data collection. After data collection and analysis there is what may be termed a 'theory-after' perspective advanced.

### **(vii) Research Parameters and Methods**

This research has clear empirical parameters. To begin with, the study is based in Northern Ireland and covers the period from the beginning of the 'Troubles' in 1968-69 until the Assembly election of November 2003. Indeed, there are two further parameters. First of all, its principal focus, (as aforementioned) when referring to 'public relations' (or PR) is 'media relations' work. Secondly, all specific research conducted that refers to the media in Northern Ireland has been confined to the Belfast-based regional print and broadcast media (*The Belfast Telegraph, The Irish News, BBC NI* etc.), thus excluding mainland British or Southern Irish media.

In conducting this research, data was obtained through thirty in-depth interviews with key 'high-profile' respondents who were involved directly or indirectly in Northern Ireland politics or in the reporting of the peace process (religious and political leaders, party political public relations personnel and governmental press officers, journalists and editors etc.). Significantly, the central importance of this study resides in the detailed information gleaned from the interviews (see Appendix 3 for a list of interviewees).

In the course of this study, public relations materials as well as interviews with public relations personnel and political representatives from the four main political parties were correlated with media texts and interviews with journalists to provide a



multi-faceted narrative that takes the reader into the multiple dimensions of the research area and displays it in all of its complexity.

### **(viii) Research Outline**

This research is made up of three main sections that collectively aim to examine the rise of party political public relations and its impact on the media and the peace/political process. Each of the three sections are broken down into six subsections, that is, four that examine individual party political public relations developments, one that examines the role of the media, and a final subsection that takes the form of a summary / conclusion.

**Section one: *Pre-Agreement Developments in Party Political Public Relations and the Media***, explores the period from the beginning of the Troubles in 1968-9 until Good Friday 1998 and is, in its simplest form, an introductory section or a ‘forerunner’ to sections two and three. It provides historical background and context, explores the pre-Agreement political public relations developments of each of the four main political parties and outlines the role played by the media during the period in question.

This section also provides a chronological exploration of the four main parties’ political posters in an attempt to complement an investigation of pre-Agreement public relations developments. In doing so, it attempts to ascertain which political parties were repetitive, conservative or simplistic in their approach to public

relations or which were innovative, creative and imaginative. Essentially, this section determines which political parties acknowledged and appreciated the importance of public relations, and in particular, the need to develop their media relations.

Section one also investigates the relationship between the political parties and the media. In addition, it questions whether the media during this period were for the most part orientated towards an official, British government perspective. Finally, it determines whether the media were helpful or unhelpful in relation to concentrated efforts at promoting peace, that is, whether they could be accused of reinforcing differences and disagreements over consensus and agreement.

**Section two:** *Party Political Public Relations and the Media during the 1998 Referendum Campaign*, chronicles the roles played by each of the four main political parties and the media during the referendum campaign in a wider attempt to understand more fully how the Good Friday Agreement was sold to the people of Northern Ireland.

This section looks closely at the different public relations campaigns of the four rival political parties (and touches on British government involvement), all of whom had the common aim of influencing media discourses and more generally the public at large. It attempts to ascertain how successful the UUP, the SDLP and Sinn Féin were in selling the Agreement within their own constituencies, and gauges how effective the DUP were in persuading the electorate to vote No to the Agreement. It

also explores public relations strategies and techniques employed by each of the parties to determine the significance of such activities, that is, whether it could be contended that 'public relations' activities had an impact upon the referendum result.

Finally, section two establishes whether the media in Northern Ireland were biased or unbiased in their coverage of the referendum campaign, that is, whether they appeared to side with either the pro- or anti-Agreement camps. Only a matter of weeks prior to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, the British government developed a strategy document (that was leaked by the DUP) on how to sell a potential peace deal. The document proposed a strategy of at best, managing, at worst manipulating the media in Northern Ireland. As such, this section attempts to establish whether the British government (as key signatories to the Agreement) had a major influence on the media during the referendum campaign. In addition, it also (once again) determines whether (at this juncture) the media were helpful or unhelpful in relation to concentrated efforts at promoting peace.

**Section Three: *Post-Agreement Developments in Party Political Public Relations and the Media***, explores the five-and-a-half-year period from the 1998 referendum campaign result up until the November 2003 Assembly election. It details more recent party political public relations developments and highlights the role played by the media during this period.

This section also details the growing number of public relations personnel who were employed by the political parties in the post-Agreement era, in particular, after devolution was introduced in December 1999 (when both the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive were established). In addition, it highlights which political parties developed on either a centralised or decentralised basis, the implication being that it is fundamentally more difficult to provide successful communications or keep party members 'on message' in a decentralised party.

Section three also ascertains which political parties were slower or quicker to realise the importance that public relations could bring to their future development and which parties adequately invested (in terms of both financial and human resources) in their communications operations. In acknowledging the successful rise to political power in Britain of 'New Labour', it also questions whether there is a correlation between effective public relations developments (establishing cohesive, efficient communications structures etc.) and electoral or political success.

Finally, this section explores the symbiotic relationship between party political public relations personnel and journalists in an attempt to determine the impact or growing influence of 'spin doctors' on the media in Northern Ireland. It also questions how the media in Northern Ireland faced up to the challenges of the new political dispensation, that is, after devolution was introduced in December 1999. Significantly, it questions whether the media contributed to a greater understanding of the political process or highlighted positive post-devolution work conducted by the political parties. In addition, it questions whether the media could be accused at

certain times of reproducing or amplifying communal division, thus making the road to peace (for political parties) a more difficult one to travel.

To summarise, this study addresses a number of important questions that are intended to shed a reliable light upon, and illuminate further an area of research that for the most part has remained in the dark, absented or ignored in contemporary literature pertaining to Northern Ireland.

Critically, this research highlights the important need for scholars and disciplines to engage with the literature and empirical material produced on the ‘other side’ of the academic divide. For example, media studies scholars frequently omit crucial literature in politics and public relations, and those in politics departments themselves rarely refer to public relations or the work of media sociologists. This study attempts to bridge the gap.

At the time of writing, almost seven years have come to pass since the people of Northern Ireland endorsed the Good Friday Agreement. Yet, Machiavelli’s prophetic words still ring true. Initiating changes in the state’s constitution (that is, implementing the Agreement and its institutions) has not been easy to arrange, or been without its doubts of success.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing in 1990, John Whyte observed that since the outset of the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland in 1968, there had been an ‘explosion’ of research on the area, with hundreds of books and an even larger number of articles published (1990, x). However, as Miller (1998) stresses, the majority of research and literature on Northern Ireland has failed to adequately address the relevant issues:

The standard of academic, media and popular commentary on the Northern Ireland conflict remains abysmal. Specifically, British propaganda, unionist ideology and revisionist ‘scholarship’ inform most contemporary discourse. In those spaces where this is not the case, traditional nationalist discourse retains something of a grip. The predominance of notions of tribal conflict and irrational or self-interested violence gives a seriously misleading and distorted view of the conflict in Ireland. This can be explained partly in terms of fear, danger and coercion, but also in terms of the class, national and occupational interests and ideologies of academics. (1998, xix)

Too often academics have shied away from researching and theorising on controversial issues pertaining to Northern Ireland. It is not the intention of this author, however, to get embroiled in the long-standing debate as to the causes of conflict in Northern Ireland but to acknowledge with Miller that distorted views (and myths) permeate current academic writing. If ‘peace’ holds in Northern Ireland, the barriers of fear, danger and coercion may be removed in a relatively short period of time, but it is unlikely that barriers consequential to many ill-informed and misleading academic viewpoints will be as easily removed.

Before digressing, the rise of party political public relations and its impacts on the media in Northern Ireland and the peace/political process, is also an area of research that has not, as yet, been properly focused upon. Indeed, at the outset, it should be established that there is a lack of significant literature specific to this inquiry. In the first instance, relevant literature or informed accounts pertaining to the development of publicity operations and the subsequent employment of political public relations and media strategies by any of the four main political parties in Northern Ireland are virtually non-existent. While there remains a dearth of writing on Sinn Féin communications, there is even less material available on the SDLP, the UUP and the DUP. Those limited accounts that are available, that is, which do highlight public relations or communications developments are explored in section (i).

Furthermore, although there has been some material written concerning the media's role during the Troubles, highlighting their tendency to adopt dominant (that is, British government) explanations of the conflict or to play a supportive role in relation to state propaganda in the war against terrorism, there is far less material available on the subsequent 'resolution' of the conflict or the emerging 'peace'. There is also a distinct lack of investigation into the role played by the media during the 1998 referendum campaign, or whether they played a similarly supportive role in adopting dominant explanations in the post-Agreement era. The negligible amount of material devoted to the media and the conflict, and to the ensuing peace process is explored in section (ii).

Significantly then, a fundamental need arises to explore other literature that will help to provide a theoretical starting point for what is a complex and multifaceted analysis: that is, an examination of developments in party political public relations or communications by Northern Ireland's mainly 'resource-poor' parties who employ propaganda to influence the electorate within what is commonly termed the public sphere. As such, the literature review explores the concepts of (iii) the public sphere, (iv) political communication, (v) public relations and media strategies, (vi) 'resource-poor' groups and finally, (vii) propaganda.



## **(i) Developments in Party Political Public Relations**

### **Sinn Féin**

As far back as 1974, Sinn Féin produced a *Manual of Publicity* (a primary source used in this research) that reads like a practical guide on gaining positive media coverage; akin to Ward's *Getting the Message Across* (1992) or Salzman's *Making the News* (1998). Curtis in *Ireland: The Propaganda War* (1984), has examined the development of the republican newspaper *An Phoblacht / Republican News* and her pioneering study was the first to detail the emergence of the republican press centre in Belfast. Other material relating to this area has been published, such as, counterinsurgency theorist Wright's *Terrorist Propaganda* (1991), Picard's work on *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (1991) and both Picard (1989) and Irvin's (1992) work on 'terrorist' public relations.

Nevertheless, there has been a distinct lack of direct investigation of terrorists' media strategies in the literature. As Miller (1994) argues, Joanne Wright's (1991) study of the propaganda activities of the IRA entirely lacked contact with members or former members of the Republican Movement. Miller, on the other hand, gained invaluable access while exploring Sinn Féin's communications apparatus, and in so doing, acknowledged that the party were not given sympathetic coverage by the media. Yet, after Miller's study and in the years following the IRA cease-fire of August 1994, Sinn Féin were indeed afforded more sympathetic coverage as they became committed to the peace process and were seen to follow the path of

constitutional politics (Bean 1994; Cox 1997; Shirlow and McGovern 1998; Ruane and Todd 1999).

Following not far behind the footsteps of Wright (1991), Rita Lago's unpublished doctoral thesis, *Political Communication and News Coverage: The Case of Sinn Féin* (2000), is a further example of detailed research conducted without interviewing many key republican players. This is not to denigrate Lago's highly informative and insightful research into the contemporary communication activities of Sinn Féin, but simply to highlight that the study's merit and credibility would have been greatly enhanced with the inclusion of firsthand accounts.

To counter this, invaluable accounts (if not from republicans themselves) were gleaned from journalists' interviews and media surveys conducted by Lago that highlighted developments in Sinn Féin's sophisticated use and application of communications strategies.

An important point, repeatedly emphasised by Lago throughout her thesis, was that a change in journalistic attitudes towards Sinn Féin, were the outcome of a much deeper and wider process of political transformation. The more positive reporting of Sinn Féin changed over the years, not only because the party itself had evolved, but also because government attitudes toward the party and the conflict were modified.

Whilst Fawcett (2001) explored Sinn Féin PR and media relations during a short research report on post-devolution Northern Ireland, and acknowledged that the party had led the way for many years in both respects (as opposed to the other main political parties in Northern Ireland), those findings that related to Sinn Féin's PR or communications constituted only a matter of a few paragraphs, that is, the research lacked more thorough or detailed analyses.

With the sole exception of Lago (2000), what emerges from the literature is the real dearth of detailed contemporary writing on the development of the public relations and media activities of Sinn Féin. In the autobiographies of Gerry Adams (1986; 1989; 1995; 2003) or books that detail the party's history (O'Brien 1995; Taylor 1998) there is scant reference to either communications developments or those key players behind-the-scenes within the 'publicity department' who have made significant contributions to the party's successful development over the years (for example, Danny Morrison in the past, or Richard McAuley in the present).

### **The SDLP**

As for the SDLP, Kennedy and Hanna (1985) developed a useful handbook covering the basics of public relations for party press officers and members entitled *Dealing with the Media* (another primary source used in this research). This handbook mirrors an academic text on public relations and media strategies like Bland et al's *Effective Media Relations* (1996) or Jefkins's *Planned Press and Public Relations* (1986) – essentially simplistic and practical guides on how to plan

PR campaigns, write news releases and work with journalists to get the best possible media coverage.

As with Sinn Féin, autobiographical works, biographies or the few books that chart the SDLP's history (McAllister 1977; White 1984; Drower 1995; Hume 1996; Routledge 1997) either neglect to mention at all, or only acknowledge in passing, the party's communications developments. Murray's *John Hume and the SDLP: Impact and Survival in Northern Ireland* (1998) is the exception to the rule. Murray highlights a number of developments, including the financial troubles the SDLP experienced in the early 90's when their only full-time press officer left, of his own volition, before his bankrupt party would have no choice but to let him go.

### **The UUP**

As for the UUP, Butler (1991) analysed how unionists had been presented in the media and concluded that during the Troubles, the media had overestimated the IRA-as-cause explanation of events, the result of which had seen unionism marginalised, absented and ignored. Indeed, the UUP's poor media coverage did not drastically improve throughout most of the 1990's due in part to continuing poor public relations and presentational skills (Parkinson, 1998). Parkinson argued that the lack of analytical coverage of the unionist position and the predominance of negative images in the media (for example, bigots in bowler hats) had resulted in the current negative stereotyping of unionists in the British media. Yet, while Parkinson highlighted some UUP developments (for example, the establishment in 1996 of the Unionist Information Office in London) his study focused primarily on

media representations of unionists rather than upon their communications or public relations developments.

The UUP's Thomas Hennessey (2000) provides an interesting behind-the-scenes account of the peace process and the referendum campaign on the Good Friday Agreement, as does David Trimble's biographer and journalist Henry McDonald (2000). However, while both provide important insights into the UUP's communications and public relations developments, the narratives are explorations of the much wider peace/political process.

### **The DUP**

As for the DUP, a negligible amount of information concerning party developments can be gleaned from the behind-the-scenes accounts of Hennessey and McDonald as well as others, including George Mitchell's autobiographical *Making Peace* (1999) or Irish journalist Deaglan de Breadun's *The Far Side of Revenge: Making Peace in Northern Ireland* (2001). Nevertheless, illuminating works by other journalists like Susan McKay's *Northern Protestants: An Unsettled People* (2000), helps to create a better understanding of the DUP's thinking and provide reasons why many Protestants in Northern Ireland, felt beleaguered, misunderstood and outmanoeuvred (by nationalists and republicans), the result of which has seen them suspicious of the entire peace process and the Good Friday Agreement. Another illuminating work by Fionnuala O'Connor (another journalist) – *Breaking the Bonds: Making Peace in Northern Ireland* (2002) provides valuable insights in profiles of the leaders and deputy leaders of the four main political parties, including the DUP's Ian Paisley and Peter Robinson.

However, there is not a single academic work or one conducted by a journalist (including biographies or works on Paisleyism) that describes or explains in any detail the developments in DUP communications over the years.

What emerges then from the literature is that the very limited material available (published or unpublished) on all four main political parties tends to detail or highlight the public relations or communication efforts of a single party in isolation from the others. A transparent need arises, therefore, to collate the disparate information available on the four main political parties' public relations or communications and bring all of the pieces together (connected as in a 'patchwork quilt') to increase, and in so doing, facilitate a better understanding of the history and development of political public relations in Northern Ireland.

## **(ii) The Media and Northern Ireland**

The idea of the noble institution of the British media as the trusted 'fourth estate', wherein notions of balance and impartiality are core elements of its constitution, has been seriously undermined by its coverage of Northern Ireland. As Schlesinger et al argue:

The coverage of Northern Irish Affairs in the British media has tended to simplify violent incidents, to avoid historical background, to concentrate on human-interest stories and to rely heavily on official sources. Even during periods of the most intense constitutional activity, such as election campaigns, the story has been pre-eminently one of violence, and of irrational, inexplicable violence at that. (Schlesinger et al., 1983, p.37)

Curtis (1984) also draws similar conclusions to those of Schlesinger et al:

The record of the British media coverage of Ireland has been far from heroic. Those in positions of power, both in government and in the media, have proved most reluctant to provide a full picture of events in the North or their government, and have made considerable efforts to prevent journalists, dramatists and film-makers from exploring the situation from any angle other than that favoured by the British establishment. (1984, p.275)

The recognition that the media have been systematically orientated towards the British government perspective (and that journalists relied heavily on 'official sources') permeates much of the literature on the media and the conflict in Northern Ireland. To acknowledge Thomas's phrase, it becomes apparent that the British media 'toe the establishment line.' (cited in Butler, 1991, p.122)

However, Miller (1994) demonstrated that the relationship between the media and official sources was much more complex than previously acknowledged. In reality, the relationship consisted of a process of negotiation that (while still tending to favour official sources) was not entirely predictable in terms of its outcomes (Fawcett, 2001). Examining governmental attempts to control and shape media coverage, Miller established that the government and its agencies were collaborating in organised forms of overt and covert propaganda and that they tended to dominate and influence journalists and ultimately the news coverage. Yet, it is not that the media were simple 'dupes' of the government and its agencies, but that they failed on many occasions to adequately question the 'primary definers' or 'official sources'.

With the emergence of the peace process in the early 90's, the media were also guilty of failing to adequately challenge the British government over its policies on Northern Ireland. For example, there was little criticism in the media when it was revealed that John Major lied to the House of Commons by claiming that it would turn his stomach to talk to terrorists, when, in fact, his officials were holding secret meetings with representatives of the IRA (Miller and Mc Laughlin, 1996).

Yet, although Schlesinger, Curtis and Miller were important contributors to the illumination of the role of the media during the conflict years, their relevance begins to wane in light of the media's role in the more contemporary politics of the peace process. A more recent study, by Spencer (2000), highlighted that in the changing



political climate of the peace process and the subsequent peace negotiations, the media shifted from supporting to obstructing dominant political discourse:

As political wings of paramilitary groups were absorbed into the workings of mainstream politics, they became subject to greater media scrutiny and were thus able to inject perspectives and comments which challenged dominant official viewpoints. This posed a number of difficulties for dominant groups trying to use news as a means for communicating the direction of peace and given the growing contestations over this direction, the media's role became less orientated towards any dominant consensus about peace and more orientated towards emphasising disputes and dissensus. Or, to put it another way, the news media were now more concerned with promoting contestation than consensus. (Spencer, 2000, p.183)

Highlighting the media's tendency to construct the impression of 'winners' and 'losers', politicians interviewed by Spencer concurred with a view that the media's propensity to reinforce differences and disagreement during the peace process and the subsequent peace negotiations made it difficult to generate trust and confidence between the opposing sides.

What emerges from the literature pertaining to the media and Northern Ireland is a conclusion that most commentators have been highly critical of their role at every stage of the pre-Agreement era. Spencer's study examined the peace process and the subsequent peace negotiations that led up to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Yet, once the historic Agreement was concluded, the essential question that needed to be answered was how the media would react to the challenges ahead? In essence, would the print and broadcast media 'toe the establishment line' or

might they continue to obstruct dominant political discourse? Indeed, would they be helpful or unhelpful in relation to concentrated efforts at promoting peace? Such questions are not adequately addressed in the contemporary literature on the media and Northern Ireland. The present thesis provides a rigorous and critical answer.

Significantly, it is proposed that a holistic approach is required whereby the complexity of the four main political parties and the media's involvement in 'selling the Good Friday Agreement' is thoroughly examined.

While it has become evident that there is limited published material on either the development of party political public relations or the media in Northern Ireland, there is other literature that does impinge upon and hold the key to understanding more fully the research area.

### **(iii) The Public Sphere**

The importance of an intelligent and knowledgeable electorate dictates that democratic politics must be pursued in the public arena, where citizens can freely make informed choices or decisions and in so doing, influence public opinion (McNair, 1995). Public opinion is formed in an arena or forum – what Jurgen Habermas (1989) has called the ‘public sphere’:

By the public sphere we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed... Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, within the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions. (1989, p.89)

Habermas’s theorisation of the public sphere, explored in great detail in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (translated 1989), was an attempt to find possibilities through which democracy could be realised. As such, his concept relates to the conditions within which healthy and just political conditions may be realised.

Yet, as the widely available literature is testament to, there is no single definition of what precisely constitutes the public sphere. Ernst (1988, cited in McNair 1995, p.19) believes that the public sphere should be recognised as ‘a distinctive discursive space’ where individuals can converge and transform themselves into a powerful and influencing force in the political arena. Curran (1991) views the public sphere as ‘the space between government and society, in which private

individuals exercise formal and informal control over the state: formal control through the election of government and informal control through the pressure of public opinion.’ (1991, p.29)

However, the idealised realm or sphere that Habermas originally envisaged, has never been realised as there has never been a single forum to which all citizens were guaranteed free access, nor, where the discussion of free ideas occurred (Verstraten, 1996). Indeed, feminist perspectives on Habermas’s work have highlighted the exclusionary and elitist nature of the public sphere’s original conception as an idealisation of an historical period of Northern European society. Fraser (1992) argues that it is unrealistic to assume that the historical exclusion of women, or the racial and property criteria needed to participate in the public sphere can be overlooked or ignored. Rather, the likelihood is that overlooking group differences will lead to the exclusion of some groups from participation within the public sphere. For Fraser, the solution is to see not a singular public sphere but a number of public sphericules, through which groups interact, contest and withdraw to when they so desire. In viewing the public sphere in this way: ‘it is possible to offset the reality that participatory privileges are something to be enjoyed only by members of the dominant group.’ (Hartley, 2002, p.192)

Essentially, while it is evident that there is no single definition of what constitutes the public sphere, there are two main strands of thought that are important to distinguish. The first is the Classical Liberal Theory, whereby the public sphere is defined as the area between the government and society where the media has a certain degree of influence and has a critical role to play in facilitating information

and acting as the fourth estate (Curran 1991). The second strand, in sharp contrast, relates to more radical conceptualisations of the public sphere, whereby the media are no longer the trusted fourth estate but are exploited and used as a tool to sell and publicise information by the powerful in society. Thus, within a radical understanding of the public sphere, public relations and media strategies are employed by governments and political parties to manage or control the media and, in doing so, dominate the public sphere in which opinions are formed. However, in weighing up the pro's and con's of both strands, one acknowledges that the media has increasingly become a forum of debate where a variety of private interests are pursued, whilst remembering that it remains a forum in which scrutiny of the powerful does still occur.

Media theorists have used Habermas's public sphere to highlight or explain the importance of communication for the processes of democracy (Garnham 1986; Price 1995). Yet, as the case of Northern Ireland illustrates, the lack of an arena or forum in which ideal communication and discussion occurred (and in which nationalists could participate equally) is the enduring legacy of 'dominant' unionist governments who for half a century presided over an 'undemocratic' state. Prior to Direct Rule in 1972, the public sphere (for the most part) was reserved for the Protestant and unionist community, while Catholics and nationalists were repeatedly discriminated against, marginalised or excluded from the main political and social process.

As such, an ideal form of the public sphere has never been realised in Northern Ireland. Instead there is contest and division and two (Protestant/unionist and

Catholic/nationalist) or perhaps more (republican and loyalist) overlapping public spheres or 'sphericules' as Fraser has alluded to.

Northern Ireland, sadly, lacks an ideal forum within which debate occurs, where the generation of ideas, shared knowledge and the construction of opinion that occurs when people assemble and discuss is present. There is also a distinct lack of what Habermas describes as 'a network for communicating information and points of view' (1996, p.360) or indeed an arena where ideas and information are shared or where public opinions are formed as a result of communication.

Effectively, the usefulness of the entire concept, as applied to Northern Ireland, can be questioned as to its relevance, as Finlayson & Hughes (2000) assert:

Indeed part of the difficulty with politics in Northern Ireland is the at best opacity at worst absence of a public sphere. The public is so divided that there is no bottom-line consensus on top of which public political communication may take place. (2000, p.408)

Yet, the idea or the concept of a public sphere should not be abandoned. It is an ideal that should be worked towards, that is, as a crucial, underpinning notion of democracy, operating as a 'mode of societal integration.' (Calhoun, 1992, p.6)

Indeed, as a result of the Good Friday Agreement, the Northern Ireland Assembly had the potential to transform the nature of the public sphere. While there have been four suspensions and continuing 'setbacks,' there is still a potential for devolution to lead to a rejuvenation of the public sphere with a much more meaningful version of democracy and public debate realised. Crucial to the

realisation of such a vision must be the channels of communication through which politicians and the public can disseminate and exchange their views (Fawcett, 2001).

#### **(iv) Political Communication**

Like so many other terms or concepts, there is no universal definition of 'political communication' and therefore the term has been commonly used in reference to communicating any information that can be considered relevant to the political process. In this respect, (amongst others) the present thesis incorporates a critical analysis of Northern Ireland's four main political parties' posters as they too serve as 'purposeful communication about politics.'(McNair, 1995, p.4)

Blumler and Gurevitch argue that 'political communication' which they refer to as 'mediated political messages' are 'a composite product, reflecting the contributions and interaction of two different types of communication: advocates and journalists' (1995, p.103). In this sense, political communication becomes an interactive, two-way process between politicians (or more recently, their spin doctors) and journalists, where information is exchanged and both parties contribute to the production of the output.

The main function of 'political communication' should (ideally) be to provide relevant information that is required for the formation and maintenance of not only an informed electorate, but also a viable and healthy public sphere.

Yet, more recently, there has been a qualitative shift in political communication with the introduction of various experts whose backgrounds in marketing, public relations and advertising have led some to question whether politicians are either 'effectively' informing the electorate or indeed 'positively' contributing to a healthy



public sphere. Many commentators argue that there has been a 'dumbing down' of politics and a greater amount of insubstantive 'spin' disseminated by political parties and government information officers alike (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995; Franklin 1994). Franklin argues that 'politicians and policies have become packaged for media presentation and public consumption.' (1994, p.4) Indeed, there is a growing feeling that 'style' has replaced 'substance' in politics, whereby politicians are now assessed in terms of the sophistication of their image or quality of their delivery, rather than on substantive policy issues.

Yet, there is also an opposing view, whereby the 'packaging of politics' has further facilitated access to information that was previously in the sole domain of the ruling elite. From this perspective, an 'opening up' of the political process has contributed to a fairer and more balanced public sphere, since 'the new methods (of campaigning) enable politicians to communicate with millions of voters via television or direct mail, rather than hundreds of voters face to face.' (Kavanagh 1995, p.9)

Nevertheless, 'style over substance' politics has for some commentators (including Franklin) become a worrying feature of politics in the modern era. Such worries are compounded by the significant growth in the hiring of spin doctors or media relations personnel whose job it is to 'influence' and 'shape' media coverage to the advantage of the political party who pays their salaries.

## **(v) Public Relations and Media Strategies**

Although at times confused and described as one and the same, it is important to first understand the main distinction between public relations and media strategies. Essentially, a media strategy is simply a component part or an element within a wider 'all-encompassing' public relations strategy. Indeed, public relations strategies can be aimed or directed at an organisation's internal as well as external audiences, whereas media strategies are aimed specifically at improving the relationship between an organisation and the media, as well as gaining positive media coverage for that organisation.

Confusion arises because a key 'external' audience for the public relations practitioner is often the media, as Wragg (1992) explains:

One of the most important aspects of PR is media relations. There are those who feel that the role of media relations is sometimes overemphasised, and that this even reflects the presence in PR of many former journalists, but one has to face the fact that in most instances the media is the initial audience for the message, and it is through the media that the message is channelled to the ultimate target audiences. (1992, p.43)

To compound definitional difficulties, there is also confusion surrounding the distinction between public relations 'practices' and 'techniques'. 'Practices' refer to the different aspects of public relations, for example McNair (1995) suggests four: media management, image management, internal communications and information management. On the other hand, 'techniques' refer to the more 'specific' means

involved in carrying out a 'practice', for example in media management - press releases, case studies and feature articles. Indeed, in political public relations there are a number of identifiable techniques that range from the traditional 'loud-speaking' to more contemporary 'direct mail-shots', yet these techniques are all but absent and are ignored in the literature.

Turning attention to the specific nature of media strategies, Franklin (1994) arrived at four distinct areas, categorised as: attempts to influence the news agenda; structuring contacts with broadcasters; the need to train politicians in the area of performance and the search for the ways to control the coverage of politics by the media. By focusing on broadcasters, Franklin neglected to include the equally important role of structuring contacts with the print media. Nevertheless, what is evident from Franklin's categories of 'media strategies' is that there is significant overlap with the 'public relations practices' of McNair, in particular, both media and image management. It is, therefore, understandable why there is confusion over the distinction between public relations and media strategies.

By delving into the literature, it quickly becomes apparent that there is a significantly greater number of works dedicated to the 'practical' as opposed to the 'theoretical' nature of public relations. Cutlip et al. (1994) argue that this imbalance reflects 'the struggle of an emerging profession seeking its unique identity.' (1994, p.2)

Indeed, (once again) there is no universally accepted definition of public relations. Harrison (1995) simply suggests that it ‘means exactly what the words suggest – relations with the public.’ (1995, p.1)

According to the *Institute of Public Relations* (1995), the term refers to the ‘planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and understanding between an organisation and its public.’ (cited in Harrison 1995, p.2) Yet this definition fails to acknowledge that one of the main aims of public relations is to change or alter public perceptions, and as such, does not necessarily sit well with benign notions like goodwill and understanding.

Indeed, all investments made in public relations and media strategies by political parties should be seen primarily as attempts to further their own particular interests (for example, to increase their appeal to the voting public) and therefore they naturally reflect more selfish concerns. Sauerhaft and Atkins (1989) come closer to the mark when they argue that public relations is the ‘art and science of informing, influencing, changing or neutralising public opinion.’ (cited in Moss et al. 1997, p.3)

Public relations (just like political communication) should (in its idealised form) be a two-way communicative process. However, in the practical world of politics, the ideal does not always correspond to the reality, and as with the transformation of political communication, there are differences of opinion as to whether the growing influence of political public relations has a positive or negative impact on democracy. As McNair (1996) highlights: ‘for some, public relations is a wholly

legitimate, indeed essential input to modern politics. For others, the development of political public relations has signalled the sinister corruption of democracy.’(1996, p.35) While ‘public relations’ is a pejorative term (just like notions of propaganda and persuasion) the ‘intent’ of the practitioner is all important. Thus, public relations and media strategies can be directed towards either positive or negative ends.

In Northern Ireland, the sophisticated use of public relations and media strategies has only recently become a widespread and integral feature of politics. All of the main political parties have become more aware of the dramatic effect the media can have on public opinion. In addition, they all now strive for positive media coverage in the acknowledgement that their goals (in particular their appeal to voters) can be further enhanced by incorporating professional public relations and media strategies, as well as by developing more fruitful relationships with journalists and broadcasters.

The increased professionalisation of public relations and media strategies has meant that political parties in Northern Ireland now (more than ever before) require greater resources to compete with one another via both the print and broadcast media. When such resources are not readily available, the ability of the parties to influence the media agenda can be severely restricted.

## **(vi) 'Resource Poor' Groups**

The term 'resource poor' was first introduced or coined by Goldenberg (1976) to describe organisations with limited resources. More specifically, he outlined three different, yet interrelated categories of resources: financial, organisational and cultural. Financial resources relate to the amount of disposable income available to the organisation and its ability to raise further funds. Organisational resources refer to the availability of facilities, technical equipment and staff levels within an organisation. Lastly, cultural resources relate to the advantages or disadvantages, respect or disrespect, that an organisation possesses because of its history and position within society.

Miller and Mc Laughlin (1996) highlighted that the British government/Northern Ireland Office (NIO) regarded the media as fundamental to the success of their strategy, hence their efforts to manage media coverage. Yet, the resources available to the institutions of the state, in particular the NIO, could not be matched by any of the political parties in Northern Ireland, therefore they had an in-built advantage, that is, better financial resources for public relations over the mainly resource-poor political parties, and thus a better chance of influencing the media agenda. Miller (1996) asserts:

Governments, businesses and pressure groups actively compete for media space and definitional advantage. However, in the competition for access there are marked resources inequalities between organisations. (1996, p.5)

Although limited resources are problematic *per se*, determining and constraining the activities of political parties and their members, the situation is further aggravated by the fact that these restrictions also impinge upon their ability to gain media coverage. Crucially, the overriding communications differences between the four main political parties in Northern Ireland and indeed their political fortunes can be partly explained by the quantity, quality and variety of resources each has, at any given time. Hence, if a particular party is financially constrained, their ability to produce a steady stream of posters and party literature for example, is compromised. Indeed, the lack of organisational resources, for example, press officers or communications personnel, can have serious consequences for both internal and external development, in particular the parties' relationships with the media. Yet, the ability of a political party to influence the media is also bound up in the power and respect that it commands in society (or its cultural resources). While Sinn Féin has a history of having adequate financial and organisational resources, their greatest problem has been a lack of cultural resources, in particular resulting from its associations with IRA violence and the marginal position the republican movement has occupied in society. On the other hand, the SDLP have always had adequate cultural resources yet in the early 90's (as aforementioned) they found themselves in the difficult position of lacking both financial and organisational resources.

Yet, all of the political parties in Northern Ireland, irrespective of whether they have adequate or inadequate resources, have continually attempted to influence or win over the hearts and minds of the electorate by adopting or using 'propaganda'.

## **(vii) Propaganda**

Unionists freely admit they lost the propaganda war to their nationalist opponents early in the conflict and never managed to recover from their loss. (Parkinson, 1998, p.30)

Much of the material on Northern Ireland relates to a 'propaganda war', including Curtis (1984), Miller (1994) and counterinsurgency theorists Wilkinson (1990) and Wright (1991). Yet, it is always difficult to discuss propaganda objectively because it is apparent that in common usage, the term 'propaganda' is pejorative. Connotations of the word in English have largely reduced it to a device for destroying the credibility of opponents – arguments labelled 'propaganda' are dismissed as negative, dishonest and unworthy of further attention.

There are many 'propagandists' in Northern Ireland, yet, the marked antipathy aroused by the term is not necessarily justified; propaganda as a form of communication can be regarded in its simple and original form as the propagation of a faith (any faith). Because it is essentially a neutral word, it should not always be associated with, or imply, negativity and dishonesty. Qualter (1985) contends that in discussing propaganda as the attempt to influence attitudes, the initial requirement is that one clears their mind of dominant prejudices. Propaganda must be approached as a form of communication in the neutral sense of an activity that can be directed towards positive or negative ends and conducted by the whole gamut of honourable and dishonourable methods. Essentially, 'Propaganda is not in principle devoted either to truth or falsehood, but to persuasion.' (1985, p.17)



When describing Allied Psychological Warfare campaigns at the end of the Second World War, Crossman (1971) emphasised that all really effective propaganda was both factually true and credible. In fact, Allied Propaganda had an impact in Europe because it was basically 'accurate, objective and sober' (1971, p.344). E.R. Murrow, Director of the United States Information Agenda (USIA) also argued that:

To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful. It is as simple as that. (cited in Sorensen 1968, p.4)

As the case of the Good Friday Agreement illustrates, arguments or propaganda from both unionists and nationalists that the Agreement was either 'a strengthening of the union' or 'a stepping stone towards a united Ireland' respectively, could equally be understood as believable, credible and truthful.

Ubiquitous propaganda techniques were employed by all of the political parties, non-party groups and the British government/NIO during the 1998 referendum campaign. They *all* deliberately attempted to influence or alter the attitudes of the citizens of Northern Ireland in order to achieve a certain result – 'Yes' or 'No' – in favour or rejection of the Good Friday Agreement. In this sense, they were *all* propagandists, as Qualter argues:

Once it is established that any statement, book, poster, or rumour, any parade or exhibition, any statue or historic monument, any scientific achievement or abstract of statistics whether true or false, rational or irrational in appeal or presentation, originates as the deliberate policy of someone trying to control or alter attitudes, then that activity becomes part of a propaganda process. (1985, p.122)

Essentially, in this age of propaganda, there are countless individuals and groups vying to control and alter peoples perceptions and attitudes by employing propagandistic messages to accomplish their goals. However, it should not be assumed that by the fact that they engage in propaganda, that, propaganda in itself is a corrupt or pernicious form of communication. Propagandistic messages can be used to accomplish an array of positive social ends, such as campaigns to stop smoking, reduce drink driving or in the case of the present research – *to help sell peace.*

In the political spectrum, extensions of the mass media have enabled propagandistic messages to be communicated in extensive and positive ways. Basic political freedoms have extended precisely from managing the media in propagandistic ways for political ends, for example as aforementioned, Allied Propaganda at the end of the Second World War. Robins et al. (1987) argues:

Far from being exceptional, anomalous or aberrant elements in the democratic process, propaganda is a *constitutive* aspect of actually existing democracy, democracy in the mass society. (Robins et al. 1987, p.8)

Thus, propaganda could be argued to have become a necessary and important social force, articulating and orchestrating the views of people (public opinion) in an often-complex society like Northern Ireland. Giddens (1985) highlights:

Information control is fundamental to, and indispensable for, both the cohesion and regulation of social systems spanning large spatial terrains. (1985, p.180)

What emerges from the literature on both public relations and propaganda is that they are not opposites or opposed to one another. In their popular usage they are often pejorative terms, yet when brought to life, they can be directed to either positive or negative ends. It is only by setting aside the derogatory associations of propaganda and public relations that one is able to accept that they both have a legitimate part to play in the political process and in society at large in Northern Ireland.

## Summation

To summate, the aforementioned theoretical literature provides a framework for the present research. For political parties (resource-poor or otherwise) their continued existence within the public sphere or sphericules in Northern Ireland is predicated upon their ability to successfully communicate their political analyses to their target audiences (including the media) by incorporating effective public relations strategies.

The ability of 'sources' to access the media, as such, is one of constriction or expansion of the public sphere. Is political public relations simply a means by which the British government and state sources can further dominate access and manage media agendas in Northern Ireland? Or, does it enable non-institutional or 'resource-poor' political parties to gain an influence in the media, previously denied them?

Importantly, can 'culturally' resource-poor political parties like Sinn Féin or the DUP use voluntary human resources and professional public relations strategies in place of institutional legitimacy and/or large capital expenditure? If they can, it follows that professional political public relations offer some potential for widening, rather than restricting, source access. Empirical research into the development of political public relations in Northern Ireland, and its influence on the media, remains sparse. The question of how the new professional class of political public relations practitioners in Northern Ireland is affecting the abilities of various sources to gain access to journalists and set media agendas remains to be fully explored.

The present thesis makes an attempt to answer such necessary questions and to concomitantly pose other pertinent questions emerging from the critical literature review.

In 1922, Walter Lippman argued that the practice of democracy had turned a corner; that the democratic process had come to incorporate self-conscious strategies of persuasion by political actors in an attempt to influence public opinion; that public opinion could be manufactured, shaped and manipulated; and that there was a rise in a new professional class of 'publicists' or 'press agents' who stood between political organisations and media institutions whose job it was to influence press coverage of their clients and thus, they hoped, public opinion. (cited in McNair 1995, ix)

As Northern Ireland heralded the arrival of both a new century and millennia, these trends had:

accelerated to the extent that the practice of democracy and politics were now being played out before a global audience through highly technical forms of electronic media and a more sophisticated and developed print version. As the role of the media in mediating between politicians and the public grew in importance, so too did the role of publicists and press agents, now more commonly referred to as the 'political public relations industry.' (McNair 1995, x)

Principally, through investigating the development of the political public relations industry as it pertains to Northern Ireland, the thesis examines critically the ability of its four main political parties to influence and shape media content, particularly

those communications personnel who provide the source material. Concurrently, focus will be placed upon the producers of journalistic output or the media themselves. It is intended, at this juncture, to advance an argument that the public relations strategies employed by a number of key political players were critical in managing public opinion and manufacturing consent in Northern Ireland for the Good Friday Agreement. This 'manufactured consent' allowed the Agreement a chance to 'live', and with this life, create from a strong foundation the subsequent conditions whereby a realistic vision of peace could be conceived by the people of a country artificially formed; ironically in 1921, the very year Lippman concluded his authoritative work.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **(i) Research Problem and Method of Inquiry**

The thesis, located within a qualitative paradigm, is based upon extensive qualitative interview data, gathered through a series of thirty in-depth interviews from 1999-2003 with communications personnel, journalists, editors, politicians and other significant figures involved in the politics and the reporting of the peace process in Northern Ireland (see appendix 3 for list of interviewees). Indeed, the excellent access and the interviews are of key value to this research.

The research problem to be addressed centres upon how both the rise and the developments in party political public relations has had an impact on the media in Northern Ireland and the wider peace/political process, in particular, since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

To gather empirical data that enabled interrogation of this problem, one-to-one interviews with the aforementioned individuals involved in the politics and the reporting of the peace process were conducted. Given that such proposed interviews were to be conducted on an individual basis and purposefully to elicit information both personal and confidential (at times), it was deemed appropriate to use an unstructured interview format (Fielding, 1998). Although the interviews were structured from a pre-arranged list of questions they were not always asked in a defined order, but rather were raised at points in the interview when they seemed most relevant and effective. It was not an intention to be clinical or restrictive in the

approach to the interviews. Rather, it was the intention of the interviewer to enable the respondents to describe, engage and put forward their own idiosyncratic views or to expand upon areas they themselves deemed important.

The fluid and more open aspects of the unstructured interviews helped to develop a rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee which was often conversational and consistent with Fielding's description of the unstructured interview, where although 'interviewers simply have a list of topics which they want the respondent to talk about' they are nevertheless 'free to phrase the questions as they wish, ask them in any order that seems sensible at the time, and even join in the conversation by discussing what they think of the topics themselves' (Ibid. p.136).

An important objective of the interviews was to gather evidence about interactions between communications personnel and journalists and editors that would facilitate the discovery of problems and concerns largely unknown. The interview was therefore as Searle (1998) puts it 'a *resource* to discover things about events outside the interview situation' (1998, p.215). In the present research, the theoretical concerns and central arguments were made in light of the interview material, rather than in advance of it being gathered.

Ethical consideration was given to the entire research process with specific depth consideration given to issues of confidentiality and to potential requests for anonymity by the respondents. The ethical consideration was discussed with each respondent and individual consent and agreement obtained. Some interviewees brought attention to the confidential nature of what they were saying and others



asked for their comments not to be attributed. For this reason, some respondents have been described as ‘anonymous’ or are only identifiable by the positions they occupied at the time of the interview. Such identification has been consented to.

## **(ii) Interview process**

Interviewees were contacted by telephone and email and most responded favourably, that is, they agreed to be interviewed. Of those who responded ‘unfavourably’, it was not a case of them declining to be interviewed, rather that they were too busy at the time and would try and arrange something for a later date (this on occasion did not transpire). For example, on one occasion having travelled to Sinn Féin’s Headquarters in Dublin and whilst awaiting an interview with their National Director of Publicity, Dawn Doyle, she was called to Belfast on urgent business and thus the interview proved to be unobtainable. On the other hand, when contacting the UUP on occasion, the impression given was that they did not really want to be responding to questions about their public relations developments at a time when the party was chronically divided. Instead, they kindly replied that they were too busy at present but would see what they could do in a fortnight or so (in fact, after being continually fobbed off, the decision reached was to attend their party conference instead and get to speak, successfully, with their press officer, Alex Benjamin).

All of the interviews were conducted either at the interviewees’ offices or places of work, or in cafes or bars. In the cases where interviews took place in cafes or bars,

it was not so much because the interviewees felt able to talk more openly outside of work, but because it was either convenient for them or reduced the possibility of disturbance.

The interviews centred upon specific questions examining the history of party political public relations and the role of the media in Northern Ireland. The questions focused upon three distinct periods – pre-Agreement developments, the 1998 referendum campaign, and post-Agreement developments.

All interviewees consented to having the interviews tape-recorded and in most cases the interviews lasted between thirty minutes and one hour, depending upon how much time the respondent could give. The interviews themselves were carried out in London, Edinburgh, Belfast, Dublin and Derry.

In transcribing the interviews, the material was broken down into categories and concepts that helped to generate ideas for thinking about the subjects and issues under discussion, as well as aiding the process of explanation and theoretical design.

In interpreting and evaluating the interview material, two interrelating processes impacted: the management and analysis of data. Management of data requires ‘reducing the size and scope, so that you can report upon it adequately and usefully’, and analysis of the data once shaped into a manageable size necessitates abstracting the material into areas of priority and ‘drawing attention to what you think is of particular importance and significance.’ (Blaxter et al. 1998, p.183) The categories derived from management and analysis of the data also enabled the

presentation of data to be delivered in narrative form, convenient to the aim and goal of the work.

The study also applied the technique of non-probability sampling, which involved utilising the material that most conveniently and appropriately addressed the subject of analysis (Ibid. p.81). In instances where interviewees spoke about events, issues and problems that were not considered relevant for the concerns of the study (for example, John Hume speaking about his relationships with various American presidents) they were excluded from analysis. One of the problems with unstructured interviewing, is that no matter how specific the questioning, the flexible nature of the conversation inevitably leaves room for the interviewee to divert from the subject of the interview, and to bring in other considerations which they may perceive as relevant but which the interviewer may not. Whilst on some occasions such deviations can be productive and provide useful additional material that has a bearing on the subject of inquiry, often they are not, and through a process of discernment were deselected from the data when transcribed.

### **(iii) Multiple Sources of Information**

The study purposefully investigates, analyses and explains developments in political public relations and the media in Northern Ireland using a qualitative approach. The inquiry takes the form of an intrinsic case study, that is the case examined is revelatory, unique and no research has been conducted (importantly in a holistic

way) in this area from a public relations perspective. Creswell (1998) defines a case study as:

...an exploration of a 'bounded system' or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context. (1998, p.61)

Extensive and multiple sources of information pertaining to data collection became "texts" purposeful to and utilised to provide a detailed, in-depth narrative of the area under study. Newspapers, political magazines, party websites, media reports, speeches and statements, campaign literature, political posters and both internal and external communication literature (publicity manuals and press releases respectively) were examined throughout the research process. As with the aforementioned interviews, similar processes came into play in evaluating the 'multiple sources of information'. During the management and analysis of the data the technique of non-probability sampling was also applied to select the most relevant data. Following on from this process, the data was arranged chronologically into three sections – Pre-Agreement developments, the 1998 referendum campaign, and Post-Agreement developments. This made it much easier to extract relevant information or quotation and enabled the presentation of data to be presented in a coherent narrative form.

During the research process, a decision was made to examine the four main political parties' posters as an integral component of section one of the study, 'Pre-Agreement Developments in Party Political Public Relations and the Media.' The main reason for this was to complement the parties' public relations developments and to introduce to the reader pre-Agreement developments, that in many respects

would be important in understanding the parties' attitudes to the Good Friday Agreement, the role they played during the 1998 referendum campaign, and indeed post-Agreement developments. A further reason was a much simpler one. To coherently distil three decades of political communication developments in Northern Ireland (by the four main political parties) into a single concise section proved especially difficult without 'the luxury of sufficient previous academic research having been conducted within the period under question. A decision to include an analysis of political posters from over 3,300 images (mainly posters from 1968 to 2001) on a CD-ROM painstakingly compiled by the Linen Hall Library in Belfast, entitled 'Troubled Images' was made. Of the 3,300 images examined (using the aforementioned methodological procedures) the most relevant data for the study, that is, 134 posters were analysed (see Appendix 2). The aforementioned CD-ROM's most important contribution (from the perspective of the present research) is that communications personnel from the four main political parties undoubtedly left their imprints upon the material contained therein. Without substantial research having been conducted previously on communications staff and personnel or the political slogans and messages they devised, the CD-ROM became an invaluable research tool for the following study.

#### **(iv) Verification: issues and process**

Essential standards of quality and verification were rigorously adhered to throughout the research process. A process of triangulation was used whereby multiple and different sources of information (interviews, newspaper articles, press

releases etc.) were examined to corroborate the data and in so doing shed a reliable and validating light upon the research. A primary and necessary standard to achieving quality and verification adopted was that of constantly examining personal pre-understandings to indicate potential researcher bias. This was crucial, not only to the integrity of the research process but to ensure that the reader was enabled to understand the researcher's position and any biases or assumptions impacting upon the inquiry (Merriam, 1988).

In accepting the paramount nature of the aforementioned standard and, specifically in an effort to uphold the integrity of the research, it is acknowledged that, in raising questions, gathering and interpreting data and, in constructing textual interpretations, the 'lived experience' (Van Manen, 1990) of the researcher as a Northern Irish Catholic requires transparency. Essentially, the relationship of the researcher to that being researched in the epistemological sense, is one of 'closeness' and of being an 'insider' in the field of study. The underlying axiological assumption is one of objectiveness in the factual descriptions of the case and impacting issues which pertain to the developments in political public relations and the media, yet within the narrative and more essentially within interpretative stages, judgements emerge which may be construed as subjective and value-laden with biases transpiring. This is not an uncommon feature that confronts all researchers who choose to interpret political issues relating to Northern Ireland as their area of inquiry or study.

To summate, the present research provides original data on a neglected area of research. As such, it makes a significant contribution to the fields of political

communication and media research and to understanding the roles of political public relations and the media within conflict resolution politics.

## **SECTION ONE: PRE-AGREEMENT DEVELOPMENTS IN PARTY POLITICAL PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE MEDIA**

### **Introduction:**

It must be acknowledged first and foremost that political public relations in its multitudinous and varied guises has undoubtedly existed within Northern Ireland since the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 formally separated the island into North and South, each with its own parliament and government.

At this juncture, it becomes important to begin this section by providing a rudimentary political history of Northern Ireland before taking an in-depth look at developments in political public relations and the media from the beginning of what has been deemed 'the Troubles'.

The actual partition of the thirty-two county island occurred in 1921, with the six north-eastern counties (a six-county statelet or Northern Ireland) remaining part of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland had an in-built majority (approximately two-thirds Protestant and one third Catholic at the time of partition). Although sovereignty and reserved matters such as defence and foreign policy were retained in Westminster, successive British governments were content to leave Northern Ireland responsibilities firmly in the hands of the Protestant-dominated Stormont administration. Essentially, Northern Ireland was to become in the words of its first prime minister, James Craig, 'a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people' (cited in Taylor 1998, p.19). There were opportunities in the period from inception, until



the introduction of direct rule in 1972, for successive Ulster Unionist governments in Northern Ireland to assimilate or integrate the Catholic minority into a more overtly British cultural and political 'way of life'. Yet, a chronically insecure Protestant majority (mirroring themselves on a Westminster model of operation) relegated the Catholic minority to the status of disloyal second-class citizens and did not fully contemplate (not to mention enact) legislation that would infer notions of equality of citizenship. In the 1960's, an alienated Catholic minority suffering electoral malpractice and ethnic bias in housing allocation and employment teetered on the brink of radical change or revolution, in a context of witnessing and empathising with civil rights demonstrators and campaigners in the US. The newly educated Catholic minority who indirectly benefited from post-war British welfare and educational provisions had now graduated to a position whereby they could challenge the discriminatory nature of the state apparatus, which in the eyes of their own tradition or community had never commanded full political legitimacy.

For almost fifty years, the majority of political communication in Northern Ireland could be attributed to, or was monopolised by a single Protestant party, the (Official) Ulster Unionist Party, from the country's formation until the outbreak of what was deemed 'the Troubles' in Derry on October 5, 1968. On that fateful day, the media captured and relayed worldwide the barbaric levels of Protestant-dominated 'security force' aggression that was hitherto hidden, or for the most part unacknowledged in the deliberately isolated statelet. On this occasion, the violence meted out was directed at civil rights demonstrators, the great majority of whom (if not all) were Catholic. Yet, this infamous day was not only significant in terms of being a catalyst to the Troubles. Significantly, it is this author's contention that

October 5, 1968, constituted the date when the real 'propaganda war' began – from which seemingly immobile Protestant / Unionist / Loyalist ideologies were aligned with security force brutality, and from which they (as a community) have never quite fully recovered from. On the other hand, seemingly mobile Catholic / Nationalist / Republican ideologies appeared to be strengthened by this event, fully utilising a potential to move progressively forward (as a community) towards an original goal of equality and civil rights and possibly further still to fulfil an aspirational goal of a united Ireland.

Whilst one party dominated the political landscape of Northern Ireland prior to 1968, it was only in the following years that distinctive groups began to emerge and mobilise to form the majority of political parties that we are accustomed to today.

This section examines developments in political public relations of the state's four main political parties, all of whom have played a pre-eminent role in Northern Ireland politics during the Troubles and the subsequent peace process. Importantly, four major political parties have dominated Northern Ireland's political scene since the outbreak of the Troubles – two unionist parties – the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) – and two nationalist parties – the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin. In some senses, there is symmetry between these alignments. On the one hand, the UUP and SDLP increasingly appealed to middle-class and middle-ground unionists and nationalists respectively. On the other hand, the DUP and Sinn Féin both tended to attract greater support among the working-classes and younger voters of their respective communities.

Section one also examines the role played by the media in Northern Ireland during the Troubles and explores the positive or negative impacts they have had on the peace process that led up to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

Essentially, there follows a chronological examination of the emergence of political public relations efforts from the early conflict years to better understand strategic developments and ensuing processes of change that ultimately led Northern Ireland's political parties into a new phase of conflict resolution.

The aims of this section are to explore not only the key communications personnel and dominant political messages that emerged from differing persuasions during the Troubles, but also the distances the various political parties travelled (great, small or non-existent) to arrive at a settlement (whether voluntarily or imposed). By introducing a historical context and analysing developments in political public relations and the media, we can better determine both how the Good Friday Agreement could have been 'sold' to the people of Northern Ireland and the reasons why its subsequent implementation since 1998 has been so problematic.

The section is broken into four subsections that examine the four main political parties and a fifth that analyses the media's role during the period in question. A sixth and final subsection draws together the previous analyses and takes the form of a summary discussion to determine how developments in political public relations and the media have impacted upon the peace process in the run up to Good Friday 1998.

## **(i) Social Democratic and Labour Party**

Seven Stormont politicians, including Westminster MP Gerry Fitt as leader and John Hume as deputy leader formed the SDLP in August 1970, as a merger of several opposition groups in the Northern Ireland Parliament. The double-barrelled name of the party reflected the tensions between its two main founders – the Belfast socialist Gerry Fitt from the Republican Labour Party who was leader of the party until 1979, and his successor John Hume (1979-2001), a Derry-based social democrat and keen supporter of business innovation. The newly formed party included independent civil rights MPs and breakaway elements from the Northern Ireland Labour Party, the Nationalist Party, the Republican Labour Party and also the full membership of the National Democratic Party – a short-lived group of modernising nationalists. (Hepburn, 1998)

The SDLP quickly became the main political voice of the Catholic community, consistent in their opposition to violence, yet, committed to working for Irish unity ‘by consent’. They established a link with the British Labour Party and joined the Party of European Socialists, enjoying a presence in Europe heavily influenced by former French teacher, Hume, who has represented Northern Ireland in the European Parliament since elections began in 1979. On the domestic front, the party’s demands in the political sphere of Northern Ireland remained fairly constant from its inception and the Sunningdale Agreement (1973) through to the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985) and more recently the Good Friday Agreement (1998) – executive-level power-sharing coupled with a strong ‘Irish dimension’. The party attracted high levels of electoral support from all sections of the nationalist

community since its formation. However, with the introduction of Sinn Féin into party politics from the early 1980's, the SDLP's vote has consistently come more from the emerging middle-class than from the working-class where Sinn Féin has acquired a stranglehold (Ibid.).

## SDLP Public Relations and Communications Developments

After a downturn in SDLP electoral fortunes in the 1983 Westminster general election (with the increasing politicisation of Sinn Féin), John Hume contacted the leadership of the Democratic Party in the US in an attempt to broaden the political base of his own party (Murray, 1998). The Democratic Party pointed the SDLP in the direction of its National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) who in turn concentrated their efforts on the organisational weakness of the SDLP. Effectively, the NDI's remit was to help build up the party machine in a context of falling membership and outmoded electoral techniques. The NDI believed it was totally impractical that some of the SDLP's brightest and best calibre candidates were not receiving training. Former SDLP election agent, Tom Kelly, recalled: 'The NDI were insisting that the SDLP choose the brightest and best candidates for training. However, the party leadership selected people for personal reasons rather than out of merit' (Ibid. p.240).

In reality, interference from an outside body or 'a fresh pair of eyes' exposed a whole second tier of potential SDLP leaders, who demonstrated considerable talent and acumen. This is something which the NDI was keen to cultivate. Yet, at this juncture, senior party figures would not subject themselves to a diminution of their own power or control at the hands of a younger generation in the party.

As an offshoot of NDI involvement, the Social Democratic Group (SDG) was established as a formal training and development organisation for key figures in the SDLP, including training in media techniques. SDG objectives set out to provide

technical assistance and training for branch development, campaigning and electioneering techniques, communications, fund-raising, policy research and political education (Ibid. p.243). However, the SDLP did not take full advantage of the NDI's professional input and a plethora of bureaucratic structures and poor communication between the SDG and themselves, and between the SDG and the NDI led to its demise in 1989 (Ibid. p.246).

Nevertheless, the NDI's influence in 1986 marked the party's first formal professional training and with some of the techniques picked up in the US, the SDLP's Mark Durkan successfully implemented an effective electoral strategy in both 1986 and 1987 for Seamus Mallon and Eddie McGrady respectively (Ibid. p.248). Electoral targeting (as in the case of the two aforementioned Westminster MPs) became a priority within the party over and above organisational issues and this prioritisation continued into the early 90's.

The fundamental problems the SDLP experienced from 1992 onwards could be simply put down to complacency. From 1983 to 1992 the party had increased its representative number of MPs from one to four. Tom Kelly, who became the Managing Director of Drury Communications in Northern Ireland and a public relations adviser to the SDLP, maintained:

The European Elections demonstrated that electorally Hume could do no wrong. If anything he galvanised Nationalist opinion at this stage. There was no analysis how he got that vote out. In the past the party would have looked to see, do they need an extra six votes here or there? It was fairly scientific between 1985 and 1992. When things are going well people do not feel any need to remedy anything organisationally. There was a very close

look at key constituencies and vote management. It all went to the wayside because after 1992 you had the high of the Local Government Elections; the high of Hume's personal vote at the European Elections. People then thought there is no need to analyse voting patterns because we have won the electoral battle. They obviously hadn't. (Ibid. p.194)

The party failed to capitalise on its good performance at the 1992 elections and allowed Sinn Féin to utilise the peace process as a vehicle to increase its own electoral support. Former SDLP press officer, Jonathan Stephenson, reflected on the consequences of Hume helping to bring Adams in from the political wilderness:

The price has been paid in the electoral performance of Sinn Féin . The price is worth paying to get the Republican movement to understand that politics is the way forward. That does not mean what John Hume did was the only way to open that door to them. They would have reached that decision themselves. John Hume got them to realise that sooner. It was extremely worthwhile. It is generally accepted that the Republican movement are now on the road to political involvement; Hume with his discussion with Gerry Adams has helped that process on the way. Clearly as Sinn Féin moved down the road of political involvement and used SDLP language they would eat into SDLP territory. (Ibid. pp 204-5)

However, although the electoral misfortunes of the SDLP could in part be blamed on Hume's attempts to guide Sinn Féin along a peaceful, constitutional path, their electoral misfortunes were also symptomatic of problems occurring behind the scenes. Continuing financial crises towards the end of 1991 meant that the party was left with no other choice than to cut three of its staff at its Belfast headquarters, leaving only two. The posts of General Secretary, press officer and a clerical position were reduced because of bank debts in excess of £150,000. (Ibid.). Jonathan Stephenson, who resigned as press officer in August 1991 before his



position was about to be made redundant, accused the SDLP leadership of reducing the party to 'the status of a postal address in South Belfast.' (Ibid. p.249) For a number of subsequent years it would not be Belfast headquarters but the office of John Hume in Derry that would handle most media relations. A radical internal shake-up was thus required and the SDLP created important changes, the objective of which was to modernise and introduce more democratic mechanisms within the overall party organisational structure. Despite the financial crises during the early 90's, by 1996 the SDLP had managed to turn the downward spiral of cutbacks around to the extent that it employed seven people at spacious new headquarters in Belfast. (Ibid.).

For all of the main political parties (with the exception of Sinn Féin) 1996 was a pivotal year in terms of communications, as involvement in negotiations would thus require a greater public relations capability than they previously had. In November 1996, the SDLP made a number of appointments including Conall McDevitt as its first Director of Communications and Tim Attwood as Director of Organisation and Development (including responsibility for fundraising).<sup>5</sup> Attwood (like Mark Durkan and previous party members), had returned from America where he gained valuable insights whilst helping the Democrats during their elections: 'I was looking at the technical side of how they run their campaigns, the way they define the message, how they get their vote out... Not everything transfers to here but we can learn from some of their techniques.' (Ibid.). One aspect of politics that is universally applicable is the

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<sup>5</sup> Attwood Back from Boston Elections, The Belfast Telegraph, p.6, Nov 15, 1996

need for financial resources and although the SDLP's bank balance was much healthier in 1996 than it was in the early 90s, Attwood's job was to boost the party coffers even further. Targeting America was one option; he rejected the notion that Sinn Féin had already cornered the market: 'John Hume is a political hero in the US'. (Ibid.) Essentially Attwood naively believed that the SDLP had a selling point in Hume that no other Irish party could match (that is, Sinn Féin). With the optimism and idealism usually associated with someone embarking upon a newly appointed role, he stated his objective was to make the SDLP a 'better organised, better focused, dynamic, modern, political party.' (Ibid.)

Accompanying Attwood at party headquarters was Connal McDevitt, who, with a support staff of one, was to take charge of the party's press relations and advise on the SDLP's overall communications strategy. McDevitt stated that a major part of his job would be to explain and promote the SDLP's significant role in the Northern Ireland peace process, in particular the role of John Hume.<sup>6</sup> He would also seek to publicise party policy on issues such as health, education and inward investment in the run up to the 1997 Westminster general election. Like Attwood, he inferred that the party would need to make some changes: 'The SDLP is a party with a very broad policy base and there is a critical need to be proactive in communicating bread and butter issues.' (Ibid.)

McDevitt had a difficult job ahead, especially in the context of painful comparisons being drawn between the SDLP's rusty communications machine and that of Sinn Féin's slick, highly polished one. The 24-year-old's appointment was seen as an

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<sup>6</sup> PR Week, p.13, November 15, 1996

attempt to inject some modernity into the SDLP's greying image and overcome internal reviews that acknowledged public perceptions held the party and its members to be, 'mediocre, middle-aged, middle-class and muddled', effectively a party out of touch with its own supporters. (Murray 1998, p.247)

Sixteen months into the job and only six weeks before the Good Friday Agreement was signed, McDevitt was interviewed for a feature in *The Belfast Telegraph*.<sup>7</sup> One key observation from the interview was that he hadn't performed miracles with the SDLP's scarce PR resources and the whiff of glamour that still clung to Sinn Féin, given its associations to violence in the recent past. (Ibid.).

When he took up his appointment, McDevitt's first priority was to make himself accessible to journalists 24 hours a day and to introduce into the organisation a culture of using a press office. As he understood it: 'We were starting from a minus ten situation. Maybe we're just about scratching the surface now but we've a long way to go and we need more resources in the long run to do that' (Ibid.)

In the course of his interview he praised Hume, yet it was ironic that only two months prior to the SDLP inspired 'Yes' concert where Hume met U2's Bono on stage, McDevitt contended that it wouldn't be a good idea if Hume pepped up his party's image by meeting the Spice Girls. He believed that Hume was admired by 'cool' people but didn't have to emulate them asking: 'Would Gandhi have met the Spice Girls?' (Ibid.)

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<sup>7</sup> Man Without a Mission; Brief Encounter; Liz McPherson talks to Connal McDevitt, p.14, *The Belfast Telegraph*, February 28, 1998

In relation to his political rivals for the nationalist vote, McDevitt claimed:

Sinn Féin and the SDLP are two very different parties. Sinn Féin is propaganda driven - most political parties don't have propaganda driven publicity machines. I know three or four Sinn Féin press officers and presumably there's a lot more, so from a volume point of view it's difficult to compete with that (Ibid.).

McDevitt believed that for the SDLP, the endgame was more important than the short-term gratification of playing everything out in the political domain. As a self-proclaimed unselfish, committed party speaking with the 'voice of reason' within an aggressive political arena, McDevitt maintained:

The SDLP is committed to having a successful outcome to this process and frequently we deliberately choose not to portray ourselves aggressively against another party - we know that although it would give us some short term political satisfaction and make a nice headline it wouldn't actually do the process any good, I mean it's pointless having a fantastic spring this year if we don't have an outcome in the summer. I think what the party's working towards is an outcome in the summer, an outcome, which will be able to go to referendum and that referendum will be carried. (Ibid.).

## SDLP Political Posters

SDLP communication material (via their political posters) during the period under question could in general be regarded as conservative and simplistic and it is noticeable by its exclusion of overt political symbolism. The party has distanced itself from traditional nationalism not only in its interest in socio-economic and European issues, but also in relation to its more 'long-term' aspirations for a united Ireland. For example, the traditional colours of the tricolour, which since at least 1848 have represented an Irish republic, (green representing the nation of Ireland, orange the traditions of the unionist community and white a symbol of the peace between them) are not prominent in SDLP communication material. The party colours of green and red do take into account their nationalist tendencies, but the red (representing socialism) offsets this or is given equivalence.

The first election the emerging SDLP contended was the 1973 Northern Ireland Assembly election with the slogan, 'A New North: A New Ireland' (PPO2857). This phrase was used by the party from the early 70's, though in later years they modified it to, 'A New North, A New Ireland, A New Europe' reflecting the party's reformist, nationalist and European characteristics.

In the February 1974 Westminster general election, posters proposed 'Another Step Forward: Vote SDLP' (PPO2873). Party leader Gerry Fitt was the only SDLP candidate to win a seat, retaining West Belfast, which he had previously held as a Republican Labour MP prior to founding the party. Later that year, in the October 1974 Westminster general election, the growing confidence of the SDLP shone

through with a guiding theme of 'strength' incorporated into posters such as 'One Strong Voice: Vote SDLP' (PPO2803).

By the 1975 Northern Ireland Convention election the theme was modified to 'Speak With Strength: Vote SDLP' (PPO2840). The election returned a clear majority of unionists opposed to a Sunningdale-type agreement and failed to produce a report acceptable to both nationalists and the British government.

In the first direct election to the European parliament in 1979, the SDLP won a seat that it has retained ever since with the simple message, 'Vote Hume, SDLP, Your No.1 for Europe' (PPO2846). In the same year's Westminster general election Gerry Fitt retained his West Belfast seat with the message 'Strengthen Your Voice: Vote SDLP' (PPO2855).

A slightly amended message was used in the 1982 Northern Ireland Assembly election that called for 'constitutional' nationalists to 'Stand Firm: Vote SDLP' (PPO2828). In the wake of republican electoral successes during the hunger strikes in the 1981 Fermanagh-South Tyrone by-election, some believed that Sinn Féin would rapidly overtake the SDLP as the largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland – further destabilising the political situation. The poster featured John Hume, who was elected leader in November 1979.

For the Westminster general election of 1983, the SDLP's slogan was 'Build a New Ireland' (PPO2854) reflecting the party's involvement in the New Ireland Forum that involved constitutional nationalist parties throughout Ireland (and for this

reason excluded Sinn Féin ). John Hume became an MP for the first time, winning the new constituency of Foyle.

A rehashed message was produced for the 1984 European parliamentary elections: 'SDLP, Strength in Europe. Hume No.1' (PPO2847)

Among SDLP electoral communication for the 1987 Westminster general election was a text produced for the strongly contested West Belfast constituency fought between sitting Sinn Féin MP Gerry Adams and Dr Joe Hendron of the SDLP. Posters pointed out 'Some logical reasons for voting Hendron ... and some emotional ones' (PPO2150a&b). They attacked Sinn Féin's abstentionist policy, claiming that Gerry Adams 'has no right to run away' from local problems and that he should 'challenge Thatcher face-to-face, at Westminster'. In the event, Adams retained his seat with a 2,221 majority over Hendron. In the same election, the SDLP's Eddie McGrady won the South Down seat, defeating Ulster Unionist MP Enoch Powell, effectively ending his long and often controversial career.

The slogan for the 1989 European parliamentary elections was much the same as before: 'Strength in Europe, SDLP, Hume1' (PPO2845).

Moving into the 1990's, a lack of original thought was becoming evident with the phrase 'A New North, A New Ireland, A New Europe' (PPO2794) which featured prominently in the SDLP's 1992 Westminster general election campaign.

Two years later, another simplistic, yet progressive message was produced for the 1994 European parliamentary election: 'Hume – 1. Vote SDLP. Towards a New Century.' (PPO2983) The poster also incorporated an emblem of the rose, the symbol of the European Socialist Parties of which the SDLP continues to be a member.

Finally, communications for the 1997 Westminster general election centred on the message 'Your Voice For Peace. Vote SDLP' (PPO2834) and featured the party's four sitting MPs - John Hume, Seamus Mallon, Eddie McGrady and Joe Hendron. The first three retained their seats but Gerry Adams defeated Hendron to regain his West Belfast seat after a five-year hiatus. Deputy leader, Seamus Mallon, retained his Newry and Armagh seat and acted as the SDLP's chief negotiator in the multi-party talks that were to lead to the Good Friday Agreement.



## **(ii) The Ulster Unionist Party**

Sometimes known as the Official Unionist Party, the more common UUP (Ulster Unionist Party), is the oldest and (until recently) the largest political party in Northern Ireland, having evolved in 1885-6 as a protest movement united by a broad antipathy to 'Home Rule' in Ireland. The party subsequently governed the newly formed 'Northern Ireland' continuously from 1921 until the introduction of Direct Rule in March 1972. After 1921, and the creation of a 'Protestant parliament for a Protestant people' (cited in Taylor 1998, p.19), the party sustained unity through a trenchant stand on the Union, an implicit anti-Catholicism, and a passive or reactive approach to most other areas of policy.

Since its inception, the UUP embraced a broad range of Ulster Protestant opinion, led by the commercial elite of eastern Ulster, accompanied by a notable residual landed presence. In subsequent years, however, the Protestant professional classes soon came to dominate the parliamentary party at Stormont, both within the House of Commons and the Senate, with proletarian unionism never adequately being represented at leadership level. (Jackson, 1998)

Hampered by the fragile and diverse nature of its support, the party never developed far from its original ideology of protest against Home Rule. In fact, unity within the UUP has often been bought at the price of inactivity. During the UUP's continuous reign in the North, anti-partitionist administrations in Dublin perhaps unwittingly aided the party's survival that was based on a simple and uncomplicated appeal to British loyalty. The Irish Constitution of 1937 allowed Lord Craigavon to reunite

unionism in the Stormont election of 1938, while the declaration of an Irish Republic in 1948 enabled Sir Basil Brooke to perform a similar feat in 1949 (Ibid.).

Recurrent IRA campaigns throughout a virtually unchallenged half century in power reinforced the defensive posture of the party and brought a lasting emphasis on law and order policy, from the Special Powers Act (1922) through to later Acts during the Troubles such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (1974). Post-World War 2 posters produced by the UUP reflected their defensive loyalism: 'Ulster holds the Fort! Maintain our Freedom, Vote Unionist' (PPO2682).

The fragile nature of the Unionist coalition, and its socially conservative leadership, meant that broader social and welfare issues tended to be relegated within the party's priorities. Effectively, the UUP duplicated British welfare legislation, in particular that of Attlee's post-war government, yet, on Unionist principles rather than the party's own intrinsic commitment to reform (Ibid.).

Economic differences between Northern Ireland and the Republic were prioritised over tackling social problems arising within the state itself. Political posters from the 1950's depicted Viscount Brookeborough and Eamon DeValera on either side of a road sign, one pointing to the 'United Kingdom' and a modern scene of prosperity, the other pointing to a poverty-stricken and backward 'Eire Republic'. The campaign poster asked: 'Which is your road? Vote Unionist.' (PPO0587) The notion of 'which is your road' is a common theme in UUP communication material. Along much the same lines, the traditional Protestant image of the signpost signifies the moral or religious choices a person has to make throughout his or her life.

During the 1960's it was ironic that the UUP should use such a traditional signpost theme in the poster 'Forward Ulster, Prosperity, Keep it that way, Vote Unionist' (PPO0592) at a time when the party was seeking to modernise itself. Another poster of the era entitled 'Forward Ulster, Vote for industrial expansion' (PPO0618) highlighted the party leader and prime minister Terence O'Neill's attempts to project such a modernising image. Other images incorporated the portrayal of well-dressed and well-nourished school children, accompanied with the attendant message: 'Forward Ulster, Their future in your vote' (PPO0651).

In the late 60's and early 70's the party experienced severe divisions and splintered under the impact of the civil rights movement and the renewal of IRA violence, and it began to slowly lose its privileged position within the government and administration of Northern Ireland. Liberal Unionists, dissatisfied with internal opposition to O'Neill, joined the non-sectarian or non-confessional Alliance Party. Working class loyalists, dismayed by O'Neill's leadership, joined the Democratic Unionist Party. Militant loyalists, dissatisfied with the apparently impotent constitutionalism of the party, turned to the Ulster Vanguard movement or to the populist vigilante groups and emergent paramilitaries later unified under the umbrella of the Ulster Defence Association (Ibid.).

In 1973, a great many Ulster Unionists rejected the Sunningdale Agreement (the fundamental principles of which included power-sharing with a Council of Ireland) and this led to the resignation of its then party leader, Brian Faulkner. Subsequently, in the mid-1970s, the UUP formed part of the United Ulster Unionist

Coalition that also opposed power-sharing with nationalists in the 1975 Northern Ireland Council Convention (Ibid.). Under the leadership of James Molyneux (1979-95) some degree of consolidation was achieved within the party, including the containment of the emerging challenge from the DUP.

Whilst supportive of economic co-operation with the Republic of Ireland, the party has remained adamant that the government in the South should have no political role in the affairs of Northern Ireland. Accordingly, the UUP categorically rejected the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 that gave the Irish Republic a definite (but limited) say on certain political matters in Northern Ireland. Even a decade later, the 1995 Framework Documents also provoked a hostile reaction from the UUP for broadly similar reasons (Tonge, 1998).

In 1995, David Trimble was elected party leader, and for the first time in 30 years, a UUP leader met the Republic of Ireland's Táoiseach for talks - emphasising the party's view that friendly relations with the South were possible. Yet, the flipside of this historic encounter were demands by Trimble that 'these relationships must preserve the political independence and territorial integrity of states which are fundamental principles of international law' (Ulster Unionist Information Institute, 1995, p.16). The demands fulfilled a core part of Unionist ideology – the rejection of claims of Irish nationalism that the geographic unity of Ireland must necessarily translate into political unity. The UUP consistently rejected the territorial claims to Northern Ireland enshrined in articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution. In the run-up to Good Friday 1998, the party viewed Northern Ireland as a legitimate entity,

historically, culturally and politically part of Britain and was therefore adamant that there must never be a dilution of British sovereignty over the state.

## UUP Public Relations and Communications Developments

'Unionists freely admit they lost the propaganda war to their nationalist opponents early in the conflict and never managed to recover from their loss.'(Parkinson, 1998, p.30) One initial reason or argument for this propaganda failure was Ulster Unionists' firm belief in the moral supremacy of their case; an unrelenting arrogance that they were so 'right' that they didn't have to 'sell' either themselves or the state of affairs they had found themselves in (Ibid.). With built-in control of their state and an uncritical overseer at Westminster, Ulster Unionists did not feel pressurised into justifying their political beliefs or policies. An additional argument for unionist antipathy towards propaganda in the early years of the Troubles was their conviction that the media were so much against them that theirs was a lost cause. (Ibid. p.31)

The status quo nature of the UUP's political aspirations and the restricted range of subjects for publicity purposes meant that their propaganda focused largely on the 'evil' attributes of 'enemy' figures ranging from Civil Rights and political leaders to representatives of Sinn Féin and the IRA (Ibid. p.33). Much of the early UUP propaganda was directed towards demythising the claims perpetuated about the Northern Ireland state by the Civil Rights movement in general and Bernadette Devlin in particular. The main targets of Ulster Unionists' 'hate' propaganda since the early 70s have undoubtedly been republican terrorist groups, most notably, the IRA (Ibid.). Unionist criticism of the IRA was a major feature of their propaganda and continued even after the ceasefires of 1994 and '97. Although the choice of targets for such literature widened as the Troubles developed, the excesses of the

IRA ensured their place at the top of unionist 'hate' propaganda. Whilst the tone of such literature was always bitterly hostile, its nature changed in the 80's as the political dimension of the republican campaign grew stronger. Consequently, UUP attacks on 'political' republicanism increased, and the party adjusted their position to underplay increasing loyalist paramilitary activity whilst claiming that Protestants were more likely to suffer from terrorism than Catholics.

Although the UUP became more adept at compiling propaganda literature for the 'external' market in the 80's, their publications lacked the cohesion and consistency that could be associated with a purpose-built 'propaganda' department. (Ibid. p.31) Despite the occasionally effective pamphlet or overseas counter-republican initiative (such as the visit of unionists to America during the H Block crisis of 1981 and later trips to the US which coincided with those of Gerry Adams), there was an absence of a carefully-orchestrated propaganda campaign. This was not rectified until 1988 when Martin Smyth founded the Ulster Unionist Information Institute (UUII), from headquarters in Belfast. (Ibid.) The emergence of the UUII can be construed as evidence of the UUP's acceptance that they had failed to make adequate inroads into reversing nationalists' and republicans' propaganda successes.

Moving into the early 90's, the UUP appreciated more fully the need to promote their case and pointed out that 'a considerable quantity of material is delivered from the Unionist Party headquarters at regular intervals.' (Ibid.) Unionist public relations teams distinguished between propaganda specifically for the 'home' market (with its emphasis on denigrating political opponents, particularly the DUP)

and 'external' literature (that downplayed internal divisions), 'designed for the attention of individuals and institutions, both on the mainland and abroad.' (Ibid.)

After the IRA ceasefire of 31<sup>st</sup> August 1994, the UUP's David Trimble and colleagues made several trips to Washington in attempts to break the public relations monopoly long held there by Irish nationalists. (McDonald, 2000) His recognition of the impact of the US on events in Northern Ireland prompted him to suggest that the UUP should create a Unionist Information Office in Washington as a counter-balance to the highly polished PR machine that Sinn Féin had established there. Trimble felt that unionism had always undersold its message in the US and his brainchild (the Unionist Information Office) was one initiative the then UUP leader James Molyneaux readily agreed to. (Ibid.)

Yet, in spite of some creative or innovative responses, the general acceptance of Ulster Unionists' inability to project their case in a positive light was still commonplace, as illustrated by a 19<sup>th</sup> March 1995 article, 'Selling the Unionists' published in the *Independent on Sunday*. The article started with the premise that loyalists were 'the image-maker's nightmare' and asked six advertising agencies how they would counteract the 'negativism' of unionism, which 'seems to be losing them a PR battle with the Republicans' (Ibid.). The agencies believed that the existing unionist image as 'dour, stubborn, bigoted, inarticulate (although excessively noisy) and tribal' was a 'caricature' and that the Unionists had a genuine case that could be considered powerful, even moving (Ibid.). However, events on the ground in Northern Ireland (that would receive negative worldwide publicity) would have the ad agencies rushing back to their drawing boards. David



Trimble's 'dance down Carlton Street' with Ian Paisley in the aftermath of Drumcree '95 was played over and over again on television screens and appeared prominently in national newspapers. In the minds of the press, it had planted an idea of Trimble as someone every bit as hard-line and belligerent as Ian Paisley and the subsequent fall-out was to include Trimble being depicted in the UK media as a 'bigot in a bowler hat' (McDonald 2000, p.150).

A substantial communications re-think was thus required by the UUP, and during this period in question the Ulster Young Unionist Council produced the pamphlet, *Selling Unionism: Home and Away* (cited in O'Dowd, 1998). The mainstay of the pamphlet expressed a sense of urgency about communicating the unionist case to a variety of audiences, not only in Northern Ireland (Aughey) but also in the rest of the UK (Burnside), the USA (Donaldson), Republic of Ireland (Harris) and the EU (Adams).

Two contributors to the pamphlet are worth highlighting or noting because of their influence in the field of PR and communications. The first is David Burnside, who was a press officer for the Ulster Unionist Party's student branch at Queens University, Belfast, during the early years of the Troubles, and subsequently Ulster Vanguard's press officer. He left Northern Ireland for a glittering if somewhat controversial career in PR, eventually being elevated to the position of the 'UK's most important in-house PR man' as British Airways' Director of Publicity.<sup>8</sup> In *Selling Unionism: Home and Away*, Burnside stressed the need for unionists to target their audiences in the UK and to combat the successful resources and

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<sup>8</sup> Irish Times, July 29, 2000

techniques of John Hume and the 'pan-nationalist front' (O'Dowd 1998, p.75). Burnside listed the British audiences most sympathetic to the unionist cause: new right think-tanks and lobby groups; key newspapers such as *The Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Sunday Telegraph* and *The Sun*; the Friends of the Union founded in 1985, and 'friends in the Labour Party who believe in the Union' (Ibid). Indeed, he thought that the party should begin a process of positive image building and also stressed the need for unionists not to appear anti-Catholic (Ibid.).

The second and most controversial contribution to *Selling Unionism* came from Eoghan Harris, a Southern Irish columnist with the Irish edition of the *Sunday Times*. Harris was also a former Workers' Party strategist (a central intellectual influence in the evolution of Official Sinn Féin to the Workers' Party in the 70's and 80's), Radio Telefis Eireann television director, and he had also helped to run Mary Robinson's media campaign during the 1990 Irish Presidential election. Harris (in his role as a media strategist) also eventually became a key adviser to David Trimble. In *Selling Unionism* he began by bluntly stating that Catholics have certain cultural advantages over Protestants when it comes to communication. They 'tell a good story' and thus have rhetorical advantages over Protestants who are more prone to preach, make a case, and pay attention to the 'text' (Ibid. p.77). For Catholics unlike Protestants, the 'truth is in the tone, not in the words.' (Ibid.) Harris concluded that the 'siege mentality plus the evangelical and preaching tradition produce a public, polemical sound that is not suitable for television or radio.' (Ibid.) In his contribution, he also provided a mini-handbook for unionists incorporating twelve rules for winning the 'propaganda war' in the media and pointed out a deeper problem for unionists, that is, that they lack a theory of change,

‘of political struggle as a process of political change.’ (Ibid.) Essentially, Harris believed that they ‘seem to want to stop things short, and settle down. But life never settles down...The same cognitive flaws that allow unionists to see politics as a product rather than a process, prevent them doing well on the mass media.’ (Ibid.) According to Harris, unionists don’t understand the dynamics of change; they ‘don’t believe the basic rule that freedom is the recognition of necessity, that you can only win ground by giving ground’; and that ‘unionists are reactive and serial thinkers when they need to be proactive and dialectical thinkers.’ (Ibid.)

The controversial Eoghan Harris may not have gone down very well in the majority of unionist circles but he did highlight key recurrent weaknesses within unionism and the fact that they would have to begin a process of self-reflection in an attempt to clarify the ‘positive’ substance of their case.

In September 1995, only a few months after his infamous two-step with Ian Paisley, David Trimble became leader of the UUP - the cover of the party journal, *Ulster Review*, celebrated his election by proclaiming the arrival of a ‘new unionism’<sup>9</sup>. It was to be ‘pro-active, inclusive, open, pluralist, dynamic, progressive, outward, articulate, intelligent, coherent, professional, confident.’(Ibid.) Some contributors to the journal argued that much work remained to be done in modernising the party. Nonetheless, they did now feel that some of their leaders were capable of absorbing the ideas of a new group of academics, journalists and other professionals who since the early 80’s had sought to reinvigorate the intellectual case for the Union. ‘New Unionists’ believed that for much of the previous 25 years, the case for the Union

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<sup>9</sup> *Ulster Review* 1995-6, cited in O’Dowd 1998, p.70

had been allowed to go by default, by an inability to communicate the merits of unionism to a wider audience in a rational and coherent manner.

To reiterate this point, one analysis of unionism succinctly summarised the on-going problems of comprehensibility for unionists of all hues:

They (the loyalists) are loyal to Britain, yet ready to disobey her; they reject clerical tyranny, yet oppose secularism; they proclaim an ideology of freedom and equality, except for Catholics; they revere law and authority, then break the law. And they refuse to do the rational obvious thing. (Ibid. p.76)

Although unionists and loyalists alike had observable problems of comprehensibility, the UUP were showing growing signs of a realisation that they needed a more structured communications operation. In 1996 a London-based publicity department was established, the Unionist Information Office (however, it did not get off to the best of starts when it picked up unwanted headlines due to its manager, Patricia Campbell, suing the party for alleged discrimination - reported in *The Times*, 27 July 1996). In the latter half of '96 (after the Entry to Negotiations elections) a young law graduate, David Kerr, was hired by the UUP as a full-time press officer/press secretary to David Trimble.<sup>10</sup> Previously, there had been a loose configuration of press officers in some of the UUP constituencies with little or no central co-ordination and such appointments in the main were not full-time or permanent positions.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Alex Benjamin, UUP Press Officer, 1 June 1999

In addition to David Kerr and also a subsequent appointment of Phillip Robinson as press officers, based at UUP headquarters (from the summer of 1997), assistance was forthcoming in the form of Eoghan Harris (Ibid.). He had been continually sending David Trimble position papers on a range of issues running the gamut from Drumcree to decommissioning. He was also trying to reshape the stiff, media-awkward Ulster Unionist leader into a product that could be sold around the world. Harris claims that he is the man who 'reinvented Trimble', particularly in the Republic of Ireland (McDonald 2000, p.191). He also claims that he changed Trimble's image from the sash-wearing triumphalist holding Ian Paisley's hand aloft in Portadown to someone who could reach out beyond the narrow confines of the Orange Order, the UUP and Protestant Fortress Ulster: 'One of my position papers told Trimble to reach out to civil society in Northern Ireland. I told him to use this concept of civil society in his speeches' (Ibid.). Drawing on his years of experience in television, Harris also advised that Trimble should change his on-screen image. He urged him to control his temper with interviewers, which he saw as one of the leader's major weak points (Ibid.).

Notions of presentation and style fascinated Trimble, and he took on board many of Harris's recommendations. Being somewhat mesmerised by the New Labour spin machine (to the horror of some traditionalists) he even called on the party to set up a Blairite-style 'rapid rebuttal unit' in London (Ibid. p.200).

Nevertheless, during the negotiations that led up to the Good Friday Agreement, the shambolic organisation of the UUP stood in stark contrast to the cold control of Sinn Féin, who marshalled their representatives at the talks with military precision.

This highlighted that whilst the UUP had begun to take ‘baby steps’ in the direction of a sophisticated communications strategy, the progression to ‘giant leaps’ remained illusive.

A historically disunited party was made more publicly evident by the sharp departures or walkouts by members of the talks-team during the final round of negotiations on Good Friday 1998. In this respect, David Kerr spotted something more coldly logical about Jeffrey Donaldson’s refusal to support the Agreement and his party leader on the 10<sup>th</sup> April:

His rationale, his argument to our group that afternoon was that the people out there would reject the document because of issues like prisoners, because of decommissioning, because of proposed changes to the police. He was saying that he was not sticking with Trimble because the people were going to reject it, and he didn’t want to be part of the ship when his leader fell overboard (Ibid. p.210).

It was only at the eleventh hour, after a great deal of persuasion, and more importantly, a hand-written letter from Tony Blair, that the obstacles were finally surmounted. The UUP’s David McNarry confirmed that the road to the Blair letter started around noon on Good Friday with a telephone call from a ‘powerful newspaper magnate’:

A call came through to our office and the newspaperman said, ‘Can I speak to David?’ I remember the room very well – everyone was hungry because there was no staff to make lunch. The newspaperman said, ‘What’s the problem?’ and David outlined his difficulties. Then the newspaper man said, ‘Leave it with me.’ He must have telephoned Blair, because ten minutes later the phone rang again and it was the Prime Minister on the line. Blair

asked Trimble for ten minutes, and the phone went again. This time it was Bill Clinton on the line. I was standing next to Trimble when he took the call from the President. He told Clinton what his problem was and Clinton also said, 'Give me ten minutes.' The end product of all those phone calls was Blair's letter (Ibid. p.211).

McNarry also revealed that prior to the first call from the newspaper magnate, David Trimble had drafted a note to Tony Blair stating that the UUP would not accept what was on offer because there was nothing in the letter of the Agreement linking decommissioning to Sinn Féin in government. 'High noon was the crisis point, and the only thing that stopped Trimble from walking away was that series of phone calls' (Ibid.).

McNarry's illuminating insight poses a number of important questions, including: How is it possible that a so-called 'powerful newspaper magnate' could so easily get through to the prime minister at such a pivotal point in the proceedings? In addition, how well does this bode for media organisations that claim to act as a trusted fourth estate, as distinctly independent from governmental influence, when relationships are so evidently close?

To conclude, as the referendum on the Agreement loomed, the UUP had two full-time press officers located centrally at party HQ and an external 'PR pool' available that could be utilised as and when required. This pool included people such as David Burnside, Eoghan Harris and John Laird. Only time would tell if this amalgam of PR professionals could help David Trimble to successfully sell an Agreement (that as party leader) he eventually signed up to on Good Friday 1998.

## UUP Political Posters

In the early 70's, when the level of political violence was much higher than the previous decades (and indeed future ones too) the UUP emphasised 'FOR... Safety in your home, Security in your work, Stability in the U.K., Vote Unionist.' (PPO0646) After Direct Rule was introduced in 1972, the 'Unionist blueprint' entitled 'Towards the Future' highlighted a forward-looking party with a consistent view that Northern Ireland's future undoubtedly lay within the United Kingdom. However, 'Towards the Future' also floated the idea of an all-Ireland intergovernmental council, a key issue that broke UUP leader Brian Faulkner's power-sharing administration in 1974. In one poster of the time, a red hand (a symbol of Ulster) shakes a Union Jack hand implying a contractual agreement between two parties rather than an absolute unity (PPO0649). Other communication material containing the slogan 'Towards the Future' prevailed in the 70's along with 'I'm Official Unionist' stickers (PA0109) widely used during this period because of the fragmentation of unionism into a number of competing political parties.

A year later, the UUP's 1973 manifesto entitled 'Peace, Order and Good Government', highlighted the party's long-term stance on law and order (PPO0642). During the election campaign for the local government elections the UUP issued two posters with a politically ubiquitous theme of the Troubles: 'Think of their welfare and future' - both using photographs of young children and senior citizens (PPO0655 & PPO2987).



For the same year's Border Poll, UUP's press officer, Sam Butler, used a 1950s 'Keep the Link' design. Entitled 'British Connection' (PPO0626), unionists interpreted the chains as the link with Britain. Many nationalists (on the other hand) viewed the chains as a symbol of slavery.

The slogan 'Dublin is just a Sunningdale away' (PPO0593) was coined by John Laird (now Lord Laird and present owner of a Belfast PR consultancy) for the February 1974 Westminster general election. Anti-Sunningdale Agreement unionists, operating together in the United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC) assisted in undermining the entire Sunningdale project that was based on power-sharing allied to a Council of Ireland. During this period, the UUUC resurrected a tactic from the heroic days of 'old unionism' - the signing of the Ulster Covenant in 1912 - yet, this time variously called the 'Save Ulster Petition' and the 'Anti-Sunningdale Petition'. A great deal of imagery was created by the UUUC including an hourglass with the attendant warning 'Loyalists, Time Is Running Out' (PPO0947) that brought to the fore biblical connotations - the foreshadowing of a coming apocalypse. Other images reverted back to the ubiquitous signpost device and the choice between good and evil in Protestant ideology. 'You Can't Have It Both Ways' was the title of one poster (PPO0967) with opposite posts pointing to a 'Council of Ireland' and 'British heritage.' Another poster of the time reflected the unionist enthusiasm for law and order in the form of scales of justice entitled 'In the Balance: United Ireland, United Kingdom. Tip the Scales. Vote United Ulster Unionist.' (PPO0935) It is interesting that slightly amended UUUC communication material would not have seemed out of place 24 years later in the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement including: 'The Big Peace Lie Exposed, Reject the Council

of Ireland and SDLP/IRA Rule' (PPO0940). It is somewhat ironic that in 1974, Ulster Unionists were denouncing an SDLP/IRA alliance, while Sinn Féin was denouncing an SDLP/moderate unionist alliance.

By the end of the decade, elections were taking place for the 1979 European parliament - the first in which members were directly elected to Strasbourg. The two UUP contenders, Harry West and John Taylor proclaimed 'A United Team' (PPO0596). Taylor was elected, but West had a poor campaign and subsequently resigned as party leader, paving the way for the long-standing James Molyneux (1979-95).

'The Unionist Party, Party of the Union' was the slogan used on a variety of posters for the 1983 Westminster general election (PPO0640). By 1983, only two parties (the UUP and DUP) now overwhelmingly represented unionist public opinion and the Ulster Unionists were therefore able to dispense with the name 'Official' Unionists - widely used during the 70's when unionist party politics were deeply fragmented.

For the May 1985 District Council elections the party produced a poster that was to become an enduring theme in subsequent years. The poster incorporated a superimposed image of an IRA gunman between the portraits of Gerry Adams and Danny Morrison, inferring that the two were closely linked to (if not members of) the IRA Army Council (PPO0589). The text posed the question 'The IRA Army Council or your next District Council? Put Sinn Féin out of Business, Vote Ulster Unionist, Keep Ulster British'.

Another poster for the same District Council elections (that led up to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement) attacked Anglo-Irish summits claiming that their 'careless talk costs lives' (PPO0688). However, the UUP were impotent in relation to the British and Irish governments' intentions to go over the heads of local political parties in their attempts to move forward or find a solution to the Troubles.

'Democracy not Dictatorship: Scrap the Anglo-Irish Agreement' (PPO0785) demonstrated the sense of frustration and alienation felt by unionists in the wake of the Agreement. The poster suggested that the Northern Ireland Office had isolated itself from unionists and an image of Stormont reflected that this 'dictatorship' had to be protected by barbed wire and the security forces. Thousands of 'Unionist Solidarity' stickers were also produced by a coalition of unionist parties formed to protest the signing of the Agreement and were used throughout January 1986 by-elections brought about by the resignation of all unionist MPs in protest against the Agreement (PA0042). The central use of the word 'Solidarity', its typography and the inclusion of barbed wire were borrowed from the Polish Solidarity movement – inferring notions of democratic legitimacy in the face of oppressive government.

Other communication material produced by the UUP in the months following the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement included 'Ulster. Let The People Decide' (PPO0695) - a poster that incorporated a photograph of unionists demonstrating against the Agreement in Belfast City centre on 23 November 1985. Estimates of the crowds size varied wildly, however, NIO Minister Richard Needham later noted in his autobiography 'Battling for Peace' that '250,000 people crammed the centre of Belfast on the following Saturday. The NIO claimed it was 30,000. It was not.'

(Needham 1998, pp.76-77) Another widely circulated poster of the period included the slogan 'No Dublin Rule' (PPO0638) - a direct attack by Ulster Unionists at the Anglo-Irish secretariat to be based at Maryfield outside Belfast, which they believed to constitute a significant and direct input by Dublin in the governance of the state. For more than a decade, unionists were unsuccessful in their continued attempts to scrap or reverse the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the advances envisaged had been made by the Irish government.

Party political communication for the 1989 District Council elections highlighted a more confident and progressive UUP as evidenced in the posters 'The Party For The 90's' (PPO0604) and 'Into The Future: Vote Ulster Unionist' (PPO0605). In the same year, Jim Nicholson took over the reins in the European parliament from John Taylor who retired as MEP after ten years (1979-89), a position that Nicholson has kept since.

Moving into the early 90's, a UUP recruitment poster of the time reflected the now common party line and featured the image of the flag of the UUP – an outline of Northern Ireland emblazoned with the Union Jack accompanied with the slogan 'Join the Ulster Unionist Party. It Serves Ulster. It Serves You. It Maintains the Union' (PPO0694).

By the 1992 Westminster general election the party had developed yet another slogan: 'Ulster Unionist: The People's Choice' incorporating a crowd of people carrying posters with the letters UU or the red hand symbol of Ulster (PPO0599). A

year later, in the 1993 District Council elections, the attendant message produced was simple: 'Accountable Democracy: Vote Ulster Unionist.' (PPO0601)

Three years later, the photograph of a smiling David Trimble was at the forefront of communication material designed for the Northern Ireland Forum/Entry to Negotiations elections of May 1996. Party-wide communication for the same elections used the traditional image of the family group, entitled 'Building Your Future Within The Union' (PPO0677) and also a recurrent message of 'The Union Through Strength' (PPO0697).

One year before the Good Friday Agreement was signed (in the 1997 Westminster and District Council elections) the image of a Union Jack arrow with the slogan 'Secure the Union, Build Your Future' was produced (PPO0686). The UUP's intention was to convey the impression of a progressive party with the Union at the core of its future.

### **(iii) Democratic Unionist Party**

Sometimes referred to as the Ulster Democratic Unionist Party, the DUP was formed in September 1971 by Ian Paisley and Desmond Boal as a successor to the Protestant Unionist Party that vehemently opposed the UUP prime minister, Terence O'Neill's reformist unionism. The party set out to be immovable on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland but progressive on social or 'bread and butter' issues (Jackson, 1998). At its formation, the DUP claimed that it would be right wing on constitutional issues but left wing on social policies, an appeal designed especially for working class loyalists. In practice, the emphasis of the party has been firmly against co-operation with the Catholic Republic of Ireland, and against, or at least reluctant to, share power with nationalists, while advocating the Westminster majority-rule model of government. Sharing the core beliefs of the UUP, the DUP is regarded as the advocate of a more hard-line unionism. This includes persistent demands for more vigorous action against the IRA and a refusal to deal with Sinn Féin, except where they believe it to be unavoidable at local council level.

The party grew rapidly in the 70's, in the context of a divided Ulster unionism and high levels of communal violence 'on the ground' in Northern Ireland. Inextricably opposed to the Sunningdale Agreement, Ian Paisley identified himself closely with the Ulster Workers' Council strike of May 1974 - the organisation that effectively brought the Sunningdale Agreement to its knees. The party was also a prominent partner in the Unionist alliance (the UUUC – the United Ulster Unionist Council) that emerged in opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. By 1993, the

hitherto civilised relationship the DUP had with the UUP began to show widening cracks with the two parties taking markedly different approaches to the Downing Street Declaration (Dec. 1993) - the DUP being more hostile than its rival.

Over the years, the party's command over a section of the unionist electorate has remained formidable with a local electoral asset in Ian Paisley, one of the most prominent individuals in Northern Ireland's political life over the last thirty-five years. First elected to Stormont as a Protestant Unionist in 1970, Paisley won the Westminster seat of North Antrim in the same year and has held it since. In addition, he was Northern Ireland's first elected MEP in 1979, and has topped the poll in every Northern Ireland election to the European parliament since. Paisley has consistently polled more highly and across a wider base than other DUP candidates, the party ultimately benefiting from a relationship with his Free Presbyterian Church that has provided a core of dedicated party activists. These advantages have allowed the DUP, like earlier populist loyalist movements, to cultivate two constituencies neglected by mainstream unionism - the urban working classes and rural evangelicals (Ibid.).

## DUP Public Relations and Communications Developments

Early DUP communications (as it was for all the political parties in Northern Ireland) during the 70's and early 80's were a bit of a 'hit and miss' or hap hazardous affair (with the possible exception of Sinn Féin). When a subject or contemporary issue arose, it was the media who chased parties or individual party members. There were infrequent press conferences held by the political parties' themselves.

As professionalism started to creep into the control and management of news (filtering in from US election campaigns) the DUP began to sit up and take notice of the importance of the media in getting their party message across. Yet, it was not until the mid-80s that the DUP first designated the role of 'press officer' within their organisation and at that time it was not a full-time position.<sup>11</sup> Party members like Sammy Wilson and Ian Paisley Jnr. (to name the two most prominent) were designated press officers during this period and this loose arrangement continued into the 90's. However, Wilson and Paisley Jnr. acted only if and when they were required, their roles encompassing the arrangement of basics for press conferences, writing press releases or liaising with the media about a future event (Ibid.).

It was not until 1996, when the political scene began to 'step up a gear' with the talks-process running parallel with the Northern Ireland Forum that it became more obvious to the party that they needed to have better liaison, control and interface more professionally with the media in general. In line with their newfound

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with St.Clair McAllister, DUP Director of Communications, 1 November 2001.



thinking, the party officers decided to create a new post, that of Director of Communications, although the position was not filled until 1998 (Ibid.). The post demanded someone who would be more than a press officer, someone who would take charge of all internal and external communications and become involved as a party officer in the decision-making process. The DUP's St Clair McAllister outlines the qualities required (in a Northern Ireland context) for the job and the reasons he was chosen as the party's first Director of Communications:

They were looking for someone who obviously had the political background, who had say a business background, and who was used to public speaking, and who had had an interface with the media in the past. We first of all thought about trawling generally outside the party as well as inside. It became very obvious, that although some people maybe had great talents in PR, etc., they were very weak on the political front. That marriage is difficult and I think it is still difficult to get the right people into any particular political party. Yes, you're there to help to sell a message, just as Heinz Baked Beans have someone to sell a message. But there's a difference because of the politics, the understanding of the nature and the background of where you are and where you want to be. From that point of view after a lot of thinking about it, researching, talking to people, it was suggested that although I was one of the people looking for this person, that I myself was the ideal person for the job... For the sake of the party and for the sake of the general good, I made the decision. I felt strong convictions about this in every sense, that this was the best way to go forward, for myself, for the party, and eventually, obviously for the country (Ibid.).

The DUP's ability to communicate as a political party (in a professional sense) was greatly enhanced by the introduction of McAllister. As the party's first real 'spin-doctor', he would oversee a radical shift in party communications. However, as Director of Communications he didn't have much time for those who associated his

newly appointed role with the pejorative connotations associated with the title ‘spin-doctor’:

I do not like the term that’s used for trackers of communications, I think it’s worthwhile saying; I do not like the term spin-doctors, although I believe there are spin-doctors. They do exist out there in the real world, but although it has been applied to me several times, I’ve always resisted that because it implies you’re taking something and bending it and shaping it into what suits you. We have never been a party to do that. If you look at our party ethos, it would tell you that we are a party who says it how it is and are more concerned about getting the truth out. At the end of the day that is what will eventually take people into new particular relationships - being honest with themselves and with others (Ibid.).

All political parties and their political spokespersons in Northern Ireland seem to believe that they alone have a monopoly on ‘the truth’ (which shall be discussed later). One thing that remains true, however, is that in the run-up to the Good Friday Agreement, the DUP (with the inclusion of McAllister) was now better positioned than at any time in its history to ‘sell’ their own particular reading of the ‘peace process’ and ensuing events. The timing of his introduction coincided with a growing membership and potential ‘target audiences’ that included sceptical and disaffected Ulster Unionists – figures who were none too pleased with the so-called ‘peace process’.

## DUP Political Posters

Pre-DUP communication material reflected Ian Paisley (Moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster) in typically defiant mood (PA0418) and incorporated the unionist slogan from the early twentieth century Home Rule crisis ‘For God and Ulster’, co-opted by Paisley in the late 60’s as leader of the Protestant Unionist Party. The simple yet powerful conjunction of religion and politics has consistently been the mainstay of Paisleyism, and this poster illustrated Paisley dressed in clerical attire set against the backdrop of a Union Jack flag.

A poster produced for the 1969 Stormont election, sometimes referred to as the ‘Ulster at the Crossroads’ election, displayed a photograph of Paisley accompanied with the message ‘Vote Protestant Unionist. Remember 1690, Keep Ulster Free’ (PPO3222). ‘Remember 1690’ is the loyalist slogan used to celebrate Protestant King William III’s defeat over Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne.

In the DUP’s formative years of the early 70s, political communication material featured the party catchphrase ‘Service Ever – Surrender Never’ (PPO0726) and attacked the Ulster Unionists for being less sound on the Union than the DUP – ‘The Unionist Party that has earned your Trust!’ (PPO0708) A DUP plaque from this period employed the symbol of a burning sword and a six-pointed star (representing the six counties) with the Ulster symbol of a red hand in the middle (PA0290). The DUP used this symbol until the late 90’s when it was replaced by a red lion’s head. Party badges from the early 70’s incorporated the saying ‘6 into 26 won’t go’ – a reference to the counties of Ireland - and yet another loyalist catchphrase harking

back to the 'good old days' of the Home Rule crisis –'Ulster will fight and Ulster will be right.'

In 1971, the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of Northern Ireland and the year the DUP was formed, the state's very existence came under threat. Paisley chaired the Ulster Constitution Defence Committee (UCDC) espousing a now typical apocalyptic rhetoric that became his mainstay throughout his tenure as leader. One UCDC loyalist demonstration poster (PPO0702) referred to the common theme of resistance: 'YOUR glorious opportunity to demonstrate your determination to resist all Ulster's enemies & to save the province from all Lundies [traitors] in church and state... Give the IRA your answer... No Surrender... God Save the Queen.'

Parallels exist from this period that link both past and present such as those surrounding the issue of police reform. A 1971 DUP poster (PPO0767) reprinted from the *Daily Mirror* edition of 21 August 1969 headlined with 'Who told the Truth, Faulkner or Paisley?' and concerned the abolition of the Ulster Special Constabulary (the USC or B-Specials). While the Ulster Unionist leader and prime minister of Northern Ireland, Brian Faulkner, had denied there would be any major changes to the USC, Paisley had taken an opposing view. On 21 August the Hunt inquiry was established to examine the structure of the RUC and USC, subsequently finding in favour of the disbanding of the USC, to be replaced by the Ulster Defence Regiment. Over a quarter of a century later, history was virtually repeated (as will be discussed later). The aforementioned poster also had a recruitment dimension '

Join the Ulster Democratic Unionist Party and help save your Ulster heritage! No Compromise... No Surrender.'

Another enduring theme or slogan produced by the DUP in the early 70's was 'Save the Union' which appeared in a 1973 poster (PPO0699) featuring photographs of guns and bombs under the heading 'Their Weapons' set against the image of a vote and ballot box under the heading 'Our Weapons.'

In the first direct election to the European parliament in June 1979, Paisley topped the poll and became Northern Ireland's first MEP. Anti-European integrationist attitudes were prevalent from the outset as evidenced in the DUP election campaign literature, characterised by an attack on the then European Economic Community (EEC) and on what Paisley saw as the strong Catholic influence within it. One poster (PPO0714) claimed 'Ulster desperately needs a strong voice in the European Assembly to expose the many scandals of the EEC... So if you want a representative who will... Faithfully put Ulster first... Then vote for the Unionist you can trust.'

The theme of trust, truth and honesty has consistently pervaded a great deal of DUP political communication material over the decades and although the slogan 'Vote for the unionist you can trust' appeared on many 70's election posters it was modified and incorporated into communication material in subsequent years.

In 1981, as increasing political contact continued between the British and Irish governments, Paisley and other DUP leaders signed a covenant at Belfast City Hall.

The document was modelled on the Ulster Covenant of 1912 signed by over 500,000 men and women who pledged resistance to Irish Home Rule by any means necessary. During '81, Paisley also conducted a series of rallies named 'The Carson Trail' after his historical hero, the oratorical unionist and anti-Home Rule leader Edward Carson.

Amidst the tension of the hunger strikes of the same year, a DUP poster (PPO0713) for the District Council elections incorporated a photograph of Fianna Fáil leader and Irish Táoiseach Charles Haughey – highlighting unionist fears and apprehension over Dublin's intentions. The photograph was accompanied with the message 'Haughey is watching and waiting. Give him your answer: Vote DUP.'

Another theme or message to gain prominence on electoral material produced by the DUP was developed in the early 80's: 'Let's Get Back to the Stormont Way. Vote Democratic Unionist –DUP' or 'Let's make it the Stormont Way' (PPO0706 & PPO0760 respectively). These were inferences to the golden days of majority rule in a 'Protestant parliament for a Protestant people' (cited in Taylor, 1998, p.19).

In the 1983 Westminster general election campaign, the DUP produced a poster (PPO0718) featuring the Union Jack and Northern Ireland flags as the sleeves in a contractual handshake that also included the Houses of Parliament in London and Parliament Buildings at Stormont. The accompanying DUP slogan was 'This we will maintain (the link with Britain)... This we will Retain (Northern Ireland).' Additional posters from this period included the party's commitment to social issues: 'On the ground working for you. Vote DUP.' (PPO0725)

By May 1984, constitutional nationalist parties from both sides of the border concluded a New Ireland Forum report stating that 'the desire of nationalists is for a united Ireland in the form of a sovereign, independent Irish state.'<sup>12</sup> Other options in the report included a federal or confederal state or joint authority. The DUP's view on each of these options was simple, as spelled out by a poster produced at the time: 'ULSTER IS BRITISH' (PPO0717).

In the same year's European elections, the DUP claimed 'The EEC puts your pound in Dublin's pocket' and Paisley was successfully returned as a sitting MEP (PPO0731). During this particular term at Strasbourg (in October 1988) Paisley interrupted a speech by the Pope in the European parliament when he held up a written placard with the message 'John Paul II Antichrist.' As he was physically restrained and escorted from the chamber he shouted several times 'I renounce you as the antichrist.' These typical Paisley outbursts certainly did not diminish his popularity in unionist circles back home, as he consistently topped the Northern Ireland poll in every European parliamentary election held since.

At the launch of the DUP's 1985 manifesto, Paisley produced four sledge hammers each carrying the words 'Smash Sinn Féin ' and posters for the District Council elections included the message 'DUP says Smash the IRA and ban Sinn Féin ' (PPO0700a). Their manifesto promised to 'challenge, confront and confound Sinn Féin whenever they dared raise their heads.' Interestingly, a not too dissimilar form of these very words were used by David Trimble on entering into the multi-party negotiations in September 1997 (with Sinn Féin ) which ultimately led to the Good

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<sup>12</sup> New Ireland Forum, May 1984, Stationery Office, Dublin

Friday Agreement. On the other hand, the DUP reneged on previous pledges by walking away from the 1997-8 negotiations/talks process and they certainly did not 'challenge, confront and confound Sinn Féin whenever they dared raise their heads.' Other communication material for the District Council elections of 1985 was less aggressive in tone as in 'Vote DUP. You can do no better' (PPO0727).

In the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of November 1985, a variety of DUP posters gained prominence particularly in the period surrounding the January 1986 by-elections, which occurred because all Unionist MPs resigned in protest at the signing of the Agreement. 'Keep Ulster British... Vote Democratic Unionist – Ulster Says No' (PPO0737) and 'No Dublin Rule' (PPO0721) were the most widely used messages emanating from the party during this wayward time for loyalists and unionists alike. One DUP poster of the period in question (PPO0771) is reflective of the genuine mood in the unionist community – a depiction of the Red hand of Ulster giving a victory sign as it tramples the Irish tricolour emblazoned with the initials IRA. The poster also features the slogans 'Ulster Says No' and 'No Surrender' and incorporates the Union Jack and Northern Ireland flags.

Throughout its relatively short political history, the DUP has always been keen to support the security forces, an important target audience with potential voters in their ranks. In 1989, they produced a poster entitled 'Hands Off The UDR' (PPO0738) as part of an ongoing campaign opposing changes to the Ulster Defence Regiment. In 1991, the British government announced that the UDR would merge with the Royal Irish Rangers to form the Royal Irish Regiment (RIR). The government presented the amalgamation as part of an overall review of security



needs in the post-Cold War era. Yet, unionists and loyalists were highly suspicious of this and believed it to be a smokescreen, the changes simply being what they believed to be a sop to nationalists. In July 1992, the newly created RIR was formally established.

1990's political posters reiterated the now common DUP message: 'Stop Dublin Interference' (PPO3001). Similarly, another poster stated: 'We will not have Dublin Rule. For God and Ulster' and was accompanied by a photograph of Paisley in a ubiquitous pose reminiscent of Edward Carson - Northern Ireland symbols and paraphernalia adorned the background.

In April 1993, as the peace process continued to gather momentum, Secretary of State Patrick Mayhew, enraged unionists by implying that Britain was 'neutral' in relation to Northern Ireland. In the May District Council elections a backlash was evident in DUP communication: 'Unionists alienated – Answer back! Get Mad With Mayhew: Vote DUP' (PPO0730). In December of the same year, in the aftermath of the Downing Street Declaration, the poster: 'Major's Treachery. Resist Dublin Rule' (PPO0734) was accompanied with the visual image of a knife stabbing a Union Jack emblazoned map of Northern Ireland. Rejected by the DUP, the joint declaration by the two prime ministers, John Major and Albert Reynolds, formed one of the key building blocks upon which the Good Friday Agreement was built.

An additional 'block' - the 'Frameworks for the Future' documents of February 1995, were once again completely rejected by the DUP who regarded them as too

pro-nationalist. Attending a United Ulster Loyalist Rally in May 1995, the DUP's Gregory Campbell was one of two main speakers, the other being Glen Barr, the leader of the Ulster Workers Council that brought down the Sunningdale Agreement in 1974. The poster advertised to rally support for the event claimed that 'PEOPLE POWER wrecked the Sunningdale Agreement in 1974 – That same power can prevent the Framework Document's united Ireland proposals being implemented... The Framework Document presents Ulster Protestants with a choice – A united Ireland or self-determination.' It continued 'Reject the Framework Document! Say, "Yes" to self-determination and democracy!' (PPO1164).

One year later, the peace process began to gather momentum with the 1996 Northern Ireland Forum/Entry to Political Negotiations elections where the DUP's message to voters was simple 'Give Ian Paisley's Team Your Vote. DUP – The Team you can Trust' (PPO0733). This seemingly innocuous message caused an enormous controversy at the time as a DUP request to the Northern Ireland Electoral Office for Ian Paisley to use his own name on the ballot paper was granted. Legislation only allowed for the recording of party names on the ballot paper, however, the DUP's intentional gamble of boosting its vote by emphasising Paisley in the election (as this had benefited the party in European elections) was passed and the request stood.

In the Westminster general election campaign of 1997, the DUP slogan of 'This we will maintain' was positioned alongside a Union Jack flag (PPO0669). In the same year (and only 11 months before the Good Friday Agreement was signed) a card

and accompanying posters were produced by the DUP featuring Paisley with the now recurrent rhetoric of 'not an inch to Dublin' (PA0022).

#### **(iv) Sinn Féin**

Sinn Féin , translated from Irish as ‘We Ourselves’ or ‘Ourselves Alone’, dates its all-island origins from inception in 1905 and later from the independence movement that gathered momentum at the end of World War I in 1918. Linked to the Provisional IRA, the ‘modern’ Sinn Féin (that is, after the 1970 split) followed a traditional policy of abstentionism in politics until after the hunger strikes of the early 1980s. Since then it has gained considerable electoral support, predominantly from republican and nationalist working class and younger voters. Over the years, the party has enjoyed considerable fund raising success in the US. Historically, all of the unionist parties in Northern Ireland have either refused, or been generally reluctant to co-operate with Sinn Féin; their justification for non-co-operation intimately linked to an absence in more recent years of total decommissioning of paramilitary weapons by the IRA (Northern Ireland Yearbook, 2003).

## Sinn Féin Public Relations and Communications Developments

Sinn Féin in its early modern guise (that is, following the emergence of Provisional Sinn Féin in 1970) engaged in a variety of communication activities such as the issuing of statements and party pamphleteering, yet their efforts were largely simplistic and disorganised (Curtis1984). When republican veteran Jimmy Steele opened their first press office in Belfast, it was described by Curtis as ‘a very loose arrangement, with no fixed headquarters or formal meetings. It put out statements to the media, which were delivered by hand to the various offices in the city (Ibid. p.263). Essentially, (in the early 70’s) the republican movement primarily centred on the IRA and its military actions, while any form of political action and communication was largely seen as inconsequential, their political wing was literally perceived as a ‘poor second cousin to the IRA’ (Adams 1986, p.150).

By 1974, the first concerted attempts to empower and improve the press office emerged within the organisation with a move to premises off the Falls Road in West Belfast where they gained access to a telex machine for the first time, rented from the Post Office (Curtis 1984). The press office now began to play an important and growing role within the movement, also evidenced in ’74 by the publication of a ‘Manual of Publicity’ (Sinn Féin 1974) that detailed a complex communications strategy. Indeed, the manual highlighted the fact that key personnel within the organisation were embarking upon a more sophisticated approach to communication. In stark contrast to the focus placed at the time on military strategy, the manual highlighted the importance of securing and increasing the

support of the republican community by developing their modes of political communication:

The presence and activity of a Sinn Féin cumann should be obvious to all, both to those who live in its area of operation and to those who pass through it. This can only be achieved by constant publicity. We must be at it all the time, on all occasions and when every opportunity presents itself. True, there is plenty of other work to be done. But without constant and effective publicity most of it will not reap the rewards it should deserve. An active cumann without an active publicity programme does not make sense (Ibid. p.33).

Importantly, it could only be an informed public who could make a 'favourable choice' that could ultimately determine the future political success of Sinn Féin:

The essential point is to realise that a lot of the results of activities in almost any sphere will be lost if the public is not fully informed about them. Members of the public may or may not be won to your points of view as a result of your actions. But if they are not informed of what you are doing, of what you believe, or where you stand on issues that affect them, they cannot be expected to make a favourable choice (Ibid. p.1).

However, during this period, the party's attempts to communicate to its various publics were primarily based upon information and education in the hope of mobilising support for the armed struggle. Yet, after the IRA ceasefire of 1975 and the subsequent release of a group of young northerners from the internment camps (including Gerry Adams), some people within the organisation began to question the validity of the movement's on-going military approach - not only in terms of the conflict itself, but also in relation to how the movement communicated itself via its

newspaper (Republican News) to the wider world. The 'new group' who believed in a political solution began to make changes. As one former interneer, Danny Morrison (1985) highlights:

As we came out of jail, we were very keen to put demands upon the editorial staff of Republican News. In a very short period of time we found ourselves assuming editorial control of it, and in 1979 managed to merge with the Dublin-based republican paper An Phoblacht (Ibid. pp 84-85).

By the late 70's, a growing politicisation within the organisation led to the development of a 'twin-track' approach whereby, as Bean (1994) suggests: 'as part of the revolutionary strategy to mobilise the masses, elections and "politics" would be useful platforms and rallying points whilst the armed struggle would act as a form of armed propaganda' (1994, p.7).

Sinn Féin thus began a process of departing from what was essentially reactionary work to pre-emptive 'agitational' work, effectively assuming a more proactive stance in relation to its communication output that included systematic efforts to develop relationships with journalists and the media in general. As Tom Hartley, who worked as a Sinn Féin publicist at the time explains, the Republican press centre:

...began to be a focus for the press and for foreign support groups, supplanting the previous informal network. The telex machine was put to increasing use, and became a crucial tool, allowing republicans to convey their version of incidents immediately to the press, and for the first time enabling them to compete seriously with the various British public relations operations (cited in Curtis 1984, p.265).

Consequently, Sinn Féin PR successes (coupled with the failure of the British army and the security forces to defeat the IRA) led the British government to modify its strategy. It introduced a policy of 'criminalisation' whereby the conflict was assumed to be a simple problem of 'law and order' and republicans were judged under the circumstances to be common criminals. As a result, both the British army and security forces conducted raids on republican premises with the aim of disrupting and ideally destroying their communicative operations. Nevertheless, Sinn Féin staff quickly found alternative arrangements and recommenced their activities - demonstrating their skill and resourcefulness in overcoming difficult situations (Ibid.).

As the 70's drew to a close, staff levels at the Republican press centre continually rose as the release of prisoners from the internment camps had resulted in an influx of committed Sinn Féin members. This allowed the party to extend its communicative efforts to include dealing with media enquiries and the production of publicity and information material. In 1981, the organisation created a separate department, the Republican Publications Office, where it was staffed at the time by up to three 'volunteer' workers (Ibid. p.268).

By the early 80's, a number of press and publicity personnel were emerging (later to become key players in the communications development of the party) who included Richard McAuley who became Belfast Head Press Officer in 1980 and Danny Morrison who became National Director of Publicity in 1981. During the hunger strikes and the election of Bobby Sands in 1981 (and also later when Gerry Adams was contesting the Westminster general election in 1983) 'the Press Office on the



Falls Road was open 24 hours a day and Morrison and others slept, worked and lived from it' (cited in Lago, 2000, p.92).

During this period the Republican press centre moved once again to a different location on the Falls Road:

...where it shared the upper floor with the Belfast Sinn Féin office and the prisoners' welfare department, while the ground floor was used as a waiting room for prisoners' relatives and friends awaiting transport to the prisons. The press centre's equipment was limited to a desk, a phone – the bills apparently paid by Republican News – and a telex machine in a tiny room nearby (Curtis 1984, p.272).

In the early 80's, and particularly in the aftermath of the hunger strikes, journalists who covered the Troubles became increasingly more interested in information from throughout Northern Ireland (that is, other than the Falls press office) and began travelling outside Belfast.

One ensuing development was the beginning (to a degree) of decentralisation of republican PR and media relations. On the one hand, this indicated the party's belief that it was necessary to decentralise its operation at both the communicative and the political level in order to serve its localised communities more efficiently.

On the other hand, it was also an acknowledgement of changes in journalistic practices, and meant that party offices throughout the province, such as in Derry, became responsible for dealing with media enquiries regarding their own particular area. However, overall party policy still remained under the control of the Dublin

headquarters - in acknowledgement of the party's ulterior nationalist aims of a free, united Ireland (Tugwell, 1981).

Increasingly, Sinn Féin's political public relations were transforming into proactive and well-developed strategies, which sought to influence the news agenda, challenge the British government and, ideally, change the public perception of republicanism (Adams, 1986). Yet, despite continuing efforts to highlight socio-economic issues such as unemployment and housing, media interest focused primarily on the military activities of the IRA. The failure or the inability of the media to cover any parallel issues, which also affected republicans, essentially meant that the Republican movement was relegated to a crude portrayal as a military organisation with little or no political acumen.

To compound negative media portrayals, organisational problems that impinged upon and undermined the success of its communicative efforts, only seemed to add to the perception that the organisation was too weak, lacked structure and essentially needed to overturn the legacy of the failed republican politics of the 1970's (Ibid.). As Adams suggested:

Sinn Féin's major problem is our failure to date to build an effective organisation after long periods of self-imposed isolation derived from conspiratorial politics as well as censorship, of harassment by the guards and a lack of political understanding (Ibid. p.186).

Such organisational difficulties included the preparation, training and education of Sinn Féin politicians and activists. In comparison to the other main political parties Adams claimed: 'they (middle-class politicians) were taught their politics, methods

of management, public relations work and other skills by experts. We learned ours on the streets, in prison and through a process of self-education' (Ibid. p.154).

As a consequence of a process of internal retrospection, the organisational difficulties that were apparent to Adams (who became President of Sinn Féin in 1983) were addressed, including the development of training and educational programmes for activists and political representatives. The party also countered the negative effects of the long-standing IRA military campaign by developing a more positive discourse that emerged (albeit slowly) and highlighted a more moderate and pluralistic outlook. As Shirlow and McGovern (1998) acknowledged:

Taking possession of the language of peace in order to re-define the meaning of the conflict was central to the new strategy and opened up a new communicative dimension. The adoption of the word 'peace' in 1987 by SF was deliberate and was seen as a means to break out of the containment strategy undertaken by the British and Irish states (Ibid. p.180).

By 1988, the party was continuing to break the shackles of containment imposed upon it by forming the International Publicity and Information Committee (IPIC) to target overseas audiences. However, in an attempt to thwart the republican movement's increasingly successful communicative efforts, the British government introduced a 'Broadcasting Ban' on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October 1988 that prohibited both television and radio from broadcasting direct statements from Sinn Féin and the IRA amongst others. The effect of the ban produced a number of difficulties for the party.

Although it could be adjudged that they had not (up until that point in time) received frequent or favourable media coverage in the first instance, the ban meant that they would essentially have to adapt once again under difficult circumstances. Essentially, they would have to become more focused and innovative about getting their message across to their various publics.

As the 80's drew to a close, three people were working in the Republican press centre alongside Richard McAuley (who in the intervening years had become the Director of Publicity for the Six Counties) and Danny Morrison as National Director of Publicity. Similar growth patterns were occurring in Dublin, which also had up to three people working in their press office (Miller, 1994).

Crucial to the party at this time was their strategy of internationalising the struggle and extending the republican message beyond Ireland and Britain, in particular to the United States where they could appeal to an influential Irish-American audience.

By 1990, Gerry Adams highlighted:

It is also worth mentioning our efforts to upgrade our own international work. Sinn Féin is, contrary to enemy propaganda, a poor organisation with meagre material and financial resources - two essential requirements of international work. However, we have in conjunction with those involved started to modernise solidarity work in the USA and in Europe, and we are currently reviewing this work in Britain, and, at a slower pace, Australia (cited in Miller 1994, p.113).

On the home front, by 1991, the party's new National Director of Publicity, Rita O'Hare (who replaced Danny Morrison) began to highlight the many issues that faced the party including those of a socio-economic nature:

Obviously our first and main task is to try to explain to people what Sinn Féin is about, what our aims are, what our policies are and that covers all aspects – we aren't constantly engaged in questions around the war in the North, our job is disseminating information about what our policy is on housing, on unemployment, emigration, everything that affects people's lives. So the range is very wide, but of course we'd be concerned to try to give people information, to answer some of the more scurrilous allegations that are made against republicans, to tell people what is actually happening (Troops Out 1991, p.13).

Although it was a difficult task to communicate the republican message whilst the Broadcasting Ban remained in place, Sinn Féin were optimistic about the future, as is evident by O'Hare's vision for republicans (hinting at the importance of communication in its achievement):

I want that the past can be reflected in our future, to move us on, to be part of our future plans, but I also want publicity to reflect that republicans aren't people who are always looking back on what's happened in the past. I also think we have a huge duty to reach out to the other people in this island so I would want to be able to reflect that in our public utterances and our publications. We are looking forward to the future and I'm going to be reflecting that in everything that I'm doing – what we want for the future, what we want in Ireland, how we want to live (Ibid. p.15).

By 1993, Sinn Féin political communication was characterised by a growing discourse that incorporated notions of a peaceful future, whilst at the same time

acknowledging the difficulties and challenges that the transition from the armed struggle to politics held for republicans of all hues (Adams, 1995).

In 1994, after the IRA announced a ceasefire and the Broadcasting Ban was lifted, further changes on how the 'enemy' was described also became evident, most notably in *An Phoblacht/Republican News* where the descriptions of the RUC were no longer as negative and discriminating as the formerly used 'crown forces', 'sectarian bullies' or 'dupes' (cited in Shirlow and Mc Govern 1998, p.183). As for their traditional political foes – the Unionists – Shirlow and McGovern gave an insight into the thinking of one republican: 'the movement has got to talk to the others and we have to give people, like Unionists, a more sympathetic understanding. It's hard to swallow but we had to depict our enemies in a clearer and more positive light' (Ibid.). To reiterate this point, Lago (2000) highlights that one journalist noted that republican language had become increasingly more pluralist, conciliatory and sophisticated, essentially reflecting the changes in Sinn Féin's communicative policies, and more importantly, in the politics and strategies of the movement as a whole.

After a breakdown of the IRA's ceasefire in February 1996 and its reinstatement in July 1997, Sinn Féin entered political negotiations in September 1997. By 1998, as Good Friday approached, the party's communicative apparatus included three main offices in Ireland (Dublin, Belfast and Derry) and three offices abroad (New York, Washington and Brussels) - all dealing with media relations and garnering support for the republican vision of a future united Ireland. The offices in the US targeted

financially and politically influential Irish-Americans while the office in Brussels attempted to develop contacts throughout continental Europe.

In Ireland, although there was a degree of decentralisation in terms of the work carried out (including issues deemed important or pertinent to local offices) the overriding policy and major communications campaigns remained within the remit of Dublin Headquarters. In the Belfast press office, according to Lago (Ibid.), there were two full-time staff and a number of part-time or occasional helpers, yet it was unclear whether they were paid or voluntary workers. It was observed that although the press office was primarily responsible for issuing press releases, it also assisted many journalists with their enquiries. Indeed by facilitating the search and retrieval of material relevant to journalists' stories, they were (in the process) portraying Sinn Féin as a helpful and efficient party. One press officer, Donncha O' Hara, (whom Lago interviewed), suggested that increasingly, journalists were contacting them, explaining that they were intending to run a story on a particular topic and requesting information and contacts that could be relevant (Ibid. p.100). Lago concluded that this implied a new role for the republican press office where, upon request, it was able to influence the content of news by carefully selecting which information, opinions and contacts were passed on to journalists (Ibid.). However, it is questionable whether this was a 'new role', as communications personnel like Richard McAuley and Rita O'Hare would have been well-versed in media management techniques as they had been influencing the content of news for a number of years prior to 1998. More importantly, Lago's analysis highlighted that the media was by 1998, growing in their confidence and trust in Sinn Féin (Ibid.).

In addition to financial resources, a significant organisational resource had been addressed (essentially overcoming what Adams (1986) saw as the lack of training of its officers and politicians) - the press office now provided organised training and advice to any party worker who would be dealing with the media. This was conducted through the organisation of weekend media-training courses, where topics such as 'media relations', 'how to influence the media' and 'interview techniques' were explored (Lago 2000, p.102). Also, (only six months before the signing of the Agreement) they were even training its 'younger generation' in PR and media relations via Sinn Féin Youth's first ever Winter School and Conference. One poster highlighted workshops in: Mural painting, computer aided design, press and publicity skills, organisational skills, stencil/banner making, and screen-printing (PPO0282).

As Good Friday 1998 approached, Rita O' Hare was National Director of Publicity and Jim Gibney was the head of Sinn Féin's Belfast press office, however it was Richard McAuley working as Gerry Adams' Press Secretary who was regarded as 'Sinn Féin 's press supremo' (Ibid.).

All seemed strong on the communications personnel front with a coterie of individuals adept at media relations and 'political persuasion' or more generally political public relations. On the financial front (and thus their potential to channel money into communications) journalists alluded to huge economic resources hailing from America whilst the party would generally fob them off as over-zealous claims. Miller (1994) has suggested that the yearly budget for the Belfast press operation in the early 90's was around £7000, with fax and phone bills ranging from £400 to



£800 per quarter and other resources such as paper, approximately £100 a month.

Richard McAuley told Miller that:

If they're [the press officers are] really lucky and the party's feeling generous, then they might get 50p for their lunch, seriously. There would be a very small allocation of money set aside every week just for milk and tea bags and lunches and literally you're talking a tenner. Outside that, any other money that's spent on the office is spent on equipment, either in terms of phone bills or buying computer disks (1994, p.133).

However, Miller's interview with Mc Auley took place before Bill Clinton granted a visa to Gerry Adams in the pre-1994 ceasefire period. Essentially from early '94 until Good Friday 1998 the party's fundraising capabilities increased exponentially. Since 1994, journalists like Martin Fletcher, the Belfast correspondent for the *Times*, have repeatedly doubted Sinn Féin's claimed poverty, suggesting that their resources are extensive and unsurprisingly primarily come from donations from the USA:

Per capita, they are probably one of the richest parties, certainly in Britain if not in Europe. Northern Ireland has the population of the size of Hampshire, 1.6 million people, a million dollars goes an awful long way. And on top of that, most of the party workers work for nothing, or very small stipend... All the expenses they receive during the Stormont Talks, and they got, I don't know, £100 a day per negotiator – all that went to the party. I don't think they can argue that they are poor (cited in Lago 2000, p.102).

To add to Fletcher's opinion, an article published in the *Financial Times* suggested that the party had raised £595,000 in the United States over a two-year period (Ibid.). Indeed, writing in the American Newspaper, *The Irish Voice*, Gerry Adams

himself refers to a fund-raising dinner in New York's Plaza Hotel attended by more than 400 people, each of whom paid over \$1000, totalling more than £250,000 in one single event (Ibid. p.103).

It is difficult to determine Sinn Féin's financial situation and how much they have invested in communications. Lago (2000) nevertheless correctly suggests that the increase in the quantity and quality of publicity material by the party reflected enhanced economic resources:

Even if technological development now means that with fewer resources and facilities, more professional and sophisticated material can be produced, its installation and maintenance still demands some initial financial investment (Ibid.).

While it may remain difficult to conclusively determine the party's pre-Agreement financial resources, what remains less difficult to determine is that by 1998, in terms of its communicative resources, Sinn Féin was the one party who stood 'head and shoulders' above all others on Northern Ireland's political stage. For their ubiquitous rivals in both traditions it was high time to take stock of their own flawed communications structures and lack of personnel; to acknowledge Sinn Féin's communications success story (in the Northern Ireland context) and try to emulate the party in future attempts to 'effectively' communicate their own positions.

## Sinn Féin Political Posters:

An analysis of Sinn Féin political posters from 1970 to 1998 lends credence to the main communications personnel and political public relations developments aforementioned, but is also insightful in that it illuminates further the process of change that Sinn Féin underwent over three decades.

The sheer quantity of available Sinn Féin posters has meant that of the hundreds available, only a select few or the most relevant are highlighted below. They are divided up into three sections – the 70's, the 80's and the 90's.

### THE 70's

The 70's party political posters were generally simplistic and symptomatic of a somewhat 'schizophrenic' period for Sinn Féin - they contain dual images and discourses on both violence and peace. They also highlight recurrent themes that have their origins in the early 70's yet are observable throughout the following decades, for example, socio-economic strands or anti-security forces/British army campaigns.

The first few years of the 1970's were arguably the most destructive and violent years of the entire Troubles, and therefore, it is not surprising that the party's early posters reflect this period: 'End British Terror', 'Support the Republican Movement' (PPO0181) presents a gory image in which the skull and crossbones, a traditional emblem of death, is saturated in blood from the British Union Jack.

Anti-security forces (and anti-British army) sentiment was widespread in republican communities during the early 70's, as one poster (PPO0925) highlights with a selection of photographs of individuals (presumably Catholics) being attacked by the (presumably Protestant) police force, with the accompanying title 'RUC Out.'

Whilst the image - PA0067 – of a computer mouse-pad is from the 1990's, it is important because it highlights the 'University of Freedom: Long Kesh, est. 1971.' The 'university' refers to the tendency of many republicans to use their time in prison to debate political strategy and ideology, to read widely and write prolifically. It was established in 1971 (when there was a massive influx of Catholic prisoners into Long Kesh) mainly as a result of the introduction of internment without trial on 9<sup>th</sup> August of that same year.

The strong socialist strand or orientation of Republican thinking was also evident in the posters from the 70's, as highlighted by one calling 'For a Socialist Republic.' (PPO0167) The quotation (the poster's two separate quotations should be read as one) asserts - 'In the long run the freedom of a nation is measured by the freedom of its lowest class; every upward step of that class to the possibility of possessing higher things raises the standard of the nation in the scale of civilisation.'

Other socialist posters highlighted: 'The social and Economic Programme of Sinn Féin . Buy it – Read it – and work for a New Ireland' (PPO0416) and also 'Eire Nua. Workers' Co-operative Enterprise will re-distribute wealth' (PPO0296). Adopted by the party in January 1971, the 'Eire Nua' or 'New Ireland' policy

proposed that Ireland should be a federal state based on regional governance for the four historic provinces of Ulster, Munster, Leinster and Connaught. Publicity material of the time included images of scales and doves, usually accompanied by the slogan 'peace with justice'; the 'N' in 'Eire Nua' is seemingly a dove in flight, and one poster portrays an image of hands with broken chains reaching into the air symbolising freedom (PPO0306).

Although the 70's were characterised by extreme violence, it is evident that Sinn Féin's political communication was not totally devoid of peaceful intent, such as: 'Peace with Justice - A British withdrawal, A new Ireland negotiated by the Irish people themselves, A general amnesty for all political prisoners. Support these demands for a just and lasting peace.' (PPO0300) This poster was probably produced around the time of the IRA's 1975 ceasefire and implies that peace without justice is futile. It is interesting that this poster may not have seemed out of place in the 1990's when Sinn Féin used the slogan of 'A New Ireland' to signify a willingness to negotiate with unionists.

However, 1970's posters showed more of a willingness to attack other politicians, political parties and indeed the governmental institutions themselves. The poster 'No Return to Stormont' (PPO0912) was probably promoted during the June 1973 Assembly election campaign with Sinn Féin abstaining and bitterly opposed to any partial settlement. Memories of the hated pre-1972 Stormont government are evoked, and it is John Hume, rather than the SDLP leader of the time, Gerry Fitt, who is viewed as co-conspirator with UUP leader, Brian Faulkner, although from a

unionist perspective, Hume was the more overtly nationalist of the SDLP politicians.

In addition to 'No Return to Stormont' Sinn Féin also called for a boycott of the Northern Ireland Convention elections held in 1975: 'For Ireland's sake, Boycott 6 county elections, We want 32' (PPO0853). The refusal to participate in 'six county' political assemblies continued until the development of the peace process in the 90's.

Of final note, other images from the 70's highlighted how innovative the party could be, such as the development of a Sinn Féin Christmas postal service: 'The Republican Postal Service has been in operation each Christmas since 1975. Every year the motif on the stamps reflects a different aspect of the struggle by the Irish people for National Self-Determination' (PA0262). It was Derry Sinn Féin who established the Christmas postal service, a practice that its Belfast counterpart quickly imitated. This original idea (traditional stamps having the 'Queen's Head' insignia) served the purpose of both highlighting the party's anti-establishment views and questioning the legitimacy of the 'state' in which they lived.

## THE 80's

Moving into the 1980's, Sinn Féin political posters highlighted emerging developments that included - electoral communication (that became prominent for the first time), censorship and the 'Broadcasting Ban', and a new internationalist perspective. Other themes or images, which were prominent in the 70's continued to be visible throughout the 80's, including campaigns on social issues and posters

attacking security forces and the British army. Also, as Sinn Féin became more immersed in the electoral process, the party stepped up its attacks on rival politicians and parties.

Sinn Féin entered the electoral affray (after a hiatus of just over 25 years) in 1981 with the success of hunger striker Bobby Sands who became MP for the constituency of Fermanagh/South Tyrone only weeks before he died.

Standing on the traditional Republican abstentionist platform for the 1982 Northern Ireland Assembly election, the party's key slogan was: 'Break the British connection! Smash Stormont! Vote Sinn Féin - For a new leadership and a principled Irish stand' (PPO0854). It was produced for the West Belfast constituency where Gerry Adams topped the poll and was duly elected.

Another poster produced for the 1982 Assembly elections incorporated the message 'Sinn Féin : One Ireland, one people – the only alternative. Vote No.1 Morrison' (PPO0864). At that time, Danny Morrison was Sinn Féin Director of Publicity. Only a year earlier, Morrison had famously told the party's Ard Fheis 'with an armalite in one hand and a ballot paper in the other, we will take power in Ireland.' (cited in Taylor, 1998, p.282)

A simplistic 'Sinn Féin' poster (PPO0921) was produced for the 1983 Westminster general election featuring the party emblem or logo with the stylised letters 'SF' and the island of Ireland on a white background. For the same election, a poster

incorporating the text: 'Sinn Féin winning seats would worry me – Thatcher. Give her a headache. Vote Adams X' was also developed. Gerry Adams became MP for West Belfast and subsequently party leader in 1983, also the year Alex Maskey became the first member of the party to take a Belfast City Council seat since 1920.

By the 1989 District Council elections, Sinn Féin 's 2.6 per cent lead in terms of first preference votes over its political rival, the SDLP, enabled the party to claim: 'Sinn Féin is the largest Nationalist party in Belfast: Standing up to Loyalism. Setting the pace. For proper representation strengthen your voice. Vote Sinn Féin' (PPO0914).

A ban on the broadcasting of direct statements by representatives of Sinn Féin and a number of other organisations was introduced in October 1988. The ban proved counter-productive and only served to increase foreign interest, particularly in the statements of Sinn Féin . The poster 'End Censorship' (PPO1887) promoted a 1989 march against the ban, which was lifted in September 1994, two weeks after the declaration of the August IRA ceasefire. An additional poster of the time opposing censorship - 'Fight Censorship' (PPO0299) provided a stylistic and visually striking image of red lips on a white background.

The late 80's was a period in which Sinn Féin 's new internationalist perspective emerged, as evident in posters like 'Stop the Zionist Holocaust! Support the Palestinians!' (PPO0440). Here the Middle East is acknowledged - an argument that the discrimination that had been inflicted upon the Jews in the 1930s was now being inflicted by the Jews themselves upon the Palestinians.



On the social front, one of the ways in which Sinn Féin built up its power base in the 80's was to offer advice on welfare issues, as seen in the poster 'Sinn Féin urges you to claim now!' (PPO0467). The increase in 'means-testing' meant that those who were less well off did not claim state benefits that they were entitled to, and as such, Sinn Féin advice would have been invaluable.

The poster 'Keep Your Health Service. Fight The Cuts.' (PPO0373) also highlighted the party's continued interest in social issues, in this case opposing cuts to the health service.

As in 70's posters, throughout the 80's, Sinn Féin posters continued with the theme of outright resistance to the security forces (RUC/UDR) and the British army. The poster 'RUC UFF UVF UDR' (PPO0451), highlights alleged collusion between the security forces and loyalist paramilitary organisations, with the initials RUC and UDR interlined with those of the UFF and UVF.

'The Loyalist mUrDeRers' (PPO0397) also highlights the letters UDR (Ulster Defence Regiment) in the word murderers, and accuses the locally recruited regiment of committing a range of crimes against Catholics. The flag behind which the men are posing, features the Ulster Vanguard symbol. The Vanguard Unionist Party (of which a young David Trimble amongst others aligned himself) had close links to the loyalist paramilitary Ulster Defence Association.

Other Sinn Féin posters specifically related to the British Army presence and highlighted some traditional republican rhetoric. 'The writing on the wall.'

(PPO0376) features a poem from Patrick Galvin entitled, 'Letter to a British Soldier on Irish Soil' that concludes: 'Go home, soldier. Your presence here, Destroys the air, Your smile disfigures us. Go home, soldier; Before we send you home, Dead'.

Whilst not as explicit, 'Discover Occupied Ireland' (PPO0458), parodies a similar tourist board campaign entitled, 'Discover Ireland', the former featuring a series of photographs showing the British army and the RUC in aggressive postures.

Other themes or posters that spilled over from the 70's into the 80's included those that attacked politicians and political parties. 'Don't compromise, vote Sinn Féin' (PPO0903), was an early 80's poster that made an indirect attack on the nationalist credentials of John Hume and the SDLP. The use of a photograph of Hume standing behind a podium with the unionist name 'Londonderry' rather than the nationalist name 'Derry', accused Hume and his party of being 'compromisers.' A similar poster made much the same point: 'Would you vote for the Londonderry branch of the SDLP?' (PPO0909).

Another poster that attacks a politician (PPO2608) comes from the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 when there was an upsurge in the number of Loyalist killings of Catholics, with Sinn Féin attempting to link some of the murders to comments by Ian Paisley who said on 24<sup>th</sup> June 1986:, "I give notice to the NIO, if a Protestant backlash is the only thing that can destroy the Anglo-Irish Agreement then I will not stand in its way."

Of final importance (in 80's posters) evidence of conventional fundraising methods such as 'Sinn Féin Election Fund: National Collection' (PPO1536) and 'Sinn Féin 200 club' (PPO0427), challenges the presumption by some of Sinn Féin's political opponents that it raised all its local funds by illegal means.

## THE 90's

Moving into the 1990's, the most palpable difference in Sinn Féin political communication (as evidenced in the political posters), was the emergence of a more conciliatory rhetoric or discourse – in many respects correlating with the 'peace process' that gained momentum throughout the '90's. An example of this is that the harsh rhetoric evident in anti-security-forces posters of the early '90's was significantly 'toned down' by the end of the decade.

During the '90's, Sinn Féin aligned themselves more closely with Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC), as part of their strategy of internationalising the republican struggle. In addition, the issue of prisoners became a dominating theme of republican posters in the aftermath of the IRA's 1994 ceasefire.

Yet, some themes remained consistent throughout the '70's, 80's and '90's, for example the party continued to campaign on socio-economic issues during the peace process. Not unrelated to the party's 'on-the-ground' work, Sinn Féin's growing electoral confidence also became evident throughout the '90's, whereby the party emerged from what could be best described as a dormant electoral state into a recognised political force.

### *Recruiting members*

Some early 90's posters demonstrated the party's attempts to widen or increase its membership, including: 'Join Sinn Féin' (PPO0317). The quote used in the poster: "Everyone, republican or otherwise, has their own particular part to play. No part is too great or too small, no one is too old or too young to do something" is from the hunger striker Bobby Sands. His portrait, along with examples of his writing or poetry, was not uncommon in republican posters since his death in 1981, in this case his memory was evoked as republican icon or martyr and utilised to recruit members into the party from within the Catholic/nationalist community.

### *Anniversaries*

While on the issue of evoking the past, an analysis of Sinn Féin posters would certainly be incomplete without reference to those posters that commemorate turning points in republican history, for example, anniversaries of the 1916 Easter Rising, Bloody Sunday, internment etc. One 1995 poster (PPO0261) advertised the anti-internment march where Gerry Adams responded to a heckler demanding that the IRA break its eleventh-month ceasefire with the riposte: 'They [the IRA] haven't gone away you know'. This riposte was to be repeated consistently by the party's political opponents for many subsequent years as evidence of continuing IRA activity while 'supposedly' on ceasefire.

### *Social campaigns*

As in the 70's and 80's, social campaigns were also an integral component of party political communication as the 90's progressed, including 'Save the RVH [Royal Victoria Hospital]' (PPO0466) and 'Save our Hospital Services. Support the

workers. Support the health service. Join the fight to save our hospital' (PPO0343). The party fought vigorously against any British government cuts in Northern Ireland's public services, none more so than for the RVH which is situated in Catholic West Belfast and one of the major employers in an area where Sinn Féin has widespread support.

Other social campaigns related to drugs abuse, as the problem became more common in the 90's in both parts of Ireland. The party began to develop a proactive anti-drugs strategy, particularly in urban areas of Belfast and Dublin, as one poster highlights: 'Smash the drug rings' (PPO0398).

### *Internationalising the struggle & the issue of Prisoners*

The internationalisation of the struggle continued throughout the early 90's as evident in the poster 'FREEDOM' (PPO0462). The quote included in the poster is from Nelson Mandela: "Our resort to armed struggle was purely a defensive action... The factor that necessitated the armed struggle still exists today. We have no option but to continue... We have waited too long for freedom." The Republican Movement's close ties with the African National Congress (ANC) are illustrated here with an array of anti-apartheid and Irish Republican symbols and the inclusion of the iconic figures of both Mandela and Bobby Sands. Republicans have always been keen to emphasise their links with the internationally respected Mandela and to draw similarities between the widely popular anti-apartheid campaign and their own struggle for 'freedom'.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1994 IRA ceasefire, the issue of prisoner releases became central to the party's short to medium term strategy. The establishment of Saoirse (a Sinn Féin-related organisation, translated as 'Freedom') on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1994 illustrated their objective: 'Free the Prisoners: A march for Freedom' (PPO0209). Indeed this was Saoirse's first march, organised with the help of Sinn Féin. The lark, viewed by republicans as the bird of freedom, features prominently on many similar posters.

By 1997, Sinn Féin made attempts to compare Mandela (imprisoned for twenty-seven years by the apartheid regime) with Irish Republican prisoners Eddie Butler, Joe O'Connell, Harry Duggan, and Hugh Doherty; 'We have our Nelson Mandela's. 22 years in English prisons. Release them now!' (PPO1247). Known collectively as the 'Balcombe Street Four' or the 'Balcombe Street Gang', the republican prisoners were part of an IRA unit that was highly active in London in the 70's before being captured after a dramatic siege in which the gang took a couple hostage in Balcombe Street.

### ***Censorship and the Broadcasting Ban (1988-94)***

As in the latter years of the 1980's, early 90's posters were replete with messages that protested against the broadcasting ban on Sinn Féin . As the 'peace process' developed however, their political messages became more conciliatory, as evident in the poster 'Oppose Censorship' (PPO1945). It features a nationalist/republican (in the green, white and gold of the Irish Tricolour) gagged by a Union Jack. It is only when he or she is helped to release the gag that he or she can speak in favour of peace (as represented by a dove).

Sinn Féin were quite capable of adapting to some precarious situations and their difficulties surrounding the broadcasting ban (that excluded them from conventional broadcasting media) meant that the party needed to create novel ways or channels through which they could get their political message across. The posters 'Kool SF. Sinn Féin Radio 106 FM.' (PPO0442) and 'Cool SF 106 FM. St. Valentines Day...' (PPO0443) advertise a Sinn Féin pirate radio station, modelled on the local Belfast commercial radio station 'Cool FM'. Spelt sometimes beginning with a 'C' and at other times with a 'K' one of the posters promotes the station, which 'Will be on the air Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> April, with uncensored news and views from West Belfast.'

### *Marketing*

Sinn Féin also began to use their ingenuity by marketing an emerging 'brand' (mostly to the Irish-American audience) that would help bring funds into the party. An image of three mugs (PA0106), from the early to mid 90's, features three different messages that the party was keen to emphasise. On one mug, Gerry Adams posed in front of the conjoined flags of Ireland and the USA. On another, a Robert Ballagh painting produced to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the arrival of British troops in Derry in 1969, said simply 'slan abhaile' (safe home) to the British soldiers and declared that it was 'time for peace.' The final mug featured Gerry Adams shaking the hand of Nelson Mandela.

### *Attacks on the SDLP*

Despite the reduction in political violence from 1994 onwards, a number of disputes between the Orange Order and local Catholic residents over the routes of Protestant marches poisoned community relations. During the 1996 Drumcree dispute the

RUC forcefully removed nationalist protestors from the Garvaghy Road in order to allow Portadown Orangemen to proceed through the nationalist area. The poster '1969 – Nationalist rights did not exist. 1996 – Nationalist rights do not exist' (PPO0267), provided an argument by Sinn Féin that reform within the UK has not improved nationalists' lot. The poster is also a jibe at the constitutional nationalist party, the SDLP and was intended to appeal to SDLP supporters, whose core argument was that their party's constructive engagement with the British State had improved the lot of nationalists since the start of the Troubles. Yet, for Republicans 'nothing had changed' and the approach taken by Hume and his colleagues was a flawed one. Essentially, this type of poster continued in the same vein as 1980's posters that claimed the SDLP were 'compromisers'.

### *Anti-'security forces' and the British Army*

The changes in the republican lexicon from the early to late 90's are most apparent when analysing anti-security forces/RUC/UDR/British army posters. For example, one 1990 poster attacks the UDR for crimes against nationalists - '20 years of death squads: disband the mUrDerRrs' (PPO0452). It also states that: 'While playing a major role within the British war machine the UDR is also engaged in 'unofficial' activities including murder, attempted murder, bombings and supplying weapons and intelligence files on nationalists to loyalist paramilitaries.' The poster portrays the UDR and loyalist paramilitaries as different sides of the same coin while the skull and 'bleeding' Union Jack reflect images used in more extreme early 70's posters.



Yet, by the mid 90's there was a toning down of rhetoric and no mention of 'murderers' or the inclusion of extreme images, as evident in the poster: 'Time to build. Disband the RUC now' (PPO3147). The text of the poster explained that when the force was formed on June 1<sup>st</sup> 1922; 'It was made up of some 2,000 members of its equally infamous predecessor, the RIC, and recruits from the Ulster Volunteer Force. The UVF was formed by loyalists to deny by force of arms the Irish people's democratic wish for Home Rule. Its objective a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people was granted by the British when they imposed partition and announced elections for a parliament at Stormont. Since 1922 the paramilitary RUC has existed to defend that objective. Its members have always been above the rule of law'. Another poster - 'Disband the RUC' (PPO0243) depicts an RUC policeman wearing an Orange sash – implying that the force is inherently sectarian.

Essentially, the disbandment of the RUC has been a key demand from republicans since the IRA's 1994 ceasefire – one equally opposed by unionists – and was one of the major difficulties associated with the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

### ***Sinn Féin Peace / Election Communication***

The most palpable difference in the political posters of the 1990's (as opposed to the previous two decades) was the progressive move away or shift from traditional Republican rhetoric towards a conciliatory discourse - in more or less a direct correlation with the peace process as it gained momentum.

As evidence of this shift, by the early 90's the word 'peace' had become more prominent in party posters, for example: 'Sinn Féin – Public Meeting: “Towards a lasting peace in Ireland” ' (PPO0208). Sinn Féin also launched the document 'Towards a lasting peace in Ireland' in February 1992 and it marked a significant shift in their traditional position, hinting that the move towards a united Ireland could be preceded by interim measures to allay Unionist fears. It also called on the Irish government, Fianna Fáil, and the SDLP to pressurise the British government into making concessions.

This phrase from their policy document was also incorporated into election material, as in 'Towards a lasting peace. Votail Martin Mc Guinness' (PPO0836a&b) produced for the 1992 Westminster general election. In line with the party's peace strategy the poster explained 'We are not asking people to vote for an armed struggle. We are asking you to accept our analysis that a peace process that goes to the heart of the problem – the partition of Ireland – must begin now. An increased vote for Sinn Féin will accelerate that process, and make everyone face a new reality.' The reverse of the poster also highlighted the party's position on a variety of issues including discrimination, housing, jobs, women, the environment and political talks.

By 1993, the growing confidence of a political party 'on the rise' was evident in posters including 'Our city also. Nationalist rights march to Belfast City Hall' (PPO0457). 'Our city also' was a phrase employed by Sinn Féin to indicate its desire for the nationalist and unionist populations to share the traditionally Protestant city of Belfast. This was due in part recognition of the growing

numerical and political strength of Catholics/nationalists/republicans in the city, and part reflection of the way in which Sinn Féin was modifying its traditional Republican rhetoric as the peace process developed. That this was the first ever republican rally to be held outside Belfast City Hall was an indication of how power was shifting in the city, and by the late 90's Sinn Féin had in fact become the largest political party in Belfast.

From January to March 1994, the party publicised hearings to be held in Derry, Dublin, Galway, Cork and Belfast as part of an overall 'Sinn Féin Peace Commission' (PPO0256). As part of a long consultation exercise, it highlighted (amongst other points) that: 'A number of submissions, 85 or 37% believed that Sinn Féin should encourage the IRA to call a unilateral cease-fire; or a cessation of offensive military operations; or initiate a three month cease-fire to enter negotiations' (Sinn Féin, 1994).

Subsequently, the IRA called a ceasefire only a matter of months later on the 31<sup>st</sup> August 1994. Yet, in the ensuing months republicans felt that the British government was stalling over the convening of all-party talks, as highlighted in the poster 'Seize the opportunity for peace' (PPO0249). Shortly after August '94, the British government insisted that republicans declare their ceasefire 'permanent'. Only a matter of months later (although that demand was dropped), a more serious demand would create difficulties for (at least) a further decade: that the IRA, and indeed loyalist paramilitaries, should 'decommission' their weapons.

The insistence of, or importance placed upon, the issue of decommissioning, meant that the transition from conflict to peace would be fraught with difficulty. Although some Sinn Féin political posters highlighted the contradictory notions of change and continuity together, such as 'The Past – Partition and Conflict. The Future – Unity and Peace' (PPO0387), on closer inspection, a break with the past would not be as seamless as the title implied. Textually, the poster appeared to suggest a clear break with the 'past' and a different 'future' (using an photograph of a child) brought about as a result of Sinn Féin's peace strategy. However, the use of the very traditional green, white and gold frame, and large Irish Tricolour, served to reassure their own constituency that fundamentals were not going to be abandoned.

Indeed other posters from the early to mid 90's such as 'Peace Through British Withdrawal' (PPO0255), were evidence that republicans continued at times to use a mix of both traditional and conciliatory rhetoric, asserting that peace could only be achieved in Ireland through a British withdrawal from the North.

By 1995, Sinn Féin were claiming that it had the 'best electorate', was the 'best party', had the 'best members' and called for 'equality for all'; as evident in the text of the poster 'Sinn Féin . Cothromas Do Chach (Equality for All)' (PPO0240).

The aforementioned republican/nationalist confidence-building theme of 'Our city also' was also continued in an invitation and transcript of the first page of Martin McGuinness' speech at the Ulster Hall in November 1995 (PA0278) entitled 'ALL PARTY TALKS NOW! What's Happening in The Peace Process.' In his speech he called for all-party talks to begin as soon as possible, and highlighted that this was

the first occasion that Sinn Féin had held a meeting in the Unionist citadel: 'This hall is particularly synonymous with unionism and everything unionist. We are conscious of this. We have not come here to provoke or antagonise. What we are saying loud and clearly is that this city belongs to all the people who live here, and this building, just like our City Hall, is our Ulster Hall also!'

Although Sinn Féin were showing obvious signs of confidence by the end of 1995, they were also sceptical and seemed at times disillusioned with the whole 'peace process'. The poster 'All-Party Talks Now! 1969 Civil Rights, 1995 National Rights' (PPO0199), encapsulates the mood within republicanism at this juncture. Angered by what they perceived as vacillation by the British government, Sinn Féin demanded all-party talks without preconditions as well as an escalation in the British government's demilitarisation programme. By early 1996, there had still been no talks involving all the political parties in Northern Ireland - undoubtedly a contributory factor in the breakdown of the IRA ceasefire on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1996. The poster includes a declaratory 'No' by John Major, obviously intended to convey the message that the British prime minister of the time favoured unionists (who were famous for saying 'No') over nationalists.

By May 1996, as minds were focused (in the aftermath of the breakdown in the ceasefire) towards a negotiation process, the message on Sinn Féin's voting card (and on many posters) for the Northern Ireland Forum/Entry to Negotiations elections, was simple, 'Votail do Shiochan. Votail Sinn Féin' (PA0282). This Irish language card translates as 'Vote for Peace, Vote Sinn Féin' This election was

called to choose the political parties who would negotiate what would eventually culminate in the Good Friday Agreement.

With thoughts in mind of imminent negotiations about to begin, one Sinn Féin poster of the period entitled 'Stormont District Council' (PPO0228), demonstrated republican contempt for the idea of a new Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont, which they viewed dismissively as a 'District Council.'

Throughout the 1990's, the popular phrase 'a new opportunity for peace' factored into a great deal of party political communication. Employed as early as 1993 for the title of a press conference in Brussels by the then National Party Chairperson of Sinn Féin, Tom Hartley, the slogan later constituted the title of Sinn Féin's election manifesto for the May 1997 Westminster general election - 'Sinn Féin. New opportunity for Peace' (PPO0159). At this juncture, the slogan referred to the belief among Republicans in 1997 that John Major's small majority in government was hampering their efforts to deliver a second IRA ceasefire. Their thinking was that a decisive result for either the Conservatives or Labour would secure an IRA ceasefire and Sinn Féin's entry into all-party talks, thereby giving the peace process additional and much needed momentum. In the event, Sinn Féin's vote, at 16.1%, was the highest since 1955, Tony Blair's Labour party also secured a 179-seat majority, the IRA restored its ceasefire on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1997 and Sinn Féin were allowed to join the 'talks' in September of that year.

In the Republic of Ireland's general election of the same year, Bertie Ahern's Fianna Fáil also triumphed, and the election was important for Sinn Féin for the

reason that Caoimhgin O'Caolain (with his party's support) broke with the republican abstentionist tradition in southern politics by taking his seat in the Dail. The poster 'Sinn Féin '97' (PPO0283) included Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness along with Lucilita Breathnach as they celebrated his victory.

By November '97, only two months after the party had joined the multi-party talks process, one Sinn Féin poster promoted a 'Rally for A UNITED IRELAND. What is happening in the PEACE PROCESS. What is happening at the STORMONT TALKS. If you want to find out, be at THE EUROPA HOTEL at 7pm on Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> November. The rally will be addressed by the SINN FÉIN LEADERSHIP.' (PPO0281). The rally was clearly intended to reassure Sinn Féin supporters that republican principles were not being sacrificed during the course of negotiations, highlighting that the leadership were attempting to keep its grassroots informed and 'on-board'.

Only months before the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, one Sinn Féin poster stated 'No British Veto in the Irish Constitution. Support Articles 2 and 3' (PPO0176). One of the key areas of debate during the talks that led to the Agreement was unionists' objection to the Irish Republic's territorial claim to Northern Ireland – contained in Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution. As such, republicans were opposed to tampering with the Irish Constitution and ultimately to the claim being dropped.

## **(v) The Media**

In 1926, Gerald Beadle was appointed the first station director in Belfast of BBC Northern Ireland (BBC NI). In March of the following year he wrote to his superior, Lord Reith: "I am sure that our position here will be strengthened immensely if we can persuade the Northern Government to look upon us as their mouthpiece."<sup>13</sup>

For over four decades the BBC and significant elements of the media in Northern Ireland kept silent the story of unionist discrimination against their nationalist neighbours. It was only when the 'Troubles' broke out in the late 1960's that the media's inadequacies were finally 'exposed'. According to former BBC political editor, Stephen Grimason, the media in Northern Ireland had acted outrageously and disgracefully in this forty-year period (Interview with author, 20 March, 2003). When a new (and questioning) generation of journalists emerged (Grimason included), they were subsequently berated and adjudged anti-unionist by the old guard:

The relationship with the media here wasn't good particularly on the unionist side for such a long time because there was mistrust. You know, that sort of comment that "There wouldn't have been any trouble here if it hadn't been for the media", that sort of nonsense - "You were either for us or against us". And the problem for the media was that before 1968, significant elements of the media here kept this story quiet, outrageously and disgracefully. So what you

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<sup>13</sup> cited in Rex Cathcart, '2BE consolidates: the early years of the BBC in Northern Ireland; in Bill Rolston and David Miller (eds) War and Words: The Northern Ireland Media Reader, Beyond the Pale Publications, 1996



had happening was people like me coming through in the 70's, early to mid 70's, and we tilted at the old guard. And because of that, the media was seen as anti-unionist because you would expose things that were going on... any criticism of the government was implicitly and explicitly a criticism of unionism. So unionists, unaware that this type of media was now coming at them, thought we were all a bunch of republicans. Within unionist circles, being a journalist was not seen as a good thing to do, it was seen as "You're not one of us" or "You're either for us or against us". There was a big battle that went on in journalism for a number of years through the late 60's and early 70's. It was won obviously by the new generation, it was going to be anyway, but you can see how that affects unionism today, particularly UUC (Ulster Unionist Council) people who are all in their seventies anyway, they didn't like it. There is a chill factor around all of that and the media was seen as something that was dark and unpleasant. Half the population didn't engage with it and if you looked at the nature of where the young journalists were coming from and through [the Catholic/nationalist community], there was a definite balance going one direction and the other, in terms of the community here. Now that's turned around again but for a while, there were quite significant battles fought over all of that (Ibid.).

Grimason highlights that half of the population (that is, unionists) were mistrustful and reluctant to engage with the 'new' media. Yet suspicions increased further to include republicans who also became distrustful of the 'new' media in their own right (particularly after the IRA entered the equation in the early 70's). As British military and political engagement increased, a philosophy of 'terrorism as cause' won the day over 'discrimination as cause' as definer of the conflict in the dominant media and political minds (Butler 1995, p.63).

## **Toeing the establishment line?**

In November 1971, following a speech in which the minister for posts and telegraphs, Christopher Chataway, stated that “as between the IRA and the Ulster government or between the army and the terrorists” the media “were not required to strike a balance” (cited in Miller, 1994, p.28), BBC Chairman, Lord Hill wrote to the Northern Ireland Secretary, Reginald Maudling: “between the British Army and the gunmen, the BBC is not and cannot be impartial” (cited in Smith, 1996, p.31). As for the Independent Television Authority, Lord Aylestone maintained: “as far as I am concerned, Britain is at war with the IRA in Ulster and the IRA will get no more coverage than the Nazis would have done in the last war” (cited in Miller 1994, p.34).

Far from safeguarding the ‘fourth estate’, such partisan viewpoints allowed a severe question mark to be placed over the exercise of journalistic freedom and media independence. Indeed, the whole idea of the noble institution of the British media as the trusted ‘fourth estate’ (wherein notions of balance and impartiality are core elements of its constitution) became seriously undermined by their coverage of Northern Ireland. As Schlesinger et al argued:

The coverage of Northern Irish Affairs in the British media has tended to simplify violent incidents, to avoid historical background, to concentrate on human-interest stories and to rely heavily on official sources. Even during periods of the most intense constitutional activity, such as election campaigns, the story has been pre-eminently one of violence, and of irrational, inexplicable violence at that (1983, p.37).

Curtis also drew similar conclusions to those of Schlesinger et al:-

The record of the British media coverage of Ireland has been far from heroic. Those in positions of power, both in government and in the media, have proved most reluctant to provide a full picture of events in the North or their government, and have made considerable efforts to prevent journalists, dramatists and film-makers from exploring the situation from any angle other than that favoured by the British establishment (1984, p.275).

The British government ensured that the media was 'brought into line' by utilising a number of approaches. These included indirect censorship via pressure, intimidation and the use of the law (Miller, 1994). Yet, the most 'public' approach utilised by the British government was direct censorship under the 1988 Broadcasting Ban. This was introduced to stop short the 'oxygen of publicity' allegedly gained by paramilitary groups and their political wings (most notably the IRA and Sinn Féin).

If none of the above approaches worked to the British government's satisfaction, the use of misinformation, lies and black propaganda were all weapons in the government's armament in its battle for 'hearts and minds'(Ibid.). A former director of information at the British government's Northern Ireland Office, David Gilliland, admitted to having issued "flat denials" on controversial issues during the 1970's and 80's: "I didn't resent the fact that we were blamed for telling lies," as he understood that the government had wanted "to manipulate the media and use it as a weapon in the arsenal" against the paramilitaries. <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> 'British Official Admits Lying', Irish Independent, August 29, 1994

Indeed, Miller's (1994) study examined governmental attempts to control and shape media coverage, establishing that the government and its agencies were collaborating in organised forms of overt and covert propaganda and that they tended to dominate and influence journalists and ultimately the news coverage. It is not that the media were simple 'dupes' of the government and its agencies, but that they failed to adequately question the 'primary definers' or 'official sources'.

It seems reasonable to contend that during the Troubles, the media in Northern Ireland were reluctant to strongly question some of the motives and actions of the British government. On occasion, they simply and subserviently reflected government policy. BBC political correspondent, Martina Purdy, highlights this point in relation to the media's treatment of Sinn Féin, both before and after the August 1994 ceasefire (indeed, two weeks later the British government lifted the Broadcasting Ban):

The media didn't change – government policy changed and the media just tends to reflect what the government of the day is saying. Pre-ceasefires, the republicans and the loyalists were pariahs. But after the ceasefires, government policy changed, so the media had to start reflecting that. If Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams could go to Downing Street for tea and buns, we couldn't turn them away from a studio interview. And also you had to be a little more polite. I think the relationships with the paramilitary parties changed. It became more open and less guarded to the degree that you could be friendlier. They were more accepted. That made it easier for Sinn Féin, for example, to get its messages across and to get access (Interview with author, 6 June 2002).

The recognition that the media tend to reflect government policy and that British journalism has been systematically orientated towards a British government

perspective permeates much of the literature on the media and the conflict in Northern Ireland. To acknowledge a phrase used by Thomas, it became apparent that the British media 'toe the establishment line' (cited in Butler, 1995:122). Yet for Purdy, this phrase is much too simplistic. Whilst the perception remained that the media seemed on occasion to 'toe the establishment line', this phrase discounted the fact that it does have a mind of its own:

The government of the day is very, very powerful in setting the media agenda. Now the media does have a mind of its own, it is not completely taking fishes. But if the Prime Minister says something, it's newsworthy. It's much more newsworthy than when Joe Bloggs says: "It's time to talk". So when the PM is treating Sinn Féin in a certain way and is taking a line that "Yes, we have to do business with these people", it's very hard for the media to resist that because we are not really meant to take sides so we start reflecting government policy. (Interview with author, 6 June, 2002)

Other journalists and editors believed that it was simply wrong to level such an accusation (that is, that they 'toe the establishment line') against the media, such as Mark Devenport, (who, like Purdy, understood the accusation to be too simplistic):

No, no, it is certainly not something that you could put against the media. I mean remember Eamon Mallie broke the story about secret contact between the government and the IRA prior to the Agreement and that was very much against the establishment line. You have people, like Eamon, who is known in the media pack as being very much a 'hands-on guy', who will chip away at things both in press conferences and elsewhere. You know, hopefully the rest of us are working to try to establish what the story is. I think it is simplistic to say the media 'toes the establishment line' but at the same time what happens with information is that there are people who are the gatekeepers of information. They have in their possession a bit of information that you want which will make your story, so at

certain times, stories may come out which appear to reflect the government agenda or the Unionist agenda... I don't think that you can say that 'across the board' there is any one media who act as a morass. Instead, you have got lots of different journalists with different kinds of contacts (Interview with author, 6 June 2002).

The insinuation that the media as a morass, or indeed individual journalists, 'toe the establishment line', is a slur not only on their profession but also on their independence and is often strongly rejected, as Grimason pointed out:

I think people mistake 'toeing the line' for lazy journalism. There are a number of journalists who want to be spoon-fed and I think that is outrageous, I never did. On various occasions I have been accused in previous employ of trying to wreck the peace process and just said: "bugger off". People have gone the whole way to the top of the BBC to try and have me sacked... that's normal, that's what a journalist expects, most journalists have had that. Because I was the BBC's political editor I got the 'toeing the establishment line' nonsense... "Check the track record", that's what I'll say. It's very easy to come up with nice pithy generalisations by people who have never done it. Fine, but come up with the evidence. Don't actually give us vitriol. The polemicist is king in this country. Give us the facts, give us the figures, show us where we got it wrong (Interview with author, 20 March, 2003).

In defence of the profession to which he has devoted a great part of his life, Grimason is adamant that it is more a case of a few bad apples in an otherwise healthy cart:

There will be times when we will have gotten it wrong but it's not because people are toeing the line, it's bad journalism, lazy journalism, mistaken, stupid journalism. It's not because some people are in other peoples' pockets. Don't be daft. I'm not saying that there aren't journalists who are clearly in other peoples' pockets, there are, but you take the broad sweep

of it all, there's a lively, enquiring journalism. Nobody is going to tell me that the *Irish News* takes the establishment line, nobody. They don't always get it right... but they have a go and that is all you can ever ask of a journalist, that they have a go. Independent journalism is important to me because I don't want a supine journalism. Questioning, challenging journalism will always be there and should be there (Ibid.).

While it may be difficult to prove that journalists, editors or other media personnel are 'in other people's pockets', it is evident that some newspapers do print verbatim from government press releases, as Magee maintains: "*The Belfast Telegraph* looks at times like a NIO [British Government] bulletin board" (Interview with author, 6 June 2002).

For reasons of journalistic pressure, lack of resources, time constraints or what Grimason has alluded to as 'bad, lazy, mistaken, stupid journalism' there does seem to be a tradition (at least within some newspapers if not the broadcast media also) of using either government agencies' or other organisations' copy as their own. Indeed, one media pundit (who wished to remain anonymous) highlighted that the *News Letter* makes great use of Press Association copy and takes that agency's 'line' on many an occasion:

The News Letter really needs to buck up its ideas... There was a big story here yesterday and they took the Press Association line on it. Where's their own reporter? It's a big local story. I just think they need to re-focus... it just seems to have lost its way a bit (Interview with author<sup>15</sup>).

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15 Date not provided as interviewee wished to remain anonymous.

Such instances highlight that whilst independent, questioning, challenging journalism may be the ideal, it is questionable that such an ideal is always realised. While journalists and certain sections of the media continue to present other organisations' (including the government's) copy as their own, accusations that they 'toe the establishment line' will always be levelled.

### **Amplifying Division?**

The sociologist, Anthony Giddens (1994), described how cultural diversity could both be a source of richness and vibrancy or of fear and violence:

Difference can be a means of fusion of horizons; what is a potentially virtuous circle, however, can in some circumstances become degenerate ... Wherever fundamentalism takes hold, whether it be religious, ethnic, nationalist or gender fundamentalism, degenerate spirals of communication threaten (1994, p.245).

For people in Northern Ireland, such degenerate spirals have taken place in and through the media. The three regional daily newspapers and both TV stations have routinely elided the terms Protestant/unionist and Catholic/nationalist. As Robin Wilson (1997) argues:

This not only renders secular liberals, those who otherwise define themselves as outside the conventional political space, those who are a-political or anti-political and those not from Northern Ireland (such as the substantial Chinese community) non-persons. It also flattens out the diversity within each religious community between more moderate and more extreme positions (1997, p.6).



In addition to ideological labelling, physical spaces have also become defined as 'nationalist' or 'loyalist' areas in media discourse and such representations heighten the perception of territoriality and so the struggle for territorial control (which is at the heart of the parades issue, for example). Worse still, Wilson maintains:

All Protestants and all (nominal) Catholics are hoovered up into the 'unionist community' and the 'nationalist community', whether they feel part of any such imagined community or not, and whether in particular they want to be protagonists for 'their' side against the other in the way the term assumes. Thus enemy images are constructed of individuals and whole communities with whom media consumers may have no direct modulating contact whatsoever; even such direct contact as does exist between two individuals drawn from the two deeply segregated populations is usually of a low-level and deliberately banal character (Ibid. pp 5-6).

In such a context, 'degenerate spirals of communication' (Giddens 1994, p.245) are triggered. Indeed, the controller of BBC NI, Pat Loughrey, understood this to be the case and he believed broadcasters had an obligation to communication, dialogue and the avoidance of easy labelling. Although he could envisage a danger of being accused of 'escapism from the polarised truth', he stressed that the future must be one of true individualism rather than this collectivism, because collectivism is a way to tribalism and danger ... there are not just two communities (cited in Wilson 1997, p.7).

Yet, throughout the pre-Agreement years, collectivism and tribalism have been in stark evidence in studio debates that more often than not have descended into 'shouting matches' where degenerate spirals of communication abound. It can be

contended that over the years the broadcast media could have devised innovative formats or programmes and facilitated different settings in which open discussion and civilised dialogue could have taken place. For the former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, the Rev. John Dunlop, the media had it in their power to facilitate more constructive and less confrontational debate:

The [broadcast] media is too keen to get people into studios to argue with one another, rather than to facilitate understanding. I do enough inter-church work and cross-community work to know that there is a place in this society for people to quietly sit down and interpret themselves to other people. When I get engaged in that with many people from the community to which I don't belong, either republicans or nationalists, they often say to me after listening to what I have had to say: "I never understood it to be like that". I often talk about the deep-seated sense of Protestant insecurity, or unionist insecurity and how a lot of the negative reactions which come out of unionism, come out of that profound experience of insecurity. That needs to be heard. You don't hear that in a studio debate, where you get people head-banging one another. There's too much dedicated to facilitate people arguing with one another, or facilitating people who are negative without knowing what the constructive alternatives are. The media people say they have to be fair; they have to give a voice to everybody. Yet I think they could often do it in a more constructive, less confrontational way (Interview with author, 23 April 2001).

To compound Dunlop's criticisms, Spencer (2000) argues that in the changing political climate of the peace process and the subsequent peace negotiations the news media became more concerned with promoting contestation:

As political wings of paramilitary groups were absorbed into the workings of mainstream politics, they became subject to greater media scrutiny and were thus able to inject perspectives and comments which challenged dominant official viewpoints. This posed a

number of difficulties for dominant groups trying to use news as a means for communicating the direction of peace and given the growing contestations over this direction, the media's role became less orientated towards any dominant consensus about peace and more orientated towards emphasising disputes and dissensus. Or, to put it another way, the news media were now more concerned with promoting contestation than consensus (2000, p.183).

Highlighting the media's tendency to construct the impression of 'winners' and 'losers', politicians interviewed by Spencer concurred with a view that the media's propensity to reinforce differences and disagreement during the peace process and the subsequent peace negotiations made it difficult to generate trust and confidence between the opposing sides. By constructing such impressions of 'winners' and 'losers' and amplifying division, the media often contributed to a hardening of attitudes between groups and were thus unhelpful in relation to concentrated efforts at promoting peace.

To return to Giddens' terminology, it is in assisting positive spirals of communication, rather than degenerate ones within Northern Ireland, that the media could and should have played a more positive and constructive role in the pre-Agreement era.

## Summation

### Sinn Féin

By Good Friday 1998, in terms of its communicative or public relations capabilities, Sinn Féin was the one political party who stood 'head and shoulders' above all others on Northern Ireland's political stage.

However, Sinn Féin's communications success story was not a short one. The tale was more reminiscent of a twenty-year old epic struggle, characterised by trial and error, hard work and persistence. Party Chairman, Mitchel McLaughlin, provided a summary version:

I think we worked harder and maybe better than most of the parties at publicity. I think there is a bias, which is conditioned over twenty years of censorship. I think there are many fine journalists in Ireland but they have been subjected to that conditioning process. So sometimes there is a different interviewing technique when the Sinn Féin person is up for an interview. You find frequently that they're getting interrupted and that they're getting hit with three or four questions at the one time and sometimes its more hostile and antagonistic than it would be for other parties. But I don't think that it's done us any harm. You know, to be honest, I think we've learned in a very hard school. Sometimes people say: "where did Sinn Féin get its PR skills?" We had censorship, we had to disseminate our own information, and we had media hostilities. We had to learn to cope with that and when it came to lifting censorship and when it came to a more open political discourse then we were maybe better trained to withstand the type of inquisitions that you would get sometimes. On the media, I think we learned in a very hard school but that's the way it goes. I think maybe some people were impressed and pleasantly surprised by the ability of Sinn Féin people who they discovered despite the years of silence and censorship and propaganda -

didn't have horns, could speak for themselves, could think for themselves, had an analysis and had a political perspective to offer that was different from the establishment line. I think that's reflected in our political support, in our electoral support and in our media profile. (Interview with author, 9 June 1999).

Sinn Féin was the only main political party in Northern Ireland to have full-time staff (paid or unpaid) working on a consistent basis in media relations and publicity (or political public relations) over an unpunctuated period of twenty-five years. From the opening of their first press office in Belfast in the early 70's up until Good Friday 1998, the party had created communications structures in both parts of Ireland, the USA and continental Europe.

Their successful growth cannot be simplistically attributed to John Hume helping to bring Gerry Adams and his party 'in from the political wilderness' in the late 80's and early 90's. Throughout their recent history, they have shown a strategic astuteness and an ability to adapt and innovate under very difficult circumstances. They have also become proficient at campaigning, due in part to their long history of highlighting miscarriages of justice as well as campaigning on social issues. Indeed, their network of advice centres throughout Northern Ireland have been an invaluable port of call for working class nationalists and republicans who have required advice on various issues including, for example, state benefits. They have also long understood the importance of communications and applied this knowledge to their strategic advantage, both internally by (more recently) informing, consulting and reassuring their grassroots supporters (at all stages in the peace process) and externally by internationalising their struggle as well as, for example, fundraising in the US.

A recurring theme of the pre-Agreement era was Sinn Féin's strategic attempts to portray the SDLP as 'compromisers'. Yet, as Good Friday 1998 approached, it quickly became apparent that every political party in the talks/negotiations, including Sinn Féin, would have to make significant 'compromises' if an agreement was to be concluded.

By 1998, Sinn Féin was stressing the importance of their electoral mandate and their democratic credentials while attempting to distance themselves from the IRA - claiming that they did not speak for that organisation. In doing so, their strategy was to widen their support base to include nationalists of all hues and to build upon the meagre cultural resources they possessed as a result of their link with the IRA. They had also become a party hungry for political power, a party 'on the move' and one that had both the financial and organisational resources to make further inroads.

### The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)

As for the SDLP, whilst they had a full-time press officer for a short period in the early 90's, it was more than five years later (in 1996) that the party employed a full-time member of staff to deal specifically with media relations (Conall McDevitt as Director of Communications) and indeed 1997 before a press office was established. By Good Friday 1998, because of limited financial and organisational resources, McDevitt was unable to make fundamental changes to the development of SDLP public relations. As a result, the party's rusty communications machine stood in

stark contrast to Sinn Féin's slick, highly polished one. Indeed, in the pre-Agreement era, it can be contended that the SDLP had a laissez-faire attitude towards both the media and the notion of public relations in general. As Martina Purdy highlighted while comparing the SDLP with Sinn Féin:

The best operation in terms of public relations would have been Sinn Féin ... I think part of the reason for that is, that they were hungry for power in a way that the SDLP, you know, they were comfortably ahead at that time and they didn't see the importance of the media, they just assumed that the media would understand where they were coming from. So at that time, there were a lot of Sinn Féin press conferences. They were very keen to get their message across. You might have had them almost daily, whereas you would hardly ever get an SDLP press conference, it would have to be a special occasion. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

Indeed, even the SDLP's political communication output via their pre-Agreement posters can best be described as lacklustre, simplistic, repetitive and devoid of either imagination or original thought. In addition, while the SDLP leader, John Hume, had many qualities, organisation was not one of them, and as such, the party's organisational weaknesses surfaced from time to time, most notably during the financial crises of the early 90's. An additional SDLP flaw included a reluctance of senior party figures to subject themselves to a diminution of their own power or control at the hands of a younger generation in the party. The result of these flaws from a public relations perspective, led to the party being perceived as 'mediocre, middle-aged, middle-class and muddled' (Murray1998, p.247), as well as having a 'greying' image and also that 'you wouldn't know about the SDLP other than Hume and [his deputy leader] Mallon' (Interview with Quintin Oliver, 6 June 1999).

Yet, this is not to denigrate John Hume and his admirable qualities of patience and persistence in the search for peace in Northern Ireland. Hume was the only politician and indeed the SDLP, the only political party in Northern Ireland who could justifiably claim to be the true architects of the Good Friday Agreement. Nevertheless, the SDLP leadership failed to grasp the idea or the strategic advantages that both internal and external public relations could have brought to the development of their party. As a result of such shortcomings, the SDLP's long-term future and success was put in jeopardy. Indeed, Hume's admirable dedication to conflict resolution was perhaps at the expense of resolving conflicts within his own party. As Good Friday 1998 approached, his very own words had a prescient or prophetic ring about them: "If it's a choice between the party and peace, do you think I give a fuck for the party" (cited in O'Connor, 2002, p.24).

### The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)

Moving onto the DUP, they were also 'late starters' when it came to employing full-time communications personnel. Although members of the party were involved in media relations on a part-time basis, they only began to acknowledge the pivotal importance of successfully and professionally communicating their politics following the May 1996 Entry to Negotiations election. As Purdy highlighted:

On the unionist side, the DUP were the hungry party. They were the ones who wanted to overtake and so they paid more attention to the media, they were nicer to journalists... Around



1996 Ian Paisley Jnr did a lot of their media, was very good at self-promotion and very good at promoting the party and also they would have taken a broad approach to their media campaigning, thinking about how to sell or not sell their position. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

In fact, their first Director of Communications, St Clair McAllister, only took up the position a matter of months before Good Friday 1998.

Negativity, insecurity and a 'siege mentality' pervaded all DUP communication during the pre-Agreement era. The consistent apocalyptic rhetoric of their leader, Ian Paisley, featured throughout the period in question. Paisley played on unionist fears and apprehension over the intentions of successive Irish governments (as in the political posters 'Stop Dublin Interference' and 'Not an Inch to Dublin') as well as successive British governments (as in the political poster 'Major's Treachery' - accompanied with the visual image of a knife stabbing a Union Jack emblazoned map of Northern Ireland).

Throughout the period, the party favoured a return to the golden days of majority rule in a 'Protestant parliament for a Protestant people' (cited in Taylor 1998, p. 19). In addition, a guiding theme of their pre-Agreement political communication was the issue of trust. In their determination to resist all Ulster's enemies, they were the one political party who had 'earned your trust' or were a 'team you can trust'. Yet, in 1985, Paisley produced four sledgehammers each carrying the words 'Smash Sinn Féin' and in their manifesto of that year they promised to 'challenge, confront and confound Sinn Féin whenever they dared raise their heads' (DUP 1985, p.1). However, by 1997, the not so 'trustworthy' DUP reneged on previous pledges by

walking away from the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement and most certainly did not ‘challenge, confront and confound Sinn Féin’ whenever that party entered into the equation.

Pre-Agreement communications included portraying themselves as a party of black and white certainties – good versus evil, right versus wrong, truth versus lies. In as much, St Clair McAllister believed that while spin doctors did exist in the real world, he was not in the business of bending and shaping information or in fact, of telling lies. In the run-up to Good Friday 1998, the DUP’s historical insistence of ‘No Compromise, No Surrender’ did not bode well for the future and was particularly pertinent since the Agreement represented ‘compromises’ that would have to be made by *all* of the political parties in Northern Ireland.

### The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)

As for the UUP (from the beginning of the Troubles until the mid-90s) they had lost the propaganda war because they had a dogmatic belief in the supremacy of their case. Essentially, they had an unrelenting arrogance that they were so ‘right’ that they didn’t have to either apologise for past indiscretions against their Catholic neighbours or indeed ‘sell’ themselves or their case to a wider world (Parkinson, 1998). This period was characterised by woeful public relations and a belief that the media were so much against them that theirs was a lost cause.

The establishment of two Unionist Information Office's in Washington in 1994/5 and London in 1996 can be construed as acceptance by the party that they had failed to make adequate inroads into reversing nationalists' and republicans' propaganda successes.

Slowly but surely the 'penny dropped' and there was a growing sense of urgency in the UUP about communicating their cause to a variety of audiences in Ireland, the UK and the US. Their public relations concerns at this juncture, included trying not to appear anti-Catholic, as well as the realisation that they would need to begin the process of positive image-building and develop their networking capabilities.

In 1995, the cover of the UUP journal, *Ulster Review*, celebrated David Trimble's election as leader by proclaiming the arrival of a 'new unionism'. It was to be 'pro-active, inclusive, open, pluralist, dynamic, progressive, outward, articulate, intelligent, coherent, professional, confident' ( cited in O'Dowd, 1998, p. 70). 'New Unionists' believed that for much of the previous 25 years, the case for the Union had been allowed to go by default, by an inability to communicate the merits of unionism to a wider audience in a rational and coherent manner.

For 'new unionism' to be realised, it was evident that fundamental changes were thus required in UUP public relations. In 1996, a young law graduate, David Kerr, was hired by the UUP as a full-time press officer/press secretary to Trimble. Previously, there had been a loose configuration of press officers in some of the 18 UUP constituencies with little or no central co-ordination at Belfast headquarters, and such appointments in the main were not full-time or permanent positions.

However, at this stage, the UUP were in need of a complete communications overhaul and should have been hiring the best public relations talent available, not an inexperienced graduate with little or no communications background. This appointment would simply not have occurred in Sinn Féin, as Purdy pointed out:

David Kerr was almost on a learning curve himself. He was so young and some of us felt that it was incredible that someone with such little experience coming out of university was going to be in charge of this big party... it just wouldn't have happened with Sinn Féin . It's quite incredible also that this young guy in his twenties was going to boss David Trimble around. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

By Good Friday 1998, the UUP had dabbled in image management and had a pool of 'external' public relations professionals who they could call upon for advice and help. Yet, (as the case of David Kerr highlights) there seemed to be no sense of urgency on the UUP's behalf to radically develop their communications or public relations capabilities. Essentially, they were taking 'baby-steps' in the right direction when they really needed to be taking 'giant leaps'.

## The Media

As for the media, it would not be wrong to conclude that in general, the role they played throughout the period in question has been plagued by a litany of complaints or criticisms.

These include: they were anti-unionist; they were anti-republican; they were systematically orientated towards a British government perspective; they consistently failed to adequately question the 'primary definers' or 'official sources'; they provided images and stories of irrational violence without sufficient context; they reproduced and amplified division through easy ideological labelling; they promoted contestation rather than consensus or emphasised disputes and dissensus; they reinforced differences and disagreement; and, they were unhelpful in relation to concentrated efforts at promoting peace.

On the flipside, or to counteract such negative assumptions, media personnel highlighted that: they were simply being realistic; they were reflecting or holding a mirror up to society; they didn't toe the establishment or British government line, it was more a case of bad, lazy, mistaken, stupid journalism on occasion; and within the broad sweep of it all, there has always been a lively, enquiring, questioning, challenging journalism in Northern Ireland.

While there is no doubt that sections of the media and individual journalists deserve to be singled out and praised for various honourable contributions in speaking 'truth to power', what remains problematic is that this has not been the norm, and such

cases are few and far between. From the beginning of the Troubles until Good Friday 1998, a lively, enquiring, questioning, challenging journalism has certainly not been endemic in Northern Ireland; it is more a case of mavericks or loners (such as Eamonn Mallie) who have questioned and challenged the highest levels of authority, for example, the British government's direction and policy over the years.

To compound such media criticisms, prior to Good Friday 1998, it was in assisting positive spirals of communication, rather than degenerate ones, that the media in Northern Ireland should have played a more positive and constructive role.

### In Conclusion

To conclude, during the 1990's, that is, prior to Good Friday 1998, all four of the main political parties underwent media training and became much more professional during the talks process. In addition, for many of Northern Ireland's emerging communications personnel, the talks process proved to be a very good training ground, as Purdy highlights:

In terms of the talks themselves, that really was a spin-doctor's dream because you had two or three huts full of journalists on a daily basis... quite a contingent up there waiting to be fed information... So it was an opportunity to come out into Castle Buildings parking lot and just spin away. All kinds of stories got out that way, there were leaks, there was spin and counter-spin and it was probably a really good training ground for people like David Kerr who got instant access to all these journalists who were just waiting in a hut. You

know, most spin-doctors have to develop over time, have to build their contacts, but here was a situation where the journalists were there in a heap ready to be exploited if you like, or attempted to be manipulated. (Ibid.)

In broad brushstrokes, Sinn Féin and the DUP were the hungry parties who were more interested in getting into the media because they wanted to get ahead. Both the SDLP and the UUP took more of a laissez-faire approach towards the media.

Only one political party had a competent communications team in place on Good Friday 1998 – Sinn Féin. For their ubiquitous rivals in both traditions it was high time to take stock of their own flawed communications structures and lack of personnel, to learn from Sinn Féin 's communications success story and indeed try to emulate the party in future attempts to 'effectively' communicate their own positions or political analyses.

## **SECTION 2: PARTY POLITICAL PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE MEDIA DURING THE 1998 REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN**

### **Introduction**

The election of a strong Labour government under Tony Blair in May 1997 helped to re-energise the Northern Ireland peace process. Within a matter of months a new IRA ceasefire was announced and Sinn Féin's conditions for entering talks/negotiations had been met. While unionists of all hues had serious concerns about entering into a process that included Sinn Féin, the UUP remained in the talks, whereas the DUP, led by Ian Paisley, subsequently withdrew.

Although successive British governments had attempted to instigate talks/negotiations between Northern Ireland's political parties during the state's troubled past, on this occasion (although the DUP were absent) the talks/negotiations were more inclusive than in previous years and they represented a historic move towards compromise and agreement by all of the participants involved, as acknowledged by British government/NIO Senior Information Officer, Colin Ross:

Would anyone have believed that you would have got republicanism, nationalism, loyalism, unionism, the centre party, a party involving exclusively women, representatives of the British and Irish governments, all being presided over by a chairman from the United States...if you had mentioned that five years previously you would have been laughed at, because some of the parties would have been seen as very uncomfortable even sitting in a room with the Irish government and others would not have sat in a room with loyalists. So



there was a tremendous amount of breaking down of barriers to get people to that particular point. I don't think there was anyone in the negotiations who wasn't aware of the painful path that had led to the table. (Interview with author, cited in Kirby 1999, p.27)

Importantly, the negotiations between eight political parties and the British and Irish governments continued until agreement was reached on 10<sup>th</sup> April 1998, that is, Good Friday. As a result, the Agreement represented the first significant opportunity to have an inclusive power-sharing government in the history of the state.

One of the Agreement's stipulations was that its very legitimacy would have to be strengthened by (or founded upon) a positive endorsement by 'the people' of Northern Ireland. In the event, a six-week-long referendum campaign on the Good Friday Agreement became the biggest public relations exercise ever to be carried out in Northern Ireland.

Yet, while the Agreement represented an overwhelming achievement, a lot of the language contained therein provided protective ambiguities so that different people or different constituencies could be sold on different parts of it.

This section chronicles the roles played by each of the four main political parties and the media during the referendum campaign in a wider attempt to understand how the Good Friday Agreement was sold to the people of Northern Ireland.

It attempts to ascertain how successful the UUP, the SDLP and Sinn Féin were in selling the Agreement within their own constituencies, and gauges how successful the DUP were in persuading the electorate to vote No to the Agreement. It also explores the public relations strategies and techniques employed by the four political parties during the referendum campaign in an attempt to determine the significance of key public relations activities, that is, how they may have impacted upon the referendum result.

Furthermore, it attempts to establish whether the media in Northern Ireland were biased or unbiased in their coverage of the referendum campaign, that is, whether they appeared to be 'neutral' or indeed sided with one or other of the pro-Agreement or anti-Agreement camps.

This section is broken down into six subsections, that is, four that examine the political parties' roles during the referendum campaign, one that examines the media, and a final subsection that takes the form of a summary and conclusion.

## **(i) Social Democratic and Labour Party**

In many ways the Agreement was the jewel in the SDLP crown. If any political party could have considered themselves to be the architects of it, it would be the SDLP. As party leader, John Hume maintained:

The Agreement, from the SDLP's point of view of course, was totally based on principles that we had been putting across over the years. Our analysis of the problem was very consistent throughout the 30 years, given that the problem didn't change and neither did our approach to solving it. The problem was not just about relationships within Northern Ireland but also about relationships within Ireland and between Ireland and Britain. And those are the three sets of relationships at the heart of our problem, and therefore, they should be the agenda for any talks process. Given that is the agenda, the logic of that would be that the two governments would have to come together with all the parties to do the discussions to resolve it. And all of that is what happened. Of course our proposal was, throughout as well, that there shouldn't be any victory for either side, therefore that our institutions would respect our differences in power sharing, now called partnership. We've also always pushed for an all-Ireland council of ministers, North and South, backed up by a secretariat. Those were our consistent proposals throughout our existence as a party because as I have repeatedly said, the real solution to our problem is the healing process. The institutions in themselves are not a solution; they are a framework for a solution. When you break your leg, you have to have a framework for the healing process. When you have a deeply divided society, divided for centuries by prejudice and distrust, in order to erode that distrust and prejudice, the best way of doing it is to work together in your common interests. The way I put it publicly is "spill your sweat, not your blood" and break down the barriers that way. A new society, a new North and a new Ireland will evolve in a generation or two based on agreement and respect for differences. (Interview with author, 6 May 2001)

The eternal optimist – Hume also believed that the most important element in strengthening the Agreement was the SDLP proposal that once an agreement was reached that the last word would not be with the politicians, but with the people. The notion of a referendum was also a very powerful aspect of the Agreement process because it sidelined minority groups involved in violence, which had always claimed that they were acting in the name of the people.

For Hume, one of the major aspects of selling the Agreement or garnering support for it, was the transformation of (relative) peace on the streets. The very fact that violence had dissipated had transformed the atmosphere on the streets and the whole mood of the people, and therefore strengthened any approach to reaching agreement and subsequently selling it to the people.

As for the Agreement itself, a lot of its carefully crafted language offered protective ambiguities that meant different people or constituencies could be sold on different parts of it. Indeed, the SDLP's Director of the referendum campaign, Mark Durkan, likened the Agreement to a hologram:

If we were going to get an agreement, the reality is that it was going to be something of a hologram in that, if unionists held it up to one light they would see one thing and if nationalists held it up to another light they would see other things. (Interview with author, cited in Kirby 1999, p.27)

He also highlighted that:

There were things in the Agreement put there *for* unionists and put there *by* unionists. There were things in the Agreement put there *for* republicans and nationalists and put there *by* republicans and nationalists. (Ibid. p.56)

The SDLP believed that everyone who signed up to the Agreement needed to be up front and honest about this; that this was one of the strengths of the Agreement and that the outcome was not made simply in the image of one particular identity. The very essence of the Agreement was that it provided a framework for possible reconciliation between two traditions and one in which the two communities could move forward together, not one behind the other. However, talk of possible reconciliation during the referendum campaign subsided in favour of the rhetoric of victories and defeats, as Conall McDevitt, SDLP Director of Communications, pointed out:

Most of the parties spent most of their time trying to articulate the Agreement as a defeat or a victory for one side or the other. Trimble gave you the constant line that it was a victory for unionism, that they had protected the union. The republicans gave you another analysis that it was a victory for republicanism and that proved that their position had been endorsed. Of course both are nonsense, and that's the only word I will find to describe it. (Interview with author, cited in Kirby 1999, pp 27-28)

The Agreement was essentially a total vindication of the SDLP's analysis and as such they would undoubtedly gain majority support in their own constituency. Nevertheless, the party fought a non-triumphalist Yes campaign and it was designed to limit the suspicions and fears of the unionist community in particular, as Mark Durkan highlighted:

Just as we were very conscious of the needs to factor in the concerns and impressions of others in how we would move to get the Agreement, the same was the case in the referendum and we were conscious that some parties were in a particularly sensitive position, whether because of internal tensions or because of concerns being expressed by them about possible dissent within their own constituency... We knew that people had to deal very much in respect of their own constituencies but we had a sense that the UUP weren't being that effective in relation to their own particular efforts. That was causing us concern and that meant that in a couple of instances in so far as we thought it could help, we tried doing some particular marking of some of the 'No' people, like Jeffrey Donaldson. But we had to be careful how far we went and there was a point where I was minded to open up very heavily on Jeffrey Donaldson in a way that actually I would have publicly recalled some of the meetings between ourselves and the UUP including him and some of my own direct negotiations with him and being able to trace them to show that this impression he was giving that he only found out in the early hours of Good Friday morning that we were looking at Sinn Féin coming into government. You know that was nonsense, we had good enough notes on the thing to be able to trace things well, well before that and that he was on board in relation to that. But other people in the UUP felt that at that stage "No, better not, that would go too far over the top". Part of it was they weren't ready to deal with all of those issues themselves. So, we didn't splash in, in ways that would have caused serious problems for other 'Yes' parties in relation to their own particular issues. (Interview with author, 7 June 1999)

As in the above case, throughout the referendum campaign the SDLP seemed to tiptoe around unionist sensitivities. Their general message of the campaign was designed to influence all the people of Northern Ireland, irrespective of which tradition they belonged to, as McDevitt maintained:

The fundamental message was that this Agreement was a framework for a new North, that it wasn't a solution but it gave you a structure around which a solution could be built.

Messages that fell naturally underneath that were messages of interdependence and self-sustainability. Put bluntly, “The Good Friday Agreement will mean a more prosperous North, deliver more jobs for your community, control over your education and health systems”. So if you like, empowering people, saying, “For the first time in a generation: you’ve the opportunity to seize control over your own affairs, that’s not going to come around again and you must seize this now. We are not offering you a panacea because this Agreement isn’t a solution, but what we’re doing is putting in place a framework - Assembly, consultative bodies etc. and within that framework we can move forward.” (Interview with author, cited in Kirby 1999, p.35)

Their attempts to appeal to all sections of the community were also apparent in their referendum literature. Incorporating a golden key marked ‘Yes’, Hume maintained that the vote represented “your opportunity to leave the past behind and unlock the door to a better future. There is much in this Agreement for everyone”.

Strategically, the SDLP were anxious to portray the Agreement as something that they felt they had a great deal of ownership over and they wanted the people of Northern Ireland to take that ownership from them and all the other parties who had negotiated it and use it to actually empower themselves. McDevitt believed their strategy was unselfish and quite straightforward, and one that included third party endorsement:

Our strategy was to concentrate on the Agreement, not on the tired rhetoric of victories and defeats. The Agreement was a victory for no one, it was a defeat for no one, that’s the whole point and our strategy was very much to hammer that home... So, that was our fundamental strategy and from day one we were very anxious to find messages and images that would uphold that strategy. So, for example it was important to us that we had from early on in the campaign, people from outside of the political world involved in the

campaign. We brought Peter Sutherland, the former European Commissioner and one of the most senior businessmen Ireland has, to Belfast, quietly, and we spent an afternoon with the leading business people from the North, talking to them about the benefits of trade, and we gave them access to him to do that. That was the sort of thing that had a very important public relations dimension to it but it wasn't necessarily an up front, out there, press activity. We did the same with the arts community. We brought Neil Jordan up to Belfast and gave people within the arts community exposure to him. We did the same then ultimately with the political community, bringing the party leaders from other parties within this island and party leaders from across the water over to stand shoulder to shoulder and to talk about the Agreement, and not once did we reserve these people for ourselves, we always made sure they met Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionist Party while they were here. (Interview with author, 3 June 1999)

The SDLP saw their role as the vehicle for change, the leadership in the process of change, the architects of it and therefore the people who were not concerned with petty squabbling of victories and defeats. They also promoted future policies and produced a booklet for the referendum that was a pre-manifesto for the Assembly elections. The manifesto spent a lot of time looking at how the Agreement shaped a new framework for helping to deal with bread-and-butter issues and how it would empower people across all policy areas and across all social and religious divides.

Whilst on the issue of religion, the SDLP canvass in support of the Agreement could be compared with Christ's disciples 'spreading the word' in an unselfish or benign way. As Mark Durkan pointed out, nationalists were doubtful of unionist support for the Agreement, and as such, their approach was influenced on a number of levels:



One, we didn't want people to be seen to be taking anything for granted. Two, we actually felt that it was important to go back to voters and say "we are not actually asking you to vote for us this time, we are asking you to vote for yourselves, this is important". In many ways it was the most benign canvass that you could actually do because you were going up to people and you were saying "this is what it's about and your vote is important, it's not important for me, it's important for you and your children". It was a very healthy thing to do. Also at a personal level and being involved in the negotiations and having felt at times almost a sense of cabin-fever while you were stuck up there in Castle Buildings, it was important to go out and *spread the word* in a sense about the Agreement, because an awful lot of the media stuff had all been about the release of the prisoners, policing and the North-South Ministerial Council. We were out to try and make sure people got a fuller sense of all that was in the Agreement and that they would get a direct first-hand sense from people like myself in spite of what 'argey-bargey' might be going on in the media, that we had confidence in the Agreement and we had confidence in the referendum outcome. A lot of non-unionists believed the Paisley-hype that this was going to go down and that unionism wouldn't pass it and we were trying to say "No, we think they will go for it, it's important, it's not another false dawn." (Interview with author, 7 June 1999)

Throughout their canvassing, the SDLP were especially angry with the British prime minister, Tony Blair, whom they believed was selling the Agreement (to the unionist community) in a dishonest fashion. In doing so, they believed he also compromised their own pro-Agreement position, as Durkan highlighted:

During the campaign Tony Blair in particular came in very, very strongly in ways that we weren't just sure were necessarily going to help. Writing up the pledges...it did create problems for us because we were quite clear that we were going to be honest about this throughout, because we have negotiated this Agreement and because we are going to have to live it through to its full implementation. So whenever Blair was implying that there was a precondition for a national executive, we had to say: "There is not". Of course there's

then the risk of people saying “here you are, you’re giving divided messages between pro-Agreement elements”, but we thought that it was important for ourselves that we do that because we felt people needed to have some point of certainty on which to rest in relation to these things. So we thought we may as well try to be *it* [the point of certainty] if nobody else is going to be *it*. We were trying to do that and we felt that was important too with the forthcoming election campaign. You don’t want to be in a position where people can accuse you of having lied or bluffed or dodged in relation to an issue in the context of the referendum itself. (Ibid.)

Indeed, it seemed throughout the referendum campaign that the UUP were not only given disproportionate help from the British prime minister (whom the SDLP accused of lying, bluffing and dodging issues) to sell the Agreement to the unionist community, but were also helped throughout the campaign by the SDLP themselves, as Durkan maintained:

We felt that it was particularly important to try to get to younger people and also particularly to a lot of the traditional non-voters who had just given up on politics because we saw that they would be a key additive in a referendum outcome, particularly whereby the unionists on the Yes side were reporting some difficulties. So, one of the calculations we made was that the unionist turnout particularly in the East had been going down historically and there was a lot of people switched off, and there must be a way of reaching them and re-engaging them. If traditional unionist politics or traditional Northern Ireland politics hadn’t motivated them, is there something in and around the Agreement that can? And, can we present to them the prospectus of a changed politics that the Agreement might hold? (Ibid.)

In fact, the SDLP tried on a number of occasions to have a joint approach with the UUP but to no avail as Durkan highlighted:

We did start making approaches to the UUP through shared contacts we had with church or religious interests. We were making the point that basic goodwill was out there for the Agreement and that people wanted to be able to see it expressed in some way and the fact is that since Good Friday, all the efforts of the parties appear to be disparate. We nevertheless said “look, people want to see a handshake”, but at the same time we knew that people weren’t just going to go for superficial gimmicks. So we had in play an idea that essentially myself and church-related people and some people close to Trimble were discussing “well how do you do it in a way that is credible and effective and particularly in the context of a suspicious unionist community?” We were looking at maybe having a gathering, essentially of church people, on a question and answer basis, but something that you could have had Hume and Trimble coming into a room together to address the audience, in reasonable circumstances, an intelligent audience, answering questions and in doing so, both leaders would talk about the Agreement. Obviously, in coming to the stage, they would do the handshake. It was going to be something like that because people didn’t want anything too glib or flashy at that point. We were getting humming and hawing from the unionists that they just weren’t sure about this and the idea was biting stronger after the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis and the Balcombe Street gang appearing and it really did register with some of the people in the UUP that a different picture other than the clenched fist was needed, and so there was a bit more interest in the idea. But still, while there was still an interest in having something like that, it was a case of “well I am not sure how we would do the audience and there could be sensitivities – even at this sort of event, and is it the best thing?” That was grand, all valid and legitimate questions. So meanwhile during this same period and basically over that same weekend of the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis, Tim Attwood in SDLP HQ said that he believed from the contacts that he had made that there was a good chance of getting Bono to come up and do something. There had been a couple of things like Mo Mowlam running around with Richard Branson and none of that quite working or clicking. The thing with Bono was “Yes that would do, but what to do with it?” And also, if the UUP were so difficult about a church-related type of meeting, which was very much designed to relate to their constituency more so than anything else, we were wondering that they’re hardly going to be in the market for this. (Ibid.)

At this juncture, an opinion poll published in *The Irish Times* on 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1998 showed a sharp drop in unionist support for the Agreement. Compared with an overall 84 per cent in favour by both unionists and nationalists in the previous *Irish Times*/MRBI survey conducted after Good Friday, the figure was now at a much lower 69 per cent (cited in De Breadun 2001, p158). The figures pointed to 55 per cent of unionists against the Agreement, a figure echoed by private NIO polls, which estimated that after the prison releases and subsequent appearance of the Balcombe Street gang at the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis, the No vote had increased in unionist ranks by ten per cent (Ibid.). The figures also reflected an energetic and well-focused campaign by the No camp, which contrasted with a lacklustre pro-Agreement effort on the unionist side. The poll did however highlight that the highest percentage of undecided voters was in the 18-24 age group (Ibid.).

With things starting to slip badly for the Yes camp, the SDLP's Tim Attwood suggested that what was needed to boost the Yes campaign's flagging fortunes was a major event that could capture the public's imagination. If Bono could be invited to Belfast and become involved in a concert promoting a Yes vote (in the final week of the referendum campaign) the fortunes of the Yes camp might just turn around. The idea of the leaders of unionism and nationalism united by one of the world's most famous rock stars was now biting strong, and the SDLP, concerned that Trimble needed help, sent Attwood and Conall McDevitt to seek out David Kerr, Trimble's Press Secretary.

In the meantime, Eamon McCann, one of Ireland's premier pop-concert promoter's was asked to help set up an event at Belfast's Waterfront Hall, and he told the SDLP

he might be able to get rock group Ash to join U2 at the peace concert. This band of young Protestants from Downpatrick, he thought, would be a perfect counter-balance to the Dublin-based super-group. Bono subsequently telephoned the SDLP office and told Attwood he thought the peace concert was a great idea (McDonald, 2000).

Essentially, after the loyalist killer, Michael Stone, appeared at the UDP rally in the Ulster Hall and with the Balcombe Street episode still fresh in unionist minds, a lot of media comment was claiming that the 'Yes' parties were now losing it and weren't doing anything about it (Ibid.). Not before time, the UUP were prepared to pick up on this high visibility version that would bring the two figureheads of unionism and nationalism together in ways that the UUP had been quite reticent to do before then. The UUP's David Kerr was very taken by the idea, as Attwood recalls: 'Kerr was delirious...He kept saying to us, "What? Bono? You can get Bono?" He thought it was a brilliant move' (ibid. p.232).

Indeed, the SDLP's Conall McDevitt highlighted how pivotal the U2 / Ash concert was at this particular juncture in the referendum campaign:

We felt it was a very necessary thing at that time because the whole campaign had become dominated by two very negative, very retarded, very old images - one of the Balcombe Street gang at the RDS in Dublin and the other one, Michael Stone here in Belfast, and they begun to polarise opinion around them and were leading the referendum debate into a cul-de-sac, into a very large one. So when the opportunity arose to create another image, an image which was forward-looking, which was youthful, which was dynamic, not regressive, old-fashioned and staid, we jumped at it and a very intensive four days, actually exhausting four days, meant we were able to cram three and a half thousand kids into the Waterfront

Hall and the rest is history. But that was a very important part of fulfilling our strategy. It was a tactical decision taken at the last minute, it wasn't written down in any plan but it was one that was fully consistent with the overall strategic objective of the campaign and when the opportunity arose, we were just fortunate enough to take advantage of it. (Interview with author, 3 June 1999)

One of the main logistical problems in relation to the concert was the distribution of the free tickets. Tim Attwood was concerned that some of them could fall into the hands of DUP supporters, who might disrupt the gig with a publicity stunt of their own. They finally chose to hand out the tickets through Northern Ireland's schools and spent all weekend contacting hundreds of principals to offer the tickets to their sixth-formers. A smaller number were reserved for the youth wings of the political parties in the Yes camp.

An inspired leak to the media on Monday 18<sup>th</sup> May got the story rushing and running, yet there was still some apprehension in the SDLP about how the concert may have unfolded:

There are so many dimensions to that story - whether it was the Protestant band from Downpatrick; young up and coming kids and the great Irish legends; whether it was the fact that Tim Wheeler, the lead singer of Ash's dad is a judge; whether it was the fact that Bono had allegedly burned a tricolour some years back and why he had done that; whether it was the fact that you were going to successfully put two men over fifty on a stage in front of three and a half thousand kids, keep them quiet and still have a powerful message about it. (Interview with McDevitt, cited in Kirby 1999, pp 44-45)

Nevertheless, the leak highlighting the proposed concert was of fundamental importance because it helped to steal publicity away from what was meant to have been a major coup for the No camp – former UUP leader, Jim Molyneaux was holding a press conference to call for a No vote in the following referendum. Indeed, Molyneaux’s public rebuff of Trimble was drowned in the deluge of media coverage of the forthcoming concert.

Effectively, a single public relations activity inspired by the SDLP and conducted jointly with the UUP became the most memorable and important message that could be relayed to a divided people. The coming together of David Trimble and John Hume on Tuesday 19th May at the U2 / Ash concert symbolised the possibility of a new beginning between unionism and nationalism and it provided a positive ‘thumbs up’ for the Agreement on which the electorate would vote three days later.

Many commentators suggested the handshake between the two leaders at the concert was the turning point in the referendum campaign, including Quintin Oliver, Director of the non-party ‘Yes’ campaign:

They came together for the first time ever, not just in the campaign, but the first time ever they publicly shook hands...that’s what in our view turned the campaign in the last week. Because if the vote had have been a week earlier, it would have been a very different story because it was very negative then after the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis when the Balcombe Street gang appeared and after Michael Stone appeared at the UDP rally in the Ulster Hall. Things were looking very bleak and prisoner release was the issue that was damaging the coherence of the ‘Yes’ vote. (Interview with author, cited in Kirby 1999, pp 43-44)

Significantly the SDLP believed that the concert made a lot of what happened afterwards more credible in the final days of the Yes campaign, as McDevitt pointed out:

The [British] prime ministers' successive visits were more credible. It also allowed us to be able to roll Hume out and I presume for the unionists, to be able to roll Trimble out, in a very authoritative way, in a nearly presidential way because yes, unlike anyone else they had had both sides of the community, they had had the future of Northern Ireland there at the concert and they endorsed them. So everyone saw that, the world saw that. (Interview with author, 3 June 1999)

Fundamentally, the coming together of Hume and Trimble contributed to a significant turnaround in the polls from No to Yes:

The people wanted Hume and Trimble to stand shoulder to shoulder and say "we want you to vote yes". Until they got that image they were doubtful, and it was only after that image that things really began to consolidate themselves. In the final week you got a 15% swing back within unionism, which was very critical. (Interview with author, cited in Kirby 1999, p.61)

Indeed, the tireless work that many in the SDLP put into making the concert an overwhelming success was subsequently rewarded with a 71.12 per cent Yes vote in the referendum. With eyes glistening, deputy leader, Seamus Mallon, said it was the most important moment of his political life. It was no longer a case of 'Ulster says No', but 'The North of Ireland Says Yes' (De Breadun 2001 p.161). Hume was elated with the result: 'We are overcoming,' he said, an advance on the old civil rights song, 'We Shall Overcome' (Ibid.).



## **(ii) Ulster Unionist Party**

The Good Friday Agreement had hinged on David Trimble's willingness to trust the promises contained in Tony Blair's handwritten letter of 10<sup>th</sup> April 1998. Some questioned that Trimble might have invested too much faith in the prime minister, or whether Blair could really be relied upon to keep to his word; including Brian Garret:

I was very concerned that Tony Blair might be putting too much pressure on David. I was aware of this, because David and I had spoken about Blair given my Labour connections. He obviously liked Blair a lot. But I hoped at the time that Blair wasn't doing what Bob Mc Cartney predicted he would do – that he was taking David up to the top of the temple and saying, "Look this can all be yours", and maybe entrapping Trimble with the grandeur of it all. I think you have to remember that David, like many other people, is vulnerable to flattery. I saw that as a danger even on the day. (Cited in McDonald 2000, p.214)

The arguments over whether Blair's charisma or his promises had a guiding influence or not on Trimble's decision to eventually sign up to the Agreement, meant little to unionist ultras. They proclaimed Trimble as the worst traitor since the Reverend Lundy <sup>16</sup>. The debate over whether he had sold out his tradition or community was essentially the old intellectual (if reinvigorated) argument between rational and emotional unionism. Shortly after the Agreement was signed, Trimble told the world that the deal was 'as good as it gets' (Ibid. p.215). This was a clear admission that unionism would have to swallow unpalatable compromises on

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<sup>16</sup> Governor during the Siege of Derry in 1689 who was accused of opening the gates of the city to Catholic King James II.

prisoners and Sinn Féin in government, as the price for amending Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution, forcing nationalists to accept the principle of consent and the curbing of cross-border integration (Ibid.).

Trimble believed that he had kept all the promises he made at the start of the talks, such as the ending of the Irish Republic's territorial claim and recognition of the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom. He thought it was important to distinguish between the parts of the Agreement that related to structures and those that related to policies. The structures, such as the Assembly and the British-Irish Council, were 'as good as they could be' (Hennessey 2000, p.190). The Union was safe, as he claimed: 'Dublin cannot dictate to us' (Ibid.). Trimble argued that unionists were not bound to accept the policies the British government was pursuing: 'They are not good. By policies I mean the so-called equality agenda, policing, prisoners, and so on' (Ibid.). The UUP would press the British government for more changes on these; but it 'must be obvious that we are in a better position to achieve change in those policies within the new structures than without them' (Ibid.).

Although Trimble and his negotiating team had scored several victories (particularly in Strand 2 of the North-South relationship) none of this seemed to have any impact on those tied to the emotional wing of unionism. They accused him of "going too far on prisoners and of getting too few guarantees to link decommissioning with Sinn Féin entering government" (McDonald 2000, p.217).

Revulsion at the prospect of the IRA's political wing entering an Executive government was indeed shared by thousands of ordinary unionists. Trimble now had to 'sell' the Agreement not only within his own party but also to these very people who had elected him and his colleagues into office. Ultimately the Agreement could survive or collapse depending upon his ability to persuade the majority of unionists to back the deal (Ibid.).

This was a second Sisyphean journey (after the signing of the Agreement) in the same number of months – that is, pushing the dead weight of emotional unionism, with all its historical baggage and bitter memories, up the mountain in an attempt to reach the summit of a new power-sharing government at Stormont (Ibid.).

His journey was eased somewhat on the 18<sup>th</sup> April when the Ulster Unionist Council completed its deliberations on the Agreement, endorsing it by 540 votes to 210. 72 per cent of the council voted for the Agreement, despite the opposition of MPs Willie Ross and Willie Thompson and the Orange Order in Trimble's Upper Bann constituency. Trimble's victory convinced him that the party would now rally around his line, as he predicted:

Even those who were unhappy with the Agreement and voted against it, made it absolutely clear that they had no recriminations of the talks team as a whole, or the leadership in particular. I think that's an indication that now the vote is over, the party is going to unite around the line that the council has adopted, and we proceed into the next round on that basis. We will not have a split unionist party. (Ibid. p.219)

Yet, his vision of a party united behind the Agreement was optimistic to say the least and the UUP's make-up meant there would always be room for internal rebellion to grow. The disaffected 28 per cent who lost on 18<sup>th</sup> April were not going to quietly accept defeat.

In any normal political party in the democratic world a 72 per cent vote in favour of a given policy would have bound almost the entire membership to that position. However, the UUP has never been a normal political party and although it had run Northern Ireland on the lines of a one-party state for half a century it was now the most fractious, disorganised political movement in Western Europe (Ibid.).

The party's rebels were split into two factions that sometimes overlapped. The larger group consisted of five of the UUP's nine MPs, a majority of the Young Unionists and the Orange Order. The balance included Jeffrey Donaldson who, while speaking against the Agreement at the Council meeting, was careful not to say he opposed David Trimble (Ibid.). In this early stage of the referendum campaign, former UUP leader Jim Molyneaux was part of the latter camp: he had opposed the Agreement but, initially at least, declined to join the platform of the No camp with Ian Paisley and Robert McCartney. Donaldson's opposition to the Agreement was qualitatively different from that of Ross or Thompson. The older MPs were viscerally opposed to any form of power-sharing with nationalists (let alone republicans), whereas Donaldson recognised what he believed was the fatal design fault in the Agreement – the absence of a link between decommissioning and Sinn Féin entering a Stormont government.

Trimble's troubles with his dissidents (following the UUC vote) were not made any easier after Gerry Adams told his delegates at their party conference on the same day that he heard of Trimble's success: 'We welcome it. Well done, David' (cited in McDonald 2000, p.220). When one of Trimble's aides heard Adam's remarks on the television news that evening he shuddered: 'I could just imagine all those ordinary unionists out there, uncertain as to whether they should support the Agreement, watching Adams smiling and him saying, "Well done, David." They were bound to be asking themselves why Adams was praising Trimble. Why would the political wing of the IRA be so enthusiastic about this deal?' (Ibid.)

Yet, Trimble's riposte to those from the No camp, who cried treachery over the Agreement was simply that they had no alternative strategy except maintaining the *status quo*, which meant the continuation of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement. They were effectively the 'No' voices that had 'deserted the battlefield' (Hennessey 2000, p.189).

Nevertheless, it was the 'No' voices that were first out of the starting blocks during the referendum campaign and if unionist opinion was moving against the Agreement, the UUP were definitely not blameless for its shift. Soon after the conclusion of negotiations, Trimble had gone to a long-standing engagement in the United States, Deputy Leader, John Taylor returned to his political commitments in Europe and Ken Maginnis left for a holiday in Cyprus. Effectively, this meant that the UUP's big hitters were out of the country in the opening stages of the referendum campaign. To compound difficulties, senior party organisers made an error of judgement by deciding to concentrate on the Assembly elections rather than

the referendum campaign, the result of which saw the anti-Agreement unionists having virtually a free run in its opening weeks. If wrong internal decision-making was not bad enough, the party found that it had lost nearly its entire potential campaign staff early in the campaign when younger members of the talks team (such as Peter King and Peter Weir) joined the No camp. The UUP found that it could not get party workers to even put up posters or canvass in support of the Agreement (Ibid.).

When Trimble returned from the US, he realised that without assuming a positive pro-Agreement stance and providing the accompanying imagery (in what was fast becoming the most highly televised political campaign in Irish history) he would lose the battle for unionist hearts and minds.

At this juncture he hit upon the idea of hiring an external media campaign director for the month-long battle ahead. His choice was Ray Haydn who at the time was running a successful PR and media-training agency in Belfast. Yet, there was another important advantage for the UUP in hiring Haydn - he strongly believed in the merits of the Agreement and its benefits not only for Ulster Unionism but also for all the people in Northern Ireland.

One of the first things Haydn changed within the Ulster Unionists' campaign was the leader himself. He knew how the camera could easily distort a politician's public image and was worried that Trimble's hair appeared greasy and unkempt on television: 'No one else would touch the subject in Glengall Street, so I said it. I told him, "David, you've a problem with your hair. You are going to have to wash

it every day.” He actually took my advice and for the first three days of the campaign he washed his hair every morning’ (McDonald 2000, p.222).

Haydn then insisted on further radical improvements to Trimble’s image, highlighting his tendency to wear the same suit and tie two or three days running. Trimble was at first indignant but Haydn eventually persuaded him to also invest in a ‘new wardrobe’ (Ibid.).

Cosmetic changes aside, there were more fundamental difficulties for Trimble at this juncture. Only half of the UUP appeared to be behind him – the majority of his MPs, scores of local councillors, the Orange Order, most of the Young Unionists and some of Trimble’s closest friends had joined the No camp. Haydn made up for the dearth of support among party stalwarts with a strategically planned PR offensive. He drew up a table prioritising the media and a hierarchy was established with local newspapers and broadcasters at its apex; then the Southern papers, radio stations and RTE, then the UK national papers, and at its base were the foreign media. Haydn was helping to make this the most professionally run UUP media campaign in its history. Never before had the party been given such national and international media attention (Ibid. p.223).

The UUP strategy included the targeting of those unionists living in prosperous middle-class areas east of the Bann. At an early stage the campaign team concluded that the only way to get a 70 per cent-plus Yes vote was to persuade this normally indifferent band of affluent Protestants to take time out from the garden, the boat or the golf club and vote Yes to the Agreement on 22<sup>nd</sup> May (Ibid. p.224).

However, the UUP strategy for the referendum campaign could not have included issues beyond their own control. One such 'external setback' was the triumphant welcome-home party arranged for the Balcombe Street Four who appeared at the Sinn Féin special Ard Fheis on 10<sup>th</sup> May. Their rapturous reception went down like the proverbial lead balloon among the unionist community. 'It has certainly not helped things one little bit' unionist Yes campaigners said gloomily, 'It was like Christmas for the No lobby' (cited in De Breadun, 2001, p.158). At this juncture, a significant proportion of unionists remained undecided and the issue of prisoner releases was the one that may have concerned them most. The subtleties of constitutional legislation were left for another day, but the prospect of 'terrorists' convicted of paramilitary offences being freed to walk the streets was causing unionists to question the merits of the Agreement (Ibid.).

The damage that the Balcombe Street episode had inflicted on the Yes unionist camp led (in the short-term) to low morale that was rapidly becoming fatalistic pessimism. On a canvass in Armagh city, two days after the Ard Fheis, only three supporters came out to 'pound the pavements' with Trimble (McDonald 2000, p.225).

The results of an *Irish Times* opinion poll on the same day, found that 56 per cent of the Northern Ireland electorate would vote Yes. Although it was a technical majority in favour of the Agreement, the figure meant that only a small percentage (certainly a minority) of Protestants would back the deal (Ibid.).



Trimble was furious with the two governments who had released prisoners to help bolster other parties' support for the Agreement, but those closest to Trimble during this more pessimistic time were also furious with party dissidents whom they believed had stabbed Trimble in the back. Ken Maginnis was unforgiving in his attitude towards Jeffrey Donaldson in particular, but also John Taylor's performance during the referendum campaign: 'John Taylor disappeared off the scene. He did not campaign and instead went AWOL' (Ibid. p.226).

Trimble took the view that deserting MPs Smyth, Forsythe, Beggs, Ross and Thompson, were simply short-sighted rather than overtly treacherous. His unwillingness to dismiss Donaldson as he did the other parliamentary rebels is seen by even his closest supporters as the fatal weakness of his leadership. During the referendum campaign Eoghan Harris continually urged Trimble to deal with Donaldson:

I told David that Donaldson should have been despatched on the principle that if people commit treachery then they should go. I used to quote what I call 'Leonard's law' to David, which is named after the Dublin writer Hugh Leonard. Hugh said that if you do somebody a favour in Dublin you make an enemy of them for life. I told David it would be very wrong for him to forgive Donaldson, because he would do it again in the future. Every great politician needs a chip of ice in his heart. It's probably the only down side to David's character as a politician that he can't put people like Donaldson down. (Ibid. p.226)

After a disastrous opening and middle to the campaign, optimism slowly crept in in the penultimate week of the campaign when there were signs that the unionist grass roots were not as vehemently opposed to the Agreement as some of the dissident

UUP MPs and sceptics in the No camp had been. Indeed, Trimble was given a standing ovation by Jeffrey Donaldson's own Lagan Valley constituency association only days after the Balcombe Street Four appearance.

However, the roller-coaster ride for Trimble was only beginning. The Yes unionists then suffered a second major setback on 14<sup>th</sup> May when a loyalist audience in Belfast's Ulster Hall gave the convicted UDA killer, Michael Stone, a massive hero's welcome. The Ulster Democratic Party-organised rally in favour of the Agreement turned into a public relations disaster as pictures were beamed around the world of Stone (who had launched a lone gun and bomb attack on the funerals of three IRA members killed in Gibraltar ten years earlier) being treated like a movie star by his adoring fans. It was a turn-off for middle-ground unionist opinion, which felt almost as much distaste for loyalist paramilitaries as for republicans.

One of Trimble's aides called Michael Stone's adulation a 'fucking disaster. We now had D.T. lumped in the same camp as the Balcombe Street gang and the Milltown murderer. Paisley and McCartney would exploit that to the hilt' (Ibid.). David Kerr recalled, 'We thought that image of Stone combined with the Balcombe Street gang had finished us off' (Ibid.).

With the referendum vote on the horizon, Trimble rejected suggestions that he had not prepared unionists sufficiently for the terms of the Agreement. He noted the 'remarkable absence' of argument in the campaign over constitutional matters and the three strands, particularly the 'very elaborate' provisions for running the

Assembly (Hennessey 2000, p.194). Instead, the 'problem has been prisoners' he argued and insisted that prisoners 'are not our problem' (Ibid.). It was a government problem. He blamed the Irish government and the NIO, which had 'spectacularly screwed up' on this issue and the 'conniving at the Balcombe Street extravaganza in Dublin' (Ibid.).

Trimble was not only accused of failing to sufficiently prepare unionists for the terms of the Agreement but also of vacillating in his own position towards what he had signed up to on Good Friday. One political commentator, Fionnuala O'Connor, perceptively described him as 'divided internally' (O'Connor 2002, p.176). At times throughout the referendum campaign he seemed to positively endorse the Agreement, if only by cherry-picking elements that would be received well by his audience. Yet at other times, he assumed a more distant, hard-line or negative position that left people with a distinct impression that he was undoubtedly ambivalent about the whole Agreement. It seemed at times that Trimble had not only to reassure his audience at hand of the merits of the Agreement, but also himself. Nevertheless, UUP press officer, Alex Benjamin, claimed that his party did indeed sell the Agreement to unionists:

The key message was one of reassurance and backing up our point with 'what we're doing is the right thing'. We sold it on a number of issues, namely the fact that our reading of the Agreement was that it secured Northern Ireland within the union, gave power back to the people of Northern Ireland and enabled everyone to get involved and participate in politics and have a say in how Northern Ireland was run. But it also fundamentally accepts, it forces if you like, republicans and nationalists to accept the legitimacy of partition, which they haven't done before - so we sold that. (Interview with author, cited in Kirby 1999, p.33)

Although Benjamin believed that his party 'sold' a pro-Agreement position, questions still arose over the strength of their convictions. The party's referendum campaign leaflet once again stated that the Agreement secured Northern Ireland's union with Britain. "Say YES for the union" the cover exhorted and included a photograph of Trimble and his deputy - John Taylor (who was mostly absent from the campaign itself) pictured smiling outside Stormont where the new Northern Ireland government would be based. Yet, the text of the leaflet was not overly confident in its tone or indeed conciliatory in its nature. Trimble wrote inside: "Whilst no one believes that voting 'Yes' will of itself guarantee a long and lasting peace, voting 'No' will surely guarantee a return to violence... This would be a victory for Sinn Féin / IRA which must be denied them".<sup>17</sup>

To return to the trials and tribulations between the UUP leader and his 'Young Pretender', Trimble explained that the difference between himself and Jeffrey Donaldson (who decided to vote No to the Agreement), centred on the small but important point about the 'effectiveness of the mechanism that would be used to exclude unreconstructed terrorists' (Hennessey 2000, p.194). As far as Trimble was concerned, the decommissioning issue had been dealt with and there was 'no point in worrying around the edges. It has been dealt with in a way which I am sure we can work' (Ibid.). The key phrase here was 'unreconstructed terrorists'. Trimble was quick to point out that he had no fundamental objection to Sinn Féin in government – provided republicans proved that they had abandoned violence for good, as demonstrated by IRA decommissioning (Ibid.).

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<sup>17</sup> Text from referendum campaign leaflet, UUP, 1998.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> May, Trimble came under further attack from a new and more damaging quarter – his predecessor Jim Molyneaux. The ex-UUP leader stood on a United Unionist platform in Lurgan and affirmed his support for the No campaign. Unionist misgivings about the Agreement were indeed deep-rooted. An *Irish Times* opinion poll one week before the vote suggested 55 per cent of unionists were against the Agreement.<sup>18</sup> It was evident that Trimble was failing to sell the Agreement to his own constituency and his vacillation meant that at times he seemed to be pro-Agreement but at others his stance almost echoed that of the No camp.

Trimble's adviser, Sean O'Callaghan, thought that the language of the campaign had to change in order to give the unionist community reassurance on issues like prisoners, decommissioning and Sinn Féin in government. He contacted Jonathan Powell, the prime minister's chief of staff, through a third party, and suggested that Powell should talk to an Orangeman in Co. Tyrone whom he regarded a good touchstone of grassroots unionist opinion (McDonald 2000, p.229). O'Callaghan believed that if Powell listened to this Orangeman's concerns and then conveyed them to Tony Blair, the language of the campaign could change radically in the final week.

O' Callaghan then worked on Lord Cranborne, (opposition leader in the House of Lords) who was sceptical about the Agreement, especially the rather vague promises on decommissioning. However, he managed to persuade Cranborne and Labour MP Kate Hoey to travel to Northern Ireland and canvass with Trimble. The

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<sup>18</sup> The *Irish Times*, 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1998.

Northern Ireland–born Hoey was an important addition to Trimble’s team because she had formerly been a close ally of the No camp’s Robert (Bob) McCartney.

O’Callaghan also sought to influence the chaplain of the Orange Order in Armagh, the Reverend William Bingham, stating:

Bingham was very important to get on to Trimble’s side. He was respected throughout the rank and file of the Orange Order and the wider Protestant community. Jonathan Powell, who once told me that ‘William tells me what to say and I write the script’, also held Bingham in high regard. (Cited in Mc Donald, 2000, p.230)

O’Callaghan’s personal crusade to persuade this strange but important ‘motley crew’ of supporters to come to Trimble’s aid proved an invaluable contribution to the UUP’s flagging Yes campaign. Cranborne and Hoey travelled to Northern Ireland on 18<sup>th</sup> May to accompany Trimble on his canvass of Derry. While on their walkabout of the city’s historic walls, Trimble declared:

As Mitchel McLaughlin [Sinn Féin’s national chairman] acknowledged last week, this Agreement is one in which the Irish government, nationalists and republicans are recognising the legitimacy of Ulster. They are saying that Londonderry and the Bogside here behind me are as British now as Bangor or Bournemouth (Ibid.).

Although the claim was unlikely to win nationalist hearts, his remarks were obviously aimed at winning unionist votes, not nationalist affections. Cranborne then told reporters following the group that unionists should vote Yes and show they were prepared to take a chance for peace and prosperity. He also recalled that he was one of ‘those 27 heroes’ who voted against the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement

at Westminster – and would do so again today (De Breadun 2000, p.159). The subtext for suspicious and fearful unionists was: if this pillar of the British establishment was urging a Yes vote, then the Agreement must be OK. Hoey then attacked her old comrade Robert McCartney: ‘I think he set out to make sure he could not agree with the Agreement, and now has to say some ridiculous things.’ (McDonald 2000, p.231)

On the Derry walkabout it was evident that Trimble still had a good deal to learn about media relations. As they were leaving, he was nearly caught out by a disastrous photo opportunity. After he had recalled that his ancestors were in the Siege of Derry in 1689, a photographer pointed out a gravestone in an adjacent cemetery with the name ‘Trimble’ on it and asked him if he would pose beside it. The UUP leader was heading straight for the grave when his media minders frantically intervened and quickly ushered him away. The last thing they wanted was a picture of Trimble beside a gravestone bearing his name, which would have been immediately exploited by the No camp as an image of a man whose political career was about to be buried. (Ibid.)

The Derry walkabout was an attempt to steady unionist nerves and shore up the Trimble campaign and were undoubtedly important contributions. Yet, the most critical moves were still to come when in the final days of the campaign four radically different players entered the affray - Glen Barr, Bono, Tony Blair and the former RUC Chief Constable Sir Jack Hermon.

Glen Barr had held some residual loyalty to Trimble as an old Vanguard comrade from the 70's who had been appointed to the British government's Parades Commission – a quango charged with taking decisions on controversial loyalist parades. During the referendum campaign the Commission was scheduled to deliver its preliminary verdict on whether the 1998 Drumcree parade would be allowed to pass through the nationalist Garvaghy Road (as it turned out, the Commission recommended that the Orange march be rerouted away from the Garvaghy Road. The verdict, however, did not make the light of day until after the referendum). Barr realised that during the campaign, the No camp would exploit the ban and dress it up as just one more sop to violent republicanism and as a result he contacted Trimble and informed him of the Commission's intentions to ban the march (Ibid.). Trimble then relayed to Downing Street his concerns about the impact that this would have on unionists and more generally on the Yes campaign. Tony Blair agreed with Trimble's analysis and intervened to delay the Commission's report. Significantly, Trimble was thus able, via Barr and ultimately Blair, to compromise the Parades Commission's political independence in the wider interests of saving the Good Friday Agreement (Ibid. p.232).

In the meantime, a proposed SDLP-inspired U2/Ash concert was in the process of becoming a reality and was scheduled to take place in the final week of campaigning. When an excited David Kerr told Trimble about the proposed concert his first reaction was: 'Who's Bono?' (Ibid. p.233). Ray Haydn, who burst out laughing, recalled:

About sixty million people around the world knew who Bono was – except David Trimble. I suppose if it had been Pavarotti or Domingo he would have known. But I jumped at the



idea, even though there was huge reluctance initially from many of the old guard – the ones with the Neanderthal attitudes in Glengall Street. I was trying to drag the party into the twentieth century, never mind the twenty-first, and this was the perfect opportunity to do that. (Ibid.)

As with almost every decision during the referendum campaign, Haydn made Trimble agree. ‘That’s great, that’s great,’ he kept repeating in order to convince his media director that he was taking the whole thing seriously. (Ibid.)

The rock group Ash (whose members were Protestant) agreed to attend a press conference with Trimble at the Waterfront Hall just hours before the concert to urge a Yes vote. Haydn claimed it was the most enjoyable press conference of the entire campaign and highlighted its importance: ‘We needed a young Protestant image to urge first-time voters in the unionist community to come out and vote.’ (Ibid. p.234)

During the concert (at Bono’s invitation) John Hume and David Trimble discarded their suit jackets and strode on to the stage in front of a backdrop which proclaimed: ‘YES – Make Your Own History’. The audience, composed mainly of teenagers, went ecstatic when Bono grabbed Hume and Trimble’s arms and held them aloft. The gesture turned out to be the dominant image of the referendum campaign, eclipsing the triumphalist hero-worship of the Balcombe Street Four and Michael Stone. This public demonstration of unity between constitutional Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism was in complete contrast to the last time Trimble had presented such a public image – hands held aloft once again but this time with Ian Paisley at Drumcree in 1995.

However, the Bono-Hume-Trimble image almost never happened. According to the SDLP's Tim Attwood, the original plan had been for the two party leaders simply to be seen in the audience and it was Bono's idea on the day to bring both of them on stage during the concert. (Ibid. p.235)

Yet, Trimble could not simply 'bank' on the goodwill provided by the peace concert to sell the Agreement to a sceptical and nervous unionist population. He also needed a political 'superstar' to convince the unionist community, or at least a majority of it, to 'buy into' the Agreement. As with Good Friday, Tony Blair returned again to rescue Trimble, armed with a raft of pledges aimed specifically at assuaging unionist fears.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, Trimble's campaign team had a final ace up their sleeve to play before he went into two head-to-head television battles with Paisley and McCartney on the eve of the poll. One of the most nervous constituencies inside the wider unionist community was that of the RUC and their families who were deeply concerned about their own future and what Chris Patten's commission (a stipulation of the Agreement) would mean for them. Hayden and his team needed an experienced, well-respected policeman to calm those fears, which they eventually found in former Chief Constable, Sir Jack Hermon. Indeed, Hermon had guided the RUC through troubled waters (including the shoot-to-kill controversies and subsequent Stalker investigation) and was still highly respected inside its ranks.

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<sup>19</sup> Blair's pledges included that there had to be IRA decommissioning otherwise Sinn Féin would be excluded from office in the Northern Ireland Assembly and he also reassured unionists that the RUC would not be disbanded. See Hennessey (2000).

On the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup> May he joined Trimble outside Belfast City Hall and the subsequent pictures of the two together on the Yes trail were an invaluable propaganda coup. In fact, Haydn insisted that the walkabout may have even been more important than the U2/Ash concert in gaining wavering unionists' support. (Ibid. p.238)

Later that afternoon, Trimble's first televised clash with Robert McCartney was recorded for BBC Northern Ireland's flagship politics programme *Hearts and Minds*. During the course of the debate McCartney clearly landed a number of severe blows on Trimble, particularly on decommissioning. He berated Trimble so much that the UUP leader made a damaging gaffe, calling disarmament 'irrelevant.'(Ibid.) It was thus evident that Trimble had lost 'round one'.

'Round two' was less than three hours away, when he was scheduled for his first live television debate with Ian Paisley. Haydn armed Trimble with a secret weapon to produce during the course of the debate – a series of photographs of Paisley and DUP colleagues wearing the red berets of the paramilitary styled Ulster Resistance in 1986. When Paisley accused Trimble of supping with the paramilitary devil, that was the IRA / Sinn Féin, by signing the Agreement, Trimble pulled out the pictures. 'What about these, Ian?' he kept shouting at the DUP leader (Ibid. p.239). Trimble kept his notorious temper under control and won round two by listening to Haydn's advice and effectively using the photographs to shield against Paisley's line of attack.

Some onlookers, including Gerry Adams, believed Trimble had won the head-to-head with Paisley because: 'he took up a positive position, putting clear blue water between the pro-and anti-Agreement unionist camps. For once he sold the agreement like a leader who believed in it.' (Cited in Adams, 2003, p.374)

Trimble's more positive pro-Agreement approach in the final week of campaigning may well have contributed to the successful 71.12 per cent Yes vote announced on the 23<sup>rd</sup> May. At the count he proclaimed: 'The people want to go forward... They cannot be held back any longer.' (Mc Donald 2000, p.241)

Yet, worrying signs for future developments were never far away and indeed evident on the day of the count itself at the King's Hall in Belfast when Trimble still refused to talk directly to Sinn Féin. Instead, he made indirect demands or ultimatums from Gerry Adams and his party, calling on the republican movement to disarm their war machine and make the promise that there would never ever be a return to violence.

### **(iii) Democratic United Party / United Unionists**

In the opening weeks of the referendum campaign the DUP and the 'No' camp hit the ground running; they were 'first out of the blocks' because (in comparison to the other parties) they had adequate time to prepare. The DUP and Robert Mc Cartney's UKUP had left the talks in September 1997 when Sinn Féin were allowed to participate and unlike the eight political parties advocating a Yes vote in the referendum (who had spent an exhaustive time preceding the signing of the Agreement in negotiations), the No camp were fresh and ready to fight a campaign.

At the DUP's campaign launch on the 15<sup>th</sup> April, Ian Paisley demanded that both sides of the argument get equal treatment in the forthcoming referendum campaign (Oliver, 1998). He said the DUP would take legal action if the Yes campaign got government backing - remarks that could be attributed to a leaked memo by the new Director of the Northern Ireland Information Service, Tom Kelly, which was published by the DUP on Friday 28<sup>th</sup> March 1998. The memo outlined a British government communications strategy for a potentially historic referendum campaign and consisted of measures that would be taken to ensure a favourable outcome for the government, that is, a high Yes vote. It is interesting that initially the document was leaked to the UUP - as this infers that it may have been a disaffected or anti-Agreement member of this party who copied or passed it on to the chief opponents of any emerging deal - the DUP. St Clair McAllister, Director of Communications for the DUP, highlighted the UUP's role in the affair (as well as voicing his distrust of the British government/NIO in general):

The Ulster Unionist Party had the Tom Kelly document some 24 hours before we did. In the Forum I asked a question that particular day: "Well if you had it 24 hours, which they admitted, what were you doing with it for 24 hours? Did you not think it was significant to release it?" Of course they didn't want to release it because they were basically pro-Agreement. It was the DUP that revealed it. It had a clear and obvious deception about it, and in relation to the people, it was... Entertain them, bring them on, spin the message out, and sell the whole product. From that point of view it revealed what we've always thought about the British government and the NIO... I do not see the NIO as a friend; I see them as the enemy, in gentle terms. (Interview with author, 1 November 2001)

For McAllister, the entire 'peace process' had only come to fruition as evidenced by the Agreement because four key factors had fallen into place at the right time:

A weak British government, continuing violence, a weak leader of Ulster Unionism and a weak leader of the RUC... all those things came together and people said "Right! Here's the opportunity, it has come together, we can do this now". For a con job to work several factors have to be in place; it can't work just around one particular person (Ibid.).

The challenge at this point, for the DUP and the No camp was to stave off the emerging pro-Agreement caucus (or those key players involved in what they deemed 'the con job') by running an effective campaign of their own to convince the unionist electorate to vote No in the forthcoming referendum. As such, they began to develop a number of key messages and slogans, two of which were pivotal during the referendum campaign. McAllister provides an illuminating insight into the process (and importantly, the thinking) behind the creation of their first core message or key slogan of the campaign:

The slogan came up as a combined effort. I remember we were sitting talking about this and we were saying that we had to tell people that there was nothing wrong with saying No. One thing I put forward - if you analyse it - most of us sitting around that table were all parents... You actually have more often to tell your child No for its own good, more often than you say Yes. No to drugs, No to drink, and people think No is a very non-constructive word. I put forward the case that it was probably a more constructive word than saying Yes. Also the fact – I put this in, I thought it was quite good – that if you even look at the Ten Commandments, apart from one, every other said ‘No’. And I said “well now, I wouldn’t like to go to God and say: “You’re not being very constructive with these Ten Commandments”. We had to get people to want to say that it’s right to say No. Suddenly we had it...after sitting down with around 200 options, somebody said “that’s it!” – It’s right to say No! In this case it’s right!” Like a lot of good ideas, you toil over them for a matter of days or weeks and then suddenly within seconds the whole thing just comes together (Ibid.).

The No camp’s key slogan of the referendum campaign was coherent, simple and dogged and cleverly turned a negative into a positive. Essentially, this simplistic ‘line’ was pursued or ‘hammered home’ throughout the referendum campaign. Indeed, McAllister summed up the DUP’s position:

We want an agreement but we want an agreement that the vast majority on both sides of the fence can agree with. So we’re saying give us an agreement that the vast majority of both nationalists and unionists do like. Devolved government Yes, we’ve always been a party for a devolved government and we’ve always been positive in that. We are saying that it’s right to say No against this particular Agreement (Ibid.).

Equally insightful, McAllister also explains how the second and subsidiary message or theme was arrived at:

We had a committee of anti-Agreement unionists with ourselves being the main party... there was also Robert McCartney, for example, involved at that time as well as others. We wanted to have a campaign, a slogan, and a message that people could identify with. We sat down and we thought about it. When you cut away all the economics etc. what is it that really drives people on? What is it that holds people together? If a football team is losing or if a family is having problems? Well it's their heart. They love their family or their team because they have a passion for it. It's a very emotive thing obviously as well. It really came about by that, by sitting down and analysing the situation and it was very obvious that the heart symbol has been used for a long, long time for various things. It's a symbol of love, a symbol of broken hearts etc. It was also a very acceptable type of symbolism and the obvious thing then was to have a heart-shaped Union Jack with the attendant message 'have a heart for Ulster.' (Ibid.)

The key theme of 'have a heart for Ulster' summed up everything that their campaign was about - pulling on the heart strings of Ulster and asking the people to vote No for Ulster. During the referendum campaign, heart-shaped lapel pins were sold in the thousands to raise finance for the No campaign.

The No camp's combined themes or messages were widely regarded by political friends and foes alike as being the best slogans of the referendum campaign, including the SDLP's Director of Communications, Conall McDevitt:

They got off to a very good start with a couple of exceptionally smart moves. They chose to use a base British-Unionist nationalist ticket and they articulated it extremely clearly. The 'have a heart for Ulster' was the most effective campaign image I have seen in a very long time. It was a very tasteful image in terms of you found it very difficult to offend you even though you didn't agree with it, and it was a very upfront and honest image as well...whoever thought that up did a very good job and their campaign consolidated very



well around it. They managed to divide the Ulster Unionist Party, which is always a very sensible thing to do when you are trying to stir up unionist opinion. (Interview with author, 3 June 1999)

Indeed, during the referendum campaign, the No camp took the fight to the UUP leader's own constituency. A United Unionist coordinating committee consisting of the DUP, the Orange Order, the Ulster Clubs and several anti-Agreement members of the UUP set up an office in Portadown, in the heart of David Trimble's Upper Bann constituency (McDonald 2000). While Trimble could call on the support of intellectuals and academics, the No camp played on the real fears of ordinary unionists. From the outset, the No camp played the emotional card with unionist voters who were horrified at the prospect of terrorists walking free from prison. The referendum effectively became an intellectual struggle within unionism between the rational and emotional wings.

Essentially, the central thrust of the No camp's assault on the Agreement was to play on the raw emotions of Protestants who had withstood thirty years of republican terrorism. Also during the referendum campaign the more extreme wing of the No camp (the LVF, along with some of the Ulster Independence faction etc.) 'terrorised' UUP members using dirty tricks and intimidation tactics. Vandals attacked Trimble's offices in Portadown, and party workers in his Upper Bann constituency faced a constant barrage of verbal abuse via the telephone (Ibid. p.221). Leaflets distributed in the constituency contained the home telephone numbers of Trimble and some of his more faithful party stalwarts. Under the title: 'Trimble embraces the IRA' one leaflet printed the constituency office numbers of Trimble, along with John Taylor, Ken Maginnis and Cecil Walker (Ibid.). The text

of the leaflet claimed that Trimble was an agent of the British security services: 'Why is David Trimble taking this course of action? Is he an MI5/6 agent - recruited during his Vanguard days - as some allege?' (Ibid.) Another leaflet produced at the time incorporated a picture of a bomb-damaged Portadown with the attendant message: 'If you want some good to come of this destruction of our town make yourself this promise. I WILL NEVER VOTE FOR DAVID TRIMBLE AGAIN!' (Ibid.) In addition, one of the more subtle propaganda ploys was the overnight appearance of a series of fly posters in mainly Protestant areas of Northern Ireland. They depicted an Irish tricolour with the message: 'Vote Yes.' (Ibid.) The UUP was convinced that the posters had been put up by elements in the No camp, designed to make Protestants see the Agreement as an exclusively republican/nationalist project.

Indeed, throughout the referendum campaign, the DUP's deputy leader, Peter Robinson, had claimed that it should now be clear to all unionists that the Agreement was a 'vehicle to trundle us into a united Ireland' (cited in Hennessey, 2000, p.189).

Although the Good Friday Agreement was arrived at after negotiations between several parties, Paisley termed the settlement a 'Trimble-Adams' pact, and it was, in his view:

Worse than the Anglo-Irish Agreement, more treacherous than the Framework Document and poses far greater dangers to the Union than the Sunningdale Agreement ever did. Under the deal, the Union is weakened. It is nothing short of deception and lies to portray this deal as strengthening the Union. Unionists know that any deal so enthusiastically

endorsed by the Dublin government and the SDLP is something that represents a dilution and diminution of the Union. (Ibid.)

Although the No camp attempted to soften their image with the message 'Have a heart for Ulster', this was very much at odds with the emotive and often apocalyptic language employed throughout their campaign, as evident in the DUP's referendum campaign leaflet featuring a grandfatherly portrait of Ian Paisley accompanied by a 'dear friend and voter' letter: "The Agreement is a staging post to a united Ireland and has come about by abject surrender to IRA/ Sinn Féin . A Yes vote is a vote which the enemies of our Province and those who have surrendered to them are calling for." Paisley concludes: "Let the world know that the Ulster people will not be bullied, bribed or butchered into accepting fascist rule. It is suicidal to do otherwise".

MacGinty believed that the DUP were quite clever and deliberate in their use of emotive terms:

It isn't the case that they are unsophisticated in using this language. They've sat down and they've thought: 'How are we going to maximise our vote? The answer is by scaring the hell out of people.' (Interview with author, 2 June 1999)

Indeed, St Clair McAllister lends credence to MacGinty's assertion that the DUP intentionally use emotive language and he sees no problem with this:

I have no problem in using emotive language and I have no problems with emotions. I don't know what planet people come from if they want to have this dead, zombie-like existence of neutrality. It doesn't exist anywhere in the real world. It's the passion that

men have, the desire that men have, that drives them on. The desire to know what's over the other hill, to see what's in a foreign country, to make a better motor car, to get to the moon. All those things start with emotion, they don't start with a cold, clinical fact. They're emotional. I've used umpteen examples and no one has ever proved me wrong on this. You go to the likes of a Louis Pasteur who gave his life working night and day to bring about advanced medicine. Why did he do it? To make money? To be famous? No. He cared passionately and emotionally about people. You go to any really good organisation that is achieving anything. There's passion there. Yes, they have to pay their way; they have to have their shareholders – all of those things. But the most successful companies are the ones who deal in emotions. I think it's important to use emotive language. It's there, it's part of our being and I have no problem using it. If you're talking about telling lies and using emotive language, then that's a different subject, that's basically telling lies. I don't believe in telling lies, but I have no problem in having the right position and using emotive language. (Interview with author, 1 November 2001)

Returning to the referendum campaign, on 5<sup>th</sup> May, a growing number of anti-Agreement unionists came together under one umbrella group and 'officially' launched their campaign with the aforementioned slogan 'It's Right to Say No.' Calling themselves the United Unionists, their campaign team composed the DUP, the UKUP and dissident UUP MPs Willie Ross and Willie Thompson. The former UUP leader, Lord Molyneaux, also launched an attack on the Agreement from the House of Lords, warning that the IRA's failure to decommission would threaten a 'nightmare situation' of elected Assembly politicians 'sitting at the table side by side with terrorists with guns on the table, under the table or outside the door' (Hennessey 2000, p.190).

In outlining the strategy of the United Unionists, Peter Robinson was confident that a majority of unionists would vote No in the referendum and once that was

achieved, the objective would be to elect as many anti-Agreement unionists as possible to the Assembly, where they could dismantle the entire process from within. (Ibid.) They would attempt to frustrate the establishment of cross-border bodies; would vote against Sinn Féin entering government; and would oppose the release of prisoners. Robinson believed that nationalists, and in particular the SDLP, had provided the anti-Agreement unionists with the means to achieve this: ‘John Hume has been too clever by half. By insisting on an Assembly with a nationalist veto, he has also provided an Assembly with a unionist veto. He may regret that.’ (Ibid.) He predicted that the Agreement would inevitably collapse and that ‘for the first time in generations the thrust of government policy would have to be: “How can we accommodate unionists?”’ (Ibid.)

Robinson also denied that the United Unionists were acting irresponsibly. For him, it was the Yes campaigners who were acting immorally. They supported the establishment of a ‘rigged and undemocratic’ Assembly that was not based on majoritarian principles; they had agreed to cross-border bodies that allowed a ‘hostile foreign state’ a growing role in Northern Ireland’s internal affairs; they were proposing to sit ‘cheek-to-cheek with Adams and McGuinness in government’ while the IRA remained ‘armed to the teeth’; and they would allow the release of ‘unrepentant’ prisoners and the destruction of the RUC, which had valiantly upheld law and order in trying times. (Ibid. p.191) In addition, the only way for Adams and McGuinness to be removed from office – because of the need for cross-community support – was if they were ‘found with a smoking gun in their hand’ (Ibid.). Furthermore, Robinson believed that the IRA would resume its terrorist campaign. He found it ‘unbelievable’ that the UUP leaders who had opposed the Sunningdale

Agreement would now support this Agreement: 'I stood shoulder to shoulder with David Trimble and John Taylor back then. They told us that agreement was bad for the Union because it put [the SDLP's] Gerry Fitt in government. Now they tell us this agreement strengthens the Union when it puts Gerry Adams in government.'

(Ibid.)

The DUP deputy leader also rejected the arguments of the 32-County Sovereignty Committee and Republican Sinn Féin - that the Agreement copper-fastened partition: 'Those people simply want a united Ireland today. They are not prepared to wait even a few months like the Sinn Féin leadership.' (Ibid.) His contention was that the repeal of the Government of Ireland Act 1920 meant that Northern Ireland was no longer an integral part of the United Kingdom: 'The mooring ropes have been loosened and we have been set adrift and pushed towards a united Ireland.'

(Ibid.)

Only a matter of days after the United Unionists' campaign launch, the No camp were handed their greatest propaganda coup of the campaign to date. The stars of the show at Sinn Féin's special Ard Fheis (to endorse the Agreement and end their policy of abstentionism) were the IRA's Balcombe Street Four who had been imprisoned for 23 years. The four, who had been transferred to jails in the Irish Republic, were granted temporary release to attend the conference, and were greeted with wild cheers and a standing ovation. The triumphalist reception of what many Protestants deemed 'IRA murderers' being hugged by Sinn Féin politicians on the platform and the general heroes' welcome they received, led to outrage in unionist quarters in the North. The No camp could justifiably argue that triumphant scenes

like these would be the norm each time IRA prisoners walked free from jail without completing their sentences over the following two years. Only by voting No to the Agreement, they believed, could this sickening prospect be prevented. Essentially, the notion of prisoner releases only seemed to confirm Robert McCartney's contention that the Agreement was all about appeasing terrorists (McDonald 2000).

The No camp were handed a further propaganda coup on 14<sup>th</sup> May when loyalist killer, Michael Stone, appeared at a UDP (Ulster Democratic Party) rally in the Ulster Hall in support of a Yes vote in the forthcoming referendum.

At this juncture, the No camp were making inroads in the battle for unionist hearts and minds. In stepping up their campaign, they then launched an emotive media blitz via poster and newspaper advertisements. One showed a young woman wiping away a tear, a year after the referendum, asking: 'How did I bring myself to vote SF/IRA into government?' (Ibid. p.227).

The United Unionists also cleverly turned sufficient consensus on its head. After decades insisting that the majority in Northern Ireland – effectively the unionist population – should decide the constitutional future of Northern Ireland, anti-Agreement unionists now claimed that a Yes vote would be invalid unless a majority of unionists and nationalists *separately* voted in favour of the Agreement (Hennessey 2000 p.192). This view was also widely accepted in government circles. As such, Tony Blair began to move into overdrive to reassure the unionist community of the Agreement's merits, and one individual in particular, the UUP's Jeffrey Donaldson. Unlike many anti-Agreement unionists, Donaldson had

supported the constitutional arrangements in the Agreement; however, he also believed that there were weaknesses and amoral aspects of the Agreement. Intensive pressure was applied by Downing Street to persuade Donaldson to come down in favour of a Yes vote, as such an outcome could sway many undecided unionist voters. (Ibid.) Finally, a week before the referendum vote, Donaldson confirmed that he would be voting No.

Also in the final week of the campaign, former UUP leader, Lord Molyneux confirmed he would be voting No. Indeed, the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland added further to the British government's misery at this time when it declared that as an 'organisation committed to civil and religious liberty' it could not instruct anyone how to vote but it was 'unable to recommend the Agreement to the people of Ulster' (Ibid. p.194).

At this juncture, with the No camp inflicting damage to the Yes vote and seemingly in the ascendancy within unionism, the UUP made attempts to hit back. They did so with the help of the SDLP-inspired U2/Ash peace concert. However, the DUP's McAllister was dismissive of the concert and its effect on Northern Ireland's younger generation:

People look back to the U2 concert as being the super masterstroke or whatever the case may be... that this rather strained handshake between Hume and Trimble was somehow a tremendous step forward. I have the facts and figures to show that during the referendum campaign, the vast majority of 18-26 year olds, which was the targeted age group, were actually coming to the DUP. We had 23%. The next was actually Sinn Féin who were not involved in the U2 concert as well at around 15%. The SDLP were down at 8% and I think



Trimble's UUP was about 12 or 13%. We were 10 points clear [of the UUP]. That was a very worrying thing for the government at that particular time. I've always maintained that young people have much more savvy than you give them credit for, and I think that one thing that they're looking for above all else is honesty, they're looking for the truth, what is the bottom line here? They respect that straightforward honesty and they don't want any nonsense or flannel. They can see through all that flannel. I think that ours was a straightforward message, in spite of the U2 concert and all its attempts to make appeals to people. (Interview with author, 1 November 2001)

McAllister may indeed be dismissive of the concert's effect on younger voters, yet the event did represent a defining moment in the referendum campaign when for the first time (in such a public way) the two traditions came together in a show of unity. Its positive reverberations undoubtedly contributed towards a swing back in unionism from No to Yes. Indeed, in the final week of the campaign the No camp began to steadily lose ground, none more so than in its final throes. According to Stephen Grimason, BBC Northern Ireland's political editor during the referendum campaign, Robert McCartney's public haranguing of Tony Blair (caught on camera) had a negative impact on the No camp:

And then the last dregs of the campaign... the disastrous meeting between Bob McCartney and the Prime Minister in Holywood, absolutely had a very bad effect on the No camp's campaign because at that point it wasn't fashionable at all to be haranguing the Prime Minister. Then interestingly McCartney was savaged by a bunch of women after he called them a rent-a-mob, one of them Lord Napier's wife, Lady Napier. You know, it wasn't his finest day and given that he was supposed to have been in Belfast at that point with Ian Paisley and various other people on that part of the campaign and didn't tell them what he was doing. Paisley made it be known very clearly to Bob as to how he thought that had been handled... there was an awful row between them. And that happening the night

before, well the coverage was the day before the referendum itself... I think that nudged the figure in a certain direction. (Interview with author, 20 March 2003)

After a strong pro-Agreement surge in the final week, the referendum result came in at 71.12% Yes, and 21.88% No.

The No camp's leaders tried their best to put a brave face on their defeat. As he left the count centre Robert McCartney insisted that a majority of unionists had actually voted No (McDonald 2000). In fact, a *Sunday Times*/Coopers and Lybrand survey published a day after the result showed that 96 per cent of Catholics voted Yes, while a smaller majority of Protestants, around 55 per cent, also backed the Agreement. (Ibid. p.241) Behind McCartney, came Paisley and his DUP team, who had to run the gauntlet of jeering loyalists who were chanting: 'Cheerio, cheerio, cheerio...cheerio, cheerio, cheerio, cheerio!' (Ibid.)

McAllister was adamant that one person in particular had greatly contributed to the No camps' failure to win over unionist hearts and minds - Tony Blair. The British prime minister's interventions and the 'pledges' he made to the unionist community was in McAllister's mind the main reason for the Yes camp's success in the referendum vote:

It was quite obvious that the Yes campaign was under pressure because they didn't have one central distinct message that they kept saying. Government focus groups were revealing that we were winning a tremendous amount of ground... the turning factor for the Yes campaign was the prime minister's promises – in other words if you couldn't trust the prime minister, who could you trust? That was the turning point for them. That was, shall we say, their masterstroke, even though it was deception and lies to try and turn the campaign

around. I think if he hadn't done that, with their mixed message and our very definite central message, I think we would have got the required numbers in the unionist community. We would have clawed back that extra 10% or whatever it was, to around 62%, where David Trimble would not have been able with 62-63% to go ahead with the Agreement. So those percentage points that we lost in that sense were entirely due to the prime minister. (Interview with author, 1 November 2001)

For McAllister, the Agreement was sold by Tony Blair in a way that a snake-oil salesman sells to a naïve audience:

They [the people of Northern Ireland] were told this was going to cure all your ills, that there would be no side effects from it, that one dose would do it... I'll use the analogy of the snake oil salesman... He's coming into a town where there's been no excitement, no buzz for a long time. There suddenly arrives a brightly painted, coloured wagon and it looks good. He'd stop and he'd rest, he looks good, he's well groomed, people around and about him. He's talking about the success he's had somewhere else. He's got the magic cure for all your ills; it's only a dollar a bottle. You can use all the analogies in the world and that is what it basically came down to. It was a snake-oil salesman arriving in a place where people were willing and wanting to buy. I'm glad to say that not everybody in the town bought a bottle. (Ibid.)

After failing to achieve the requisite number of Assembly seats needed to produce an anti-Agreement unionist majority, the challenge now for Paisley and the DUP was to persuade enough UUP 'waverers' to defect to the combined anti-Agreement benches. If he could help to alter the balance in the Assembly and produce a majority of unionists opposed to the Agreement, the entire project would collapse. The process was predicated on the central condition that the Agreement must have cross-community support in the Assembly, and therefore, if a unionist majority

voted against its implementation the entire arrangement could not function and would essentially be deemed unworkable.

#### **(iv) Sinn Féin**

In the aftermath of Good Friday, the Sinn Féin leadership had a somewhat difficult task in selling the Agreement to the republican grassroots. After the 1970 split, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness had built their revolutionary reputations partly by accusing Official Sinn Féin of selling out on basic principles. In the early 70's, the Officials had decided upon a more reformist path that entailed the *de facto* recognition of partition and their willingness to enter into a Stormont-based administration. A quarter of a century later, in relation to the Northern Ireland institutions set out in Strand One of the Agreement (whether they liked to admit it or not), Sinn Féin were effectively following the same course (although every ideological retreat could be dressed up as a strategic move to either gain ground politically or essentially wrong-foot unionism) (McDonald 2000).

On Strand Two (or the North-South dimension), Adams (in the run-up to Good Friday) set out as his bottom line (*Ireland on Sunday* on 8<sup>th</sup> March) – that he wanted cross-border bodies operating independently of the Assembly; the retention of Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution; and policing and courts coming under the remit of new all-Ireland institutions. In the Agreement, however, there was a reduced number of North-South bodies - under the Northern Ireland Assembly's control, amendments to Articles 2 and 3 and no provision for all-Ireland police and courts services. The Agreement's strength derived from the fact that no political party achieved their 'bottom line' and that all participants had made 'compromises'.

The scale of the philosophical recasting of republicanism (and Irish nationalism in general) was ambitious and innovative - the territorial basis was (on the face of it anyway) being discarded and the claim to Irish unity was now to be a matter of argument and persuasion rather than doctrine. While there may have been cynicism about their true value, the amending of Articles 2 and 3 did represent a major change in the nationalist and republican mindset (De Breadun 2001).

For some Sinn Féin supporters (who may have dwelt on issues like changing the Irish constitution or entering Stormont) a sudden change of mindset would not be forthcoming and there was a very real prospect that some members would fall away and join the hardline 32-County Sovereignty Committee or Republican Sinn Féin .

The political journalist, Deaglan de Breadun, summed up Sinn Féin's predicament at this juncture:

If the North-South bodies had a wider remit and the policing reform(s) were 'nailed down' better, the document would have been easier for the Sinn Féin leadership to sell to its members. The issue of whether the new Assembly was a truly partitionist institution or not was bound to surface. Given the safeguards for the minority and the link with the North-South Ministerial Council, there was an argument that this was a fundamentally different institution from the old Stormont. Some Sinn Féin members felt the North-South bodies would never be more than token institutions unless the party was represented on them. For that to happen, Sinn Féin would have to stand for the Assembly, take its seats and overcome any decommissioning obstacle that might exist to becoming ministers. Although Sinn Féin would not put it this way, in order to push for a united Ireland there would have to be pro tem acceptance of partition. (Ibid. pp 148-149)

Even if the referenda passed, in both Northern and Southern Ireland – or perhaps especially if they passed – further violence was envisaged. Yet, the Sinn Féin leadership seemed to be keeping a firm grip on most of the grassroots in the republican heartlands of the North. The party left the negotiations with a number of positives – the ‘equality agenda’, prisoner releases and policing reform. Sinn Féin believed that life ‘on the ground’ would have to improve for ordinary nationalists in the short term and that the bread-and-butter concerns of nationalists and the political structures necessary to accommodate them should now take precedence over ‘physical force’ republicanism. (Ibid.)

It was the equality agenda espoused by the party, which was the key that would help unlock the door to republican participation in the Assembly and the northern executive. As de Breadun highlighted:

The ultimate objective of a united Ireland would be maintained but, in the meantime, what could be wrong with achieving the maximum level of rights and equality for nationalists within the existing set-up, especially if you were also undermining partition in the process? Mainstream republicans argued that unionism was based on sectarian supremacy and that, by campaigning for equality, you were helping to remove the basis for unionism. (Ibid. pp 149-150)

Yet, dissident republicans rejected this analysis (and indeed Sinn Féin’s) out of hand, that is, collaboration with six-county institutions would end up with republicans being absorbed into the existing scheme of things or else pushed to the margins of political life.

As tensions began to emerge, Sinn Féin decided that two weekend gatherings were needed to reach a decision on the Agreement. The first was the 92<sup>nd</sup> Sinn Féin Ard Fheis that began on 18<sup>th</sup> April 1998. One of its highlights was a speech by Thenjiwe Mtintso, the Deputy Secretary General of the ANC (African National Congress), South Africa, who arrived with a prepared speech but discarded her text and instead spoke from her heart. She told the delegates of her experience of revolutionary struggle as a soldier in her fight against the apartheid system. She also dealt at length on her experiences of negotiations. It was a fitting contribution that caught the mood of the moment and touched on many of the fears evident among republicans (Adams 2003).

While many at the first Ard Fheis raised their concerns about the Agreement, the overwhelming majority expressed confidence in the party leadership and its strategy. However, it was also obvious from the speeches that there was a real difficulty for Sinn Féin in the South. An unambiguous 'Yes' vote in the forthcoming referendum was at this stage not an absolute 'given' as tampering with the Irish constitution remained unpopular.

There would be some erosion of republican ranks, but at this juncture the circumstances did not exist for a massive split. It was evident that there was a war-weariness in the air at the first Ard Fheis, and several speakers from the North (older and more experienced than most of the Southern contributors) voiced the desire that their children and their children's children would not have to go through what they had suffered, (De Breadun 2001). Watching the debate, De Breadun stated that:



One was tempted to conclude that when this document was accepted and when, as expected, Sinn Féin entered the new Assembly not as a servant but as one of the masters of the banquet, then it could indeed be said that the war, if not over, had at least lost most of its soldiers. (Ibid. p.151)

The party president would normally give the keynote address at an Ard Fheis, but this time Martin McGuinness (possibly in an attempt to win over the more hard-line element) joined Adams to give delegates a lengthy, blow-by-blow account of the negotiations. Adams told those present that he wasn't going to prejudge the outcome of the vote that they would have in a matter of weeks, but that, united they could achieve what they desired. (Adams 2003)

A reconvened one-day session on 10<sup>th</sup> May was scheduled to take a formal decision on the Agreement. Adams was determined that he would not be rushed and that there needed to be time for party activists and republicans generally, to discuss and debate the many issues that arose from the Agreement. Essentially, his hope was to maintain internal unity and cohesion – that could best be accomplished if people had ownership of the process of agreeing a position on the Agreement. A further hope was that members could endorse it, but do so in a way that even those opposed to it would not walk away from the struggle. (Ibid.)

After the (first) Ard Fheis, Sinn Féin delegates returned to their own areas with instructions to hold strategic discussions at all levels of the party. There was also a leadership-led nationwide series of meetings. (Ibid.)

As part of Sinn Féin's internal debate, the leadership asked President Mandela if he would send a senior ANC delegation to Ireland to speak to republicans about their process of negotiations, the management of change and the challenges this entailed. The effect of Thenjiwe's contribution to the first Ard Fheis was the trigger for this request. If activists could learn from the experience and question those who had previously been on a similar path, then post-Agreement events would not seem such a leap into the dark. The request was granted and key participants from the process of negotiations in South Africa arrived to offer their views. (Ibid.)

The South African contingent travelled widely throughout republican Ireland. In Crossmaglen in South Armagh, Mac Maharaj (Minister for Transport who had spent twelve years imprisoned on Robben Island) spoke of change as a permanent condition, in which republicans would have to reconcile their strategy, tactics and principles. He told the audience 'You can make a wrong choice in your strategy, but if you do it as a united force you can later change your course.' (Ibid. p.371) To allay fears over a new political dispensation, he pointed out that for everyone 'When change looms there is doubt and hesitation' (Ibid.).

It was very hard to argue with revolutionaries who had succeeded in their own country when they said tactical flexibility did not imply selling-out on principles. At a rally in Belfast's Ulster Hall, Cyril Ramaphosa, ANC chief negotiator during the transition to South African democracy, told the audience: 'Negotiations are about give and take. Had we wanted everything or nothing, we would have ended up with nothing' (Ibid.). Ramaphosa and Matthew Phose also visited the men and women prisoners in Long Kesh and Maghaberry.

Sinn Féin Chairman, Mitchel McLaughlin highlighted the difficulties the leadership faced at this point in time:

We had to change the party constitution. It stood for 80 years. We had to end the policy of abstentionism that had existed since partition. It wasn't easy to do and we did meetings travelling night and day in the weeks immediately after the Good Friday Agreement. We had to deliver more than anybody else. We had to convince our people that giving up on Articles 2 and 3 was the right thing to do, that ending the policy of abstentionism was the right thing to do and that returning to Stormont was the right thing to do as part of our commitment to the Good Friday Agreement. We had to do all of that against a background of David Trimble misrepresenting what we had agreed to. He was telling his constituency that we had agreed to decommission IRA weapons, well we hadn't, we never had...David Trimble's argument to his constituency was creating difficulties in ours. (Interview with author, 9 June 1999)

Behind-the-scenes or the public glare of the media spotlight, widespread briefings of Provisional IRA members were taking place. These indicated that the Agreement was 'better than expected'; that the Northern Ireland Assembly was part of 'transitional' arrangements; and that there would be no point in further continued violence, because within '10 to 15 years' there would be significant 'demographic' change in the North's population to provide for a nationalist majority in favour of a united Ireland (Hennessey 2000, p.189). This message, reinforced by all prisoners to be released within two years, meant that the Provisional IRA was prepared to accept the Agreement. It was understood that Sinn Féin negotiators at the talks had rejected a longer period for prisoner releases. The offer of a two-year release deadline had been communicated to prisoners at the Maze and was immediately accepted. The role of the prisoners in supporting the peace process and the

emotional pull of getting their comrades home was a decisive factor in convincing members of the republican movement to lend support to the Agreement. (Ibid.)

On the 30<sup>th</sup> April, the IRA issued a statement, which said that, while the Agreement fell short of what was required, it nevertheless marked ‘a significant development’ (De Breadun 2001, p.154). However, the organisation maintained its hard line position on the weapons issue: ‘Let us make it clear that there will be no decommissioning by the IRA.’(Ibid.) They also restated their belief that a durable peace required national self-determination and that whether the Agreement heralded a transformation of the situation was entirely dependent on the will of the British government. Its statement concluded by commending the efforts of Sinn Féin. (Ibid.)

The call now among republicans was for a united front, as no one wanted a split in the ranks. Adams (who had been lobbying for months for the British to transfer republican prisoners from jails in Britain to Ireland) made it clear to Mo Mowlam that this was crucial in the build-up to the second Ard Fheis on 10<sup>th</sup> May, (Adams 2003). In a move clearly calculated to influence republican thinking, six prisoners were eventually transferred to the Republic of Ireland. Among the six were four IRA volunteers – Hugh Doherty, Harry Duggan, Joe O’Connell and Eddie Butler – known collectively as the Balcombe Street Four.

The Ard Chomhairle met again, and the Sinn Féin leadership agreed two emergency motions to be put to the delegates at the reconvened Ard Fheis. There were many in the media who believed the ‘emergency’ motions to be a foregone conclusion and

they were essentially convinced that the leadership would win any vote (Ibid. p.372). However, Adams claimed that there remained inherent difficulties:

For Sinn Féin to take seats in the assembly in the North, we had to change the party's constitution and rules. That required a two-thirds majority. I knew that to carry the party and remove any risk of a serious schism we needed a massive endorsement. The Ard Chomhairle also agreed to ask the Ard Fheis to pass a motion to call for a "Yes" vote in the referendum in the Twenty-six Counties. Many colleagues in the South were especially unhappy with the proposed changes to the Irish constitution. I knew there was bound to be resistance, but I couldn't judge how extensive it might be. All of the feedback from our internal meetings pointed to almost all the Southern delegates being against changes to articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution. Some of our key activists, including leadership people, felt strongly about this. (Ibid. pp 372 - 373)

Despite the claims by Adams, many sceptics remained critical that the Sinn Féin debate on the Agreement was a total sham, a charade for the benefit of the voters and the media (De Breadun 2001). It was presumed that delegates would vote whatever way the IRA leadership (dominated by prominent members of Sinn Féin) had decided. Whereas, the first debate on the 18<sup>th</sup> April had clearly been genuine, with Southern delegates obviously plagued by doubts, after the IRA gave a qualified blessing to the Agreement criticisms began to mount. By the time of the second Ard Fheis on the 10<sup>th</sup> May, the only difficulties that the sceptics could foresee for the leadership was how to keep it from looking too easy. (Ibid.)

At the second Ard Fheis, Martin McGuinness told the delegates that the Good Friday Agreement had weakened the Union because of a clause limiting its life to the will of a majority in the Six Counties (ignoring that this had been British

government policy since 1973) (Hennessey 2000). He accepted that the Agreement did not go as far as most nationalists wished but it was the basis for advancement and the republican analysis was now at the heart of Irish politics as never before. Britain's role in the Union was now somewhat akin to one partner saying the relationship was over but that he or she was willing to wait 'until the children have grown up.' (Ibid. p.188) There was now 'no absolute commitment, no raft of parliamentary Acts to back up an absolute claim, but only an agreement to stay until the majority decides otherwise. This is a long way from being as British as Finchley.' (Ibid.)

The downside to the Agreement for republicans involved the proposed inclusion of the consent clause in the Irish Constitution and the definition of the nation in terms of its people rather than its territory. However, on a more positive note, McGuinness drew the delegates' attention to the Irish constitutional amendments that established North-South bodies. Although the Union had been weakened, partition remained. Nevertheless, this too could be weakened by the dynamic operation of all-Ireland structures which were part of the Agreement and which unionists had fought 'tooth and nail to prevent.' (Ibid. p.189) From the beginning, explained McGuinness, Sinn Féin knew that the talks parameters laid down by the two governments meant that a united Ireland would not come out of this phase of the negotiations. So the party set itself the task of 'weakening the British link while defending the rights of Irish men and women and it is in this context that we must honestly measure the gains and losses.' (Ibid.)

Critics and sceptics alike would claim a contrary view to McGuinness – that an ageing, war-weary movement had come to terms with reality and settled for political advances within Northern Ireland while accepting that the Border was there to stay. (De Breadun 2001.) Closer to the truth was that everything was still to play for. Every concession boasted by unionists in the Agreement could be matched with a gain claimed by nationalists. The unionist veto had been secured but the link with the crown weakened.

Unbeknownst to the delegates and visitors attending the Ard Fheis, the Sinn Féin leadership had persuaded firstly Mo Mowlam and then the Irish government to release the recently transferred Balcombe Street Four for their first parole in twenty-three years. Indeed, other prisoners were also released on parole from prisons in the North, including Padraid Wilson, the Officer Commanding (OC) of Long Kesh, and Geraldine Ferrity, the OC of the women republican prisoners in Maghaberry. (Adams 2003)

If there were any prospects of substantial opposition to the Agreement by delegates, it quickly dissipated with the Balcombe Street Four's arrival. They were greeted with sustained and wild applause and cheering lasting over ten minutes. Although some accused Sinn Féin of triumphalism, Adams maintained:

In truth, the intention was to show that the Agreement was making a difference. Still, all of us underestimated the reception these men would receive. That shows how busy we were on other issues. The Balcombe Street Four were iconic figures. There is a great affinity with prisoners within republicanism, and prisoners incarcerated in Britain itself are held in special regard. Some years before, we had launched a publicity campaign around the

Balcombe Street Four. The huge spontaneous outpouring of welcome when they entered the Ard Fheis was a measure of the love and respect in which they were held. Tears flowed freely down many faces. They came on to the stage, and the RDS shook with the sound of clapping and the rhythmic stamping of feet (Ibid. p.373).

Indeed, few in the modern era who claimed the label 'political prisoner' had served so much time as the Balcombe Street Four and Adams (once again) compared them to Nelson Mandela. Other prisoners also appeared, spoke from the platform and mixed with the crowd. Republicans, who had been locked up with the key thrown away, were now (much to the distaste of unionists) almost on the point of release as part of the terms of the Agreement that had been negotiated by Sinn Féin.

In the event, there was a huge majority in favour of ending the policy of abstentionism and Sinn Féin's successful candidates taking their seats in a Northern Ireland Assembly. The motion advocating the move was supported by 331 of the 350 delegates (Hennessey 2000). Significantly, they had placed their trust in the Sinn Féin leadership, a leadership that had the pedigree of leading the republican movement in war and now, in relative peace. Adams maintained that:

Of all the moments that have been described as historic, this truly deserved that description. The Ard Fheis really did make history. I again had the job of summing up, of giving people some sense of how far we had come, but also of how much we still had to do. British rule was not ended. Neither was partition. Our struggle had to continue. But that brought us back to the development of strategies and tactics that were needed to build and increase our political strength. The struggle is where the activist is, I told them it was about ending poverty, building political and economic democracy, as well as equality and ending British rule. (Adams 2003, pp 373-374)



In the aftermath of victory at the RDS, if Adams felt any temptation to break into a broad smile, he successfully resisted it. His expression was sombre and in his concluding speech to delegates he went out of his way to console the opponents of change (De Breadun 2001). He may have been thinking of the much larger number of dissidents who were not in the hall but would still consider themselves part of the republican movement. It would not be wrong to contend that significant numbers in attendance may have voted the right way out of loyalty rather than conviction.

Indeed in Parnell Square, a short distance from Sinn Féin's Dublin office, posters of Adams and McGuinness were displayed with the motto: 'Wanted for Treachery' (Ibid. p.155). The Sinn Féin leaders were accused of betraying 'the memory of the Irishmen and women who made the supreme sacrifice.' (Ibid.) Although the posters lost a great deal of their force through being anonymous, they were a disturbing indication of the climate developing in some quarters of the republican movement. There were also reports that Provisional dissidents had regrouped in a new organisation, variously dubbed 'IRA Nua' (Irish translation of 'New IRA') or 'Real IRA'.

Although Sinn Féin had not convinced everyone of their political analysis or the way forward, they had brought the vast majority of the republican movement with them. Their challenge now was to persuade a deeply suspicious unionist community of their peaceful intent. Adams attempted (in his concluding remarks to the second Ard Fheis) to reassure unionists that when Sinn Féin spoke of ending the

British presence in Ireland, it did not mean driving the Protestants into the sea.  
(Adams 2003)

Yet, the media publicity surrounding the Ard Fheis and particularly the reception received by the Balcombe Street Four, (dubbed a 'PR disaster' by the other members of the Yes camp), did not help unionists to feel any more at ease or reassured. However, Sinn Féin's Chairman, Mitchel McLaughlin was more circumspect:

If it was a PR disaster, you have to ask yourself who it was a PR disaster for? And would it have been a bigger PR disaster if the Sinn Féin organisation had rejected the Good Friday Agreement? We delivered big time, we went through the pain and we took the brick bats and we took the criticisms, internally and externally. We brought most of our party who voted it through with 93% support, but we also lost people. There was 7% of our organisation that didn't agree with us and thought that the Good Friday Agreement was not a good deal. They were entitled to their democratic opinion and most of them expressed this and then accepted the will of the party, which passed it with such a vast majority. Others didn't and we lost people who were good friends of ours, comrades over many, many years. The IRA, it seems, had similar difficulties and people left and formed another organisation and we got 'Omagh' as a result. So you can see that the stakes we were playing with were very high. The Balcombe Street Four, I don't deny that they had a huge impact on public opinion but nobody expected to happen what would happen. It was just a question of people who had been buried alive in the British penal system for 23 years suddenly presented – what did they expect to happen? I was there – you could have walked on the atmosphere. There was no question that it was stage-managed; there was no question [if] it was artificial. What was happening there was genuine, raw emotion. People sometimes either cling on too long to issues or exaggerate them, sometimes they may be beneficial and the positive dimensions of it are not properly explored. That's what should happen. (Interview with author, 9 June 1999)

After the second Ard Fheis, the challenge for Sinn Féin was to mobilise support for a Yes vote on the Agreement and in the referenda on the 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1998. With the SDLP promoting a Yes vote and a positive endorsement from Sinn Féin, it was obvious that the nationalist vote, North and South, would be overwhelmingly Yes. McLaughlin highlighted Sinn Féin's approach at this juncture:

In our case, we took an electioneering approach as we were about to contest an election following the referendum and therefore it had a two-fold function. Firstly, our approach helped to get the election machine cranked up. Secondly, it gave us an opportunity on a very positive message to be on the doorsteps recommending a 'Yes' vote, analysing and articulating the analysis that we had developed, the reasons why we supported the Good Friday Agreement, the changes that we thought it would bring about and the purpose of that in strategic terms for a society that was in transition but was also coming out of the turmoil of 30 years of warfare. There were a lot of positive reasons why we would support it and a lot of positive arguments that we presented on the door, which resounded positively on us as an electioneering party. (Ibid.)

Although McLaughlin was adamant that there was a great deal of positive public support throughout Northern Ireland for the Agreement, he was also generally dismissive of how David Trimble and his party took advantage of this:

I have to say, in PR terms, we were gnashing our teeth at the way in which Trimble and co. went about the business of selling the Agreement and thought the UUP had a very inept approach... David Trimble could and should have benefited much more than he did, but in some ways he misrepresented it, he was vacillating, he was betwixt and between at times in his messages and you didn't know whether he was actually at the end of the day genuinely in favour of the Good Friday Agreement or not. (Ibid.)

McLaughlin clearly laid the blame for much of the anti-Agreement or the No camp's relative success at Trimble's doorstep, once again berating the UUP leader:

I think they [the No camp] did better than they should have done because David Trimble just wobbled all over the place. He was inconsistent, inept, and hostile in his presentation and was confrontational within the Yes camp. I think he could have taken advantage and a lot of cover from the huge support that was coming out of nationalism. Even with all his ineptitude he still managed to get a majority of unionism to support it. Now, what would he have gotten had he taken a more positive and confident approach? I think he may have been able to push unionist support up as far as 70 per cent and really wiped Paisley's eye. The No camp had an effective campaign but David Trimble was almost an ally at times. 'No' to the Good Friday Agreement meant 'Yes' to a return to war. For God's sake, David Trimble should have wiped the floor with them. Instead he was trying to fight republicans or was at war mentally with republicans. Instead of saying the same message, delivering it consistently and coming back with a totally and absolutely irrefutable majority within unionism that would have empowered him to do the rest of what he has yet to do, he made a hains [mess] of the referendum campaign... it was time to expose the fact that Paisley represented a declining perspective within unionism and I think that David Trimble bottled out. (Ibid.)

During the final week of the referendum campaign, Sinn Féin mapped out a strategy that included leafleting, a poster campaign and a doorstep canvass. Yet, for McLaughlin it turned out to be the easiest campaign he had ever been engaged in simply because nationalists/republicans were already sold on it at this stage:

The dynamics of the peace process obviously had been around for 4 or 5 years. I think a lot of people were clued in. I have heard it observed often that the general public and public opinion in many ways was in advance of the political parties and the political process. They were tuned into the potentials and the opportunities that were there and we were working

within the nationalist/republican community with enormous goodwill and it was an easy message... We found it a very relaxing campaign and we were delivering a message that our people readily understood, appreciated, enjoyed and welcomed. (Ibid.)

However, while Mc Laughlin refers to party efforts during the latter stages of the referendum campaign, Sinn Féin (usually one of the most energetic and proactive parties) were noticeable by their absence in public and they hardly canvassed at all on the streets of republican heartlands like West Belfast. Sceptics or critics claimed this was due to the overall lack of enthusiasm for the Agreement amongst the Provisionals' rank and file.

Yet, closer to the truth was that Sinn Féin had (after the second Ard Fheis) completed the 'workload' needed to gain majority support in their own constituency for the Agreement (mostly behind the public glare of the media). Unlike the other more orthodox political parties during the referendum campaign, Sinn Féin, sold the Agreement in their own idiosyncratic or unconventional way. As the party's Northern Director of Publicity, Mark Mc Leron pointed out:

Our view in this, all in all, was always to talk our base through, right from pre-ceasefire days, it's the old ANC position where you talk to your own people before you talk to anybody else. (Interview with author, 30 October 2001)

Even if the Agreement was to receive a massive endorsement and Sinn Féin were successful in the Assembly elections, Gerry Adams acknowledged that it's implementation was going to be a long and arduous process, that is, there was still a great deal of work to do:

I knew that thirty years on we were into the endgame. Maybe it was only the beginning of the endgame, but we had to see our way through the next few decades if we were to bed down a peace process and to build a new Ireland. There was so much to do. Building a political party right across the island. Delivering on the outcome of the negotiations and getting the Agreement implemented... When the euphoria died down, when the elections were over, it would be back to the tedious, mind-numbing effort to make the rhetoric of the Agreement a reality. I didn't underestimate how difficult all of this was going to be. Particularly in meeting the needs and removing the fears, or at least helping unionists to remove the fears and concerns they had about the future. Senator Mitchell's words came back to me. Implementing the Agreement was going to be harder than negotiating it. (Adams 2003, pp 375 -376)

## **(v) The Media**

Northern Ireland has a very sensitive and by and large, sensible media...The political media, the political process and the politicians are almost a kind of symbiosis. It is true that politicians used the media from time to time as a conduit. At the same time, the media also knew when not to be used and when to step back. They were clever enough to understand when there was going to be an element of manipulation entering into the equation. They were so skilled, they knew the issues being discussed, the potential of those issues to at any moment cause ripples in society, which at times may not have been helpful and could have resulted perhaps in violence. They were always sensitive and careful to keep what they were reporting within the bounds of good sense and good political judgement. (Interview with Colin Ross, 8 June 1999)

Senior Information Officer of the British government, Colin Ross, depicts the media as sensitive, sensible and skilled and of possessing good political judgement. Yet, during the referendum campaign some critics questioned whether the media showed good political judgement, knew when not to be used and when to step back, or were indeed clever enough to understand when there was going to be an element of manipulation entering the equation.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> March 1998, as the negotiations were entering its final stages, the DUP leaked a British government document on selling a potential peace deal, entitled 'Information Strategy'. Written by Tom Kelly, Director of Communications at the NIO, the document outlined the British government's strategy for obtaining a positive result, that is, a substantial Yes vote in the 'most crucial election campaign

in Northern Ireland's history' – the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May referendum on the Good Friday Agreement. (Kelly 1998, p.1)

The Information Strategy proposed a campaign of organised media manipulation designed to overwhelm Northern Ireland with positive stories about the benefits of the deal. The accompanying commentary stated 'government officials will be used to manipulate media/public'. (Ibid.) The strategy proposed 'effective monitoring' of media coverage so that ministers and civil servants would be better placed to intervene and set the agenda. (Ibid. p.3) The document's key references to the media were as follows:

We will wish to put more emphasis on the briefing of media people generally... We will be particularly anxious to use this as a means of exerting some influence on the content and quality of media coverage. The many weekly newspapers around Northern Ireland offer considerable scope for us to present our message, and the editors of these papers should feature in the efforts of ministers to cultivate the media... (Ibid. p.3)

And,

It would be open to us to encourage some degree of public opinion polling, by, for example, newspapers and current affairs programmes, where we believe the results are likely to be supportive. Some of this can be encouraged during meetings and briefings of senior media people. (Ibid. p.5)

The strategy document also referred to '10-12 current affairs broadcast programmes with which Information Service will liaise closely', mentioned important 'intelligence gleaned from informal contacts with key media people' and included



how Kelly would become personally involved: “I will myself arrange a number of occasions on which I will bring together selective influential media people.” (Ibid. pp 5-6)

In the article *‘Spinning the peace deal’*,<sup>20</sup> Brendan O’Neill (1998) argued that before and during the referendum campaign, the media in Northern Ireland were ‘enlisted’ by the British government and that they unquestioningly endorsed its line:

Despite New Labour’s claim that the peace deal was born of ‘the People’, in reality the ‘key message’ of the deal ‘It’s Your Choice’ was agreed in the backrooms of the Northern Ireland Office while the negotiations were still taking place. A comprehensive strategy for selling the deal and enlisting the media to do the government’s dirty work was drawn up even before the nationalist and Unionist parties had agreed to it. It is not often I find myself agreeing with Ian Paisley, but I sympathise with his claim that this document ‘makes Machiavelli look like a rank amateur’ (Ibid. pp 2-3).

O’Neill also made reference to a (largely unreported) survey of media coverage in the weeks following the signing of the Agreement by the UKUP’s Robert McCartney, to confirm his own analysis and suspicions that the media had indeed become the mouthpiece for the British government. The survey found that:

The BBC gave 68 per cent of its coverage to Yes campaigners and 32 per cent to the No camp; Ulster Television gave 72 per cent and 28 per cent respectively; the Belfast Telegraph gave 78 per cent to Yes and 22 per cent to No and the Irish News gave 74 per cent and 26 per cent respectively. (Ibid.)

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20 In LM Magazine 111, June 1998

While O'Neill's assertions may on the surface seem plausible (and indeed some may well be correct) they are not backed up with either hard facts or substantial evidence. The 'Information Strategy Document' was indeed a composite publicity plan, but one in which any Northern Ireland Office (NIO) Director of Communications would undoubtedly have had to compile in the prospective scenario of a historic deal being reached that would eventually be decided by a referendum. It would also be quite naive to assume that in his position as Director of Communications, Kelly would not use his influence to either 'spin' or 'push' the government 'line' with senior media personnel or employ a range of public relations techniques (including only availing of the most positive opinion poll results) to pursue a substantial 'Yes' vote in the referendum campaign (as they were ultimately key signatories to the Agreement). As the BBC political editor during the referendum campaign, Stephen Grimason, pointed out, the story of the leaked document was neither too damaging for the British government, nor really pre-eminent in the overall context of the referendum itself:

It was not really damaging, it was just part of what washed up. One would have expected at that time that there would be that type of stuff floating around. The politicians seized upon it, particularly the anti-Agreement politicians. I think its importance can be overestimated. I mean one would expect anyone charged with, not even in terms of selling, but promoting what had been signed up to, would have had that type of plan together. I mean, we focussed upon it, we discussed it and it was a story, but it wasn't pre-eminent in terms of the overall referendum scenario. (Interview with author, 20 March 2003)

Martina Purdy, who was working as political correspondent for *The Belfast Telegraph* during the referendum campaign, pointed out that in Kelly's attempts to

influence the media: “He wouldn’t have bothered so much with the likes of me at the time but he certainly would have been on the phone to Stephen Grimason, Ken Reid [UTV political editor], television people, spinning, pushing.” (Interview with author, 6 June 2002). However, while this may well have been the case, it does not simply follow that media personnel would subserviently acquiesce with the wishes or demands of either Kelly or the British government in their pursuit of a substantial ‘Yes’ vote in the referendum campaign.

As a result of the document being leaked, many people named therein as ‘champions’ of the cause, would have been very wary to come forward or indeed associate themselves with Kelly during the referendum campaign in case it smacked of canvassing for the government (Kelly1998, p.4). As Purdy maintained:

That leaked document was embarrassing for a lot of people... It not only embarrassed the media but it embarrassed a lot of people like Archbishop Eames who then felt that their hands were tied, that they simply weren’t going to go out and sell this Agreement because they had no credibility. Sceptical unionists were not going to accept the word of these people because all of a sudden they became NIO poodles... that memo damaged the campaign to sell the Agreement really badly. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

Whilst the British government did make strenuous attempts to influence the media agenda during the referendum campaign, if the BBC were indeed their mouthpiece (as O’Neill would purport), then presumably the BBC would have been ‘on-side’ or would have publicised what the government wished (on all occasions), which was clearly not the case, as Mark Devenport highlighted:

Clearly in the referendum campaign, there were strenuous attempts by the government to influence the agenda. These constant visits by Tony Blair and the bringing in of personalities were an attempt to influence the agenda. One of the interesting things however, was that to a large extent, a lot of the tactics that were used backfired. For instance, the visits by Tony Blair – it's one of those things where the first time you get a visit by a Prime Minister this is big news. The second time, it is diminishing once you have started using that particular weapon in terms of the media. It really does take on a lesser role and there was an occasion in which Tony Blair visited Northern Ireland but on that particular night they had released Michael Stone from jail and he was brought to the Ulster Hall for a rally for Loyalist prisoners. I know that Alasdair Campbell was of the view that the Prime Minister's visit was significant and should lead the news ahead of Michael Stone. The BBC and everybody else said "We are looking at what is new here and what's newsworthy and we deem these pictures of Michael Stone and his rally to be more newsworthy and more relevant"... to that extent it backfired for them. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

While O'Neill brings Robert McCartney's survey results to bear in order to confirm his suspicions of media compliance with the Labour government's strategy, he fails to mention that the results (compiled only a couple of weeks into the six-week-long campaign), may have been methodologically unsound or even biased (considering McCartney's anti-Agreement position). One of the survey's findings was that the BBC gave 68 per cent of their coverage to the Yes campaigners and 32 per cent to the No's. This observation was indeed correct, yet it could be contended that this was simply a reflection of the ongoing debate, as BBC Political Editor Stephen Grimason maintained:

Interestingly, the BBC took the view that there were three campaigns on the referendum and that's why you got a third going to pro-Agreement nationalism, you got a third going to pro-

Agreement unionism and a third going to anti-Agreement unionism. We at the time came to that conclusion because of the widely different positions that those three groups had... You had nationalism basically saying that this brought a united Ireland closer. You had pro-Agreement unionism saying that it actually secured the union and then you had anti-Agreement unionism taking the same standpoint effectively as the nationalists on this but obviously in the overall tilting match between the two political blocs within unionism, they had to have their say. The anti-Agreement unionists at that point wanted half and half. They wanted half of the coverage to be on pro-Agreement unionism and nationalism and half of the coverage to be on anti-Agreement. So there were some quite fine judgements made and it was pretty tough and you know all sorts of things were threatened. (Interview with author, 20 March 2003)

Political parties, the British Government / NIO and non-party groups like Quintin Oliver's 'Yes Campaign' were all keeping a close eye on television coverage during the referendum campaign. The BBC's political editor acknowledged that he would be criticised by at least one group for almost every decision taken or difficult choice made throughout the campaign. For example, to broadcast lengthy 'actuality' footage of a public relations disaster for the No camp's Robert McCartney (who harangued Tony Blair) the day before the referendum vote, brought severe criticism from anti-Agreement supporters and indeed may even have nudged the vote in favour of the Yes camp. According to Grimason:

At that point, we were very concerned in the BBC that we would be seen to be leading the charge or anything, and my advice at the time, which was followed, was that we wouldn't put our voices on that exchange, we would run it raw. We would run it and let people make their own minds up; we wouldn't say this is good or this is bad or indicate anything like that. Mark Simpson [BBC political correspondent] was actually doing the coverage that night and I said, "Look, keep your voice off it. What you do is just present it and let people

make up their own minds as to what it was they saw". And for the first two to three minutes I think you heard about seven or eight words from Mark. The actuality was compelling, it was absolutely compelling, very good stuff. But it's not something you want to tinker with that close to a referendum because the accusation of bias is always there. (Ibid.)

Of course for O'Neill, this incident would only add to evidence that Tom Kelly, Alasdair Campbell or even Mo Mowlam for example, had influenced a BBC political editor into carrying out the British government's dirty work. Yet, Grimason prided himself on his balanced approach during the referendum campaign and argued that he took criticism from all quarters, including the government:

I worked very hard to give all sides of that [referendum campaign] and I'll stand on the record for that. Obviously we took criticism, fine. I like to get criticised by everybody, which I was and that kept me happy. If I was only getting criticism from one place all the time then I would have been worried, but I got it from everywhere, including the government, so I was relaxed about it. (Ibid.)

To return to McCartney's survey results, although he claimed that *The Belfast Telegraph* gave 78 per cent of their coverage to the Yes camp and 22 per cent to the No's, on this occasion these figures simply did not add up in the context of the overall referendum campaign (O' Neill 1998, p.3). For example, Oliver maintained that *The Belfast Telegraph* played an unhelpful role in respect to the non-party Yes campaign:

We had most trouble with *The Belfast Telegraph*. It seemed both to insist on equal coverage each day, regardless of the news content or innovation of the stories available, and

yet, it also appeared to give inordinate prominence to the 'No' campaigners in news story length, picture stories and the letters columns. (Oliver 1998, p.55)

Indeed, Oliver is very close to the mark, as acknowledged by Purdy of *The Belfast Telegraph*:

The editorial line was to be in favour of the Agreement and that was the case for all three Belfast dailies, but at the same time the editor [of *The Belfast Telegraph*] made it clear to us that for every line of copy that we were using for the 'Yes' we had to have a similar amount for the 'No'. So, everything had to be evenly balanced and some of the Yes people were unhappy about this because they were saying: "Look, out of the ten parties that were elected to the talks, two-thirds of them are in favour of the Agreement and therefore we should get two-thirds of the coverage." But, in the end I think it was very balanced, although we got plenty of complaints from both sides. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

In relation to the question of the media's 'balance' throughout the referendum campaign, Oliver claimed that: "The two television stations – BBC Northern Ireland and UTV – felt and acted as if they were bound by it... Newspapers are not covered by any such requirement, but some acted as if they were." (Interview with author, 6 June 1999) He argued that balance should have been interpreted as either that reflected by the current opinion polls, which showed 2:1 in favour of the Agreement or by a count of the political parties for and against it. This was also about 2:1, but only if one included the Irish Republican Socialist Party and the Conservative Party (Northern Ireland) alongside the DUP and the UKUP as being against the Agreement. If one didn't, the ratio increased to 4:1 or even 5:1, especially if one included Democratic Left, the Green Party and the Workers' Party in favour. Oliver was unforgiving in his assessment of the press during the referendum campaign:

The press were poor on it [the referendum campaign]; they didn't understand how to handle it. They didn't have clear policies on it, they didn't have a clear line on it, they were muddled and a lot of them had very artificial notions of balance. (Ibid.)

As for the broadcast media, Oliver made formal complaints to the BBC and UTV who he argued went for 50:50 on studio panels and in the audiences. He claimed that those against the Agreement tended to be vocally and vigorously against it, whereas those in favour may have had some doubts or qualifications but on the whole supported it. For Oliver, this meant that the 'No' supporters combined with the undecided or doubters, seemed to dominate most audiences, creating squabbles and good TV perhaps, but definitely not helpful for informed debate. (Ibid.)

Similarly, he also believed it was absurd to hunt for a 'No' voter amongst the thousands of sixth formers who attended the U2/Ash peace concert, which was promoting a 'Yes' vote. Yet, according to Oliver the BBC did so, finding a teenage son of a dissident Unionist MP to push an aggressively negative message. Infuriated, he questioned: "When does the search for balance become distortion?" (Oliver 1998, p.53)

However, for some media personnel, Oliver was treading a very thin line (throughout the referendum campaign) between simply promoting a Yes vote and wanting to use the media as a propaganda tool. As Grimason maintained:

He wanted full pursuit... You can't have that. You undermine the thing by overstating it. While it is perfectly legitimate for him to make the case that he wanted more help, I don't think it would have been right to give it to him... It actually undermined the campaign.



You tell people something is wonderful often enough and they become suspicious. I think the process is robust enough to withstand significant criticism and always was. *The Belfast Telegraph* was broadly pro-Agreement and still is, but once you start getting into propaganda, which is where I think he wanted to go with it on the Yes campaign, it is another matter. I have nothing against the Yes campaign at all; it's perfectly legitimate what they did, but I think newspapers have to be slightly more careful... we live in the real world and those newspapers are right to live in the real world and you know a significant number of people who buy *The Belfast Telegraph* are anti-Agreement as well. So, in business terms, it's not very smart. I'm not convinced that *The Belfast Telegraph* did anything wrong. (Interview with author, 20 March 2003)

Indeed, for Mark Devenport, Oliver's complaints that he wanted more positive coverage from the media for the Yes campaign were unhelpful at a time when the media was more concerned with their responsibility to reflect the debate fairly:

You could say from Quintin Oliver's perspective that the angels were all on one side but at the same time if you are a unionist who had relatives killed by the IRA and you see the Balcombe Street Gang released or equally if you had relatives killed by loyalists and you see Michael Stone released then you have a legitimate point of view if you want to say I don't want peace at this particular price. So we have a responsibility to report the debate. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

It is because the print and broadcast media were central to reporting and interpreting the debate that so many (like Oliver) made attempts to dominate the media agenda. Indeed, dominating the media agenda could prove crucial to a party or group's success. For example, in describing the SDLP-inspired U2/Ash concert where John Hume and David Trimble shook hands publicly for the first time, Conall Mc Devitt,

the SDLP Director of Communications, summed up the widespread belief within the 'Yes' camp:

The media were critical. They had been the vehicles for the very negative images that began to polarise the campaign, and so we were entirely reliant on them to 'turn it' in the most overwhelming way. That is, why in turning it, we needed to create one great big bang, a glitzy image, which would have so much currency that it would not be dropped until polling day. The concert was the only thing that would offer that. We needed something, which would just blow everything else off the agenda, and the media needed that. The media will not fight a campaign for you. They may be willing and anxious to reflect the campaign favourably but what they couldn't do, and what they will never do, is do it for you. They will just respond to your activities if you can set them up and that's why the concert became such a pivotal exercise in the whole campaign, because it offered the media that one jewel of a story. (Interview with author, cited in Kirby 1999, p.52)

Mc Devitt continued to stress the pivotal role played by the media during the referendum campaign as the conduit for both positive and negative messages or images:

Lord Molyneux of the UUP [the former leader] came out on the day of the concert to say 'Vote No' and was knocked to an inside page of *The Belfast Telegraph*. Had there not been a concert that night, Molyneux's coverage would have set the tone for the final week of the campaign. So again, it goes to show you the role the media played in all of it, the importance of knowing what the media need out of a campaign and being able to respond to that. (Ibid.)

For the duration of the referendum campaign, the local, regional, national and international media had a voracious appetite for stories. It could be proposed that

because of this appetite the media played a positive role (although perhaps unwittingly) in favour of the 'Yes' vote, as McDevitt pointed out:

The international interest was overwhelming and whenever you left on a canvass or a campaign trail there were literally three or four camera crews with you...People felt attracted to and motivated by this and ordinary people on the streets felt a sense that something very special was happening here. (Ibid.)

Essentially, the media played an influential role in creating intense interest within Northern Ireland and further afield in almost epic proportions. The people of Northern Ireland were left in no doubt as to the weight of expectation (created in a sense by the media) to move forward, and because the eyes of the world were watching and may not forgive, this may have been a pressurising variable in the mind of the electorate. Whether this element or variable helped to change voting patterns and contribute to the overall outcome of the referendum is speculative to say the least, yet it should not be completely overlooked.

Another variable that should not be discounted is the fact that two of Northern Ireland's local daily newspapers, the nationalist *Irish News* and the unionist *News Letter* were able to agree on joint editorials during the referendum campaign. As the Rev John Dunlop acknowledged: "I thought that was very significant and very important and I think the two editors deserve to be commended for attempting to do that." (Interview with author, 23 April 2001)

Northern Ireland's three regional daily newspapers (the other being *The Belfast Telegraph*) were to varying degrees all supportive of a Yes vote in the referendum, as Grimason highlighted:

The newspapers definitely were all pro-Agreement because that's where they were coming from, they had supported the talks process the whole way through... people who were reading those newspapers knew that they were pro-Agreement. It was more difficult for the News Letter, given the split within unionism but not slavishly, but broadly speaking was quite pro-Agreement and quite pro-the talks process, pro-involvement of loyalists and they had been brought onside as much as possible by the politicians themselves at all levels.  
(Interview with author, 20 March 2003)

Indeed, *The News Letter's* front page on the day of the referendum was emphatic: 'Say Yes and Say it Loud' (*The News Letter*, 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 1998). *The Irish News* was consistently behind the Yes vote as it represented the nationalist community and the SDLP in particular. *The Belfast Telegraph* (Northern Ireland's largest circulation paper read mainly by unionists but also by nationalists) was quite reticent throughout the referendum campaign to come out in clear support of the Yes vote, but on the eve of the vote they made their position quite clear: 'This deal is right, just and proper.' (*The Belfast Telegraph*, 21<sup>st</sup> May, 1998)

Essentially, once the historic Agreement was signed on Good Friday 1998, the media in Northern Ireland reacted to the challenges ahead by supporting, rather than obstructing, the dominant political discourse. Both the BBC and UTV, and the three main regional newspapers were helpful rather than unhelpful in relation to concentrated efforts at promoting peace.

Whilst the individuals who make up ‘the media in Northern Ireland’ are professionals whose job it is to refrain from telling only one side of the story, during the referendum campaign, only one side seemed to prevail – a pro-Agreement one. On this particular occasion, it remains problematic to contend that the media ‘toed the establishment line,’ simply because the British government line, in this instance, mirrored the ‘majority line’ of those individuals who work for media organisations in Northern Ireland. The following three quotes highlight some underlying reasons why journalists and broadcasters may have (wittingly or unwittingly) contributed to the pro-Agreement nature of coverage during the referendum campaign:

I would say that the media is generally, if you take individuals working for the media, that most of them are pro-Agreement, but that in part, is because we reflect society and the majority are pro-Agreement. But also, most middle-class people are pro-Agreement and the media tends to be middle-class. (Interview with Martina Purdy, 6 June 2002)

I think there is a genuine issue around the general pro-Agreement nature of journalism because remember the journalists here have been covering this story for 25 years, 30 years. We’ve been through all the murder and the mayhem, we’d seen all that, we didn’t want to go through that again ourselves. (Interview with Stephen Grimason, 20 March 2003)

You’ve an awful lot of men and women out there [in the media] who are motivated by the best of intentions, they want to see a decent society, not just for themselves but for their children. They want to do whatever they can to assist the politicians and the people when arriving at something that is mutually agreeable. (Interview with Colin Ross, 8 June 1999)

## Summation

### Sinn Féin

Unconventionally, Sinn Féin sold the Good Friday Agreement internally, out of the glare of the media spotlight. The party had to overcome a number of difficulties that included ending their policy of abstentionism, which would mean entering a (partitionist) Stormont-based government. They also had to acknowledge that by signing up to the Agreement it would mean amending articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution, which was also problematic for many republicans. As Martin Fletcher of *The Times* argued:

Subsequently they did a good job in presenting an agreement, which was not very favourable to them; they did a very good job in selling it to their followers – a much better job than the UUP. (cited in Lago 2000, p.235)

Sinn Féin's many public relations activities during the referendum campaign included calling upon ANC leaders from South Africa (who had been through a comparable experience) to help sell the Agreement to their grassroots. They also held strategic discussions at all levels of the party and embarked upon a leadership-led nationwide series of meetings. In addition, behind-the-scenes or privately there were widespread briefings of Provisional IRA members; the party's public relations efforts designed to sell the Agreement without causing major rifts or a serious schism. Indeed, the only substantial 'public' event to be captured by the media was during the party's second Ard Fheis, which included the appearances of the

Balcombe Street Four. This public relations spectacle was important (and successful) because delegates had no prior knowledge that the iconic 'Mandela-like' figures were going to be released. Furthermore, this spectacle (more so than any other) highlighted that prisoner releases and indeed significant 'change' in other areas (like the equality agenda and demilitarisation) could be swift and therefore may have been an influencing variable or indeed may have swung the Yes vote in favour of the Good Friday Agreement for many wavering republicans.

### The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)

The DUP and the No camp's key messages ('It's Right to Say No' and 'Have a Heart for Ulster') were the best of all the political parties' slogans during the referendum campaign. Indeed, the first message cleverly turned a negative into a positive whereas the second sympathetically appealed to the emotions of their target audience, unionists of all hues.

During their negative campaign, anti-Agreement DUP leaders advocating a No vote, portrayed the Agreement as a Trimble-Adams pact or a vehicle that would trundle unionists into a united Ireland. In their ubiquitous attacks on Trimble, the DUP claimed that it was nothing short of deception or lies to portray the Agreement as a strengthening of the Union, as Trimble was doing.

The No camp also conjured up 'nightmare scenarios' that included future Assembly members sitting side-by-side with terrorists in government who had guns on the table, under the table or outside the door. Indeed, their whole campaign was

noticeable by the intentional use of emotive, apocalyptic rhetoric or language. Their various public relations activities included the launch of an emotive blitz via poster and newspaper advertisements, one of which showed a woman wiping away a tear a year after the referendum, asking “How did I bring myself to vote Sinn Féin /IRA into government?” (McDonald 2000, p.227)

Throughout the referendum campaign, the No camp were bolstered by a number of propaganda coups, most notably the releases from prison of the Balcombe Street Four and Michael Stone. High-profile UUP members, such as Jeffrey Donaldson and Lord Molyneaux, also gave impetus to the anti-Agreement campaign after they confirmed they would be voting No in the forthcoming referendum.

However, in the final days of campaigning, the No camp suffered a public relations disaster when the media captured Robert McCartney publicly haranguing Tony Blair and subsequently turning on a crowd of women whom he called a rent-a-mob. Indeed, the DUP believed that their failure to get a high No vote was because of similar interventions by the British prime minister and in particular, pledges he made in order to win unionist support for the Agreement.

### The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)

Whilst being constantly attacked throughout the referendum campaign by the emotional wing of unionism, David Trimble and his party had a somewhat difficult task to sell the Agreement and appeal to the rational wing. The No camp



consistently portrayed Trimble as a traitor or a 'Lundy' who had sold out unionism by signing up for the Agreement.

Trimble's riposte to the No camp was that they had deserted the battlefield and had no alternative strategy except maintaining the status quo, which meant the continuation of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, that is, unionists having no say whatsoever in how the Irish government was interfering in the affairs of Northern Ireland.

Yet, Trimble had failed to sufficiently prepare unionists for the terms of the Agreement and he and his party were also to blame for the No camp's free run in the opening weeks of the campaign. High-profile members of the UUP (Trimble, Taylor and Maginnis) were either on holiday or attending other engagements and were not even in Northern Ireland for its opening stages. Also, senior party organisers made a potentially disastrous decision to concentrate on the Assembly elections rather than the referendum campaign. To compound growing difficulties, younger party members switched to the No camp, which meant the UUP lost potential campaign staff, that is, they weren't able to get sufficient numbers of party workers out to put up posters or campaign in support of the Agreement. (Hennessey 2000)

After a disastrous start, the party did begin to make some inroads. The UUP hired a media strategist, Ray Haydn, who changed Trimble's image (including his hair and clothes) and planned a strategic PR offensive that included running the most professional media campaign in the party's history. They also enlisted the support

of Lord Cranborne and Kate Hoey to canvass with Trimble and thus help the party's flagging Yes campaign.

Yet, it was Glen Barr, the SDLP and Bono, Tony Blair and finally Jack Hermon who contributed most in helping Trimble to sell the Agreement to unionists. In addition, (the night before the referendum vote), in a television debate with the DUP's Ian Paisley, Haydn armed Trimble with a series of photographs of Paisley and DUP colleagues wearing the red berets of (the paramilitary-style) Ulster Resistance in 1986. When Paisley accused Trimble of cosyng up to Sinn Féin /IRA, the UUP leader was able to effectively use the photographs to hit back and ultimately quieten Paisley. Essentially, Trimble won the debate by listening to Haydn's advice and for once, selling the Agreement like a leader who believed in it.

However, this was a rare 'stand' in the context of the overall campaign. Closer to the mark was that a vacillating Trimble appeared internally divided over the Agreement, was mainly inept and unconvincing on his own, and required, not to mention relied upon, the help of others to sell the Agreement to the wider unionist community.

### The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)

The Good Friday Agreement represented the culmination or the vision behind twenty-five years work by John Hume and his party and was indeed the jewel in the SDLP crown. They were the only political party that could claim to be its

architects, and as such, they would undoubtedly gain majority if not full, support within their own constituency.

Nevertheless, the party fought a non-triumphalist Yes campaign, strategically designed to tiptoe around unionist sensitivities and thus limit the fears and suspicions the unionist community held in relation to the Agreement. The SDLP were also the only main political party whose public relations activities and key messages were designed to appeal to 'all' the people of Northern Ireland irrespective of which tradition they belonged to. In doing so, they made clear that the Agreement was a framework for conflict resolution and that it neither signified nor represented a victory or a defeat for any single political party in Northern Ireland.

Their attempts to appeal to all sections of the community were also apparent in their well-designed referendum poster. Incorporating a golden key marked 'Yes', John Hume maintained that the vote represented 'Your opportunity to leave the past behind and unlock the door to a better future. There is much in this Agreement for everyone'. (SDLP referendum campaign leaflet, 1998)

The SDLP's PR offensive included a strategy of third party endorsement, whereby they brought high-profile figures to Northern Ireland from outside of the political world to endorse a Yes vote, including, amongst others, businessman Peter Sutherland and film director Neil Jordan.

Indeed, as a result of an SDLP-inspired Yes peace concert, the most important third party endorsement of their campaign came in the form of U2's Bono. In particular, the Bono/Hume/Trimble handshake became the dominant image of the referendum campaign and its importance cannot be overstated, as it was the only major public demonstration of unity between constitutional Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism during the referendum campaign. The concert stole publicity away from the No camp, provided the Yes camp with a positive platform on which to build, and contributed to a swing from No to Yes in the final week of the campaign. As Conall McDevitt highlighted:

The people wanted Hume and Trimble to stand shoulder to shoulder and say: "We want you to vote Yes". Until they got that image they were doubtful, and it was only after that image that things really began to consolidate themselves. In the final week you got a 15% swing-back within unionism, which was very critical (Interview with author, cited in Kirby 1999, p. 61)

### The Media

Only a matter of weeks before Good Friday 1998, the DUP leaked a British government document that outlined the government's strategy on how best to sell a potential peace agreement, entitled 'Information Strategy'. Written by Tom Kelly, Director of Communications at the NIO, the Information Strategy proposed a campaign of organised media manipulation designed to garner widespread support for a Yes vote.

Indeed, during the referendum campaign itself, there was little doubt that the media in Northern Ireland (as a morass) were pro-Agreement or were supportive of a Yes vote, as Mac Ginty observed:

Looking at the news media, you would have to look far and wide to find anyone who would support the No vote. I think the tightness of the pro Yes vote was remarkable given a free press. That doesn't happen automatically, it was quite an artificial coalition and it was far and wide. The newspaper bedfellows that were editorialising more or less in unison, was quite remarkable. (Interview with author, 2 June 1999)

Indeed, to varying degrees, both the BBC and UTV, and the three main regional newspapers were pro-Agreement. Accusations that the media were 'toeing the establishment line' during the campaign were rife among anti-Agreement supporters and such accusations could only be given credibility by comments like those of British government/NIO Information officer, Colin Ross:

I found them an excellent bunch [the media]; they never let me down. There were people that I could have gone the extra mile in briefing; I would have asked them to retain it, it was confidential. They never broke the trust and I hope that it helped them arrive at a reasonable view of what was going on, what the British government was trying to do. (Interview with author, 8 June 1999)

Yet, while the British government undoubtedly made attempts to influence the media agenda during the referendum campaign, there is no conclusive evidence to support the view that the media either reciprocated or indeed 'toed the establishment line' because of governmental pressure. Furthermore, it would be quite naive to assume that Kelly (as NIO Director of Communications) would not have such a

strategy in place or that both he and Ross would not use their influence to either 'spin' or 'push' the government 'line' with senior media personnel. Although it can be questioned whether it was right or wrong to do so, it was in many respects obvious that the NIO would employ a range of public relations techniques to pursue a substantial Yes vote in the campaign (as the British government was ultimately a key signatory of the Agreement itself).

Indeed, the reason for a great deal of confusion over whether the media were government 'dupes' or not, is that the 'establishment line' (in this instance) mirrored the 'majority line' of those individuals who worked in media organisations throughout Northern Ireland, that is, they supported the Good Friday Agreement. Underlying reasons why journalists and broadcasters may have (wittingly or unwittingly) contributed to the pro-Agreement nature of coverage during the referendum campaign include: the media reflect society, the majority of which are pro-Agreement; most middle-class people are pro-Agreement and the media tends to be middle-class; media personnel had been through all the murder and the mayhem and didn't want to go through it again; and those working in the media want to see a decent society, not just for themselves but for their children and will do whatever they can to assist the politicians and the people when arriving at something that is mutually agreeable.

Essentially, the media in Northern Ireland played an important and influential role during the 1998 referendum campaign. They supported, rather than obstructed the dominant political discourse and they were helpful rather than unhelpful in relation to concentrated efforts at promoting peace.

## In Conclusion

The Good Friday Agreement was sold to the people of Northern Ireland in a disparate, rather than a cohesive manner, that is, there was no collective party political 'Yes' campaign. The three main parties who supported a Yes vote (the SDLP, Sinn Féin and the UUP) interpreted the Agreement in their own idiosyncratic ways and as a result, differing and sometimes confusing spins and emphases were relayed to the electorate throughout the referendum campaign. In the political spectrum and the public arena, party leaders, after signing the Agreement together, failed to show the political will or courage to develop a new politics for Northern Ireland. Unionists, in particular, were wary about joining forces with pro-Agreement nationalists and republicans, as Oliver argued:

Why did the unionists not sell this Agreement with the people they had agreed it with? You agreed it together on Good Friday, why could you not sell it together and would that not have been good politics? Here was a golden opportunity for them to say "This could lead to the most remarkable accommodation between unionism and nationalism for eight centuries. Isn't this something to be proud of?" But they couldn't do that. (Interview with author, cited in Kirby 1999, p.28)

The reason why they didn't sell the Agreement together was a simple one – a lack of trust between unionists and nationalists/republicans. Whereas the SDLP embraced the reconciliatory principles of the Agreement and designed their campaign to appeal to both traditions, the UUP and Sinn Féin reverted to selling the Agreement specifically within their own constituencies. As a result, while both were advocating a Yes vote, they were also seemingly poles apart, as acknowledged

by Mac Ginty: “I thought it was absolutely bizarre, simply because here was the Ulster Unionist Party and Sinn Féin, both advising us to vote for the same thing [Yes to the Agreement] but approaching it from different angles.” (Interview with author, 2 June 1999) Consequently, throughout the referendum campaign, the fractured nature of the Yes campaigns was set against a singularly strong and emotionally appealing ‘No’ campaign.

In the literature on propaganda, Qualter (1985) contends that propaganda is something consciously or deliberately done to achieve results. In this respect, all four of the main political parties were propagandists. They were all guilty of deliberately attempting to influence the electorate and their intentions were directed to either positive or negative ends depending on which side of the equation – Yes or No, pro-Agreement or anti-Agreement – one was situated.

During the referendum campaign, those institutions that wield a significant amount of power and influence in Northern Ireland (that is, the British government/NIO and the media) may not have unabashedly come out in full support of the Agreement, yet they did divert from their own (often strict) remits of objectivity and impartiality to at worst favour, at best promote, a Yes vote.

Essentially, the British government/NIO had at their disposal the power to wield influence in media circles and by so doing, help to legitimate the call for peace epitomised by voting Yes for the Good Friday Agreement. The extent to which the media acquiesced is not easily discernible.



It is also difficult to determine exactly how the 71.12% vote in favour of the Good Friday Agreement was achieved. From a public relations perspective, the evaluation stage of the cause and effect of political campaigning is always difficult to measure. It could be measured in terms of the turnout, that is, more people voted than would normally in Northern Ireland elections, or in terms of the 71.12% vote itself, yet difficulties emerge when attempting to measure individual or group contributions.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that certain public relations activities and communications personnel were highly influential during the course of the referendum campaign, for example: Sinn Féin's public relations efforts that included endorsement of the Agreement by ANC leaders and the Balcombe Street Four; Ray Haydn's involvement with the UUP, as well as other contributors like Tony Blair and Jack Hermon who helped persuade unionists to come out in support of a Yes vote; and last but not least, the SDLP-inspired U2/Ash peace concert that provided the dominant image of the referendum campaign and helped to garner cross-community support for a Yes vote.

Essentially, public relations activities, like the peace concert, contributed to an all-important swing of 15 per cent in support for the Agreement within unionism in the final week of campaigning. Considering that two referendum exit polls<sup>21</sup> variously estimated that 55 per cent and 51 per cent of unionist electors voted in favour of the Agreement, this 'swing' was crucially important. As Stephen Grimason, (and almost everyone else who was interviewed in the course of this research)

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21 The Sunday Times, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1998 and RTE May 23rd, 1998

acknowledged: 'The Bono bringing together Trimble and Hume was a big moment. It turned the campaign.' (Interview with author, 20 March 2003) It follows then, that it would have been impossible for the Agreement (which is based on sufficient consensus or cross-community support) to achieve the requisite support (that is, over 50% in favour) in the Protestant/unionist community, had it not been for a number of pivotal, pre-arranged public relations activities. Indeed, the Agreement may not have even 'gotten off the ground' were it not for such activities. In this respect, the 1998 referendum campaign highlights that party political public relations efforts by the Yes camp had a direct and profound impact upon the peace process, that is, such efforts helped sell the Agreement and ultimately gave it a chance to live.

### **SECTION 3: POST-AGREEMENT DEVELOPMENTS IN PARTY POLITICAL PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE MEDIA**

#### **Introduction:**

Following the Good Friday Agreement and the positive referendum result, attention switched to the Assembly elections. Importantly, the 1998 Assembly election campaign represented an extension of the referendum campaign. The best word to describe the mood of this subsequent campaign was 'apathy'. Indeed, it was as if both Northern Ireland's media and electorate were suffering from collective exhaustion. In the event, the life-long work of John Hume and his SDLP (that is, as the Agreement's main architects) was acknowledged and rewarded by Northern Ireland's electorate. When the Assembly election results came in on the 25<sup>th</sup> June 1998, the SDLP secured the highest number of first-preference votes for any political party (the first time this had happened to a nationalist party in the history of the state). However, the vagaries of 'proportional representation' meant that the UUP acquired more seats than their nationalist opponents in the 108-member Assembly. The final distribution of seats in the Assembly revealed the split within unionism, with a number of the UUP's Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA's) publicly opposed to the Agreement. The results of the four main parties were: UUP – 28 seats, SDLP – 24 seats, DUP – 20 seats, Sinn Féin – 18 seats and Others – 18 seats.

Significantly, the four mistrustful protagonists divided into four principal pillars suggesting a 'Balkanisation' of the region's politics: republican (Sinn Féin),

constitutional-nationalist (SDLP), constitutional-unionist (UUP) and fundamentalist (DUP) (Wilson 2001, p.7).

Throughout the 1990's as the 'peace process' developed, the Protestant/unionist community and their (main) political representatives in the UUP and DUP had become increasingly restless, torn between those who sniffed 'betrayal' by the British government in appeasement of IRA 'terrorism' and those who insisted republican advances could only be stemmed by confronting Sinn Féin in negotiations. Originally associated with hard-line unionism, the UUP's David Trimble chose the latter position for tactical reasons that harked back to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 – a clear indicator of the limits of the 'unionist veto' and the evolving direction of both British and Irish governmental thinking. Yet, to say that this was a pragmatic or moderate position taken by Trimble and his party is not to say that it was either harmonising or conciliatory.

The period between the 1998 Assembly elections and the transfer of devolved powers in December 1999 was dogged for the most part by inactivity, save for the then customary calls for 'guns before government' or 'government before guns'. This period was earmarked by the harsh reality of unionist-nationalist mistrust and antagonism and as a result, the Assembly lingered long in shadow form.

The consociational-type partnership that was perhaps envisaged by the progenitors of the Good Friday Agreement then, was not realised until almost 20 months after its inception in April 1998, with the devolution of power to the Northern Ireland Assembly occurring in December 1999. Even when powers were finally transferred

to the new administration on 2<sup>nd</sup> December of this year, the involuntary coalition that had been constructed was far from a utopian ideal, with the anti-Agreement DUP absent at the historic roundtable meeting of the fledgling Executive Committee.

The following period under analysis (post-1998 referendum campaign up until November 2003 Assembly Election) is fundamentally marked by both unionism and nationalism appearing to be more obsessed with the pressures within their own constituencies, with scant appreciation for the needs of their partners in government.

Essentially, the following sections analyse the major political public relations or communications developments of the four main protagonists and highlight the media's role and the challenges they faced within the new political dispensation.

## **(i) Social Democratic and Labour Party**

During the period beginning on Good Friday 1998 and up until the Assembly elections in November 2003, SDLP communications could best be described as ‘in a state of flux.’ The party underwent fundamental shifts, beginning with electoral defeat to Sinn Féin in the 2001 general election that meant the party could no longer claim to be the true political voice of nationalism. Consequently, this electoral defeat factored into a changing of the guard – long standing founder and leader, John Hume, along with older politicians stood down to be replaced by Mark Durkan and a younger contingent of party members.

Although their Director of Communications, Conall McDevitt, was confident in the pre-Agreement days (see section one) that the SDLP would successfully develop an effective communications structure (including an efficient press office system), such hopes simply did not materialise. A year after the Agreement in 1999, a closer examination of the party’s predicament in regard to public relations was best described by the very same leader-in-waiting, Mark Durkan:

I mean, there’s a lot more we could and should be doing and need to do on the whole PR front... Yes, there are health warnings about making PR the master of all your politics, but the fact is there is more the SDLP could be doing to make PR a more useful or influential servant of our political concerns. I know people caricature “You don’t want to be going down the Tony Blair road” on the one hand, or our people would say, “You don’t want to be going over the top with the wall to wall PR of Sinn Féin”. But I would point out to them that “Yes, you could point to the excesses of anything, but that doesn’t mean you do none of it.”  
(Interview with author, 7 June 1999)

As Durkan highlights, members of the SDLP were suspicious about employing PR, as if it were a 'black art' (Gould, 1998) only practiced by unscrupulous individuals and parties. More importantly, it highlights the mentality of SDLP members who were 'light years' behind their counterparts in Sinn Féin in that they were slow to acknowledge, or simply ignorant of, the benefits that strategic PR could bring to their party's future development.

On the public relations personnel front, Conall McDevitt did not have the requisite human and financial resources at his disposal to oversee the fundamental overhaul of SDLP communications that would be required if his party were to develop along the lines of Sinn Féin, not least in their media relations effort. To compound difficulties for the SDLP, McDevitt did not remain in his position for a substantially long enough period to implement much needed long-term changes, and subsequently left the party in early 1999 to be succeeded in February of that year by a new Director of Communications, Barry Turley. For more than three years (until May 2002 when he left the SDLP to work for political lobbyists Stratagem), Turley attempted to develop the party's communications structures and media operation, yet seemed to find himself in the same predicament as his predecessor – working alone for the most part with limited resources at hand. After two years, the SDLP brought on board a full-time press officer to help Turley to advance the party's communicative ability. Under Turley's tutelage, Gayle McGreevey (who took up her position in March 2001) remembered being introduced to a disorganised and unprofessional state of affairs (in terms of party communications) that she believed had been the norm for a number of preceding years:

It was a very amateurish set-up at that stage to be quite honest. Conall was the Director of Communications for a while and then Barry, and they didn't have any support in terms of any other press officers. They would have had support from the wider party, you know, Director of Organisation, Headquarters stuff and so on, but there wasn't a press office established. (Interview with author, 19 March 2003)

With such a lack of support in terms of other press officers, it is understandable why political journalists (in research conducted by Liz Fawcett) believed that in relation to 'quality of media service' or 'efficiency' the SDLP was incapable of 'delivering the goods.' (Fawcett 2001, p.13)

It is difficult to determine whether Turley himself was either ineffective or inept as Director of Communications, or was a victim of circumstances given the obvious pressures he faced in professionally delivering various communicative functions without adequate resources. Nevertheless, conclusions from Fawcett's research are reiterated by other journalists (including Eamon Houston, former Sunday Derry Journal Editor) who described the SDLP as 'lazy' (Interview with author, 1 June 2003) and by Kevin Magee who believed Turley had a flawed approach in the way he dealt with journalists:

I knew Turley. I didn't think he was very effective to tell you the truth. He was difficult, you know. Journalists don't like that. All we're really trying to do is make programmes or tell the story under a lot of pressure and tight deadlines and you just can't afford the luxury of somebody messing you about. Sometimes I think they see it as an exercise of power and control over some journalists. Really, it's completely the wrong tactic. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)



In addition, Magee also made comparisons between the SDLP and Sinn Féin:

The SDLP press office is nowhere near as efficient as Sinn Féin's office nor does it have the same control over its participants. There's much more of a one-to-one emphasis, a relationship between a journalist and a politician with the SDLP rather than a party with a centralised nature like Sinn Féin. (Ibid.)

When Mark Durkan took over the reins as leader of the SDLP in November 2001, he was adamant that the party's PR and communications would have to be reassessed and it was indeed an area that needed to be addressed, as Gayle McGreevey highlighted:

When Mark took over I can remember him going to America and he said, "the party has needs, these needs need to be addressed, there are communications needs, there are organisational needs and they will be addressed and very quickly". (Interview with author, 19 March 2003)

Indeed, the new SDLP leadership began to address and initiate changes that included a new party logo, launched on the 25<sup>th</sup> June 2002. McGreevey described its significance:

The SDLP is obviously in there, the corporate colours had always been red and green and we added a new colour being orange this time which was to symbolise the diversity, the inclusivity, the bringing together of all of our communities. The little flower is supposed to symbolise in many ways the shamrock, which is all about our all-Ireland identity and that aspect of things. The design was also sourced from different designs in the Book of Kells, which gave us this idea of ancient Ireland and Irishness and bringing that on board. The actual way the SDLP was written was different again, the type of font used was clear,

modern and so it was to symbolise a new, modern party. It was about changing the corporate identity of the SDLP in many ways. (Ibid.)

Although the logo was designed to signify or symbolise a 'new, modern party' many of the 'old, traditional' communications problems that the SDLP had experienced in the past were re-emerging once again. Only two months before the launch of the logo, Turley (as Director of Communications), resigned from the party. His sole accompanying press officer, McGreevey, was left in the unenviable position of having to assume responsibility for most, if not all, of the SDLP's communicative functions. A simple, yet lengthy listing of McGreevey's responsibilities, highlight the problematic nature that both she and her predecessors faced, for the most part alone, whilst head of SDLP Communications. These responsibilities included:

Basically implementing the party's communication strategy both internally and externally. I would be responsible for looking after any publications that we format, the Social Democrat is the quarterly paper that we distribute through the Irish News and the papers. There's the internal party newssheet, there's a monthly newsletter to America, and I would be responsible for all of those. On a Monday and Tuesday the Assembly obviously sits here, and I am responsible for trying to get the message out in terms of what the SDLP MLAs are doing in the Assembly, if we have questions down to ministers, obviously highlighting those and putting out press statements on them. If we have motions down, adjournment debates, obviously trying to get the maximum press coverage out of those motions... throughout the rest of the week, I am also responsible for all of our councillors' press, so that just varies from week to week. And I am also responsible for the wider political issues, looking after the leadership, after Brid Rodgers [Deputy leader]; I have responsibility for co-ordinating leadership visits to local constituencies and co-ordinating any local press there. So it's quite varied and quite widespread, and there is a lack of resources at the

moment within the press office. I mean I am doing all of that at the moment with only me. It is a lot but when you're down a body, and we are in fact down two bodies it's not terribly structured and you are dealing with a lot of "fire-fighting". You're really dealing with a lot of the day-to-day stuff, and you don't have the capacity, and you don't have the resources to really put in place a longer-term strategy. (Interview with McAteer, 6 June 2002)

McGreevey could not possibly have consistently operated effectively within this apparently chaotic communications environment. The party's leadership (in acknowledging that the press office was not working effectively), reviewed its structures and came up with an arrangement that included McGreevey taking over as Senior Press Officer in May 2002 (that is, there would be no Director of Communications) and the provision of resources to have 'two bodies' recruited – a press officer and an assistant press officer.

In March 2003 (10 months later), McGreevey highlighted that for the first time in the history of the SDLP, there were three full-time staff working in the press office (accompanying McGreevey was Paula Kavanagh as press officer and James Dillon as assistant press officer). The SDLP also had staff throughout the 18 constituencies doing 'local press' for the party although they were not full-time media relations personnel. A more upbeat McGreevey still acknowledged that the SDLP had limited resources in comparison to other parties, yet believed there had been a major shift in party members' attitudes towards public relations:

Things have changed in the last year, there's been a change of personnel, a change of attitude and we do run a much tighter ship and you can even see that in many ways. I mean, people do talk about Sinn Féin being a very media-orientated party and that's true and the DUP would be very similar in that regard. You know they have a huge amount of resources

and a huge amount of personnel and they are able to do that. This idea of a big party machine, I mean it's no great mystery, it's just having a lot of people doing a lot of work and unfortunately the SDLP has never had the resources of those parties and it is really only now or really only in the past year and a half that it has come to plough what resources it does have into press. So the changes that have been made are the results of an awakening of "we know we have to compete in a very competitive market, we know we have to be more PR-focused". (Interview with author, 19 March 2003)

By March 2003, the party was indeed 'running a tighter ship' and on the communications front there were signs of central coordination that included, for the first time, a daily dispatch to party members to help ensure that they were 'on message' (Ibid.). Whereas in the past they seemed only to be 'fire-fighting' and at times incapable of seeing through the fog, they were now implementing longer-term strategic communications plans. In addition, whereas in 2001 the party's Youth Group had completely collapsed, by 2003, after steady and targeted support, the group was showing visible signs of recovery with approximately 100 members.

Essentially, the SDLP underwent a process of introspection; party members had reassessed their relationship with journalists and with one eye on their rivals for the nationalist vote, Sinn Féin, who were highly successful in 'dealing with the media', they began to make incremental advances, as McGreevey highlighted:

I think the party is making inroads. I think it can be difficult sometimes, it's a vicious circle that people think the Shinners are very, very good at doing press and PR and they do have more resources. A criticism of the party [the SDLP] was that in the past they didn't maybe brief journalists such as they should have done. Now that has totally changed. That idea that you shouldn't tell journalists things has gone. You have a very young, vibrant

leadership here now. Mark is someone who would have always dealt with the press himself and he understands the importance of working and briefing the media. We have more briefings now with people than we've ever had and in fact in the Hillsborough talks there was a cover piece by Dan Keenan in the Irish Times and it said something like "Not even the spin by Sinn Féin or the counter-spin by the SDLP could entertain us". I thought that was interesting because we were never ever, or people did not pick up that there was ever any counter-spin. But you know there is a system of rebuttal in place that whenever the Shinners say something that is incorrect we do rebut it and there is a lot more briefing going on of journalists. So, they are ways that you make inroads and its difficult when the perception is there that they are better, that you have to keep pushing and trying and working a lot harder even than they work, but it's being done. (Ibid.)

While the SDLP were obviously making inroads, it may be a little naïve to believe that the SDLP's 'three' full-time staff would be able to compete with Sinn Féin's well resourced media operation. Indeed, McGreevey's obvious delight at her party being associated with counter-spin on rare occasions only highlighted how far the SDLP were really behind their rivals in this regard. Nevertheless (in the communication stakes), the SDLP were at least moving in the right direction for example, by introducing a system of rebuttal. They also increased their media training of party members through internal workshops and courses provided by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) who were working with all of the pro-Agreement parties (Ibid.).

For the most part, McGreevey believed that the SDLP's continuing efforts to court journalists was reaping rewards and that overall, she could not complain too much about the party's media representation. Yet, in some instances, she believed the SDLP had been marginalised in the media when the success of the peace process

was portrayed as hinging on a future relationship between two main parties – the UUP and Sinn Féin:

There are times when you have to push things a bit with people especially in recent times it's quite easy to be written out of negotiations because we are not necessarily the people causing the problems and it can be easy to ignore the SDLP view. I mean generally, I be happy enough. There are a couple of things that cause concern. There is the Daily Mirror, for example, once a week have a Sinn Féin and DUP column but won't give the SDLP or the Ulster Unionists one. Things like that that are blatantly unfair and I would have difficulty with that. But generally things aren't too bad and certainly the Irish News we wouldn't have any difficulty with. None of the main newspapers or news agencies, I mean, now and again there are times when you have to complain but overall it's not that bad. The broadcast media aren't bad either. I have to say UTV would be fairly good. Now and again things like the programmes [on the BBC] – 'Let's Talk' and 'Hearts and Minds' – sometimes I feel that we can be slightly sidelined on those and that would be a concern, but generally overall I don't think we have got too much to complain about. (Ibid.)

On the communications front (under McGreevey) the SDLP were showing visible signs of progress in many areas, yet there was still much work to be done, for example, the party's website (and thus their ability to disseminate information via the internet) in the run-up to the 2003 Assembly elections was significantly below par. As McGreevey readily acknowledged:

It's currently being developed. The one we have is rubbish at the moment. Somebody created it for about a £1000 a few years ago and it was rubbish. That was a matter of just getting the money passed; the budget has been passed and there is a design company in Dublin working on that, so that will be launched, touch wood, before the election. (Ibid.)

Although the SDLP was still experiencing internal organisational and communications problems, McGreevey and her colleagues were at least attempting to address these. For example, they appointed regional organisers – one in the northwest, northeast and so on – to coordinate constituencies and get people out canvassing for the party.

The party's communications, whilst moving in the right direction, could best be described as 'work-in-progress'. However, in many ways it was a matter of 'too little, too late'. While communications flaws could undoubtedly be improved upon in the medium to long term, with the Assembly elections looming, a more fundamental or immediate problem for the party was becoming more and more apparent. The SDLP were at a significant electoral disadvantage with many of its older members or 'big hitters' standing down (for example Seamus Mallon, Brid Rodgers and Eddie McGrady). As McGreevey highlighted:

They were people who were big vote getters and they were people who had spent 30 years working for the party so yes, they had high media profiles, well known throughout the South, the North and America, so it will be a loss but it just makes it a challenge to promote other people up. (Ibid.)

However, a fundamental problem for the SDLP was that they had failed for a great number of years, both organisationally and in a communications capacity, to target and promote younger party members, in stark contrast to Sinn Féin. As Kevin Magee pointed out:

I would say that if you looked at the various parties, Sinn Féin I'd imagine could put up maybe 40 people who'd give a polished view of their position, where they're coming from. I mean, you just don't get that in any of the other parties. Particularly in the SDLP they really have lost that battle, vis-à-vis Sinn Féin, because they haven't promoted the people that they have. They have some very astute young people but they don't give them the platform... assets they have that they are not fully utilising. But if it was Sinn Féin, they would have spotted their potential years ago and they would have been building them and building them and manoeuvring them into positions whereby they would have positions of power. That's the classic example of how Sinn Féin have a very, very well-worked-out strategy whereas the SDLP over the years, one person once described it to me that it wasn't a party at all, it was just a collective of fiefdoms – South Down, Armagh and Derry. Sinn Féin target long in advance as you can see with Alex Maskey and [Belfast] City Hall, that's all part of the grand strategy and it's paying dividends. The SDLP have serious, serious problems but it's not as if they weren't made aware of them. Brian Feeney [former SDLP member and now a political pundit] has been trying to bring it to their attention since 1984, yet they just haven't progressed anyway near the same way Sinn Féin has. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

In the run up to the 2003 Assembly elections, there was a growing expectation that Sinn Féin would continue to profit at the expense of what was perceived as an ageing SDLP. To counter the threat of a well-organised and well-financed opponent in Sinn Féin, the SDLP drafted in advisors from parties in the Republic of Ireland as well as the British Labour Party (Wilson and Fawcett 2004).

The SDLP's key slogan for the election attempted to persuade voters that it was particularly important this time around to vote SDLP: 'Now More Than Ever'.



They produced a 30-page manifesto in both large-print and audiotape versions, as well as summary versions in Cantonese, Irish and Urdu. They also went beyond the traditional-style manifesto by producing a summary version on CD-rom. Remaining on the technical front, only months before the election campaign, the SDLP developed a new and improved website that helped to make it easier for policy issues to be addressed during the campaign, for example, what the party was both for (education and health) and against (water charges).

During the campaign, the SDLP also targeted first-time voters by sending out 10,000 copies of a DVD entitled 'Rock Your Vote'. Their target audience were given the chance to win free tickets to a Justin Timberlake concert but they had to watch the DVD in order to find out how to enter the prize draw. (Ibid.)

Their Party Election Broadcast (PEB) featured a background soundtrack of middle-of-the-road Irish music with ordinary citizens expressing their wishes for the future. Only one politician made a brief appearance at the end of the video, party leader Mark Durkan, who said: 'All these hopes and more can be fulfilled. Together we can make it happen. Now more than ever'.

The party opted for a 'presidential-style' campaign that focused on the SDLP leader, although one main billboard poster featured Mark Durkan and six other candidates. However, in an attempt to get away from the traditional 'group shot' the candidates all faced in slightly different directions and their poses looked staged, awkward and unnatural.

While lesser key messages of other parties' campaigns were related to their main slogans, the SDLP opted for eye-catching additional catchphrases not obviously linked to their main slogan 'Now More Than Ever'. The party produced two election posters that attempted to persuade the public that voting for, or transferring to, the SDLP, would prevent the DUP from gaining power. One contained a road-sign with 'Stop the DUP'. Underneath were the messages 'Vote SDLP', followed in slightly smaller letters by 'Transfer SDLP' and lastly, in an even smaller typeface, 'Protect the Agreement'. The other poster contained a picture of Ian Paisley Senior and Junior with the words 'Two Good Reasons to Vote SDLP'. Yet, neither of the posters explained why voting for, or giving a transfer to, the SDLP would stop the DUP. (Ibid. p.19)

All political parties should attempt to avoid sending out mixed or confusing messages during an election campaign. The 'Stop the DUP' slogan was not a logical extension of their main campaign slogan and because it was not self-explanatory it risked confusing voters. (Ibid.)

When the results of the Assembly elections came in, the swing in the balance of unionist advantage from the UUP to the DUP was matched by the reversal of fortunes in nationalist politics. The SDLP, having in 1998 for the first time topped the poll in securing its highest share of the vote at any election, now languished in fourth place.

Under the leadership of Mark Durkan (after the 2003 Assembly election) the SDLP looked fated to be the junior partner, not just in nationalist but also indeed in regional politics.

Throughout the 1990's and into the new millennium, it was widely acknowledged that the fundamental reason for the party's electoral downturn in recent years was due to their unselfish attempts, through the Hume/Adams talks, to help direct the republican movement away from the path of political violence and down the road of democratic politics. Yet, such contentions only serve to cloak or disguise more complex reasons for the party's electoral downfall and in fact, seemingly absolve the SDLP of their own internal sins. These include structural faults within the internal organisational working of the party, a failure to develop an effective communications capability and also to recognise the importance of magnanimity in politics – thereby encouraging the advancement of younger party members. Indeed, Magee was adamant that the party's main rivals for the nationalist vote, Sinn Féin, would continue to advance in the electoral stakes at the SDLP's expense:

[Within Sinn Féin] individuals are really instruments or the collateral; the progress of individuals is paramount. I don't think you can say the same about the SDLP, I just don't think there's the magnanimity there that is necessary in their development as a political party, whereby Seamus Mallon ten years ago might have said, "Well O.K, I'll give this seat up if we are sure we can find a successor for the next twenty years". It's like self-destruction. If they don't have the young people coming up behind they can't really expect that they'll advance. It's serious, serious problems as opposed to Sinn Féin. (Ibid.)

The prescient Magee was not wrong. After a humiliating defeat in the 2003 assembly elections, the SDLP would once again have to reassess their position within the nationalist fold and a further process of introspection would have to begin. A legacy of organisational and communications problems within the party had come to bear and would seemingly afflict the party for some time to come. Only the most optimistic party members could believe that their difficulties would indeed be surmounted in the coming years whereby they would once again be able to claim that their party represented the true voice of northern nationalists.

## **(ii) Ulster Unionist Party**

In the wake of the 1998 referendum campaign, the Assembly elections and throughout the intervening years under analysis (that is, 1998-2003) the UUP was split between party members who were, for the most part pro-Agreement and those who were anti-Agreement. However, the dilemma many party members faced was not a simple black and white one; there was a great expanse of 'grey' in the middle whereby members within the pro-Agreement wing were sceptical about certain elements of the Agreement, yet had not uniformly sided with those in the anti-Agreement camp. A new and very vocal political category quickly emerged – anti-Agreement UUP members – who began to have a major impact upon the party's ability to communicate effectively, that is, to deliver a clear, cogent and cohesive political argument or message. The divisions occurring within the party were highly publicised affairs, as evidenced in the broadcast media who often stood two UUP members in a single slot, each with conflicting viewpoints, as Kevin Magee explained:

One interesting thing in terms of the political debate was, and this is very important for us, what we saw over the whole referendum campaign and since the Agreement was signed was that it was no longer sufficient to stand an Ulster Unionist, you needed to have an Ulster Unionist, an anti and pro-Agreement, and that was almost as if you were dealing with another political category here although they're in the same party. They don't say that there's a split but for all intensive purposes they have split (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

Magee elaborated upon this observation by comparing a 'mixed message' UUP with an 'on message' Sinn Féin:

The difference between them [the UUP] and Sinn Féin is that they're not really a homogeneous type of party, there are a lot of different strands, a very broad spectrum really within Ulster Unionism right at the moment from No right across to pro-Agreement. You could speak to a Shinner [member of Sinn Féin] now on the street and he's what we call "on message", I mean he just talks 'Sinn Féin speak' and if you stopped another and they were a Shinner so would they, and you don't get the same variety of opinion. And that's why it's always a lot more interesting dealing with the Ulster Unionists because of the problems they've had. I mean, John Taylor [UUP Deputy Leader] isn't going to tell you the same thing as David Trimble and that can make it a bit more interesting. (Ibid.)

As the UUP began to haemorrhage following the signing of the Agreement, the task that David Trimble faced in attempting to keep his party united was a very difficult and daunting one. Throughout the period under analysis, Trimble's ongoing struggle to unite his party should be understood within the context of a wider fractured unionist/Protestant community, best described by the former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (to which Trimble belonged), the Rev John Dunlop:

I believe that David Trimble has probably had the most difficult job of anybody, because he is constantly, the whole way through the process, having to deal with the vociferous dissidents inside his own party, as well as the dissenters from the DUP and he has to try and make his way through that. He also has to negotiate with the SDLP, with Sinn Féin, with the Irish government and all the other bits and pieces who are all part of that, in terms of British government involvement and the American government's involvement. And all the time Trimble is trying to make his way through this, with unionism being as usual always factional... Trimble is fighting with this all the time. In relation to selling the Agreement,

as far as inside Protestantism is concerned, there is not a Protestant community, there's a multitude of sub-communities inside the Protestant community. There are a bunch of sub-unionist parties inside the broad spectrum of unionism. So there isn't therefore a Protestant community, there are subsets of Protestant communities. There isn't a Protestant church, there's a multiplicity of Protestant churches. This fractured community is not much given to behaving in a cohesive way nor are you selling an agreement to a bunch of people who already have a degree of solidarity amongst one another because that doesn't exist. (Interview with author, 23 April 2001)

It could be contended that such a fractured community (from which UUP members themselves hailed) were in need of a charismatic and principled leader with strong convictions to guide them through an often-painful conflict resolution process. In addition, the party itself required a confident leader who could act and speak with convincing authority, thus quelling dissent and the output of mixed messages and ultimately unite the party around a positive and accommodating unionist vision of a future Northern Ireland, integral within the United Kingdom.

Yet, David Trimble failed to provide such an image. He vacillated in his support of the Agreement and it became very difficult to determine whether he actually believed in his decision to sign up for the Agreement on Good Friday, 1998. *Hearts and Minds* producer, Mary Kelly, believed that Trimble (while obviously not literally), signed the Agreement with one hand, whilst using his other to pinch his nose, as if a nauseating smell emanated from it. (Interview with author, 4 June 2002)

Four years later in 2002, Trimble provided a glimpse of his true feelings whilst on a visit to America, when questioned by a student from Missouri Southern about his

personal opinion of the Good Friday Agreement. He replied, “Well, I have a *slight* commitment to it.”<sup>22</sup>

This was quite a remarkable response to make from a supposedly pro-Agreement leader, and only served to confirm nationalists’ suspicions that Unionism in all of its forms was incapable of making requisite compromises or changes, that is, fully implementing the democratically endorsed Agreement. His ambiguous response was in keeping with Fionnuala O’Connor’s description of Trimble as ‘divided internally’ (O’Connor 2002, p.176), that is, was he really pro-Agreement or anti-Agreement? The difficulty in deciphering Trimble’s true intentions would prove problematic for a number of ‘one-dimensional’ members within his own party and indeed those at large within the wider community, as the Rev John Dunlop highlighted:

Presbyterians are people who do not live easily with ambiguity. Normally the Presbyterian way of doing things is you try to be as explicit and clear about an issue as you can so that your yea be yea and your nay be nay and don’t be living in this middle ground of ambiguity which can go in either one or two ways. (Interview with author, 23 April 2001)

Indeed, Trimble was very rarely explicit or clear in support of the Agreement or indeed in selling its vision of the future – a Northern Ireland where vibrant and fruitful relationships had the potential to emerge and exist whereby equality of treatment or ‘parity of esteem,’ was the guiding principle. Dunlop acknowledges that Trimble fell short in promoting such a vision, although he believed attempts to

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<sup>22</sup> My Itallics, ‘*First Minister answers peace questions*’ by Karena Wells, Chart reporter, Internet address <http://www.mssc.edu/international/mccaleb/Ireland/stories/trimble.htm> accessed 16/05/03



persuade unionists of the merits of the Agreement were discernible (yet not a dominating theme) and that Trimble's personality traits may have impacted negatively upon his ability to appeal to a wider audience:

I think that David Trimble might well have sold the vision behind the Agreement more persuasively than he has done... I think that if you wanted to sell the Agreement you have to sell, not so much the nuts and bolts of the Agreement, but sell the vision of where it's trying to get to and how it answers a historic problem and sell it in those terms... the vision which lies behind it, which is this concept of accommodation in a different future. You find, say, in Trimble's speeches [that] it occurs from time to time within them. It's not a dominating theme, but it's nevertheless in there. And it's articulated – coming from a Presbyterian background – in quite significant persuasive kinds of ways. But it's not delivered in high-flowing oratory. It is delivered in an academic sort of way. Perhaps one might say sometimes it lacks warmth. But then David Trimble is an academic; he's not that kind of individual, although I think he's got a lot better at it than he was before. (Ibid.)

Dunlop highlights an important point when he expressed his opinion that Trimble had 'got a lot better at it than he was before'. This was a true reflection of changes occurring within UUP communications and the personnel behind-the-scenes of the party who attempted to improve and modernise both Trimble and his party's image (see below).

As the party continued to experience bitter internal feuding and debilitating infighting, alarm bells were ringing on the UUP's communications front. Only one year after the Assembly elections (that is, in June 1999), the disorganised state of UUP communications was highlighted by Quintin Oliver when conjuring up images of a party at death's door, one with a decentralised and chaotic character, whereby

mixed messages – both pro and anti-Agreement – were publicised via all of the party's 18 constituency associations:

You wouldn't know about the UUP because it's still constituency-based and their headquarters is like a morgue or a cemetery. There's no sense that this is a campaigning centre. You wouldn't know that this is the biggest political party in Northern Ireland and a party out for its political survival because they have not re-organised and come up to speed with the modern world. (Interview with author, 6 June 1999)

The main problem for press officers at UUP headquarters was that the more information that came from multiple sources (that is, either the pro – or anti – Agreement party members or constituency associations), the less control they had over it. Discipline and control are pivotal factors in implementing a successful communications strategy, as David Kerr explained: “spin doctors can only do so much – ultimately you have to be singing from the same hymn-sheet. More importantly, the party needs to be saying what you are saying.”<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, David Kerr spent a great deal of time trying to keep party members ‘on message’, as is evident in an internal memorandum from March 1999 that restated the ‘party line’ on decommissioning. Its communications importance is revealed in its final few words, which ended with the terse exhortation “Stay on message. Thank you” (*The Irish Times*, 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 1999).

If it was impossible to keep the party ‘on message’, the spin doctor's role in such circumstances was to try to play down division and dissent. Yet, because of internal

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<sup>23</sup> Irish Times, September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1998

rivalries and differences over the Agreement, UUP communications personnel found it very difficult to maintain a united front. The lack of central control made it easy for journalists to bypass press officers and effectively glean in-depth information – counteracting any attempts to downplay the apparent division and dissent. Kevin Magee highlights this point, while also alluding to the ineffective qualities of UUP communications personnel:

I don't find the Ulster Unionists particularly helpful to us, they prevaricate; they don't really understand what journalists need. You know, if you're making a program its no good for efficiency reasons or whatever, just being so long in making their decisions or deciding which person [to have on]. So a lot of the time we just bypass their press people. I would tend to do that generally anyway. I think you're much more successful when you deal with them directly particularly when you've worked in the area for a long, long period of time. You know the politicians better than you know their press people. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

In 1999, as UUP relations with the media continued to deteriorate, the party seemed to be in a 'communications meltdown' scenario. At this juncture, Trimble's Press Secretary and special adviser, David Kerr, as well as UUP press officer, Alex Benjamin, were assisted on the PR front by an 'old hand'. Indeed, Eoghan Harris began, behind-the-scenes, to advise Trimble once again, as he had in pre-Agreement days (McDonald 2000).

For Harris, Trimble and the UUP would have to set up a government before IRA decommissioning. He warned Trimble that his party, and unionism in general, were again in danger of losing the PR battle to republicans. At a secret meeting of Trimble's twenty-seven loyal Assembly members on 26 September 1999, he

recommended: “To win this war you have to do three things. (a) Purge the party. (b) Speak to Sinn Féin dead cool, as if you knew the war was over. (c) Sell the Agreement to your own side with or without decommissioning.” (Ibid. pp 313-314)

Two weeks later (at the UUP Annual Conference) Trimble used Harris to limber party members up for a leap of faith. Harris obliged by ranting and raving at delegates during a debate on the media and unionism over their absolutist and moralistic policy of ‘no guns, no government’: “Look, Sinn Féin fought for thirty years. It’s like a kid wanting a bike for Christmas. The bike they wanted was a united Ireland. They didn’t get the bike. Please give them the stickers.” (Ibid. p.307)

Subsequently (on the 18<sup>th</sup> November, 1999), Trimble used a press conference at party headquarters to announce a special meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council in order to overturn the ‘no guns, no government’ policy. Ray Haydn was once again hired to assist with UUP communications but ultimately to help Trimble sell the deal to his party. Haydn summed up the foreseeable difficulties: ‘This is the Agreement, the Referendum, the Assembly and Euro elections all rolled into one. The next seven days will be hell.’ (Ibid. p.318)

Harris (who remained active behind-the-scenes) offered advice to Trimble on how to structure his keynote speech to the UUC. Although he did not offer to write it, he recommended that Trimble break the speech into three Aristotelian segments:

I told him the best advice for writing any speech comes from Aristotle’s *The Rhetoric*, in which he breaks down an argument into three parts – character, argument and emotion. I

told Trimble he should start his speech with a reference to his character, his background, his history including the opposition to Sunningdale and his Vanguard days. Then he should move on to the fine detail of the argument, the detailed reasons why they must back the deal. And then finally to switch to emotion. I believe in hindsight he took this advice on board – I even provided him with a rough guide for the times he should apply to each of the three parts of his speech. (Ibid. p.322)

However, the UUP leader could not rely on Aristotelian rhetoric alone to win the day. Trimble returned to a Professor Paul Bew / Eoghan Harris inspired plan of July 1999 – a post-dated cheque of resignation – whereby he and the three UUP ministers in a future executive would resign in February 2000 if his leap of faith turned out to be misplaced. (Ibid.)

Essentially, Harris's important ongoing advice to Trimble, his Assembly team and members attending the party conference, was a major factor in influencing the UUP to move beyond the long-standing hurdle of 'no guns, no government' and helped to edge the party into a new political dispensation – devolved government on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1999.

Additional advice by Harris around this time also included helping to write part of Trimble's Nobel Peace Prize address in Oslo on the 11<sup>th</sup> December 1999, which included helping with references used throughout. He even wrote camera directions for Trimble on the script, enabling him to be at ease when he spoke. Instructions such as 'Look up at the camera', 'Look down at the lectern', 'Smile' and 'Turn to the audience' were marked on the speech in block capitals. (Ibid. p.277)

Yet, it was not only Eoghan Harris who was furnishing Trimble with PR advice at a personal level or indeed, at party political level. John Laird initiated changes that would fashion for Trimble and the UUP a more congenial look modelling modernisation plans on the revamping strategy adopted by New Labour <sup>24</sup>. Following in the footsteps of Ray Haydn during the referendum campaign, Laird began with an image makeover of the party leader. As a result, Trimble began to smile more often, not because of a shift in his personality, but because of Laird's advice. Trimble had been known in the past to turn up in newspaper offices, puce with indignation at a particular article that appeared that day. (Ibid.) His proclivity for publicly fuming bright red in the face at awkward questions from the media was also well known but became more a thing of the past. With Laird's influence at work on his public persona, Trimble's annoyance became controlled, his responses more decorous and reasonable. Laird's objective was to promote the idea that the UUP could ditch its appearance of unvaried negativity and essentially portray itself as a progressive political outfit. (Ibid.)

On the surface at least, this signalled that the UUP leadership was acknowledging the need for more focused PR. They also brought forward able spokesmen like Stephen King who became a senior adviser to Trimble and on whose behalf he began to constantly appear on television, radio and in print. King also began to do much of the daily backroom spinning to journalists and became perpetually accessible to the media (Ibid.). During this time, Alex Benjamin left the UUP as full-time press officer (replaced by Philip Robinson) and by May 2001, further

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24 The Sunday Business Post, November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2000

changes included the appointment of David Kerr as the party's first ever Director of Communications.

However, only a month later, the party suffered electoral humiliation at the hands of the DUP in the 2001 general election. Essentially, Trimble's anti-Agreement enemies had made plans to unseat him as leader, utilising a series of simple steps: (a) get rid of him; (b) collapse the Agreement; (c) renegotiate the deal (Ibid.). They foretold that no-one in his circle of allies and advisers, paid or unpaid, experienced or not, could keep Humpty Dumpty on the wall, let alone put him together again if he fell.

Yet, while Trimble persistently wobbled on the wall without falling as party leader, the UUP's communications would continue to remain in pieces as long as divisions persisted. While a number of talented PR individuals made attempts to put the UUP back together again, the idea of unity, in the face of electoral defeat, was now more elusive than ever.

In research conducted by Liz Fawcett (in 2001), the UUP's communications efforts were castigated once again by a variety of political editors and journalists. Fawcett highlighted that when a journalist telephones a party to request an interview or information, they simply want their request acted upon as quickly as possible. Both political editors and journalists alike deemed the UUP as the least efficient of all the major parties, rating its ability 'to deliver' as 'poor'. (2001, p.13) While acknowledging that the UUP were chronically divided internally over the Agreement, the political editors and journalists suggested that Trimble could have

done more personally to court a larger number of them and to keep his press officers informed of his thinking on important issues. (Ibid.)

One television broadcaster (who wished to remain anonymous) dismissed out of hand the party's PR efforts and their ability to make a significant turnaround in time for the 2003 Assembly elections:

The Ulster Unionist Party has been in bits; their PR has been in bits for a long time and continues to be. Largely, I think, the difficulty for the PR officers is that their politicians don't do what they advise... they try to get media opportunities for them and they turn them down. We have this frequently with David Trimble, for example, he's very hard to get on television and they've other people that we get frustrated with too, like Sylvia Hermon [MP] who is a very attractive proposition, rarely does anything, never available. You know, they need to think they've got an election coming up and you don't get much sense that they think in a joined up way there at all. I think a lot of press officers who have worked with the Ulster Unionist Party have been very frustrated; I know they're frustrating to deal with.  
(Interview with author)

Indeed, this very frustration with their political masters, who either failed to keep them adequately informed of high-level party thinking or to heed their communications advice, were perhaps contributory factors in the decisions by both David Kerr and Philip Robinson to resign from the party in early 2002.<sup>25</sup> Their departures sparked off a somewhat bizarre (but as we shall see below, not unprecedented) chain of events within the history or the development of the party's communications.

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<sup>25</sup> Irish News, 9<sup>th</sup> February, 2002



In March 2002, Grant Cameron, a former *Coleraine Chronicle* editor, was appointed press officer for the UUP's Assembly group.<sup>26</sup> Only a matter of months later in May, Martin McNeely, formerly an assistant press officer of the Presbyterian Church, was appointed the new 'media link-man' for the UUP (that is, Director of Communications).<sup>27</sup> McNeely acknowledged that the party was in need of a PR makeover and that relations with large sections of the media were little short of disastrous.

They [the UUP] need to recognise that they now have to have a pro-active relationship with the media. During the last few years the party has been undergoing a difficult time, but it is looking to the future now. (Ibid.)

Yet, in looking to the future, the UUP should have been headhunting far and wide for professionals with proven track records to take responsibility for the party's highest-ranking communications positions. Like their predecessor, David Kerr (who began working in the party's communications frontline in his early twenties after graduating with a *Law* degree), the appointments of Cameron and McNeely would simply not have occurred within a party like Sinn Féin (for example). Although both Cameron and McNeely had a working knowledge of the media as an editor of a *very small, local paper* and as an *assistant* press officer of the Presbyterian Church respectively, the UUP, at this juncture, required PR 'heavyweights' as they embarked upon a fight for their political survival.

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26 The Sunday People, 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2002

27 The Belfast Telegraph, 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 2002

One question springs to mind; was it simply a case that there were a limited pool of people who applied for the positions because of the daunting and difficult prospect, that is, of attempting to overhaul or even manage such a decentralised and bitterly divided party? The answer may be difficult to conclusively ascertain but the fact that both Cameron and McNeely only remained in their positions for a matter of months and not years, speaks volumes.

By February 2003, after being 'bruised' by making seemingly 'lightweight' choices, a true PR 'heavyweight' in the form of Ray Haydn had become their Director of Communications and Alex Benjamin had returned to the party as a full-time press officer.

However, only weeks before the 2003 Assembly elections (at the party's Annual Conference) the UUP were still attempting to freshen, renew and enliven their appeal to lapsed and potential unionists. Tim McKane, Chief Executive of marketing company, Fireimc, had been briefed to present the UUP to the electorate as a dynamic, modern, efficient, evolutionary and fresh political party.<sup>28</sup>

Research that had been undertaken by Fireimc concluded that the party's weakened position was the culmination of disjointed messages and a lack of clarity on the Good Friday Agreement.

In attempts to address a number of difficult issues, McKane and his company also developed a new logo for the UUP that dropped the word 'party' from the

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<sup>28</sup> Information gathered from UUP's 2003 Annual Conference, 18<sup>th</sup> October, 2003

marketing material because it suggested that to be an Ulster Unionist one would have to join the party and that this could impinge upon their ability to attract voters. He explained to the delegates how his company arrived at the new 'Ulster Unionists' logo:

We designed this logo in mind with the dynamic power of the Ulster Unionists. The double U in the logo is a strong representation of the two U's in the party name. It is red, white and blue. It is in design terms a dynamic moving curve... it has a movement sweeping forward. It has a slight representation of a bugle and you trumpet your values, there is nothing to be ashamed of. And it is a reclaiming of the unionist name. All of the other parties, competitors for your target audience, use the word 'unionist'; they use it because it's yours and you created a unionist party in Northern Ireland many, many years ago and all of the other parties call themselves unionist because you do. It's about time you reclaimed ownership of it. (Ibid.)

The Union Jack was also not in the newly-developed logo, as McKane believed that its inclusion did not represent a fresh, dynamic and forward-thinking party since it had been hijacked and could be seen by potential and lapsed unionists to represent extremist views, not the views of the UUP. In addition, Fireimc also developed a strap-line or brand position statement:

The brand position statement "Simply British" developed in conjunction with the party leadership captures the identifying core value, the core values of what people are wanting to say and it reinvents the values in the new Ulster Unionists wanting to be British. It is fresh, dynamic and innovative and it is quite the most simple thing you can say about yourself. It is very, very easy to understand by people who want to say out loud what they are in Northern Ireland... "Simply British". (Ibid.)

McKane believed that the new logo and brand position statement provided a strong, confident message that was very much at the core of what it meant to be an Ulster Unionist – taking ownership of being British whilst avoiding extremism. However, the cosmetic changes of a new logo and brand position statement could hardly paper over the party's ever-widening cracks. The reality of the predicament that Trimble and the UUP faced was alluded to in his speech at the conference:

It is traditional at Conferences and Annual General Meetings to appeal for party unity. After the summer I spent a week touring round the constituency associations. One message came over again and again. Our biggest problem is the mixed message, the constant infighting. (Ibid.)

Over the entire period under analysis (that is, 1998-2003) it was these two main constants – the mixed message and constant infighting – that continued to directly impinge upon the ability of the party's PR personnel to develop successful communications strategies, as McDevitt maintained:

I think it's very difficult to provide any sort of cohesive communications strategy when you don't have a cohesive political entity. I think until unionism itself settles down into whatever shape that it does and until Trimble ultimately deals with those who are disaffected or history deals with them, that it will be difficult for anyone. I mean no amount of public relations talent or expertise is going to overcome the fact that people can't agree amongst themselves. I think that's the biggest obstacle. I've no doubt that in the absence of disagreement, you would see a pretty professional outfit in a reasonably short space of time. And that the same, I would say about any party and I think that as soon as any political party begins to show cracks the first place it shows them is in terms of its communications strategy because if it can't agree a message, well then you've got a pretty big problem in PR terms. (Interview with author, cited in Kirby 1999, pp 65-66)

As the 2003 Assembly election approached, the UUP's key campaign slogan sought to differentiate itself from the DUP with: 'The Future not the Past.'

The party also launched its campaign with a slogan from their party conference: 'Simply British'. This was intended to both suggest that the UUP would preserve British culture and to appeal to those unionists who might be questioning why devolution was preferable to direct rule. Yet, it could be contended that the slogan simply implicitly equated life under a devolved, UUP-dominated executive with that under direct rule or that the UUP had little to offer beyond the Westminster governed status quo. Indeed, it could also be argued that the 'Simply British' slogan was not obviously linked to their key campaign slogan 'The Future not the Past', that is, it sent out mixed or confusing messages and risked suggesting that direct rule was actually preferable to devolution. (Wilson and Fawcett 2004)

During the election campaign, the UUP opted for posters featuring two 'Simply British' images: the classic Mini car with a Union flag on the roof, and a bag of fish and chips. Other posters aimed specifically at first-time voters incorporated an uncharacteristically humorous slogan 'You never forget your first time'.

Yet, during the campaign the party's website had a rather impersonal feel about it, with a lone picture of Trimble on its home page. This merely brought to the forefront the public image of isolation within his divided party. Indeed, the UUP opted throughout for a 'presidential-style' campaign that focused mainly on Trimble as the party's leader.

During the election campaign, the party also produced a rather thin 9-page manifesto, representing a triumph of style over substance and provided little more on policy than on its website.

In an attempt to establish a set of principles, the UUP produced a 10-point 'Ulster Unionist Charter', agreed to by both pro- and anti-Agreement candidates. This was clearly designed to try to provide a veneer of unity over a bitterly divided set of candidates, yet Jeffrey Donaldson subsequently produced a 'dissidents charter' that flew in the face of notions of party unity and included an altogether different set of principles.

The culmination of all of this division clearly compromised the UUP's campaign and was ultimately a godsend to their rivals in the DUP.

The outcome of the election saw the realisation of Trimble's 'nightmare scenario': in terms of vote share, the DUP and Sinn Féin emerged as the two largest parties, with the UUP and SDLP relegated to third and fourth places respectively.

### **(iii) Democratic Unionist Party**

DUP communications personnel perceived that they had an uphill struggle or indeed 'battle' to fight during the period beginning on Good Friday 1998 and up until the 2003 Assembly elections that is best understood or summarised by their Director of Communications, St Clair McAllister:

We're going to have a difficult battle ahead because the process that was being foisted upon us through the Belfast Agreement was not acceptable to us and we felt would not be acceptable to the vast majority of right-thinking unionists. It has been a tough battle. People know the battle that has raged politically, that we have a situation now that we were being told that the 'product', I'll use that term for the Belfast [Good Friday] Agreement, was going to be the panacea for all our ills, it was going to bring in a new dawn politically, it was going to bring in peace, stability, an economic boom etc., all the plus things. But of course the reality is that it has brought none of those things. We have a very unstable situation; the vast majority of unionists are now anti-Agreement and are very unhappy with the way this process is going. That's an ongoing battle; it's an ongoing fight, which we have to fight every day because it's quite obvious that we are up against two governments and the media. Even anyone who has no political interest at all, if they came in as an outside observer and observed the amount of space that we get in the papers, on television, the point of slanted questions etc., they would have no doubt that there is a movement out there against those people who are anti-Agreement and obviously it stems from government right down. (Interview with author, 1 November 2001)

Essentially, the DUP felt that they were at worst demonised, at best marginalised, within the so called 'peace process'. Indeed, when McAllister alludes to media or governmental bias he could so easily be quoting a Sinn Féin spokesperson from

before the 1994 IRA ceasefire, and just as in the case of Sinn Féin, seemingly hostile and discriminatory practices by the two governments and the media only served to harden the DUP's resolve to continue the fight.

Outside the domain of party politics, (that is, the DUP's consistent vitriolic attacks against the UUP and in particular against their leader, David Trimble), a target for DUP disdain was Tony Blair, whose pledges made during the referendum campaign McAllister believed had significantly contributed to the Yes vote within the unionist fold:

The turning factor for the Yes campaign was the fact that the Prime Minister's promises – in other words if you couldn't trust the Prime Minister, who could you trust? Well of course he has turned out to be a media-driven liar as far as things are concerned on this. He has dishonoured all those things; he's dishonoured the things that he even promised about the RUC etc. This is a Prime Minister that is totally discredited as far as I'm concerned and as far as our party is concerned. But that was the turning point for them. That was, shall we say, their master stroke, even though it was deception and lies to try and turn the campaign around. (Ibid.)

Although exit polls conducted during the referendum vote indicated that over half of those unionists who had voted, endorsed the Agreement,<sup>29</sup> McAllister 'papered over' this and was adamant that ongoing communicative efforts would be targeted towards helping to bring about a new agreement:

The vast majority of unionists didn't buy the Agreement and that's an encouraging sign because it means that the hope is there that we'll get down to the reality, that no agreement, whether it's called the Belfast Agreement, the Good Friday Agreement or whatever

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<sup>29</sup> The Sunday Times, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1998 and RTE May 23rd, 1998



agreement is going to work until you have the vast majority of nationalists and unionists supporting it. There's nothing about this Agreement that will bring that about. So it has to be a new agreement and I think that's the message that we've got to get across and I think that it will come across more and more, and we are ready for action tomorrow if it comes – we'd love that. (Ibid.)

Throughout the period under analysis (that is, post-referendum 1998 up until the 2003 Assembly elections) the DUP made consistent attempts to thwart progress made by pro-Agreement parties and to essentially delay the Agreement's implementation. According to McAllister, the people of Northern Ireland (inferring mainly the unionist community) were dishonestly sold a flawed Agreement, and therefore deserved an honest and durable (new) agreement that would command the overwhelming support of both communities:

I think that any product, whether it be a peace process, a political process or a commercial product, if it is to be successful it must be sold on honesty and durability. If you're going out to buy a product like a car, people are looking for service from that, they're looking for durability overall, that it will do its job, day-in-day-out efficiently, effectively. That's what they want in politics too and it must be sold with honesty. People must be aware of something, warts and all. I don't think they'll get a perfect agreement. I don't think in this world we live in, that anything is ever perfect. But you can work at getting the best you can. What is more important, is not a perfect agreement but an agreement that the vast majority of both sections of the community will have trust and confidence in. That by itself will give it the durability that it needs. (Ibid.)

The DUP (who contributed least to the effective and efficient working of the Agreement and by virtue, it's institutions) seemed to believe that (among Northern Ireland political parties) they were the sole inheritors of an honest and truthful

political analysis. Indeed, throughout their history as a political party they have portrayed themselves, with a seemingly religious pride, as ‘The team you can trust’ among other political parties who would either ‘sell-out’ or contribute to the ruination of Ulster. As distinct from the other main political parties, the issue of religion is one that pervades the rhetoric of the DUP and the tendency to quote from scriptural verse was none more obvious than from their Director of Communications when alluding to the false premises or promises upon which the Agreement was founded:

Above all, we’ve got to be honest and we’ve got to be honest about the product, what the product will achieve, what it won’t achieve, and we’ve got to be honest in portraying that product. At the end of the day that’s what I’m about. I’m about a seeker of the truth and portraying the truth because at the end of the day the only thing that will set me free from anything is the truth. I’ll end with scriptural verse: there’s a verse in the bible, which says the truth shall set you free. I think that’s more than just a gospel truth that’s applied in the bible. If you and I meet today for the first time, as we have, we find out between ourselves that we enjoy each others company and we’d say there’s a relationship – a friendship is going to start. The only way that it will be a successful relationship is if it’s based on the truth, if I know you and you know me warts and all, and you’re prepared to go on on that basis. Yet, if we start off our relationship upon a false promise, a false premise, a false foundation, it is bound to end in failure at some time or other. Therefore, that’s what I believe, that the truth shall set you free. (Ibid.)

The DUP incorporate strong moralistic overtones and a simplistic, yet dogmatic religious fervour into a great deal of their political rhetoric that encompasses notions of right and wrong, good and evil, truth and lies etc. Yet, their mix of religion and politics seems at odds with one another; the former infers taking a principled stand

on issues whereas the latter infers the compromising of principles to some degree or other. Having an uncomplicated idea about various issues and seeing them in black and white terms with little or no grey in the middle does not seem to bode well for future negotiations with other political parties.

Unsurprisingly, in relation to notions of spin and either the bending or shaping of information, McAllister once again took to the moral high ground:

We have never been a party to do that. If you look at our party ethos, it would tell you that we are a party who says it how it is and are more concerned about getting the truth out, because at the end of the day that is, what will eventually take people into a new particular relationship – being honest with themselves and with others. (Ibid.)

McAllister's uncompromising goal of 'getting the truth out' and successfully communicating his party's anti-Agreement political analysis seems only to have been strengthened (as in the case of Sinn Féin) by what he perceives as a barrage of hostile attacks by what he considers a biased media:

The media are biased towards us or against us and that pertains right through to even today... I think there's a need for some basic honesty and fairness and they should at least try and give both sides of the case, which is what good journalism, what a good media is about... Ask appropriate questions but give equal time and space, but that doesn't happen and it's not happening today. It's a constant battle we have... I could name several broadcasters and even their very tone, attitude and body language towards the DUP is totally different when they're interviewing anybody from the pro-Agreement camp. So there still is that, go lightly on the pro-Agreement people but put the boot in as much as you can to the anti-Agreement people, which is mainly the DUP because it's the biggest party obviously. We're not deterred by that; we'll just keep on going. (Ibid.)

McAllister's personal resolve permeated party communications in an efficient and effective way and as such, as a centralised party, they seemed to adequately prepare for all manner of questioning, even though answers at times seemed manufactured or regurgitated from a well-rehearsed script. For example, when asked to explain why his party had yet to formulate a viable (and indeed had no) alternative to the Good Friday Agreement, he simply explained:

I believe there's always an alternative. When someone says, "Oh when you're dead, that's it, there's no alternative" I don't even believe that, I believe there is an alternative when you die. I don't believe in the whole existence of god's creation, that there's not an alternative way of doing things. People were always being told in every field you can think of: engineering, medicine, etc. "You'll never be able to do that, you'll never build that pyramid" – they built them, "You'll never get a man on the moon" – they got a man on the moon. I'm an optimist by nature, by faith and existence so I always believe that there is an alternative. We were told that there was no alternative to certain things like the poll tax. Maggie Thatcher said there was no alternative to the poll tax yet the poll tax fell away and the people rejected it. I believe that there is an alternative and we can change the Belfast Agreement. The people who tell you there's no alternative are telling lies. We're back to the honesty criteria. (Ibid.)

McAllister seemed to have a plausible (if pre-arranged) answer for awkward questions and as such, was recognised by many in the media as 'very good as the DUP spin doctor'. (Interviews with Mary Kelly and Noel Russell, 4 June 2002) He presided over the rapid development of the party's communications structures (that included an efficient media relations operation) and by 2002 was confident that the DUP had sufficient personnel on board to relay the party's message in an effective way:

If you encompassed the number of people that work for us, we have certainly enough people on board. So therefore, our needs are being met. There's no worry that we are understaffed or under pressure and therefore our message is not getting out or we're suffering in that sense. (Interview with author, 1 November 2001)

Indeed, to reiterate this point, *Spotlight's* investigative reporter, Kevin Magee, highlighted and praised the communications advances the party had made with McAllister at the helm:

The DUP are very, very keen to sell their argument and I have never known anyone at the DUP who wouldn't want to participate. If you were to rank the parties in terms of media savvy I mean they're right up there with the Shinners. They know and appreciate the importance of TV exposure. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

One particular communications development that McAllister was proud of in his capacity as Director of Communications, was the party's web site:

One area which has come to the fore and is an ever-increasing part of communications is the IT revolution. We have an award-winning DUP site and now a very innovative dup2win.com campaign site, which won great acclaim. It's a very interactive site and that's an area where we're very keen to develop and we've been at the forefront of that and I'm determined that we're going to stay to the forefront of that. More and more people are coming online and more and more people are going to the net for general information and that includes politics. It's very vital that we are at the cutting edge of that. I think even a cursory glance at our web site compared to others would show that we are at the forefront. (Interview with author, 1 November 2001)

His enthusiasm to progress the technical side of party communications correlated with a drive to both strengthen grass roots support and lead a crusade to target potential voters, as evident in the 2001 general election:

We've always had our support from the ordinary mass of people in Northern Ireland and we've always maintained that, but we continue to grow, just like a company would grow its business we continue to grow our business politically. There are people voting for us now who never would have voted for us in the past or perhaps didn't vote at all, people who were of a unionist persuasion but maybe more Ulster Unionist. It's quite obvious they're moving over to us because of the number of seats we have now. You can put forward policies; you can put forward plans and all the rest of it but the hard facts are – how many people have you got elected? That's what it comes down to. Now with 5 MPs and only 2,800 short of getting 8 MPs, I think that's missed on a lot of people, that if 2,800 more people had voted for us in the right areas, we would now have 8 MPs which would clearly demonstrate that the overall majority of unionist supporters held to our analysis. (Ibid.)

Significantly, when McAllister left the DUP to concentrate on personal and business interests in 2002, he and his party had helped to convert a substantial swathe of unionists who had voted Yes to the Agreement in 1998 over to the anti-Agreement wing. In many ways the DUP mirrored Sinn Féin in that they had successfully targeted potential voters within their respective communities (that is, UUP voters in the case of the DUP, SDLP voters in the case of Sinn Féin). Indeed, like Sinn Féin, they became increasingly active on the ground and were successful in targeting and attracting younger voters.

McAllister's legacy was that at the time of his departure he had become the main contributor in the development of an effective communications structure within the

DUP that was passed on to, and upheld, by those who followed – Timothy Johnston as Director of Communications and Mike Wolseley as DUP press officer.<sup>30</sup>

As a party who were hungry for political power and appreciated the importance of television exposure, they eventually decided to enter studio debates with Sinn Féin in October 2002, when Stormont was suspended due to allegations of spying and continuing IRA activity. This departure was a tactical communications decision taken in acknowledgement that if they wanted to progress as a political party they would both have to tackle their marginalisation in the media and confront Sinn Féin as the leading voice of nationalism / republicanism, if they wanted to one day speak as the true voice of unionism.

Of pivotal importance to an examination of DUP communications during the years under analysis (that is, 1998 to 2003), party leader, Ian Paisley, became increasingly less visible publicly – to the point that he was only available for television interviews on rare occasions. Indeed, there were signs during the 2003 assembly elections of continuing marginalisation, when Paisley spent most of the campaign canvassing ‘on the ground’ as opposed to engaging in television debate. Yet the DUP’s communication strategy of shielding Paisley at times was a successful one, and as Kevin Magee alludes, whatever decision the party takes on the future role of their leader, they will have thought through their medium to long-term objectives:

I think that they understand the inevitability that Paisley is going to go at some point. Believe me, they’ll have thought well in advance how to deal with that and how they see their party progressing over the next couple of years. There’s one thing about the DUP,

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<sup>30</sup> See party website; <http://www.dup.org.uk>

they're a very, very efficient party and they pride themselves on that. That's a reason why individual profiles have been raised to the extent that they have... they are efficient and business-like in the ways they get things done. You mightn't like what they say or do, but they're efficient. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

Such a corporate, efficient mode of both operation and conduct seemed increasingly to pervade DUP political communications and would more than likely continue into the foreseeable future.

As the 2003 Assembly election approached, the DUP's key slogan for the election summed up the essence of their campaign strategy and implied that the other parties had failed to deliver an Agreement that could be equally supported by both communities: 'It's Time for a Fair Deal'.

The party ran the most effective election campaign of the four main political parties in terms of publications and use of other media forms to appeal directly to voters (Wilson and Fawcett 2004). They presented an appealing and coherent image, and all of their additional messages complemented and reinforced the key campaign slogan. The party's literature, posters and website all provided humour as well as information. The success of the party's strategy of relentless attack on David Trimble and the Agreement demonstrated once again that negative campaigning does not necessarily alienate a great many Protestant voters.

Indeed, the party continually highlighted its opposition to the Good Friday Agreement and its determination to renegotiate it. By attempting to build on the



fears of unionist voters they painted a 'nightmare scenario' of a Northern Ireland executive in which 'terrorists' held sway.

With the exception of the DUP, all the main parties' manifestos focused largely or exclusively on policies related to bread-and-butter issues, such as health and education, rather than on constitutional or 'sectarian' issues such as the Good Friday Agreement, demilitarisation or policing reform.

The DUP was also the only party to set up a special website for the election campaign (Dup2win.com.) and also attempted to get away from traditional-style manifestos by issuing theirs in the form of a glossy magazine.

In addition, they adopted a strategy of producing a set of 'principles' to help secure the votes of fundamentalist unionist voters concerned that their party might be prepared to compromise in the future on key principles.

The DUP's cartoon posters employed during the election were professional and humorous and were the most effective of any produced by the parties. Each belittled David Trimble for making too many 'concessions' to Sinn Féin. One of the three cartoons used on candidates' election leaflets showed a hapless Trimble sweeping paper notes listing the alleged concessions - 'IRA in government', 'Stormont Spy Ring' etc. under a carpet. In the leaflet, behind Trimble stood Gerry Adams with a box full of more 'concession notes', while behind the Sinn Féin leader stood a grinning paramilitary waving a grenade (Ibid. p.20). The election

leaflets also featured a series of images, also used as posters, which showed ordinary citizens saying why they were going to vote DUP. (Ibid.)

Throughout the election campaign, the party also opted for promoting a 'team' image and the DUP's main photo image featuring the party's five MPs was used on its website and on its campaign 'battle bus'.

They also made two Party Election Broadcasts (PEB's), yet, it was their second that was the most effective. It featured Peter Robinson who kept up the 'nightmare scenario' theme. The audience were treated to mock newspaper headlines like 'Twelfth parades banned' and 'Irish compulsory in all schools'. (Ibid. p.22) The DUP deputy leader also consistently attacked the UUP for all the 'concessions' it had allegedly made to republicans. (Ibid.)

As the final election results came in on 28<sup>th</sup> November (although an overwhelming majority - 74 out of 108 - of those elected were pro-Agreement) the emergence of the DUP as Northern Ireland's largest political party meant that there was little prospect of an early restoration of devolution along the lines of the model so painstakingly crafted in 1998 by the pro-Agreement parties.

Looking across the traditional divide, what was particularly significant in relation to the trend in electoral support for Sinn Féin was how this had been matched by the DUP. Whether the DUP's advance in the Assembly election constituted an irreversible trend was perhaps less certain than in the case of Sinn Féin. However,

their symbolic electoral relationship suggested that their political fortunes could be inextricably linked.

With a British general election likely in 2005, there seemed to be little prospect that the DUP would, under its current leadership, relax its total opposition to Sinn Féin's inclusion in a devolved 'executive' government short of complete IRA disbandment.

#### **(iv) Sinn Féin**

During the period under consideration (that is, 1998-2003) it quickly became apparent that Sinn Féin had continued in the same vein as pre-Agreement days, remaining the leading political party in Northern Ireland in terms of PR and communications, as highlighted by BBC political correspondent, Mark Simpson: “I would have no hesitation in saying that nobody does it better than Sinn Féin in terms of PR” (Interview with author, 4 June 2002).

*Spotlight* reporter, Kevin Magee, reiterated his BBC colleague’s assessment, while substituting PR for the more pejorative term ‘political propaganda’: “There is no doubt that the Shinners [Sinn Féin] are the most sophisticated in terms of propaganda, because that’s what it all is really, party political propaganda from all of them.” (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

In the post-Agreement era, changes in the party’s communications structures included (most notably) the establishment of a publicity operation at Stormont. Other less significant changes included the relocation of the Washington operation to New York - headed up by Rita O’Hare (who was replaced in Dublin as national Director of Publicity by Dawn Doyle). In addition, whereas the party once had a lobbying presence in Brussels (that also facilitated European visits), their EU operation was now closed down, on this occasion being subsumed within a wider ‘International Department’ based in Ireland. In June 2002, Sinn Féin also decided to open a London press office, influenced both by their MP’s successes in the 2001

general election and their wider strategy of gaining a foothold or 'voice' within the corridors of power at Westminster.

On the personnel front, the party's key communications players during the period under consideration (within the publicity department) included Dawn Doyle, who (as all-island Director of Publicity) was responsible for Sinn Féin's press operation north and south. She simplified her role as follows:

Basically it is my job to ensure that our PR strategy is in place, that it's being carried out, and that on any one day that we are responding to things being raised in the media and that we are setting out our proactive agenda as well (Interview with McAteer, 10 June 2002).

Directly responsible to Doyle was Mark McLernon who became head of the party's northern operations (mainly Connolly House in Belfast where he was based, and also the Stormont operation) - principally the two central press offices in Northern Ireland. McLernon summarised the extent of the media relations effort within the 'six counties' context:

You have three people work here with me: two press officers and another administration person. In Stormont there is a press officer and an administration person. We're actually looking at getting another one on board. And then there is a smaller operation in Derry, which is run. Then we have another press officer who deals/liases with the departments [at Stormont] and ourselves, and deals with the international output. In terms of tomorrow he'll travel to London to brief or have editorial board meetings with the English papers. (Interview with author, 30 October 2001)

In providing a synopsis of Sinn Féin's key communications players during the post-Agreement years, it would undoubtedly be incomplete without specific reference or acknowledgement to the pivotal role fulfilled by Richard McAuley. While not directly involved with the publicity department in his capacity as Press Secretary to Gerry Adams, his influence is nevertheless highly significant and his proficiency in media relations is unquestioned within the party, as McLernon pointed out: "We deal with some media requests but we'd pass them all back to be cleared centrally, Richard wouldn't." (Ibid.)

Indeed, BBC producer, Noel Russell, highlighted how fundamental McAuley was within the party's media operation, while acknowledging the strength of Sinn Féin's press office system within a Northern Ireland context:

Sinn Féin is the most efficient party... they have a very responsive media operation and they put out statements regularly, they are very good at that. They really have a very good press office system: a separate one at the Assembly that Ned Cohen runs and Mark McLernon runs the one at Connolly House and Richard McAuley is top gun really as Adams's Press Secretary. (Interview with author, 4 June 2002)

While Russell acknowledged McAuley as 'top gun' within Sinn Féin communications, other political editors and journalists alike recognised his pre-eminence on the Northern Ireland political scene and even likened McAuley at times to New Labour's Alasdair Campbell. As BBC Northern Ireland's political editor, Mark Devenport, maintained:

I think consistently Sinn Féin has had a good media operation because down through the years of the Troubles they were trained with consistently dealing with hard questions from the media, having to defend themselves about accusations over their complicity with IRA violence. Their politicians like Gerry Adams became very well honed at dealing with those questions and somebody like Richard McAuley became very well honed at spinning their particular line. I think McAuley is right up there and certainly he could teach Alastair a few lessons and Alastair could teach him a few lessons. Although it's a different game he is playing [Campbell], generally speaking McAuley's been really right up there in terms of communications. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

Devenport's predecessor as BBC political editor, Steven Grimason, also reiterated a positive assessment of Adams's Press Secretary:

Richard McAuley is pretty much up there... He's a pretty sharp operator, he knows his way around the course. People forget that Richard was involved in the Sinn Féin press office 25 years ago, so he's there a very long time. (Interview with author, 20 March 2003)

McAuley's long-term involvement in Sinn Féin communications is best understood as a 'vocation'; one in which he has been on a continuous learning curve. In this respect, Magee relates back to the 1994 IRA ceasefire announcement to highlight McAuley's media savvy both in the past and at present:

Yes, he's the best. The way that you get to Gerry Adams is through McAuley. You may as well be speaking to Adams when you're talking to McAuley. He understands programmes, he understands the needs of journalists, he understands the strategic nature of different programmes – one might carry more weight than another. I remember it was very, very evident the day of the Sinn Féin ceasefire when interviews were taking place at Connolly House and there was a hierarchy of journalists that they would let in. It began with the network programmes. It was really, really irritating for people who had been covering this

story here for 10 or 15 years, to be standing at a gate with McAuley on one side saying, “Well hold on, let Mr Snow in”. I remember that distinctly, calling Jon Snow because he [McAuley] understood the significance of Channel 4, Dimbleby for Panorama, and all these people took priority over local journalists on that ceasefire announcement. I thought that was a good insight into his savvy and his understanding of the significance of different programmes and the weight that is attached to them. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

While both McAuley and his party’s primary goal in 1994 and indeed since, remains Irish unity, this objective, (for the mean-time), seemed to be ‘put on the back burner’ in the years following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Their immediate political priority was to sustain the peace process and to defend the Agreement while pursuing its full implementation. During this period, the party was also preoccupied with building a lasting political strength both north and south so that their strategic long-term goal or aspiration of a united Ireland could indeed be realised.

On the public relations front, their approach was to put in place an all-Ireland PR strategy, as highlighted by Dawn Doyle:

We don’t have a separate strategy as such for the south of Ireland, there is one strategy, which would be on an all-island basis. Obviously at different times there would be different things you would be doing north and south because of the political realities... because of the nature of the press office in Belfast it will carry more of the peace process work by the pure nature that there is press conferences there every morning on the peace process. (Interview with McAteer, 10 June 2002)



In both jurisdictions the party's communications team made attempts to ensure all members were consistently 'on message'. For example, one key message laboured throughout was that the apparatus of the state (Northern Ireland) had failed on some level or other (most notably in policing) and that consequently, the operation of the six counties was unworkable and corrupt (justification for the party not taking their rightful place on the new Policing Board). As the party progressed (in the post-Agreement years) onto a permanent election footing, Sinn Féin members consistently sang in unison from the same communications 'hymn sheet' which included key messages or buzzwords that became familiarised into the republican lexicon like equality, justice, freedom, and peace.

The ability to successfully relay or 'sell' such messages to the electorate is always closely related to, or dependent upon, a party's resources – always a bone of contention (at least in the financial sense) when referring to Sinn Féin. Media reports suggest that the party has huge financial resources whereas public relations personnel themselves at worst plead poverty, or at best contend that they have limited financial resources available for communications.

According to the Public Office Commission in the Irish Republic, in April 2001 to April 2002, Sinn Féin (with just one member in the Irish Parliament) received twice the donations (387,787 euro) as the main governing party Fianna Fáil (194,615 euro) who had 75 members of parliament.<sup>31</sup>

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31 'Sinn Féin Outstrips Rivals in Donations League' by Mark Sage, PA News, 17 April, 2002

Indeed, such figures may only represent ‘the tip of the iceberg’, according to Mark Devenport:

There is a strong suspicion on the republican side that not all the money that you see being declared to any of these bodies is actually the money they’ve got but I’m not sure if anyone has proven that yet. The announcement in the South was interesting because Sinn Féin was the best-funded party, even more so than Fianna Fáil, which is obviously a disparity in terms of their electoral mandate. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

The Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland (at this stage) had not extended its role to investigate the finances of political parties and even if they had, media pundits like Devenport would remain cautious or sceptical of their significance in relation to Sinn Féin : “Whether we believe them [such figures] is another matter.” (Ibid.)

While it remains difficult to ascertain the true financial status of Sinn Féin, it is apparent that they do stand apart from other political parties in relation to their international fundraising capabilities. They are also a very different political party from others in that they have a great number of members and activists who are prepared to work without salaries. Mark McLernon, six-counties Director of Communications, highlights this point while stressing the need to fight for limited resources within his so-called ‘small party’:

In terms of resources, there’s no one in the press department who’s on a salary. Resources have improved in recent years in terms of Stormont, which is fitted out. As you can see we’re still a bit behind the times. We have two fax links going here basically all the time, piling stuff out. But we’re a small party, and there are a lot of people here who gets a slice

of the Sinn Féin cake within the party and we have to fight for our share annually in the same way as everybody else does. (Interview with author, 30 October 2001)

Certainly, for all of Northern Ireland's political parties, there has been a re-allocation of resources in the post-Agreement era. The introduction of the devolved Assembly meant that resources were diverted when all parties recognised the need to get a handle on broader social and economic issues, as Doyle acknowledged:

You have seen the evolving of a strategy around broader issues being covered in the north, and it's not just around the peace process. The media are covering stories on health and education, the ordinary day-to-day issues. So that would be a big change and it means a lot of pressure in terms of having very limited resources and we would be trying to get the positions right on all of these. We don't have enough research on policy, and legislative backup yet. (Interview with McAteer, 10 June 2002)

Doyle also points out that because of limited resources Sinn Féin could not conduct the extensive media analyses or produce the quick responses that they would like to:

We do to an extent, but not nearly as much as we should do. It's one of the things we're looking at, at the moment in terms of information. Because sometimes you're missing out on responding to issues because so much is happening just in the day-to-day running of the different press offices, but sometimes we miss stories, or miss responding to stories, or developing stories. It's one of the things we are looking at, at the moment that we're not nearly as strong on. The difficulty is that in the overall press operation you have ten people working in the different press offices, so you're talking about limited resources. We're taking on two more people now but they are moving into Leinster house, diverting some resources ... a large number of our people work on a voluntary basis and are not paid a salary or anything like that. Some people are, but a lot of people still aren't. Despite what is said about all the money from America, we would not have anything like the resources of

the bigger parties, not even close. We would love to have way more resources. I mean it is one of the things we fall down on in terms of having enough information, having a speedy response to issues as they unfold around us. (Ibid.)

While Sinn Féin does not have in place a New Labour-type 'Excalibur'<sup>32</sup> media system and indeed Doyle (like all Directors of Communications) would love to have more resources at hand, the fact that Sinn Féin had 10-12 full-time staff (paid or unpaid) working in media relations alone, put them at a distinct advantage over the other main political parties in the Northern Ireland context. Sinn Féin also remained the largest political party in terms of their available manpower (paid or unpaid) and party activists clearly contribute to the success of their publicity operation as a whole. In addition, the majority of Sinn Féin personnel who have entered the higher echelons of party communications (in particular, media relations) have been at a distinct advantage over rival political parties in that they have spent a number of years working for the newspaper An Phoblacht/Republican News. Only those promising individuals who demonstrated aptitude or potential were promoted, as McLernon, who went through this process himself, pointed out:

A lot of those of us who came in to the press department have come in through AP/RN [An Phoblacht / Republican News], which was always going to be a useful place to pick up people because of their time at the paper. They're skilled enough writers, they know the craic, they know structurally the basics of how to put a press statement together and they know how Sinn Féin works. It's always been a useful place for picking up good people. (Interview with author, 30 October 2001)

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<sup>32</sup> Excalibur is a computer with a huge capacity and the ability to read articles and documents and was a pivotal component in New Labour's 'rapid rebuttal system' of the 90's, (See Gould, 1998).

McLernon's colleague, Ned Cohen, who had previously no formal media experience, also typified those promoted up through the party's communications ranks. Cohen spent two years at AP/RN and subsequently worked as a press officer for three years before being appointed Sinn Féin publicity officer at the Assembly.

While Sinn Féin were progressively developing on the personnel front in the post-Agreement years (in terms of both quality and quantity), they were also developing new relationships with the media in general.

### Sinn Féin and the Media

For many years, there was a large body of journalists in the North who unbelievably supported censorship and had a disgraceful record in support of the political censorship of Sinn Féin. Likewise in the South, our team was reviled by a collection from the Workers Party for many, many years - the Eoghan Harris's of this world who would still quite openly support censorship. I don't rate them as journalists and I don't think they're credible journalists holding that position. So I think a lot of journalists, if you've grown up through that system of political censorship, you've clearly some political education to go through. I think it was in South Africa that journalists were invited to re-education camps and I jokingly suggested that sometimes to the journalists here. (Interview with Mark McLernon, 30 October 2001)

Sinn Féin has had substantial gripes with many sections of the media in Northern Ireland throughout the Troubles, yet, relationships did begin to improve and evolve when the party chose to pursue a democratic path in the early to mid 90's. Although Sinn Féin still had to fight its corner and take journalists and editors to

task over biased coverage, their relationships with the media continually progressed in the years following the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, as described by Doyle:

It has changed a lot over the past ten years and it has improved an awful lot. In the main, it's okay, it's like anything else, you have to fight your corner, try to get statements out, stories covered and interviews done. You go and make your pitch to the media and try to get coverage and if you don't get what you think you should have gotten, it's up to me to ring up and ask why it didn't get covered or why they covered a story in a particular way. I don't think it's any better or any worse than the other political parties to be honest. I think that people are slightly more open to us than they would have been a couple of years ago. I think it's the same as everyone else in that the peace process has influenced the media. While the vast majority of them would not be our biggest fans I think that they are slightly more open... but I think it's evolving and it's improving as time goes on. (Interview with McAteer, 10 June 2002)

For Ned Cohen there was even the feeling of a growing trust within certain sections of the media:

There is a long history of republicans engaging with the media, there are long-term relationships built up... I think a lot of journalists trust what Sinn Féin says, because it's above board. However, the media is not a uniform thing; the relationship is developing. (Interview with McAteer, 7 June 2002)

Like Doyle, Cohen believed that while there were improving relationships, there was also a need for Sinn Féin to continually fight its corner:

If you're concerned about something you might spend a month looking at a particular programme or a particular paper, and actually looking at the coverage they give us. So you

have the hard evidence to go back and say, “Look we put out say 65 press releases and you picked up on maybe only 2 stories out of 10, and that's not a fair reflection” - those sort of arguments. A lot of the media organisations would have a very clear, conscious agenda, rather than a subconscious agenda, a lot of which would be of a Unionist bias or a state bias. (Ibid.)

Indeed, for some within Sinn Féin it was really editorial decision-making that was causing most problems for the party and although both communications personnel and party members were enjoying more fruitful relationships with individual journalists they believed that some still relied too heavily on official sources and therefore had failed over the years to change their proverbial spots, as McLernon alluded to:

I certainly have very good relationships with many journalists. But often that's not the problem. It's the political direction that their editorial boards take which are certainly anti-republican. I would fight with people or plead cases with people over our stuff not getting carried or certain spins being put on our stuff. The Colombian stuff is a prime example where gullible journalists took lies from various secret services - MI5 sources - ran it as truth and quickly the story unravelled. I think that journalists need to be very careful in the sources that they use, particularly military sources and particularly British military sources. Some journalists are still using them and some journalists have made a career out of using them. (Interview with author, 30 October 2001)

Although it would be naïve to assume that Sinn Féin do not 'spin' their own case or that they have consistently espoused a 'truthful version of events' at all times, party communications personnel remained aware of the importance of not unduly using or manipulating journalists, as McLernon maintains:

Journalists don't like, in my experience, being used by political parties, especially journalists here; I think they're around long enough and they're wise enough to know when they're being sold a pup. So I don't think this kind of Machiavellian, spin-doctor type person is realistically a goer and I think even the influence they have over British politics have started to be criticised more and more. (Ibid.)

McLernon acknowledged the benefits of both being 'straight' in dealings with journalists and attending to their needs – in particular 'delivering on' information or people for interview when requested:

The journalists here are looking at efficiency; they're looking to process their requests quickly. If you're going to do it, do it. If you're not going to do it, tell them you're not going to do it. They like people being straight with them and I think they think that we are straight with them. (Ibid.)

McLernon's understanding of journalists' needs is supported by research conducted by Liz Fawcett (2001) who found that the quality that journalists valued most in a party's efforts in regard to media relations was efficiency. In this respect, Sinn Féin scored the highest among the main political parties in Northern Ireland and was seen as having led the way for many years (Ibid.).

Journalists interviewed for Fawcett's research also believed that Sinn Féin had benefited from being both close-knit and operating as a team. In their evaluations, journalists also placed an even greater emphasis on a party's ability to deliver what they wanted, than on its astuteness and skill at media relations. Of the main political parties in Northern Ireland, it was only Sinn Féin (according to some of the



journalists) who had mastered the art of 'spin' to any degree of sophistication and success. (Ibid. p.13)

Although evident in the pre-Agreement years, in the aftermath of the setting up of devolved institutions at Stormont, the symbiotic relationship between communications personnel and journalists became more acute. Communications personnel, by the fact that they were privy to a great deal of information, could be more aggressive and held a certain 'power' over journalists who were in competition for 'exclusives' or good stories, as acknowledged by Cohen:

Relationships on some level are based on individuals. Different members of the Sinn Féin press team would have different relationships with individuals in the media, and would talk to them for different things. I have an excellent relationship with all members of the media, though in saying that I just had a long projected argument with the editor of Stormont Live. You really need to hold people to task, and go above them and go the senior people above them in their organisation if you have a complaint. You have to be very forthright in the way you approach it. There is a general way where up here I have access to a lot of information, what's happening and what's going to be coming out in the future. Certainly people won't want to get on the wrong side of you too much because you are potentially a provider of good stories. I've given someone at the BBC a good number of exclusives over the past couple of years and consequently when she runs a story she will ring up looking for a Sinn Féin person to insert into it. (Interview with McAteer, 7 June 2002)

While Cohen (above) refers to the BBC or the Belfast-based regional media, Sinn Féin also aggressively pursued the targeting of local media in Northern Ireland during the pre-Agreement years:

In terms of how we approach it more professionally, we try to come at things a little bit differently than the other political parties. They tend to be tied into the way things have always been done, so there's a pattern as to how you approach the media, what journalists you talk to. We try to do it just a little bit differently; we try to have a focus on local media [more] than the other parties. (Ibid.)

Other political parties did not have the same resources to target local papers to the same degree or extent that Sinn Féin could, and as a result, local towns and communities throughout Northern Ireland would have seen the column inches or coverage in their local papers increasingly coloured by a Sinn Féin 'tinge' on a variety of issues.

Yet it was not simply a matter of Sinn Féin having greater resources (for example, 10-12 full-time press officers) that set the party apart from the others on the Northern Ireland political scene. Dawn Doyle believed that the party differed from other political parties because they were more hands-on and imaginative, that they were more involved at a community level and that from the top-down their political representatives consistently acknowledged the strategic importance of PR and publicity:

I think we come at it differently, and it can be a bit more imaginative sometimes. A lot of them [in other political parties] came through the same process, whether they were PR trained or were in the media and then went into PR. People come here [to Sinn Féin] and you learn in the job very much so, and because it's not as easy for us to get into the mainstream you come up with different ways to present your story. We may have to try a bit harder, and do things a bit differently, and we're also involved in street campaigning, active campaigning and involved in the communities and using that to get your message out

as well... which is PR in its own way [more] than other parties. The publicity structure is much more tied into the party itself than would be the case in other political parties; that I am almost definite about... the leadership is very much involved in the publicity and what happens, which they are probably not as involved in as much in other parties as they are in Sinn Féin. (Interview with McAteer, 7 June 2002)

The fact that, unlike other political parties, Sinn Féin's PR strategy is very much tied into their political strategy is of fundamental importance and highlights that communications personnel serve and contribute at the highest level of the party, that is, 'board room level'. Indeed, Doyle elaborated further:

As decisions are taken at a political level, publicity is [also]. Not that you are doing something because of publicity but publicity is involved in how the decisions are come to, so it's very easy for you to work out the PR strategy out of it. It's not something that's added on afterwards, it's actually part of the discussion itself, which is important. I don't think that that happens everywhere. (Ibid.)

The importance and influence afforded to PR and communications within Sinn Féin has a long history, whereas, for example, within the SDLP it has been more of a recent undertaking and has indeed been more of a case of 'adding on' afterwards as opposed to being an 'integral' function from the leadership level downwards. McLernon believed that the SDLP were on the wane in recent years not only because they lacked Sinn Féin's younger, fresher and dynamic outlook, but more importantly that the SDLP had never been a campaigning party like themselves: "They never operated like a political party should. They never campaigned on any

issue, ever! So, it's going to be hard for them to start now." (Interview with author, 30 October 2001)

There are a variety of reasons for Sinn Féin's communications success story as opposed to other political parties and not only the SDLP. They have continually progressed more professionally as a political party since the early 1980's and have become proficient at schooling both staff and party members alike in terms of dealing with the media. They have also been quite assiduous in promoting people up from within and they begin to think ahead very early about who is the next wave of people they want to represent them.

In terms of the party's growing professionalism and in regard to ongoing media training for example, Kevin Magee highlights:

The Shinners have workshops and even before an issue someone will sit in a room and three or four people will ask them questions, - "you're going to be asked this, you're going to be asked that and how are you going to deal with this? And, how are you going to deal with that?" And, I don't think it happens elsewhere. See what's important for them is the message. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

An additional reason for the party's success on the communications front is their high degree of central control (almost militaristic) – meaning that there was little deviation from a clear and consistent 'party line'. As Magee explained:

Sinn Féin have a very, very high degree of centralisation and central control as to who they will put up on what particular issue. If they are attempting to push a particular person,

you'll see them coming to the fore more and more often. I've done interviews with Sinn Féinners in the past because I have a professional relationship with them, not through the press office, but that's very, very unusual. What you would tend to find is that they are totally centralised, that a lot of the queries would go straight to the press office. You would ring a Shinner and say: "What about doing an interview?" and they'd invariably ask: "Have you cleared it with the press office?" (Ibid.)

However, it is also true that in the post-Agreement political dispensation Sinn Féin communications staff had to adapt to the uncharacteristic position of not being in 'full' control of their own media output, as McLernon highlighted:

The biggest change for us since signing the Good Friday Agreement is how to slot ourselves and how to slot our ministers into the departmental press structures and the executive press structures as opposed to us having overall control if you like of our own media operations and our own media output. (Interview with author, 30 October 2001)

Yet although Sinn Féin communications staff had to work with civil servants involved within departmental media relations, this did not adversely impact upon the party's ability to deliver a professional and controlled press operation.

In addition, the party's communications success story could also be put down to a greater strategic sophistication than other political parties. They seem to have a heightened sense of being able to read a situation and use it to their political advantage. At times, they remain silent or stay out of the limelight, or conversely they use the media at other times for agenda-setting purposes, as Magee maintained:

The general rule is that they will participate in programmes if they think it is to their advantage. For example, the Shinners wouldn't put anybody up to talk about the Columbia Three for obvious reasons, an embarrassment to them. Adams was on [*Spotlight*] recently on a programme about the UDA and again I think they see what they consider as an opportunity for them. Whatever it is they are trying to push at a particular time. I think the reason why Adams did that recent interview was he wanted to show that the Shinners wanted to engage with loyalism. It's good from the position that he said he would like to meet the guy who shot him who is a senior UDA figure and that from a news point of view was quite a good angle. But, I think it will depend on what day, or what direction, or what topic they want to push at a particular time. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

While Sinn Féin remains the most sophisticated political party in Northern Ireland in terms of their propaganda output, this does not mean that they are flawless and indeed they do make mistakes on occasions. However, the key to their success is that they learn from their mistakes and are quick to rectify them, as Magee points out in relation to one 2001 election broadcast:

There was one party political piece that they did that was an absolute disaster. It was so unlike them and it was clear something had gone wrong in their internal mechanism to allow it to actually get to the stage of a party political broadcast of such poor quality. I mean it was atrocious. So, they do make mistakes. But the thing about them is that they realise when they've made them, in terms of trying to present their message and they'll be very quick to change that. (Ibid.)

A fundamental reason why mistakes may be becoming more prevalent within the Sinn Féin household is that their political operation was much smaller in the early 90's and as a result it was much easier to manage their party communications. However, as they advanced in terms of their all-island electoral strength from the

mid 90's onwards these advances would have created problems that had subsequent repercussions, particularly in relation to their ability to run a 'tight ship'. As former BBC political editor, Stephen Grimason maintained:

They've got bodies on the ground. There is no doubt about it that the republican media effort is very aggressive and very organised but it is not as organised as people think it is. They have a reputation for being incredibly monolithic and not having any disagreements but they are also quite capable of making a complete mess of it as they would accept themselves and they do lose the run of themselves over certain bits and pieces. The reason for this is that when the movement was around 7,8,9 per cent of the population you could control it very comfortably in media terms... it's almost a throw over from the sort of old military structures that they had because they came out of a military movement with a top-down structure. The difficulty for them now is that when you represent more than 20% of the population, as they do, it's much more difficult to control and manage that. I think that is where a lot of their effort will go into. I'm not saying that they don't, but that it is a much more difficult scenario. You've so many views and added to that they are an all-Ireland party. There are differences of opinion North and South on a lot of key issues and they have to bring all of that together... it has been quite significant the amount of effort they have put into it, but they have to continue and communications is something that has to be continually worked at. (Interview with author, 30 March 2003)

Electoral success for Sinn Féin is intimately linked with the ability to both continually work at, and provide a professional and strategic public relations service. Further success will be, in part, dependant upon their ability to control and manage an even greater communications remit. Sinn Féin's track record does, however, prove that they have always been prepared for the challenge or task ahead. Since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, while at times they have shown reactive

or defensive characteristics, they have, for the most part, successfully adapted to the new political dispensation and remained both positive and proactive, as acknowledged by the BBC's Mark Simpson:

I think that all of the parties with the exception of Sinn Féin have struggled to cope with the new dispensation and the fact that they don't always have to be on the back foot. To use a cricket analogy, very rarely do they [other political parties] come out and go on the front foot and hit a four and a six, they're always on the defence. (Interview with author, 4 June 2002)

In this respect, Sinn Féin's approach and political future looked promising. Indeed, as the 2003 Assembly election loomed, Sinn Féin's key slogan promoted a positive vision of the future: 'Building an Ireland of Equals'.

The party's 90-page election manifesto was available in both Irish and an audiotape version. During the campaign they targeted first-time voters and younger voters by producing a credit-card size calendar with the accompanying message 'Sometimes it takes a four-letter word to be heard ... vote.' They also targeted rural constituencies by producing a special election leaflet designed specifically with that audience in mind.

During the election campaign, the party's Assembly election posters incorporated conventional images with a key election message: 'Your Winning Team'. Although Gerry Adams did feature on every candidate's election leaflet and on the party's website throughout the campaign, Sinn Féin primarily promoted a 'team' image. Many of their posters and newspaper advertisements promoted such an inclusive



image and featured group photographs of Sinn Féin leaders with women and younger politicians at the forefront, designed to play on nationalists' and republicans' wishes to both support and be part of the winning side.

Their Party Election Broadcast (PEB) featured traditional Irish music and a series of split-screen images showing the party's politicians in action and other images with which their target voters could identify with, such as republican murals. Caitriona Ruane who was a new candidate for the party, provided the voiceover in a softly-spoken southern Irish accent, informing the audience that 'growing numbers are voting for Sinn Féin north and south'. Designed to underline the 'Your Winning Team' campaign theme, many of the images were of group shots of smiling party politicians, clearly enjoying themselves and getting on well together.

As the 2003 Assembly results came in, it quickly became apparent that this election was Sinn Féin's strongest performance to date, that is, the party secured 24 seats in the Assembly (whereas the SDLP having gained only 18 seats, was it's weakest). The upward trend in Sinn Féin's vote was especially apparent since the IRA ceasefires of the mid-90's, the major casualty being its nationalist rival – a bitter irony for the SDLP who had helped Sinn Féin to negotiate a peaceful path.

Their political strategy, allied to the IRA's (imperfect) ceasefires and the as yet unresolved (and opaque) process of 'decommissioning' had undoubtedly reaped continuing electoral rewards.

Short of a complete breakdown in the 'cessation' of paramilitary activities by the IRA and a disavowal of the principles underlying the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 by the Sinn Féin leadership, there was little at hand to suggest that it would lose its newly-won electoral leadership of the nationalist community.

## **(v) The Media**

An analysis of the media in the post-Agreement era should begin by acknowledging the many positive developments that have taken place since 1998. For example, one needs only observe weather forecasts to see that a new approach has been taken whereby the broadcast media situate Northern Ireland within an all-island context. Pre-Agreement forecasts had a simple six-county map of Northern Ireland, as if it existed in isolation from the rest of Ireland or that 'southern' weather systems did not affect Northern Ireland. Indeed, on the cultural front as a whole, there has been a more inclusive approach taken, whereby for example, Irish language programming has been given a greater emphasis. Also, in the field of sports, Gaelic games have become a common feature of programming, whereas in the pre-Agreement era, coverage would have been minimal or non-existent.

Indeed, after a majority endorsement of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, its core principles including 'equality', 'parity of esteem' and 'inclusiveness', slowly permeated through most, if not all, layers of society in Northern Ireland, and the media were by no means an exception to the rule.

However, while there have been many positive developments in the post-Agreement era, there are also criticisms that can be levelled against the media. In the following subsection three such criticisms are examined: (i) media shortcomings by focusing on the peace process at the expense of the political process or issues of governance; (ii) the reluctance of broadcasters (for four and a half years) to deny the DUP the privilege of using a 'remote studio' and thus help to bring the four parties in the

involuntary government coalition together in the TV studios to facilitate discussion and dialogue between, in particular, the DUP and Sinn Féin; and (iii) the media's shortcomings during the 2003 Assembly election campaign including their framing of the election as a communalist 'battle' between two 'tribes'.

**(i) Media shortcomings and coverage of the 'peace process' versus the 'political process'**

In the post-Agreement Northern Ireland, media organisations like the Press Association invested financial and human resources in covering the Assembly and issues of governance, yet it was unquestioningly the BBC who invested the greatest resources of all, developing flagship programmes like *Today at the Assembly* and *Stormont Live*. For Stephen Grimason, who left his job as BBC NI political editor to become Director of the new Executive Information Service (EIS) at Stormont, it was a case of money well spent:

The BBC's investment in specialist correspondents has paid off for them because they are really wired into health, really wired into environment issues and they've got the security side sewn up. They've got a number of specialist people who can do all of this and it is they who direct and guide the coverage [in Northern Ireland]. (Interview with author, 20 March 2003)

However, while the BBC invested in specialist correspondents, a criticism levelled at the media in Northern Ireland (post-Agreement) was that journalists in general have not been keen to immerse themselves in issues of governance, or to put it more simply - bread and butter issues. As Grimason explained:

The difficulty the journalists had and continue to have is that we have a twin-track process – we have the peace process and we have the political process. While the peace process continues, it's altogether sexier for journalists to cover. It's also easier to understand. So, the bread and butter stuff is much more tricky. I think if it were only bread and butter stuff they'd turn into it much more dramatically than they have. Although that's not to say that there aren't a number of significant journalists who have begun to really understand how devolution works. (Ibid.)

In the main, however, journalists were reluctant to turn their attention or focus away from the peace process towards learning 'the ropes' of the more difficult political process. Although Grimason excuses journalists or believes this to be part of a transitional phase, it is worrying nonetheless that after a number of years of devolution most journalists appeared to be disinterested in the workings of government:

The average journalist has not focused to the extent that I think they should have on how government works. We know some of them who do, and they have come and we have told them just how you take a bill through the Assembly, how you take a bill through in primary legislation through parliament, all of those sorts of things. It's tricky, it's difficult and it's hard. Some people think it's boring but actually the more people who do come and look for it, do get into it and do find it interesting. But the difficulty you have is that the present hiatus is about guns or decommissioning and that's a sexier story than something around having seven extra sewage treatment works. So, because we're in transition and this transition will take quite a long while, journalism will be in that transition as long as anybody and that will provide its own difficulties for them. I think they take the easy option by covering the peace process because it's easier to report. I think the more difficult thing is how the country is run but that will happen in time... Security and politics tends to

dominate the news agenda and that's only to be expected. What happens, is that if you get rid of the security and hard political agenda insofar as you can, certainly the security agenda, that means the space will have to be filled by something else and that's when they'll come looking for us in terms of looking after business. (Ibid.)

Martina Purdy reiterates Grimason's view that the media are in a transitional phase and that many journalists find the political process 'boring' in comparison to the peace process. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002) Yet the media, as a matter of urgency, should have assumed more responsibility, 'rose to the occasion' or 'took up the mantle' for one fundamental reason, if no other – with a devolved government made up of an involuntary coalition of the four main parties, the media play an important scrutinising role as an effective 'opposition'. Purdy highlighted:

I think the media now are in a phase of transition between the crisis politics of constitutionalism, decommissioning, and they were very good at dealing with that, to a settled period where you have to start learning about bread and butter issues. You need to start learning about the complexities of government and it can be very dull after the excitement of 'guns and government'. I have heard some people in the media complain that bread and butter issues are boring. I think it can get exciting again but it's just going to take a bit of time to redevelop those skills and the media has a really important role in terms of a good effective opposition. You have four main parties up there in a very unusual government, they are the opposition and they are the government at the same time, which is rather bizarre. (Ibid.)

The 'unusual government', that is, the political parties themselves, also level criticisms at the media for their failure to treat the political process with the same vigour as they did the peace process. For example, the SDLP's Gayle McGreevey

believed that the media should have been less fascinated with ‘division’ and ‘sectarian politics’ and more interested in highlighting ‘deeper policy issues.’ (Interview with author, 19 March 2003) By doing so, the media could have promoted a more positive or constructive view of the parties’ attempts to work together and the significant accomplishments they made as ‘partners’ when they did so:

I think that they could be more interested in the deeper policy issues. That’s always a complaint the SDLP has, that the media are more interested in the very sectarian nature of politics. Even when the Assembly was running most days you wouldn’t have very many members of the media up here unless there was a debate on something ‘mental’ which you knew was going to get everybody’s backs up. But the general day-to-day work that was going on in committees or going on in the Assembly chamber wasn’t picked up on as much as it could have been. There were organisations like the Press Association and the BBC who would have had people down here on a Monday and Tuesday, every week, week-in-week-out following the debates, but there wouldn’t have been a huge amount of pick-up on some of that stuff. A lot of good work was done and people don’t necessarily know that. I think that the media could have highlighted that rather than all of the divisions that there were between the parties, more of the progress that was made, the bread and butter issues that were being dealt with and in that way sold the institutions and sold the Agreement a bit more... the media has a responsibility and a role to play in promoting the work that is being done with the various political parties. (Ibid.)

## **(ii) The DUP and Sinn Féin – an opportunity lost?**

It was not until October 2002 or four and a half years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement that the DUP entered the same television studio as Sinn Féin to

debate the political issues of the day. Yet, there is an interesting history behind this significant development that merits further examination.

Following the 1994 IRA ceasefire the media in Northern Ireland began to treat (the more democratic) Sinn Féin with less hostility than they had done so previously. However, it was only in the post-Agreement era that one could detect a sea-change in attitudes towards Sinn Féin in the media or at least most sections of it, as Purdy pointed out:

They [Sinn Féin] would still complain even now that some sections of the media are still at war with them. But I think there has been a sea-change in attitudes and how Sinn Féin is reported. They still get asked the tough questions but maybe in a more polite way. During the Troubles a BBC interviewer going along to a Sinn Féin press conference on health, not interested in health at all, would ask the same question over and over again “Are you going to condemn violence?” It was like a ritual interview. You can explore other issues with Sinn Féin now, not just the one-dimensional politics. As one person put it – the peace process created the “good paramilitary and the bad paramilitary”. That’s how things change. I suppose again, post-Agreement, Martin McGuinness is now a minister of the executive. He has to get the respect of that office whether you respect him or not. I think the media is conscious that it has to approach him the same way as they would approach all of the other ministers. (Interview with author, 6 June 2002)

In the post-Agreement era the media began to invest a certain degree of trust in Sinn Féin that would certainly have been missing prior to their signing up to the Good Friday Agreement. For example, they were more inclined to believe the Sinn Féin ‘line’ in negotiations that followed the Agreement, over and above the NIO or British government press officers, as the following vignette by Purdy highlights:



In the period when there was a deal done in the Mitchell talks, after the Agreement had failed to set up an executive, Mitchell came over and had those intensive talks at the American Ambassadors residence in London. Certainly there was an expectation of decommissioning. On the one hand you had Sinn Féin saying “There is no deal, don’t expect decommissioning” and you had the NIO press officers on to key journalists telling them “I can tell you right now there will be decommissioning, you have to start saying this on air.” Journalists who are being very professional will resist that because they were hearing something totally different from the other side of the house [Sinn Féin] that they were more likely to believe to be honest. (Ibid.)

By 2002, although there were some individual journalists and editors who were ‘anti-Sinn Féin’ in the eyes of their Northern Director of Communications, Mark McLernon, the fact that he also believed that the predominantly pro-Agreement media were less biased (in general) is a significant departure from Sinn Féin’s pre-Agreement analysis of the media:

I think generally the vast majority of the media in the North would be supportive of the Good Friday Agreement and supportive of the [peace] process. I think the DUP would say that there’s a media bias but I don’t think there’s a great media bias out there. The media are trying to put it across as they see it and it is hard for some to take that journalists do have an opinion and they do have a political direction. Editorially the media in the North are supportive of the Good Friday Agreement, right from the time of the referendums when all the major newspaper editors went with a Yes vote and that would be their direction and their policy. (Interview with author, 30 October 2001)

Sinn Féin's relationship with the media in the post-Agreement era was certainly developing and moving in a positive direction, whereas for the DUP, if their relations with the media were not on a constant downward spiral, they at least became more fraught. As the DUP Director of Communications, St Clair McAllister maintained:

The media are biased towards us or against us and that pertains right through to even today. I write a column every Friday for the News Letter and it was only after a couple of years of constant discussions and arguments with Geoff Martin [the editor] that we finally got a platform and it came to myself to write that. We have this column, but it was also because of the pressure that unionists were putting on the paper saying, "we're never hearing the other side of the story here". As for the media, I think there's a need for some basic honesty and fairness and they should at least try and give both sides of the case, which is what good journalism, what a good media is about... Ask appropriate questions but give equal time and space, but that doesn't happen and it's not happening today. It's a constant battle we have. (Interview with author, 1 November 2001)

The DUP's similarities with a pre-Agreement Sinn Féin are unmistakable, right down to the very complaints about the interviewing techniques of broadcasters and the party's insistence that they would continue the 'battle'. In fact, McAllister could on most occasions be quoting a member of Sinn Féin from the pre-Agreement days (if only he substituted the names of both parties):

I could name several broadcasters and even their very tone, attitude and body language towards the DUP is totally different than when they're interviewing anyone from the pro-Agreement camp. So there still is that, go lightly on the pro-Agreement people but put the

boot in as much as you can to the anti-Agreement people, which is mainly the DUP because it's the biggest party obviously. We're not deterred by that; we'll just keep on going. (Ibid.)

Whereas the pre-Agreement media had marginalised Sinn Féin, that is, party members had to participate in political debates from a remote studio, it was the DUP, in the post-Agreement era, who replaced Sinn Féin on the margins or sidelines. Grimason explained:

The history of that is quite interesting. For a long time it was Sinn Féin who were excluded from that [studio debates] and then after the Good Friday Agreement the decision was taken by the BBC that it would be Sinn Féin who would be in the studio and it would be the DUP who would be remote. Because, if they [the DUP] were sitting with them [Sinn Féin] up in committees and discussing with them in councils, technically part of the same government, the BBC took the view it's about time we rattled a few cages. Then I think the real decision on all of this was taken by the DUP. They took the view that "we're really going to have to engage with these people at some point, so we better start doing it now", and I think it's been an interesting signal from the DUP. (Interview with author, 20 March 2003)

Essentially, four and a half years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, the broadcasters 'hard-balled' the DUP by basically saying: "look, it costs money to operate a remote studio" in attempts to move the debate on (Ibid.). Yet, a criticism that can be levelled at the broadcast media is that they did not attempt this sooner and in fact, buckled under the pressure of the issue being a difficult decision to take. Indeed, Grimason (BBC political editor at the time) wanted this to happen immediately after the 1998 referendum, but his colleagues within the BBC shied away:

It is timing; it is all timing. They [the BBC] didn't do it sooner because it was difficult territory. For what it's worth, I wanted it done instantly, that was my advice, but mine wasn't the only judgement to be weighed in the balance and there were issues around whether their position [the DUP's] was principled or not. For a time they weren't in the talks, they weren't sitting with them [Sinn Féin], but once they got into government, okay not sitting around the same executive, but those sorts of things said to me that it was time for the BBC to withdraw that particular bit of comfort, that we were all in the political business and we just better get on with it. However, Ian Paisley can be a tough negotiator and he fought his case and it was significant territory because someone was going to have to take a pounding for this. It's fine provided it works, provided you end up with them all in the same studio, but if you end up without properly reflecting the DUP's view then that's a different argument and that's actually serious in terms of the balance of an argument. So these things went on in broadcasting for a very long time and there were significant discussions about it. (Ibid.)

However, indications from some within the DUP (including St Clair McAllister) were that they understood the inevitability of sitting down in the television studios with Sinn Féin. If the broadcasters had made attempts to 'hard-ball' the DUP sooner, it is not unreasonable to assume that discussion and dialogue (however vociferous) could have begun in the studios years earlier than it actually did, and potentially could have moved the peace process on to a new level much sooner than actually occurred.

### **(iii) The media and the 2003 Assembly election**

Wilson and Fawcett (2004) argued that the framing of the 2003 Assembly election in the media was predominantly as a masculinist, communalist 'battle' between two 'tribes' and confined to the four main political parties in Northern Ireland.

Indeed, many criticisms can be levelled against the media during the election campaign. For example, there was little or no explanation (until the last minute) of what voters were voting for, that is, continued suspension and a review of the Good Friday Agreement.

Furthermore, insofar as a review was addressed, it was presented in the media as a further round of 'negotiations', rather than the deliberative process the word implies. (Ibid.) Wilson and Fawcett claimed that: "This had real effects of incentivising voters to support those deemed the 'toughest negotiators', rather than those parties who might adopt a more conciliatory line." (Ibid. p.4)

The election was also consistently represented in the media as a 'gladiatorial' contest, or rather, two separate contests between the leaders of the four main parties. The emphasis on who would emerge as 'top dog' in each of the 'unionist' and 'nationalist' camps meant that the non-sectarian parties were either represented as 'a wasted vote' or often presented in such a way as to delegitimise their very existence. (Ibid.)

Wilson and Fawcett also argued that the endless predictions of the outcome of what were represented as the separate communalist 'battles' implicitly disallowed the possibility that any voter might be persuaded by the very campaign the media were contemporaneously covering. (Ibid.) Essentially, they believed that the media verged on creating self-fulfilling prophecies, by suggesting that the momentum lay behind certain parties (the DUP and Sinn Féin ) while others (like the SDLP and UUP) would be 'squeezed.' (Ibid.)

The media also left little space for serious consideration of 'bread-and-butter' issues and populist claims by parties were rarely subjected to critical or expert analysis. Indeed, while the media could have played a vital role in scrutinising the content of manifestos, those journalists who attended the parties' manifesto launches displayed very little interest in policies on bread-and-butter issues (Ibid.). As aforementioned, there remains a question mark over the capacity of the media in Northern Ireland to interrogate fully 'political issues' as opposed to those of a 'peace process' nature.

Significantly, none of the parties' policy propositions were subject to any media scrutiny as to their feasibility or desirability. UUP adviser, Alec Kane, complained: "manifestoes and policy papers are tumbling from the printing presses, stuffed with uncosted, unrealistic and largely unfulfillable promises. Publicity stunts and soundbite knockabouts have taken precedence over meaningful debate. The general public is utterly uninterested." (Ibid. p.62)

In addition, the UUP's press officer, Alex Benjamin, concurred with Kane. He expected the campaign would be 'issues-driven' yet, instead: "the media have given

all that stuff a wide berth, the press conferences on policy issues have not been covered and so it is very much stunt and personality-based.” (Ibid. p.63)

Essentially, Wilson and Fawcett concluded that the dominant media coverage of the election added up to a failure to both effectively inform and engage the public about the potential ‘deadlock’ or impasse that would follow the election if the DUP and Sinn Féin came out ‘on top’:

It is hard to see that the media, with honourable exceptions, assisted electors to make an informed choice in this election. It was almost like a train crash that all the experts could see coming, but the observers (*The Belfast Telegraph* from the outset excepted) had failed to anticipate, and, more importantly, to communicate the risk to the passengers in advance. (Ibid.)

Although there were honourable individual and organisational exceptions, the media inadequately played the critical role as the ‘fourth estate’ during the 2003 Assembly election. There were also concerns as to whether they (wittingly or unwittingly), were once again complicit in the ‘degenerate spirals of communication’ that reproduce and even amplify communal division (Giddens 1994, p.245).

## Summation

### Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)

As the party most closely associated with the civil rights movement of the late 1960's, the SDLP suffered most from the consequences of having achieved so many of their initial goals – culminating in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. They found it increasingly difficult to both articulate a vision for the post-Agreement era and on many occasions, to simply 'blow their own trumpet'. As a consequence, the SDLP was pushed further and further towards the margins of political life in Northern Ireland.

Before the 1994 IRA ceasefire, the party could rely on a clear distinction between themselves and Sinn Féin on condemnation of, or support for, the resort to violence. Since then, and especially since Good Friday 1998, this difference was seriously eroded. For many nationalist/republican voters, in particular younger ones, the differences on violence narrowed to such a sufficient degree that both parties could be assessed on the basis of their relative political dynamism, their closeness to community organisation and their capacity to force the pace of change. In the post-Agreement era, in all of these areas, Sinn Féin held a significant advantage over the SDLP.

To compound difficulties, the SDLP was a decentralised party and were slow to acknowledge, or were simply ignorant of, the benefits that strategic PR could bring



to their future development. Significantly, there was even an archaic view prevalent among many of its party members that you shouldn't really 'talk to' never mind 'tell' journalists things. (Interview with McGreevey, 19 March 2003)

The SDLP also failed to invest adequate financial resources into its communications operation. McDevitt and Turley (both Directors of Communications) worked alone for the most part with limited resources at hand. In March 2001, when McGreevey took up her position as party press officer she described the SDLP's communications operation as an amateurish set-up that was both disorganised and unprofessional.(Ibid.) Unsurprisingly then, in terms of the quality of their media service or efficiency, the SDLP were adjudged by political journalists and editors alike to be incapable of 'delivering the goods'. (Fawcett 2001. p.13)

The party also experienced significant upheavals, being the only one of the four main political parties that changed its leadership in the post-Agreement era under consideration. After a humiliating defeat in the 2001 general election, John Hume stood down as leader to be replaced by Mark Durkan. Although Durkan enjoyed a higher profile since the setting up of devolved institutions in December 1999, he was considerably less well known than many of the figures within the leadership of their rivals for the nationalist vote, Sinn Féin.

The SDLP's problems lay more with strategy and presentation than fundamental policy, and as such, when Durkan took over the reins as leader, he was adamant that the party's communications and organisational needs would be addressed. The new leadership sought to distance itself from Hume's label of post-nationalism and

instead framed its future policies in terms of an agreed Ireland. The leadership also began to introduce changes that included designing a new party logo. Nevertheless, the SDLP still failed to establish a clear identity for itself and although the logo was designed to symbolise a 'new', dynamic and modern party, it simply disguised 'old' problems, that is, on the communications front, their operation remained unstructured and unprofessional. Communications personnel had also no control over their party members and there was more of a one-to-one emphasis with journalists rather than the centralised nature of Sinn Féin communications.

By the 2003 Assembly elections, the generation of high-profile SDLP politicians who had dominated nationalist politics over the previous two or three decades was quickly disappearing and it was far from clear that the party had indeed found the next cohort to fill their shoes. With the party's electoral 'big hitters' or older members leaving, the SDLP had failed to develop and promote potential 'heirs to the throne' and simply had not progressed as a political party in the same way as others, in particular, Sinn Féin.

On the communications front, the SDLP had, for the first time in its history, three full-time staff working in their press office; were showing signs of central coordination; had in place daily dispatches and a rebuttal system and had become more PR-focused. Yet, such public relations developments were a matter of work-in-progress and crudely put, simply a case of too little, too late.

## Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)

During the period under consideration (that is, 1998-2003) there were very few positives that could be taken from developments in political public relations within the UUP. Indeed, the period was dominated by bitter internal feuding and debilitating infighting, and characterised by the party continually moving from one crisis to another. In such circumstances it was impossible for communications personnel to function effectively, that is, they were frustrated in attempts to play down division and dissent, and keep party members 'on message'. Positive public relations attempts by Harris, Haydn and Laird to portray the party as a progressive political outfit were offset or cancelled out by the negative impact of a small, but vocal anti-Agreement cabal who contributed throughout the period to the party's overall mixed or disjointed messages.

A further negative impact or weakness included the UUP's lack of clarity on the core issue of the day – the Agreement itself. Trimble's acknowledgement that he merely had a slight commitment to the Agreement speaks volumes. At a time when rational or moderate unionism required a principled leader with strong convictions to sell the vision of the Agreement, in essence, a historic accommodation with their Catholic neighbours, Trimble floundered and was simply lacking as the leader of pro-Agreement unionism. Importantly, throughout the period he never acted like a confident leader; that is, he should have forcefully dealt with, or should have even dismissed outright, party dissidents like Jeffrey Donaldson; he should have changed party structures that would have eliminated the block vote allocated to anti-Agreement factions like the Orange Order or the Ulster Young Unionist Council;

and he should have 'reached out' more to the Catholic community, instead of making public relations blunders, that included branding the Irish Republic a 'mono-ethnic, mono-cultural, pathetic, sectarian state' (*The Observer*, March 10, 2002).

Critically, throughout the post-Agreement years Trimble and his UUP members did not heed the advice of internal communications personnel (including David Kerr as Director of Communications). They also seemed oblivious to the immediate need for a thorough public relations overhaul and their relationship with the media during the period in question was little short of disastrous; that is, they were rated the least efficient of the four main political parties by political journalists and editors alike who acknowledged their 'ability to deliver' as 'poor'. (Fawcett 2001, p.13)

Yet, instead of hiring in the best public relations talent that money could buy, that is, PR or media relations 'heavyweights', to begin the process of turning around the party's poor public image, they continued for the most part with a laissez-faire attitude to both public relations and the media, employing PR 'lightweights' (like Cameron and McNeely) to oversee their communications.

Although Ray Haydn, a media relations professional, became UUP Director of Communications in early 2003, it was very difficult to provide a cohesive communications strategy when a cohesive political entity simply did not exist and could not even agree on the most straightforward of messages. Indeed, the UUP really needed to begin the process of communicating as a team, rather than an amalgam of diverse individuals, and ultimately purge the party of rebels who had no

qualms with publicly attacking their own leader. The party also needed to begin the process of speaking with a confident, unified, progressive, pro-Agreement voice. Yet, by the 2003 Assembly elections, the fractious and chaotic nature of the party was still evident and the UUP were facing not only short-term, but long-term electoral meltdown.

### Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)

During the period in question, the DUP made a strong stand against what they believed to be a flawed and dishonestly sold Agreement. Chief among their many gripes was that Tony Blair, whom they described as a media-driven liar, (Interview with McAllister, 1 November 2001) had dishonoured the pledges he made during the referendum campaign to win support for the Agreement in the unionist community (Sinn Féin would not enter government unless allied with decommissioning, the future of the RUC would be safe etc.). Effectively, because they believed the Agreement was based on false promises, premises or foundations, they were convinced that it would end in failure and they remained adamant throughout that they would work towards a more honest, durable, new agreement. They also believed (throughout the period under consideration) that they were involved in an on-going battle and were up against two governments and the media. (Ibid.) Yet, as with Sinn Féin in the past, they were not fazed by the challenges ahead and their perceived hostilities only seemed to harden their resolve to continue the fight.

The DUP made consistent attempts throughout the period to thwart progress and essentially delay the Agreement's implementation. However, with one eye on their electoral future, they sought to square the circle of participation in the Executive with their complete opposition to the Agreement by refusing to participate in full meetings of the Executive. They also made consistent attempts to exclude Sinn Féin from office and began to rotate their own ministers, thereby preventing any embedding of the structures of the Agreement.

Throughout the period the DUP also conjured up 'nightmare scenarios' of terrorists running the government of Northern Ireland. They incorporated strong moralistic overtones and a simplistic, yet dogmatic religious fervour into a great deal of their political rhetoric that encompassed notions of right and wrong, good and evil, truth and lies etc. Yet, portraying issues in black and white terms with little or no grey in the middle did not bode well for potential negotiation or political compromise with other pro-Agreement parties in the political fold.

Yet, with the possibility of future electoral success, the DUP began to moderate its rhetoric and started to talk of recasting or renegotiating the Agreement rather than smashing it, as they had done so previously.

On the communications personnel front, St Clair McAllister (as Director of Communications from 1998 to 2002) presided over the development of a centralised party system with an effective communications structure that included an efficient media relations operation. Indeed, the DUP and in particular their leader, Ian Paisley have always understood the importance of the media as the conduit or

channel through which they relay their political messages and have unquestionably appreciated the importance of television exposure. In the post-Agreement era, they remained keen to sell their argument and began to hire more communications personnel to make sure that their political messages were not lost on their target audiences.

The party also showed a great deal of enthusiasm in progressing the technical side of their communications (for example, their party website) as well as both strengthening grassroots support and leading a crusade in the targeting of potential voters. They also became increasingly active on the ground, taking up a permanent campaigning position like Sinn Féin and were successful in targeting and attracting younger voters.

For the first time, in October 2002, their strategic communications extended to entering the television studios, as opposed to being in remote studios, to confront Sinn Féin. Although in many respects the broadcast media left them with little choice, (that is, the media hinted at withdrawing their support for the DUP to use remote studios) communications personnel would have realised that the DUP could not be seen to be remaining at the margins of political life if they wanted to convincingly speak as the true voice of unionism. Essentially, from 1998 to 2003, the DUP took a more sophisticated, strategic, corporate and efficient approach to communications and they softened or moderated their rhetoric to appeal to a wider audience (that is, unionists of all hues, but in particular, disillusioned UUP supporters). Allied to these developments, the party's cohesion and its centralised

nature stood in sharp contrast to the internecine warfare and the decentralised nature of the UUP.

### Sinn Féin

Sinn Féin remained the leading political party in Northern Ireland in terms of PR and communications during the period under consideration. They had developed a very strong press office system and an equally capable communications team to run it, based mainly in Belfast and Dublin. Indeed, Sinn Féin's Richard McAuley was even likened to New Labour's Alastair Campbell (Press Secretaries to Gerry Adams and Tony Blair respectively) by political journalists and editors alike.

The party's immediate political priority after the 1998 referendum was to sustain the peace process and to defend the Agreement while pursuing its full implementation. Sinn Féin was also preoccupied with building a lasting political strength in both jurisdictions, that is, in the North and South of Ireland. As such, they were a party on the move; on this occasion armed not with the bombs or bullets of their military wing, the IRA, but with an appealing and democratic vision of a realisable goal – a united Ireland.

By Northern Ireland political party standards, they had a very well-resourced communications operation, with 10-12 full-time members working in media relations. Yet as a party hungry for all-island political success, they continually thought about progression and indeed believed that their resources were limited for



the job ahead, that is, they had insufficient resources to carry out detailed research on policy issues, conduct thorough media analyses or have speedy responses to issues as they unfolded.

Nevertheless, Sinn Féin's communications or political public relations strengths were far greater than any other party on the 'Northern' Ireland political scene. Their sophisticated, strategic communications success story can be better explained by a long, yet not exhaustive, list of factors: they have an international fundraising capability; they have a vast number of party members and activists who are prepared to work without salaries; they are close-knit and operate as a team; they are hands-on and imaginative; they are a campaigning party on a permanent election footing; they are committed at community level; from the top-down their representatives understand the strategic importance of PR and publicity; communications personnel contribute at the highest level of the organisation; publicity is involved in how decisions are arrived at; they are proficient in schooling both staff and party members in dealing with the media (holding various media workshops); they are assiduous in promoting people up from within; and they have a high degree of central control (almost militaristic), and as a result, there is little deviation from a clear and consistent 'party line'.

Throughout the period in question, Sinn Féin also developed their relationships with a previously hostile media. As such, relationships were progressing and evolving as a result of understanding and attending to journalists' needs. They were also aware that journalists simply wanted communications personnel to be efficient, 'straight' with them, and essentially 'deliver', for example when contacted for information or

an interview request with a party member. (Interview with McLernon, 30 October 2001)

Yet, while Sinn Féin's successful progression as a political party seems in many ways faultless, it has not been without its difficulties. With republican dissidents posing a threat, the party has continually had to both sell and defend the Agreement as a staging post to a united Ireland and convince their constituency that the leadership had not reneged on republican principles.

In addition, communications mistakes were becoming more prevalent in the Sinn Féin household because it was easier to control the movement in media terms when it represented less than 10 per cent of the population. Now that it had grown to over 20 per cent it had become much more difficult to manage.

Importantly, communications is something that needs to be continually worked at, and as the party progresses on an all-island basis, it has become much more difficult to control all avenues of communication and maintain a clear and consistent 'party line'. Nevertheless, Sinn Féin has overcome tougher challenges in the not too distant past and has become more and more professional with every year that passes in the post-Agreement era. They also look like a party whose 'run' is certainly not at an end, and in many respects seem unstoppable in their singular vision of becoming the largest political party on the island and fulfilling their overall objective of a united Ireland.

## The Media

While there have been many positive developments in the media since 1998, there are also criticisms that can be levelled at the media during the period under consideration.

Journalists were reluctant to turn their attention or focus away from the peace process towards learning 'the ropes' of the more difficult political process. Even after a number of years of devolution the 'average' journalist appeared to be disinterested in the workings of government. As a matter of urgency, the media should have assumed more responsibility, 'rose to the occasion' or 'took up the mantle' for one fundamental reason, if no other – with a devolved government made up of an involuntary coalition of the four main political parties, the media play an important scrutinising role as an effective 'opposition'.

Throughout the period in question, the media should have been less fascinated with 'division' and 'sectarian politics' and more interested in highlighting 'deeper policy issues'. By highlighting such issues, they could have promoted a more positive or constructive view of the parties' attempts to work together, as well as the significant accomplishments they made while 'partners' in government.

Whereas the pre-Agreement media had marginalised Sinn Féin, to the extent that party members had to participate in political debates from a remote studio, it was the DUP who replaced Sinn Féin on the margins or sidelines in the post-Agreement era. Indeed, it was not until October 2002 (four and a half years after the signing of

the Good Friday Agreement) that the DUP entered the same television studio as Sinn Féin to debate the political issues of the day.

Essentially, the broadcasters 'hard-balled' the DUP by basically saying: "look, it costs money to operate a remote studio" in attempts to move the debate on (Interview with Grimason, 20 March 2003). Yet, a criticism that can be levelled at the broadcast media is that they did not attempt to do this sooner, and in fact, buckled under the pressure of the decision being a difficult one to take. In effect, if the broadcasters had made attempts to 'hard-ball' the DUP at an earlier date, it is not unreasonable to assume that discussion and dialogue (however vociferous) could have begun in the studios years earlier and potentially could have moved the peace process on to a new level much sooner than actually occurred.

Moving on to the 2003 Assembly election campaign, many criticisms could once again be levelled at the media. For example, there was little or no explanation (until the last minute) by the media of what voters were actually voting for, that is, continued suspension and a review of the Agreement.

Furthermore, insofar as a review was addressed, it was presented in the media as a further round of 'negotiations', rather than the deliberative process the word implies. Wilson and Fawcett (2004, p.4) argued that: "This had real effects of incentivising voters to support those deemed the 'toughest negotiators', rather than those parties who might adopt a more conciliatory line." Therefore, the media verged on creating self-fulfilling prophecies, by suggesting that the momentum lay behind certain parties or the toughest negotiators (the DUP and Sinn Féin) while

other, more conciliatory parties (including the SDLP and UUP) would be 'squeezed.' (Ibid.) Essentially, the dominant media coverage of the election added up to a failure to both effectively inform and engage the public about the potential deadlock or impasse that would follow the election if the DUP and Sinn Féin came out 'on top'.

The media also left little space for serious consideration of 'bread-and-butter' issues and populist claims by the four main political parties were rarely subjected to critical or expert analysis. As aforementioned, there remains a question mark over the capacity of the media in Northern Ireland to interrogate fully 'political issues' as opposed to those of a 'peace process' nature.

Finally, by framing the election as a gladiatorial contest or battle between two tribes there are also concerns as to whether the media (wittingly or unwittingly) were once again complicit in the 'degenerate spirals of communication' that reproduce and even amplify communal division. (Giddens 1994, p.245)

### In Conclusion

In the post-Agreement era, there was a strong correlation between the electoral successes of the four main political parties in Northern Ireland and their public relations developments or communications capabilities. Both Sinn Féin and the DUP, the two parties 'hungry' for political success, who became the leading parties in nationalism and unionism respectively, 'courted' the media and developed strong

and efficient communications structures, whereas the SDLP and the UUP had inefficient communications operations in comparison, and both had a laissez-faire approach to public relations and the media.

On the one hand, both Sinn Féin and the DUP successfully developed into centralised, cohesive, efficient and professional parties who: operated as a team; were committed at community level; progressed onto a permanent election or campaign footing; assiduously promoted 'promising party members' from within their own ranks; targeted a wider base of potential voters (including younger ones); and welcomed the input and advice of communications personnel at the highest levels of their respective parties.

On the other hand, the SDLP and the UUP lacked cohesion and were decentralised parties who were slow to acknowledge, or were simply ignorant of, the benefits that strategic public relations could bring to their future development. Both parties, for the most part, failed to adequately address, or indeed invest the requisite financial resources into 'turning around' their disorganised, unprofessional and inefficient communications operations. Also, by having failed to develop and promote promising party members from within their own ranks, they were also unable to project the dynamic and more youthful image of their rivals. Furthermore, the SDLP and the UUP failed to provide a strong, positive image or an appealing vision to the electorate of how they would progress, as political parties, in the medium to long-term future.

The 2003 Assembly election campaign saw the most sophisticated attempts to date by the four main political parties in Northern Ireland to utilise public relations strategies and techniques as well as new technology (such as the Internet) to try to get their political messages across, directly to the electorate. Indeed, the campaign highlighted that there was a growing realisation (evident even within the SDLP and the UUP) of the advantages that positive public relations could bring to their respective parties, and consequently enhance their image in the minds of the electorate. Each party developed a more sophisticated approach and seemed to acknowledge that either positive or negative public relations could contribute towards, or help to determine, the electoral success or failure of their party, which in turn could have profound implications for the peace process. Essentially, the momentum behind the peace process could be brought to a standstill with the electoral success and subsequent polarisation of the two more extreme parties (Sinn Féin and the DUP) or possibly progress slowly but steadily if agreement could be reached between the more moderate parties (the SDLP and the UUP).

On the media front (during the post-Agreement years), journalists and editors could have turned their attention more vigorously towards the political process, thus providing a more constructive view of the work carried out by the political parties while in government. By highlighting the positive work and the significant consensus that had built up 'across the board' (for example, in committees where the DUP and Sinn Féin worked closely together), the media could have helped the public or electorate to understand or conclude, that in many respects, the Agreement, the institutions and the political process were successful and worked (for the most part) as long as all parties remained committed to the process.

The broadcast media could also have withdrawn the provision of remote studios to the DUP, once that party decided to take up ministerial seats in the aftermath of devolution in December 1999, thereby facilitating inclusive discussion and debate, and helping to move the peace process forward.

The media could also have set the 2003 Assembly election in context and effectively and responsibly informed the electorate of the deadlock that (more than likely) would ensue if Sinn Féin and the DUP came out on top. Also, by framing the election as a gladiatorial battle between (and within) two tribes, the media promoted contestation and dissensus over compromise or consensus. Essentially, they reproduced or amplified communal division and could, once again, be accused of being unhelpful in regard to concentrated efforts at promoting peace.

Whether or not the media act in a responsible or irresponsible manner, they have at their disposal the power to influence and to make the path towards peace an easier one to walk, for all individuals and parties in Northern Ireland, or alternatively, a journey that is more dangerous or fraught with difficulty. As such, both positive and negative developments in the media can, and essentially does, have a significant impact upon the direction that an often-fragile peace process can take.



## **CONCLUSION**

### **The Rise of Party Political Public Relations in Northern Ireland**

The first and most obvious conclusion of this research is that there has been a steady growth or expansion of party political public relations in Northern Ireland. While Sinn Féin had full-time media relations personnel going back as far as the 1970's and have had a Director of Publicity since as early as 1981, the other three political parties only really began to 'take off' in the communications stakes in the latter half of the 1990's. All of the main political parties are increasingly utilising PR to enhance their media relations capabilities and improve their image (or 'brand') with the public. What was once mainly the remit of the British government and its agencies in Northern Ireland (that is, political public relations) has now become an area in which the four main political parties (to varying degrees of success) have become increasingly more professional and well-resourced. The result of this rise of party political public relations has seen the regional media in Northern Ireland become more vulnerable to the promotional efforts of 'spin doctors' or media relations personnel from all four parties.

The media in Northern Ireland provide the channels through which the four main political parties strive to register and disseminate to the rest of society their claims on resources, status, identity and power. This has prompted determined efforts by the parties to influence its content, and in so doing attempt to optimise their chances in the ongoing competition for image maintenance and social advantage.

Simply put, the media system in Northern Ireland has become a power-brokering sphere. The importance of media exposure has been recognised by all of the political parties as a vital source of potential influence and power, creating perceptions of key events, issues and distributions of public support. As such, all political parties in Northern Ireland have increasingly given a higher priority to the media in recent years, recognising 1) that it is a competitive arena, in which their rivals are also seeking footholds and 2) that it is dominated by the standards of journalism to which their own media-destined materials must conform.

As such, political parties, politicians and their public relations personnel in Northern Ireland have increasingly become more sophisticated in their application of public relations strategies and techniques, from framing language into terse, crisp and arresting 'sound-bites' to stage-managing media events attractive to journalists and reporters (for example, the peace concert during the 1998 referendum campaign). In addition, party political public relations personnel now offer journalists what Gandy (1982) has referred to as 'information subsidies' in attempts to reduce the costs to journalists of obtaining newsworthy material. These include press releases that tell the story as journalists would write it, arranging press conferences and other media events at times optimal for news organisations' deadlines and routines, and providing a digest of new information that cannot be obtained elsewhere without effort on the journalist's behalf. Such measures not only make a journalist's job easier and less costly; they also stand a chance of converting him or her into an unwitting vehicle of party propaganda.

Overall, it seems that the public sphere in Northern Ireland is slowly being permeated by a 'promotional culture' (Wernick 1991). Indeed, greater resources are increasingly being devoted to media publicity. Higher status is also accorded, and more attention paid to, public relations and media strategists, for example John Laird or Eoghan Harris in the case of the UUP. Indeed, greater value and increased priority are being conferred on image-making skills and getting the appearance of things right (to varying degrees) by all four parties.

Moreover, it is where the power stakes are highest – namely in the combat between political parties, especially (though not only) during election campaigns – that political public relations in Northern Ireland has advanced furthest (as in the 1998 referendum campaign and the November 2003 Assembly election). This growing 'professionalism' has manifested in a number of ways: increased reliance on media strategists, and on publicity advisers, public relations specialists, campaign management consultants and the like; tactics of close message control (remaining 'on message'); bombarding journalists and editors with a deluge of complaints to show that their coverage is being paid close attention to; and an acknowledgement that the quickest and most effective way to act on the balance of public opinion is to mount strongly negative attacks on one's opponents.

At this juncture, because this research primarily charts the chronological public relations developments of Northern Ireland's four main political parties as well as developments in the media, it is important to summarise these developments at this point in the conclusion. Following this, key findings from the research are acknowledged before a discussion of the interaction between journalists and party

political public relations personnel, and issues surrounding source access to the media in Northern Ireland. Finally, limitations of the study and future research are touched upon before some concluding remarks.

### **Sinn Féin Public Relations Developments**

In terms of its communicative or public relations capabilities, Sinn Féin is the one political party who stands out among all others on Northern Ireland's political stage. Over the last three decades they have shown a strategic astuteness and an ability to adapt and evolve, often under very difficult circumstances (for example the 1988-94 Broadcasting Ban). According to Stephen Grimason:

Ten years ago they [the political parties] all struggled. Less so the Republicans [Sinn Féin] because they were always struggling and they had all sorts of obstacles put in their way that nobody else had, for example, with the Broadcasting Ban they couldn't get their voices on radio or television. So they had fewer resources to work with in terms of access. They worked really hard at that and then when things opened up they were better placed to bounce on from it. (Interview with author, 20 March 2003)

Indeed, the 1994 IRA ceasefire was a watershed. In its aftermath, the Broadcasting Ban was lifted and Sinn Féin began to break into the established elite discourse networks dominated by the British government, and to use the media to bring forward their own political analyses into the public sphere. Since then, Sinn Féin has progressively developed as a political party and they have established more

productive working relationships with the media (which was previously hostile to them) by efficiently attending to their needs.

Their successful development over the years, including that of their well-resourced communications operation, can be better explained by a long, yet not exhaustive, list of factors: they have an international fundraising capability; they have a vast number of party members and activists who are prepared to work without salaries; they are close-knit and operate as a team; they are hands-on and imaginative; they are a campaigning party on a permanent election footing; they are committed at community level; from the top-down their representatives understand the strategic importance of PR and publicity; communications personnel contribute at the highest level of the organisation; publicity is involved in how decisions are arrived at; they are proficient in schooling both staff and party members in dealing with the media; they are assiduous in promoting people up from within; and they have a high degree of central control (almost militaristic), and therefore there is little deviation from a clear and consistent 'party line'.

### **SDLP Public Relations Developments**

As for the SDLP, their rusty communications machine has stood (for a very long time) in stark contrast to Sinn Féin's slick, highly polished one. Indeed, unlike Sinn Féin, the SDLP could historically be characterised as having had a laissez-faire attitude towards both the media and public relations/communications more generally.

In the past, the SDLP have had a legacy of organisational problems and under John Hume's leadership they consistently failed to grasp the idea or the strategic advantages that both internal and external public relations could bring to the successful development of their party. They also neglected to nurture their best calibre candidates and senior party figures were reluctant to subject themselves to a diminution of their own power or control at the hands of a younger generation in the party.

The SDLP, as the one political party who was most closely associated with the civil rights movement of the late 1960's, suffered a great deal from the consequences of having achieved so many of their initial goals – culminating in the Good Friday Agreement. They found it increasingly difficult to both articulate a vision for the post-Agreement era and on many occasions to simply 'blow their own trumpet'. As a consequence, the party was pushed further and further towards the margins of political life in Northern Ireland.

On the basis of their relative political dynamism, their closeness to community organisation and their capacity to force the pace of change in the years that followed the Agreement, in all of these areas, Sinn Féin held a significant advantage over the SDLP. The party also failed to invest adequate financial resources in its communications operation, which for the most part remained both unstructured and unprofessional. When they eventually did begin to address their wide-ranging organisational and public relations shortcomings in 2002-03, their efforts could best be described as a case of 'too little, too late'.

Indeed, with the SDLP's electoral 'big hitters' or older members leaving at this time, their problems were compounded by the fact that they had failed to develop and promote potential 'heirs to the throne'. Simply put, they had not progressed as a professional political party should, or in the same way as some others had, in particular, Sinn Féin.

### **DUP Public Relations Developments**

On the unionist side of the equation, the DUP were 'late starters' when it came to employing full-time public relations personnel. In fact, their first Director of Communications, St Clair McAllister, only took up the position a matter of months before Good Friday 1998.

Yet, from that point until 2002 (when McAllister left), he presided over the rapid development of a centralised party system with an effective communications structure, and one that included an efficient media relations operation. Indeed, the DUP, and in particular their leader, Ian Paisley, have long understood the importance of the media as the conduit or channel through which they relay their political messages, and they have unquestionably appreciated the importance of media exposure. In the post-Agreement era, they remained keen to sell their argument and also began to hire additional communications personnel to ensure that their political messages were not lost on their target audiences.

In addition, the DUP showed a great deal of enthusiasm in progressing the technical side of their communications (for example, their party website) as well as both strengthening grassroots support and leading a crusade in the targeting of potential (mainly UUP) voters. They also became increasingly active on the ground, taking up a permanent campaigning position (akin to Sinn Féin) and were successful in targeting and attracting younger voters.

Effectively, from 1998 to 2003, the DUP adopted a more sophisticated, strategic, corporate and efficient approach to communications. They also began to soften or moderate their (often apocalyptic) rhetoric to appeal to a wider audience (that is, unionists of all hues, but in particular, disillusioned UUP supporters). Allied to these developments, the party's cohesion and its centralised nature stood in sharp contrast to the internecine warfare and the decentralised nature of the UUP.

### **UUP Public Relations Developments**

As for the UUP, the 1970's and 80's were characterised by woeful public relations, and a belief that the media were so much against them that theirs was a lost cause. They also had an unrelenting arrogance that they were so 'right' that they didn't have to apologise for past indiscretions against their Catholic neighbours or 'sell' either themselves or their case to a wider world.

Yet, slowly but surely the 'penny dropped' and by the mid-90's there was a growing realisation in UUP circles that fundamental changes were required in their public



relations. In 1996, David Kerr (a young law graduate) was hired as a full-time press officer/press secretary to the UUP leader, David Trimble. Yet at this stage, the party were in need of a complete communications overhaul and should have been hiring the best public relations talent that money could buy, not an inexperienced graduate with little or no public relations background. This appointment would simply not have occurred, for example, in Sinn Féin.

By Good Friday 1998, (as the case of David Kerr highlights) there seemed to be a lack of urgency on the UUP's behalf to radically develop their communications or public relations capabilities. Essentially, they were taking 'baby-steps' in the right direction when they should have been taking 'giant leaps'.

During the post-Agreement era, there were also very few positives that could be taken from developments in UUP public relations. Indeed, the period was dominated by bitter internal feuding and debilitating infighting, and characterised by the party continually moving from one crisis to another. In such circumstances it was impossible for communications personnel to function effectively, that is, they were frustrated in their attempts to play down division and dissent, and keep party members 'on message'. Positive public relations efforts by a number of key strategists (including Harris, Haydn and Laird) to portray the party as a progressive political outfit, were offset or cancelled out by the negative impact of a small, but vocal anti-Agreement cabal who contributed greatly to the party's overall mixed or disjointed messages.

A further negative impact or weakness during this period included the UUP's lack of clarity on the core issue of the day – the Agreement itself. Trimble's acknowledgement that he merely had a slight commitment to it speaks volumes. At a time when rational or moderate unionism required a principled leader with strong convictions to sell a positive vision of the Agreement, (in essence, a historic accommodation with their Catholic neighbours), Trimble floundered and was simply lacking as the leader of pro-Agreement unionism.

Critically, throughout these years, UUP politicians failed to heed the advice of their public relations personnel (including David Kerr, who was promoted to Director of Communications). Indeed, the main difficulty for Kerr and those who followed in his footsteps was how to provide cohesive communications strategies when a cohesive political entity simply did not exist and could not agree on the most straightforward political messages. Significantly, the UUP should have begun a process of communicating as a team, rather than as an amalgam of diverse individuals. As such, they should have ultimately purged the party of rebels or dissidents who had no qualms with publicly attacking their leader. The UUP could also have 'publicly' highlighted the 'clear blue sea' that existed between the majority in their party and the DUP, by simply speaking with a confident, unified, progressive, pro-Agreement voice.

## **Media Developments**

Moving on to the media in Northern Ireland, it would not be wrong to conclude that in general, the role they played throughout the pre-Agreement era was plagued by a litany of complaints or criticisms.

These included: they were anti-unionist; they were anti-republican; they were systematically orientated towards a British government perspective; they consistently failed to adequately question 'primary definers' or 'official sources'; they provided images and stories of irrational violence without sufficient context; they reproduced and amplified division through easy ideological labelling; they promoted contestation rather than consensus or emphasised disputes and dissensus; they reinforced differences and disagreement; and, they were unhelpful in relation to concentrated efforts at promoting peace.

In addition, while there remains no doubt that sections of the media and individual journalists deserve to be singled out and praised for various honourable contributions in speaking 'truth to power', what remains problematic is that this was not the norm, and such cases were few and far between. From the beginning of the Troubles until Good Friday 1998, a lively, enquiring, questioning, challenging journalism was certainly not endemic in Northern Ireland; it was more a case of mavericks or loners (like Eamonn Mallie) who questioned and challenged the highest levels of authority, for example, the British government's direction and policy over the years.

During the pre-Agreement era, it was in assisting positive spirals of communication, rather than degenerate ones, that the media in Northern Ireland could and should have played a more positive and constructive role.

In many respects, however, the media made up for some of their past indiscretions by playing a more constructive role during the 1998 referendum campaign. In the event, they supported, rather than obstructed the dominant political discourse (that is, a pro-Agreement one), and they were helpful, rather than unhelpful, in relation to concentrated efforts at promoting peace.

In the post-Agreement era, while it must be acknowledged that there were many positive developments in the media, there were also further criticisms. Indeed, journalists were reluctant to turn their attention or focus away from the 'peace process' towards learning 'the ropes' of the more difficult 'political process'. Even after a number of years of devolution most journalists appeared to be disinterested in the workings of government. As a matter of urgency, the media should have assumed more responsibility, 'rose to the occasion' or 'took up the mantle' for one fundamental reason, if no other – with a devolved government made up of an involuntary coalition of the four main political parties, the media play an important scrutinising role as an effective 'opposition'.

Throughout the post-Agreement years, the media should also have been less fascinated with 'division' and 'sectarian politics' and more interested in highlighting 'deeper policy issues'. By highlighting such issues, they could have promoted a more positive or constructive view of the parties' attempts to work

together, as well as the significant accomplishments they made while 'partners' in government.

A further criticism that can be levelled (specifically) at the broadcast media is that they should have withdrawn the provision of remote studios to the DUP, that is, once they decided to take up ministerial seats in the aftermath of devolution in December 1999. Such moves would have forced the anti-Agreement DUP into the television studios to discuss and debate the political issues of the day with their pro-Agreement opponents, thereby facilitating and helping to move the peace process forward (sooner rather than later).

A final criticism of the media is that they should have set the 2003 Assembly election in context, by 'responsibly' informing the electorate of the deadlock that (more than likely) would ensue if Sinn Féin and the DUP came out on top. In addition, by framing the election as a gladiatorial battle between (and within) two tribes, the media promoted contestation and dissensus over compromise and consensus. Significantly, during the course of the election campaign, they reproduced or amplified communal division and could, once again, stand accused of being unhelpful in regard to concentrated efforts at promoting peace.

With the summaries completed, the key findings from the research are advanced...

## **Pre-Agreement Key Findings**

Apart from Sinn Féin, the months following the Entry to Negotiations election of May 1996 represented a turning point for the other political parties in that they realised they would now require full-time public relations or communications personnel to deal with both the national and international media interest surrounding the talks/negotiations (which ultimately led to the Good Friday Agreement). Indeed, the party political public relations personnel or ‘spin doctors’ who were hired in 1996 became more experienced and professional during the course of the talks/negotiations, not necessarily because of their own endeavours, but because of circumstances – the long drawn-out talks/negotiations gave them a unique platform to both ‘learn’ and ‘ply’ their trade, to make pivotal contacts with media personnel, and (in the latter stages) to ‘spin’ on an almost daily basis to a wide array of journalists camped outside the negotiations.

By Good Friday 1998, (in broad brushstrokes), Sinn Féin and the DUP were the ‘hungry’ parties who were more interested in getting into the media because they wanted to get ahead. As for the SDLP and the UUP, they adopted a more laissez-faire or complacent approach towards the media, and public relations more generally.

## **Selling the Good Friday Agreement**

During the 1998 referendum campaign, it became obvious at the outset that attempts to sell the Good Friday Agreement to the people of Northern Ireland would be

conducted in a haphazard or disparate fashion, that is, there would be no 'collective' party political 'Yes' campaign. In the political spectrum and the public arena, party leaders, after signing the Good Friday Agreement together, failed to show the political will or courage to develop a new politics for Northern Ireland. The UUP in particular, were wary about joining forces with pro-Agreement nationalists and republicans. As a result, the fractured nature of the Yes campaigns were set against a singularly strong and emotionally appealing 'No' campaign by the United Unionists – an anti-Agreement faction made up mainly (but not exclusively) of the DUP.

Essentially, there are two main institutions in Northern Ireland that wield a significant amount of power and influence – the media and the British government/NIO. On the one hand, while the media may not have unabashedly come out in full support of the Agreement, they did divert from their own (often strict) remit of objectivity and impartiality to at worst favour, at best promote, a Yes vote. On the other hand, the British government (as co-signatories) were anxious to both promote the Agreement and to ensure that it was supported by the people of Northern Ireland. Indeed, the pro-Agreement British government/NIO made attempts during the referendum campaign to use their influence within media circles in an effort to legitimate the call for peace epitomised by voting Yes for the Agreement. The extent to which the media acquiesced is not easily discernible.

It is also difficult to discern or determine exactly how the 71.12% vote in favour of the Good Friday Agreement was achieved. From a public relations perspective, the evaluation stage of the cause and effect of political campaigning is always difficult

to measure. Nevertheless, it can be argued that certain public relations activities and communications personnel were highly influential during the course of the referendum campaign, for example: Sinn Féin's public relations efforts that included endorsement of the Agreement by ANC leaders and the Balcombe Street Four; Ray Haydn's involvement with the UUP, as well as other contributors like Tony Blair and Jack Hermon who helped persuade unionists to come out in support of a Yes vote; and last but not least, the SDLP-inspired U2/Ash peace concert that provided the dominant image of the referendum campaign and helped to garner cross-community support for a Yes vote.

Essentially, public relations activities, like the peace concert, contributed to an all-important swing of 15 per cent in support for the Agreement within unionism in the final week of campaigning. Considering that two referendum exit polls<sup>33</sup> variously estimated that 55 per cent and 51 per cent of unionist electors voted in favour of the Agreement, this 'swing' was crucially important. As Stephen Grimason, (and almost everyone else who was interviewed in the course of this research) acknowledged: 'The Bono bringing together Trimble and Hume was a big moment. It turned the campaign.' (Interview with author, 20 March 2003) It follows then, that it would have been impossible for the Agreement (which is based on sufficient consensus or cross-community support) to achieve the requisite support (that is, over 50% in favour) in the Protestant/unionist community, had it not been for a number of pivotal, pre-arranged public relations activities. Indeed, the Agreement may not have even 'gotten off the ground' were it not for such activities. Significantly, the public relations strategies employed by a number of key behind-

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33 The Sunday Times, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1998 and RTE May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1998



the-scenes players and conducted publicly by influential, high-profile figures, were critical in managing public opinion and manufacturing consent in Northern Ireland for the Good Friday Agreement. As such, the 1998 referendum campaign represents 'a case in point' to argue (because of the all-important swing of 15 per cent in unionist support) that 'public relations' can indeed have a significant impact on voting behaviour, the reverberations of which also impacted more generally on the peace process itself. Effectively, this 'manufactured consent' allowed the Agreement a chance to 'live', and with this life, create from a strong foundation the subsequent conditions whereby a realistic vision of peace could be conceived by the people of Northern Ireland.

This research then, while acknowledging that there are undoubtedly multiple factors involved in how people decide to vote, argues that the 71.12% Yes vote in favour of the Good Friday Agreement can be partly explained by the significant impact of public relations strategies and techniques employed by a number of key behind-the-scenes players and conducted publicly by influential, high-profile figures. Essentially, this research challenges the argument prevalent in the vast majority of literature on elections, which argue that public relations campaigns have very little 'effect' on voting behaviour or that changes of voting behaviour are due either to other factors or to long-term media campaigns and influences (for example, Kavanagh 1995, Norris et al. 1999).

## **Post-Agreement Key Findings**

In the aftermath of the June 1998 Assembly election and up until the November 2003 Assembly election, the electoral success of both Sinn Féin and the DUP (the two parties 'hungry' for political power, who became the leading political parties in nationalism and unionism respectively) can be partly explained by their 'courting' of the media and their development of strong and efficient communications structures. Indeed, the electoral failure of both the SDLP and the UUP can also be partly explained by their laissez-faire or complacent approach to both public relations and the media and their weak and inefficient communications structures in comparison to both Sinn Féin and the DUP.

On the one hand, both Sinn Féin and the DUP successfully developed into centralised, cohesive, efficient and professional parties who: operated as a team; were committed at community level; progressed onto a permanent election or campaign footing; assiduously promoted 'promising party members' from within their own ranks; successfully targeted a wider base of potential voters (including younger ones); and welcomed the input and advice of communications personnel at the highest levels of their respective parties.

On the other hand, the SDLP and the UUP lacked cohesion and were decentralised parties who were slow to acknowledge, or were simply ignorant of, the benefits that strategic public relations could bring to their future development. Both parties, for the most part, failed to adequately address, or indeed invest the requisite financial resources into 'turning around' their disorganised, unprofessional and inefficient

communications operations. In addition, by having failed to develop and promote promising party members from within their own ranks, they were also unable to project the dynamic and more youthful image of their rivals. Finally, the SDLP and the UUP failed to provide a strong, positive image or an appealing vision to the electorate of how they would progress as political parties in the medium to long-term future.

### **The Interaction between Journalists and Party Political Public Relations Personnel in Northern Ireland**

In the course of this research, arguments about who is in control in a Northern Ireland-centric 'tug of war' (Gans, 1979) between media and sources all tend to be rather vague and inconclusive. For example, one question in this study asked whether the media 'toe the establishment line'? On the one hand, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that journalists do in fact reproduce copy from the British government/NIO as seemingly 'independent and newsworthy' stories. However, on the other hand, there is also evidence from interviews with journalists to suggest that they have maintained a professional attitude, a fierce independence from sources, and have continued to fend off attempts to influence their output.

Anecdotal evidence obtained from interviewees then, tended to be subjective and confused by too many variables. One cannot derive clear conclusions about who is winning in the 'tug of war' between journalists and party political public relations personnel, only suggest that there is a certain degree of complexity in their

continuing relations or that journalists and public relations personnel work together in a symbiotic, yet strained relationship.

Nevertheless, by looking at resources (financial and organisational for example), trends do in fact become a little more discernible. From this perspective, while journalists in Northern Ireland continue to act with a high degree of conscious autonomy, that autonomy is ultimately subject to resource constraints.

Indeed, as the print and broadcast media in Northern Ireland continues to be cut and squeezed in recent years, and working journalists become increasingly stretched, their standards and objectivity decrease, and the need to cut corners becomes critical. Essentially, journalists have to do more with fewer resources. Under these circumstances, a weakened media industry in Northern Ireland becomes an easier target for an increasingly well-resourced political public relations sector. Political public relations personnel will therefore be ideally placed to make good any shortfalls in the news-producing industries. Indeed, the influence of party political public relations show growing signs that it will slowly expand its role in news production. As a result, journalistic autonomy will slowly be undermined by the effects of the rise of party political public relations in Northern Ireland.

### **Political Public Relations and Source Access in Northern Ireland**

For most of the Troubles 'political public relations' or 'media relations' was a means by which the British government could dominate access and manage media agendas in Northern Ireland. Yet, as the peace process developed in the 1990's

political public relations also became a means by which the mainly 'resource-poor' political parties could gain an influence in the media previously denied to them. Indeed, the 'culturally' resource-poor Sinn Féin made use of voluntary human resources and professional public relations strategies in place of the institutional legitimacy and/or large capital expenditure of the British government's communicative apparatus to gain a foothold in the media. It follows then, that professional political public relations offers the potential for widening, rather than restricting, source access. As such, the emergence of a new professional class of political public relations personnel in Northern Ireland has affected the abilities of political parties to gain access to journalists and set media agendas.

Anecdotal evidence from this research points to an increase in the dependence of journalists on information subsidies from political public relations personnel in Northern Ireland. Yet, is this dependence leading to significant changes in patterns of source access? Indeed, are certain political parties gaining more access than others in the new political public relations environment? Evidence in this research suggests that (more so than any other party) Sinn Féin, with their substantially greater communications operation as opposed to the other political parties, is continually increasing its access to the media. Indeed, a more recent development concerns Sinn Féin's specific targeting of local media in Northern Ireland. Significantly, the party have up to ten full-time (paid and unpaid) public relations or media relations personnel who inundate the media with information subsidies. By publicising the positive work carried out by Sinn Féin politicians and councillors alike in local constituencies, they thereby create higher media profiles that are pivotal come election time. The other political parties simply do not have the

human resources and cannot target the local media to the same extent as Sinn Féin, each party having at best three full-time staff involved in public relations or media relations. In addition, the media themselves (for example the *Irish Mirror* in 2003) have begun to give both Sinn Féin and the DUP a platform in the form of a 'column' to voice their views on political developments. As a result, they have effectively excluded, and thereby helped to marginalise politically, both the SDLP and the UUP. Significantly, evidence from this research suggests that both Sinn Féin and the DUP are utilising public relations to secure their longer-term access advantages in sections of the media, whereas the SDLP and the UUP are simply being 'left behind'. Such developments suggest that both Sinn Féin and the DUP will increasingly dominate the public sphere in Northern Ireland. Ultimately, the ability of political parties to access the media is one of constriction or expansion of the public sphere. When resources are not readily available (organisational or human in the SDLP's case, or are indeed effectively cancelled out by debilitating infighting in the case of the UUP) the ability of political parties to influence the media agenda and thus the public sphere are severely restricted.

## **Limitations and Further Research**

Much remains to be done, both empirically and theoretically, before one can claim to have fully established a critical understanding of the complex interaction between journalists and party political public relations personnel, as well as the factors that affect source access to the media in Northern Ireland.

An important limitation of this research was imposed by the lack of significant literature specific to this inquiry. As such, this study in many respects has attempted to 'feel its way through the dark' without the guidance of previous research to base assertions upon.

In addition, it is acknowledged that the influences of the British, Irish and American governments are not included in this study (although British government/NIO involvement during the 1998 referendum campaign was explored). Whilst recognising that the inclusion of all influences would increase 'width', it would have resulted in the diminishment of the essential focus and depth in the critical analysis requisite to this thesis. This points the way to a 'wider' project that would connect the 'voices' of the four main political parties with those 'voices' of the aforementioned governments.

## **Concluding Remarks**

By looking back at the simplistic messages and slogans of the 1970's political posters and the haphazard media relations efforts of political parties during this period and beyond, one can comprehend not only the significant distances travelled by the parties on the road to conflict resolution but also the dramatic developments that have occurred in party political public relations over the years. Indeed, the 2003 Assembly election campaign saw the most sophisticated attempts to date by the four main political parties to utilise public relations strategies and techniques (and make use of new technologies like the Internet) in their attempts to influence the electorate. Critically, the future political success of all four main parties in Northern Ireland will be partly dependent upon their ability to embrace 'public relations' as a vital ingredient of modern-day politics.

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement remains to this day the cornerstone upon which a new Northern Ireland can be built. Signed only days before Easter Sunday – a day replete with connotations of resurrection, the Agreement represented just that: a breathing of new life into a society that for a very long time was in decay. Indeed, the genuine hope is that at some point in the future, people will look back at the signing of the Good Friday Agreement as a pivotal moment in Irish history that represented the unearthing of a lost or forgotten thing, that is, how to live in peace and harmony with ones neighbours.



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