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**RECONSTRUCTIONS OF PROTESTANT IDENTITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND  
AFTER THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT**

**Claire Mitchell, Department of Politics, University College Dublin,  
Arts Building, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland  
claireymitchell@hotmail.com**

## **Introduction**

Protestant identities in Northern Ireland have too often been presented as essentialist and unchanging. Despite pointers in the literature, their socially constructed and adaptable nature has not been emphasised. This paper examines the period after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which dramatised recent social and political changes in Northern Ireland, and assesses the ways in which many Protestants are re-orientating themselves to these, using a variety of strategies to reconstruct their political and religious identities. Three such political strategies are highlighted here – assimilation, separation and privatisation. The first response, assimilation, is an active acceptance of the political package of the Agreement, the second contests it, and the third is more passive and sees getting on with daily life as more important than politics – as such the Agreement may be grumbled about, liked or ignored, but essentially viewed neutrally until such a time as it is seen to make a difference to a person's way of life. In a similar way, reconstructions of Protestant identity vary. Those politically assimilating are redefining what it means to be British, and what it means to be a Protestant in a manner consistent with the new liberal mainstream. Those politically separating articulate more confusion about their Britishness, and are often purifying their Protestant identities as these seem to offer more ideological security. Amongst those politically privatising, national and religious identities are more individualised and compartmentalised. Each is concerned with how Northern Ireland is changing and where people feel they fit into these changes. All ask, if they can affect change, and if not, how they will be affected by it. Each looks to other people, the ideas of their upbringings, their new experiences, their perceptions of power and opportunities to try and make sense of change and locate themselves, and others, within it.

It is not suggested here that there has ever been a reservoir of 'Protestant identity' to which individuals could tap into or not. In fact, historical diversity of national identities, political radicalism and conservatism, theological liberalism and fundamentalism, internal class divisions and so on, are very much part of the Protestant 'mosaic'. It is therefore not the intention of this paper to show Protestant identity 'was' before, and how it 'is' after the Good Friday Agreement, but rather to examine the processes of identity construction in a period of political transition. As such, the typology

discussed below deals with people's present strategies in response to change, outlining their evolving effects on British national, and Protestant religious, identities.

We begin with a theory of the process of identity construction. We then overview the social and political changes dramatised by the Good Friday Agreement, and evaluate the political strategies emerging to make sense of change and their consequences for identification. To do this we employ a narrative analysis of a series of episodic interviews with Northern Ireland Protestants conducted over the year 2000 (see appendix). We conclude that Protestant identity, far from being fixed, is highly responsive to political change.

### **Processes of Identification**

The argument here is that identity is constituted rather than essential, processual rather than fixed and is intrinsically social – hence, the context in which this process occurs is crucial. Conceptions of self are constituted in the social world – in relationship with other people (Jenkins, 1996). Despite upheaval and change in both our personal and political worlds, increasing the choices and options available to individuals, a person's identity is not merely a matter of free selection from a global cultural directory, rather, it develops in relation to his/her specific social and political context. People interpret their experiences in the present with relation to the past (Connerton, 1989; Samuel and Thompson, 1990), and in relation to their sense of place in society – at the centre, on the fringes or somewhere in between (Cohen, 1982). Questions of place – access to resources, opportunities, questions of where do I fit in and so on, are a way of measuring one's value against that of others. These, combined with the structure and ideas provided by powerful actors and institutions, constitute the context in which people develop their relationships with others (Colley, 1992; Jenkins, 1996, 25). It is argued here, that it is only in relationship with others in society, and recognising what one is not, that a person realises their own sense of who they are and where they feel they belong (Sahlins, 1981, 4; Jenkins, 1996, 80). As such, difference and familiarity are crucial factors in the identification process. Furthermore, these very often become entangled with moral evaluations – that difference is threatening, or in some way worse (Sarup, 1996)<sup>1</sup>. This is not to say that identities are unitary, or

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<sup>1</sup> Ideas of similarity and difference being given moral evaluations abound in the literature. See for example Colley, 1992, Douglas, 1966; Geertz, 1973.

fixed in opposition to the other. However, whilst identities may have aspects of contradiction and ambiguity, people generally try to present themselves holistically, to secure an idea of self. Individuals then, do host diversities and ambiguities, but these are often unselfconscious, and are mediated through specific cultural contexts with established patterns of relationships, values and power. Identities then, are constituted through experience and choice, but these are mediated through power – actors and institutions which structure the context in which social and political relationships take place.

In short, ideas of identity and difference are shaped by perceptions of both *cultural* and *structural* power and powerlessness. Perceptions of self and other often take the form of moral evaluations in a struggle to appropriate the past and to shape the future. As such, as the political process reallocates and re-evaluates power and resources, group members are led to reconstruct identities to make sense of change. Below, we examine how people draw on ideas of difference, similarity, values, sense of place, relation to power and so on, to check and balance various life roles with and against each other to arrive at a conception of self which makes sense.

### **Political change: the Good Friday Agreement and the Protestant community**

Northern Ireland politics and society has changed in many respects over the last ten or so years. In many respects the Good Friday Agreement, supported by 71% of the population in the 1998 referenda, does not mark a radical departure from the past, but rather dramatises and confirms the directions of political change. We examine briefly here the role of the Agreement in internal politics in Northern Ireland, in the nature of the relationship with Britain and Ireland, and with regard to wider negotiations of global culture in the region<sup>2</sup>.

The internal balance of power in Northern Ireland has changed. Although there has always been a sense of peripheralisation and difference from mainland Britain, during direct rule since 1972, Protestant identities were somewhat insulated. A British national identity was the official one; political policies and norms were essentially British; and public debate took place within the bounds of Britishness. Since the failed Sunningdale agreement of 1973, ideas of cross-community power-

sharing and an Irish dimension have been the preferred 'solution' to Northern Ireland politics, however, as long as unionists could mobilise their majority and say 'no' as in 1974 and 1986, this was a threat that could be defused. The preferred solution, in the present, has been to accommodate and institutionalise both unionist and nationalist identities and political aspirations within the context of a pluralist, devolved government in Northern Ireland. Whilst British sovereignty is maintained, it is balanced with a dynamic role for the Republic of Ireland in many policy-making areas. Within the context of British regionalism, the Good Friday Agreement also provides for extra linkages between Britain and Ireland in the Council of the Isles – however with an eye on the progress of Scottish nationalism, this is not seen by many Protestants as guaranteeing stability or security of identity. Internally, the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly is no longer majoritarian, but consociational, and there is a renewed emphasis on rights and equality of opportunity – economically, socially and culturally.

The removal of British dominance, which was the linchpin of the previous system, has implications for the entire spectrum of relationships in Northern Ireland (Ruane, 1999, 154). After the Good Friday Agreement, the British Labour government has shown that it has little favouritism towards unionism. British government decisions against Orange Order marchers in Drumcree<sup>3</sup> for example, or progress towards reform of the RUC<sup>4</sup>, confirm suspicions that Britain is running out of sympathy for the Protestant community. Moreover, unionism has failed to come up with a united political strategy in response to this, splitting almost down the centre over support for the Agreement. At the same time, the Catholic community have dramatically raised their political and economic profile. After civil rights and with the gradual reduction of official discrimination in Northern Ireland, Catholics have now entered the middle classes en masse, nationalism has ceased to be a dirty word in public discourse, and Sinn Fein<sup>5</sup> have dramatically come in from the political cold. However, inequality persists in some arenas, and as such, reform, equality and quotas continue to be prominent in public discourse and policy. Of course, by no means all Protestants are concerned about this, some think it is long overdue – but many others perceive a strong Catholic community, confidently represented, and

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<sup>2</sup> For a more substantial account of changes, see Ruane and Todd eds., 1999, *After the Good Friday Agreement*.

<sup>3</sup> Protestant Orange Order marchers claim that Drumcree is one of their traditional marching routes. The residents, predominantly Catholic, oppose the march. The British government have refused to allow the march to go ahead.

<sup>4</sup> The Royal Ulster Constabulary are the predominantly Protestant police force.

<sup>5</sup> The republican party led by Gerry Adams, associated with the IRA.

continuing to push ahead for more political 'gains'. There has been then a change in the balance of power in Northern Ireland (or at least the potential balance of power), restructuring the context in which individuals must understand their lives.

Furthermore, the Good Friday Agreement confirms that the nature of the British and Irish states have changed. Britain is decentralising, and is increasingly secular and pluralistic. British identity, always a tricky concept for Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish alike, has been further problematised in the latter case because of differing experiences during conflict, and because of various British government policies and attitudes which have cast Northern Ireland as 'a place apart'<sup>6</sup> – interpreted by many as betrayal and abandonment. Ireland too has changed. Most recognise that traditional associations of the state with the Catholic Church are no longer accurate, that Irish Catholicism has many more liberal and pluralist strains than before, and that many have withdrawn their loyalty from the church in the light of sex scandals and secularisation (Hardiman and Whelan, 1998). Ireland too, is slowly becoming more pluralistic, and has rapidly become very economically successful. Also, the relationship between the two states has changed. In both diplomatic and personal relations, they are now partners, if not allies, in seeking solutions in Northern Ireland politics. Of course, feelings of Britishness persist, as does reluctance for a united Ireland – however, these concepts are more ambiguous than ever before, and Protestants in Northern Ireland are often compelled to revise their identities and ideas in relation to these changes.

Finally, there have been wider global political and cultural changes which directly affect identification in Northern Ireland. With membership of the EU, and a great deal of American attention under the Clinton administration, local politics in Northern Ireland has received ever more international attention. To a large extent, the rules of the game have changed, and liberal, pluralist democracy represents the new political norm. These rules are unforgiving to Protestants who appear not to want to share power and resources or move beyond the issues of the 'past'. They are particularly unforgiving of Protestants who seem to have problems with Catholics on religious grounds, and whose religio-political language is seen as bigoted and pre-modern. The media has also played an

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<sup>6</sup> For example, former prime minister Harold Wilson calling Northern Protestants "spongers", former British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Sir Patrick Mayhew saying Britain would release Northern Ireland "with pleasure" or Margaret Thatcher stating that unionists were "too patriotic". There have been policy differences in many areas, for example, the Poll Tax, civil rights, availability of abortion.

important role in this respect, bringing these views into sharper contrast with dominant liberal mainstream<sup>7</sup>. This is a phenomenon which many Protestants are very aware of today, and it has created a climate of social pressure to be 'reasonable' and accept the norm. This is also the case with strong forms of political opposition to the Good Friday Agreement: its objectors clash with current ideas of social respectability – they are seen, not morally upright as they see themselves, but as extreme, and worse, as 'against peace'. Many other Protestants, assimilated to the liberal mainstream, also find those with a strong religio-political discourse unappealing; and unionist elites have proved very adept at exchanging the language of Protestant resistance to one of international law and human rights (Lane, forthcoming). The consequence for the Protestant community as a whole however, is that public discourse has a new set of guidelines – reasonable, liberal and pluralist – and this too has necessitated a rethinking of identity and ideology (see also Coulter, 2001).

The Good Friday Agreement does not wholly represent a sea change in these processes. Rather it serves to dramatise political and cultural evolutions – in Northern Ireland, Britain, Ireland and beyond – which were already well underway before 1998. As a political framework, it has famously been described as 'Sunningdale for slow learners'<sup>8</sup>, and its core structural proposals have been the basis of the search for a solution for many years. At a psychological level however, the Agreement does represent a distinctive change, in that it was properly negotiated by a wider range of Northern Ireland political actors than ever before, it has brought the most lasting peace in Northern Ireland for many years, that it was endorsed by such a large percentage of the population and that it is accepted by most as the new political norm.

### **Reconstructions of Protestant identity**

In the 1991 census, 50.8% of the population identified themselves as Protestants. Not all, Protestants in Northern Ireland are unionists, but only a tiny minority are nationalists<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, contrary to popular wisdom, not all Northern Ireland Protestants see themselves as British – but only

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<sup>7</sup> There was also something of a media blackout on DUP-style predictions of doom during the negotiations of, and leading up to the referendum on, the Good Friday Agreement.

<sup>8</sup> Seamus Mallon, SDLP, Deputy First Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

<sup>9</sup> Recent data shows that 76% saw themselves as unionist, 1% as nationalist and 23% as neither, Northern Ireland election survey, 1998.

2% identify themselves as Irish<sup>10</sup>. Neither do all Protestants agree in their analyses of the Good Friday Agreement. Overall, a small minority (1%) feel that the Good Friday Agreement benefits unionists more than nationalists, 35%, that the Agreement benefits both communities equally, and 65%, that it benefits nationalists more than unionists<sup>11</sup>. What we can conclude from this, is that whilst there are variations of identification within the Protestant community in Northern Ireland, by and large, their self-perception is not as nationalist, not as Irish – and overwhelmingly, the Good Friday Agreement is not seen as a political gain.

Viewed as such, Protestant identities may appear rather fixed in opposition to the other. However, this belies the varied range of political responses which are evolving in relation to the Good Friday Agreement. This is in part due to differing interpretations of the text, which was deliberately designed to be broad and ambiguous. But more importantly, differing responses are informed by individual's perceptions of change, based on their own ideas and experiences, and on the public political debate. We turn now to an assessment of the various political strategies which Protestants are using to make sense of change and the resulting reconstructions of Protestant identities.

### **Assimilation**

Political assimilation describes the acceptance of new political norms in Northern Ireland, and in some cases, an attempt to shape their terms. This is based on an understanding that the political situation has fundamentally changed, and that a new public language and policies of liberalism, pluralism and peace are now dominant. As such, the Good Friday Agreement is seen as a good thing, bringing peace, development and progress. Whilst people may not like everything, they express support for the overall direction of political change.

Amongst this group, significant reconstructions of Britishness are taking place. It is being recast as inclusive, pluralist and multicultural – an identity which can accommodate diversity. Although none of those I interviewed presented themselves as British pluralists, in many cases the concepts were implicit. The lack of self-conscious presentations of pluralism can perhaps be explained by the fact

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<sup>10</sup> In the same survey 78% said they were British, 2% Irish and 21%, other (Ulster, Northern Irish).

that political assimilation has just begun to be articulated at elite level in unionism (Lane, forthcoming), and has not yet established itself as a popular political discourse. There is a recognition by many liberal unionists and other Protestants that Britain is changing, and that their relationship with Britain must change too. Many essentially feel loyal to Britain, but know that the UK is in a process of transition, and feel that they need to carve out their own role before the political situation changes too much. Assimilation is particularly amongst the unionist middle classes, who have enjoyed extended professional and cultural contacts with Britain (Coulter, 1997). However, this is more of a modern British regional and pluralist identity than it is based in older ideas of loyalty and contract. It is characterised by actors such as Dermot Nesbitt, David Ervine and David Trimble<sup>12</sup> – who poignantly transformed the old adage of Stormont<sup>13</sup> as "a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people", into the Northern Ireland Assembly as "a pluralist parliament for a pluralist people" (1998).

Furthermore, the impact of travel, particularly amongst those who have gone to work or study elsewhere in the UK and who have returned to Northern Ireland, can have implications for British identity. Victoria<sup>14\*</sup> says she considers herself British – but in England she was considered Irish. She explains that she still felt British, but not in the same way English people, and as a result, was driven to redefine what Northern-Irish Britishness meant. This same is true of Phillip<sup>15</sup> whose time in Scotland, mixing with English people and coming into contact with Scottish nationalist ideas of Britishness, he says made him feel more Irish. This is a common experience for those Northern Ireland Protestants who leave for the mainland, feeling that they are essentially British. When confronted with people who are English-British, and with many who consider all people from Ireland, south and north, as 'Paddies' – people often return to Northern Ireland with a re-negotiated idea of Britishness – often retaining the identity, but adding extra dimensions of Irishness or Northern Irishness.

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<sup>11</sup> Of these, 50.5% said nationalists were a lot better off, as opposed to a little - Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> David Trimble and Dermot Nesbitt belong to the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), which is divided over the Agreement. David Ervine is the leader of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), which is associated with Protestant paramilitaries (UVF) but which supports the Agreement.

<sup>13</sup> The Stormont parliament in Northern Ireland (1921-1972) was dominated by Protestants.

<sup>14</sup> Victoria is a young artist from Belfast, who has studied in England, lived in Europe and is now working in community work back in Belfast. She voted yes for the Good Friday Agreement.

\*all names have been replaced and occupations changed to similar.

As British identity is adaptable to new political norms, so too is Protestant religious identity. James<sup>16</sup>, a Church of Ireland minister from Newry, has been influenced by his time spent in theological college in the south of Ireland, and he contrasts Protestant/Catholic relationships there very starkly with those in the north. In the south he says there is trust, no sense of threat and accommodation – in the north, no trust, a need to defend one's own, a fear 'giving in' and a sense of hurt. He says, *having lived in Dublin for three years, I relate to Catholics differently, because the Catholics in the south relate to Protestants differently than Catholics relate to Protestants in the north*. This captures well a sense of reflexive self-identity – how one's identity is constructed in relationship with other people. Other people's ideas about me, how they treat me, feeds back into my sense of who I am. James' self-presentation is one of a "moderate", a "bridge-builder" – opposed to "hard-liners" on all sides. Furthermore, his experience of Catholicism outside of Northern Ireland is presented as the impetus for his openness and he couches his narrative of Catholicism in terms of liberalisation after Vatican Two, "progressive Catholics" – some as brothers and sisters in the Christian faith, and, despite traditional conservative Catholics whom he mixes little with, he says he experiences much co-operation. Whilst James says that his church "has its truth which we believe is the truth", he says he does not judge other people for believing differently. What we see in James' narrative is articulation of strong faith, but one which is held in such a way that it does not preclude relationships with those whose beliefs differ. His faith is presented as secure. He focuses on God's love, lack of judgement, equality, support, welcoming, sharing experiences and so on. He has concluded from his time in the south that there is nothing inherently persecuting about Catholicism, and he tries to find a wide centre ground where he can meet with Catholic moderates in the north, despite the context of mistrust. Politically too, themes of moving beyond the past, giving and taking on all sides predominates.

In such a way we cannot say that religious identity for James is compartmentalised, but rather negotiates with other life roles. James articulates political assimilation and religious toleration – both

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<sup>15</sup> Phillip is a young engineer from Co. Down, who studied for five years in Scotland, and who has just returned home to live. He supports the Good Friday Agreement, even arguing that he now thinks a united Ireland may be a good idea.

<sup>16</sup> James is a recently inaugurated minister, originally from Co. Antrim. He is in his 40's, and locates himself within the ecumenical evangelical Protestant tradition. He is enthusiastic about the Good Friday Agreement.

an acceptance of new liberal pluralistic norms. Despite the fact that he presents his religious beliefs as the "truth", these are framed within the context of equal acceptance of difference. Strong religious beliefs then, need not lead to damaged social and political relationships with Catholics. Rather it depends on how they are framed, and on a person's experiences of others.

As we have seen, many Protestants perceive nationalists as benefiting more than unionists in the Good Friday Agreement – but not all of these voted against it. One such significant (but marginal) exception is Simon<sup>17</sup>, a company manager and a non-church-going SDLP<sup>18</sup> member. He feels that religion in Northern Ireland is "ritualistic and bigoted", and although he had a religious upbringing, still sometimes thinks about faith, and says he is "probably a Protestant", he feels that essentially "life is your jobs and your interests". As a long established member of Belfast's business community, he observes that the last twenty years have seen a significant increase in the numbers of Catholics amongst the professional classes. However he does not feel threatened by this, says that his profession is "very open", and that the people he works with largely do not care about religious background. His analysis of the Northern Ireland economy is important,

*Belfast and its business community is more like a village than a city, and friendship is what matters. All the big British companies, Marks and Spencers, Halifax – that isn't going to be the case with them, and they appear to me to be scrupulously fair in who they employ. I would say that as we become a community whose employers are external to Northern Ireland, there will be neither positive nor negative discrimination – it will just be the best people get the jobs*

Simon's analysis of the situation in Northern Ireland is located with reference to the global and corporate world in which he operates. His lack of concern about traditional communal politics – as evidenced by his attraction to the civil rights movement in his student days and his present membership of a nationalist political party, have been reinforced by experiences of 'neutral' multi-nationals external to Northern Ireland, and meritocracy in his working life. His self-presentation is

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<sup>17</sup> Simon is in his 40's, from Belfast and lives in Co. Down. He had a strict religious and unionist upbringing, but now is uncertain about matters of faith, and strongly dislikes unionism.

<sup>18</sup> The Social Democratic and Labour Party, led by John Hume, is a mainly Catholic constitutional Nationalist Party.

one of openness and liberalism. His comments on the Good Friday Agreement are the most revealing of all,

*I think that what the Agreement offers on paper and what it offers on a more spiritual or emotional level are two different things. There was a lot of detail that tried to be so fair to everybody that it didn't say very much – however on a spiritual and emotional level, it gave the opportunity for a fresh start – some sort of progress to mutual understanding...I think that the psychological subtext of what was going on, was that if you were voting yes as a Protestant, you were inherently apologising for what had gone in the past, you were identifying yourself with the fact that it was right and just to have an equal society, it was right and just to be pluralist, it was right and just to have involvement from every level inside the community, and you were effectively turning away from your bigoted heritage. I think as a Catholic, you voted yes as a nationalist – you were saying that there is a space on this planet – there is a space in Ulster – for northern Protestants as well as us, and we would like you to be involved in what we are doing*

Simon voted yes. This is an example of assimilation to new political norms – the language of pluralism, rights and justice. It is interesting to note that Simon's presentation of the Catholic community is as active, and the Protestant community, passive. The former invite Protestants to "be involved in what we are doing", and Protestants are accepting this and apologising for the past. But far from perceiving personal 'loss' in the Agreement, Simon hopes that Northern Ireland is becoming "normal". Overall then, Simon sees the world as changing, the economy as modernising, and Northern Ireland as pluralising – and these ideas are given reference by his experience of the social world.

Political assimilation to new pluralistic norms amongst Protestants in Northern Ireland is in its infancy. This transformation has been enabled by the changing priorities and language of Britain, internal economic change, increased mobility and travel, the liberalising influence of the media and international involvement and a similar opening up of nationalist ideology. Those who articulate assimilation tend to have had positive social experiences with Catholics and tend not to feel

personally threatened by nationalist 'gains'<sup>19</sup>. In other words, the relational and spatial aspects of the identification process come into play – when difference is not seen as threatening, or when a person perceives their place in the social world as safe, identity can be more easily opened up and transformed. Britishness can be reconstructed as inclusive, and Protestantism as open-minded. As such, the Good Friday Agreement is more likely to be seen as a positive change, creating an opportunity to transcend the exclusiveness of the past.

## Separation

Political separation describes a sense of political alienation from the mainstream. It implies a fundamentalisation of political perspective in response to a perception of the ultimate isolation of the 'Protestant people', ideas of exclusion from the centres of power, and is the most oppositional of the emerging political strategies. It is characterised by anti-Agreement unionists who excluded themselves from political negotiations and who continue to make a point of segregation in the political process<sup>20</sup>. It presents Protestant identity as under attack in Northern Ireland and in the wider world; the decline of society and morality, and persecution of the righteous are key themes; and the policies of the Good Friday Agreement are interpreted as confirmation of this downward spiral. Political separation, and often a parallel reliance on religious salvation from these threats, are responses to a perception of hopelessness and of inability to change the political situation<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> This holds from a bottom-up perspective. Of course those elites who articulate pluralism may do so for other reasons – not least to harness a fashionable language to gain international approval whilst continuing to pursue majoritarian goals.

<sup>20</sup> A total boycott of the Northern Ireland Assembly is now seen, even by the generally exclusionist Protestant DUP, as politically pointless. Whilst they oppose the Good Friday Agreement, they do not go as far as Sinn Fein did under Direct Rule by refusing to take up their seats. Instead they have decided to participate, work to undermine the Agreement from within, but still try at every opportunity to make a point of separating themselves, particularly from Sinn Fein. For example, DUP politicians continue to refuse to talk to Sinn Fein representatives in the same television studio, although they sit with them on local councils. Separation then is now symbolic more than physical.

<sup>21</sup> I argue here that both separation and privatisation are responses to an inability to change the situation. The difference is that some Protestants feel that their personal position and values are directly challenged by the Good Friday Agreement, whilst others may not like change, but focus on the private sphere instead. These perceptions, the resulting strategies, and the consequences for identification differ.

A political response of separation has serious implications for British identity. In fact, it is here where we see the most problematic reconstruction of Britishness. Helen<sup>22</sup> expresses a deep sense of abandonment at Britain's role in Northern Ireland today, arguing that the Good Friday Agreement only made the situation worse. She despairs at the current political situation, blames the British government for pandering to terrorism, and repeats the common fear that Britain does not want Northern Ireland Protestants any more –

*[there are] a million Protestant, I'm not going to call it Christian, I'm going to use Protestant, people living in Northern Ireland who have no identity. Britain doesn't want them, and they don't want to be part of the southern state...there is no British identity within Northern Ireland, I think the British section within Northern Ireland have totally lost their identity, they don't know which way to turn.*

However, there are many contradictions in her narrative. Whilst pinpointing the source of the threat to her identity as the British government, she frequently identifies herself as British, and states "I believe in Britishness". Her assertions of Britishness are strongest when she is talking about Irishness<sup>23</sup>. Her self-presentation is not one of wishing to withdraw her loyalty, or to protest against Britain, rather it is one of abandonment and confusion. She feels let down by Britain, and says she does not know "which way to turn". This is a very ambiguous reconstruction of Britishness – it both reproduces the traditional insecurity of a British identity, but abandons the defiance which has long been its counterpart, replacing it with a kind of hopeless confusion – she says that, “what [she sees] today is people sitting back, wringing their hands and accepting what they see as inevitable.” In fact,

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<sup>22</sup> Helen is in her late 30's, works in the public services and lives in Co. Down. She went to Sunday School when she was a child, but only 'became a Christian' (born-again) two years ago. I have chosen to focus on Helen's narrative in this section because it is both dramatic and representative, and because it gives the opportunity to present at least one person here more holistically. For extended presentations of the others, see my forthcoming PhD thesis, *Religion in Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement*, UCD.

<sup>23</sup> For example, *Q: What do you associate with 'Irish'? H: well, that's a difficult one... Irish...that's a real tough question because I mean I'm looking at it from a British perspective, so I can't say. ...when I look at Irish, I see complainers...when I look at Irish I see Irish dancing, Irish culture, Irish flag, Irish music, Irish, Irish, Irish! And even myself, who has a British passport, classes herself as British - Ulster British - I'm called Irish - Northern Irish. I don't see myself as Irish...when I go to Dublin, it actually feels like a foreign city to me, and when I come back up to Northern Ireland, It's such a relief to get home. They don't feel like they're my people...but they're going to have to take on board that there are over a million people up here in Northern Ireland, who view themselves as part of this Britishness. And we're here to stay, because we've nowhere to go. And we will not, I don't think, fit into a concept of Irishness, likely, or very well. Because I have no bond with Irishness at all. I still hope to be able to have my British identity here.*

Helen, like many others, actually turns to Protestantism to give her a stronger sense of identity, and uses this, rather than Britishness, as a means of understanding her situation in Northern Ireland today.

Helen has in recent years become a born-again Christian, as well as switching her political preference from UUP to DUP<sup>24</sup> after the Agreement<sup>25</sup>. Her narrative is one of encroaching nationalism, and the growing power of the Catholic community is a constant theme. Although she thinks that Catholic parents also struggle to give their children a moral upbringing, she constantly presents morality as Protestant morality, the source of threat to which comes from "aggressive Irish nationalism" – a phenomenon in which Catholics are implicated in throughout her narrative. When asked what it means to be a Protestant today, Helen replies,

*unwanted, unvalued, and definitely discriminated against...I'm not assured there is a place for Protestants and their beliefs and culture in Northern Ireland today...you know Sinn Fein talk about the British presence - well I'm the British presence in Northern Ireland. You know I didn't come from another country – I was born in Northern Ireland and I'm not going anywhere. And we're here to stay, because we have nowhere to go.*

She has heard second hand that someone in Sinn Fein said, if they got their way, Protestants would be pushed north into the sea and would have to learn how to swim. She says that there is an “attempted eradication” of Protestants in Northern Ireland, and lists examples of towns where Catholics have “driven out” Protestants. In Helen’s narrative there is an overwhelming feeling of siege. Her presentation of nationalism is as aggressive, pushing, driving, forcing, attempting eradication – and her presentation of her own community is as passive, losing, converting, becoming extinct<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, it is not only unionism or Britishness, but very much the Protestant faith which is

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<sup>24</sup> The Democratic Unionist Party, led by Rev. Ian Paisley, articulates the strongest message of no compromise with nationalism and republicanism.

<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that her perception of an increased threat to Helen’s British identity corresponds with a personal religious revival. Of course there could be many other factors which have contributed to her spiritual renewal, however, it is significant that in her narrative, she incorporates religious imagery and fears into her analysis of the political situation. It is not argued that the Agreement has caused Helen to become born again, however there does seem to be a connection.

<sup>26</sup>I reproduce a long excerpt here in full, to allow the reader to assess its interpretation: *there has been an eradication in Northern Ireland there's no doubt about it – an attempted eradication, an attempt to drive Protestants out. Border areas are a prime example. We have gradually been pushed back to areas like Banbridge, they don't exist in Newry any more, there's a very small Protestant population in Newry. My friends*

the object of nationalist encroachment. She says there is a situation of ‘religious apartheid’. What is also striking in her narrative, is the physical sense of place – the perceived ability of nationalism to geographically push Protestants around. The analogy of Protestants being pushed into the sea and having to swim is not uncommon, and is very significant. It gets to the heart of questions of identification and sense of place – but for many, this is not just peripheralisation, but a doomsday scenario of ‘eradication’<sup>27</sup>.

This perception of identity under siege has been heightened for Helen by the Good Friday Agreement. She says that it is in recent times she finds herself supporting the DUP, as they provide the strongest protection against the threats to her principles. The analogy Helen uses regarding the Agreement is strong: *if you were being raped, you continue to say no until somebody stops, and that's how I look at the DUP*. She again makes the comparison of the Good Friday Agreement with rape later in her narrative<sup>28</sup>. The moral evaluations contained within this analogy are weighty. The Agreement, which she sees as appeasing nationalism/republicanism, is presented as rape – one of the most serious violations of purity. To be raped is to be deprived of power. Helen’s analysis of the political then is articulated then in terms of purity and corruption, marginalisation and helplessness.

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*there get a terrible time. So don't let anybody tell you that in Northern Ireland it's going to be like it is in Southern Ireland, where the Protestants and the Catholics are living side by side. There's going to be real grief in Northern Ireland and I think that even as regards the South. I have many Protestant friends that, unless their families intermarried with Catholics they've lost their faith, or their faith wasn't that strong anyway. Sometimes it's an easier option that trying to maintain their faith down there because it doesn't go down very well in certain quarters if you weren't practising the Catholic faith, it was frowned upon a wee bit so it was the easiest option sometimes to convert to the Catholic faith rather than maintain your own faith. So, generally right across the board in Banbridge, I give Banbridge another 3 or 4 years, maybe not even that, and I think you're going to see big, big changes in Banbridge, you might well find that Banbridge too is a town where a lot of Security forces living here, you might find that they have to move further and further up again. Gradually I suppose we're being pushed right along to the edge of the sea when you think about it. Belfast Lough and all down round there you find big groups of Protestants living together. If people... I'd love somebody to look and actually present the facts and say 'this is a migration of the Protestant population of Northern Ireland, and now why are they migrating like this? What's driving them out?' Aggressive Irish Nationalism.*

<sup>27</sup> A strong articulation of Protestant identity amongst Protestants separating was the fear of ethnic cleansing. There was an emphasis on numbers: numbers of Protestant declining in the south; numbers of Protestants in border towns in the north having to move; and numbers and quotas in Northern Ireland. Other interviewees talked of “ethnic cleansing”. The Protestant population declining in the Republic - variously attributing the cause to ill-treatment, inter-marriage and conversion Alan, a born-again Christian shop owner from Co. Down, says that if the Graghagh Road residents get their way and Orangemen do not walk, “it will branch out and get deeper and deeper until there will be very few places left”. The picture is one of impending Protestant ghettoisation. Similarly, in respect to the marching issue, Donald (see below) talks about the Roman Catholic community in Belfast: “they crept up from the Markets area [in Belfast], they crept up to the Union bridge...and they crept up to the Ormeau bridge”. The picture here is of Catholics, creeping, almost sneakily, into traditional Protestant areas. This again, is a very physical example of the perceived changing balance of power in Northern Ireland.

<sup>28</sup> *Mr Trimble would say...yes [to the Agreement], even if he was being raped at the time, he'd put a smile on his face and say yes.*

As such, she refuses to give her support to the ‘corrupt’ new political structures of Northern Ireland, and like others with zero-sum ideas of morality, she sees political separation as the only viable option.

However, it is righteousness which is being persecuted – and this is a kind of moral power. It is as though she is under attack because of her purity. She says, *you know, we're not all lunatics in the DUP, most of us are hard working, law abiding, God fearing, people, and again we're sneered at because of that.* This self-presentation is very revealing – Helen has strong religious and political beliefs but is very conscious of how others may interpret these. She makes very clear and repeated distinctions between right and wrong, but constantly justifies herself, saying that she is not "a nutter", despite the fact that others think she is. She argues that nationalists and republicans have used the media very effectively, that the media has tried to silence DUP supporters, and that the "word-language" of anti-Agreement politics needs to change because if stated starkly, it leads to a misunderstanding of their message – i.e. as against peace. She feels that others judge her harshly and she expresses hurt at these prescriptions. Frequently, she presents her own faith as attacked, but more meaningful, more pure. John<sup>29</sup> too, a religiously fervent and anti-Agreement unionist, says he is afraid to speak his mind because he will be portrayed as against peace, which is socially unacceptable. What we are seeing here then, is liberal moral norms mediating the political context in which identity is constructed. In these cases, it is causing people to feel isolated and different from their peers – which has in turn led to a purification of a Protestant religious identity.

The consequences for Helen’s religious identity are striking. As she tries to understand what is happening in Northern Ireland, the religio-political interpretation is used to explain, to justify and to give hope of deliverance,

*the thing that always sticks in my mind is what the Lord says, ‘the truth is mine, and I will repay’, and I really do hold on to that because I do believe that ultimately he will stop it this time. Not just the Agreement, but generally [immoral, corrupt] society.*

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<sup>29</sup> John is a young university student from Co. Down. He stresses the importance of his religious beliefs, favours the DUP and frequently refers to his feeling of difference from his contemporaries.

Helen implies that truth will triumph in this world. The book of Revelation, which is very close to the heart of many evangelicals in Northern Ireland, speaks of the final days of the world, the tests and trials that the faithful will be subjected to – but ends with judgement and salvation. For those who believe in biblical inerrancy, and who perceive wider social and moral decay as indications that the end of the world is near, the Good Friday Agreement may be another "sign of the times", as Helen puts it. It may not just be an unsatisfactory deal, or another nefarious plot against Northern Ireland Protestants, but also one of the tribulations spoken of in Revelation. This is an explicit theme in Helen's narrative – and is present, to a lesser extent, in that of other interviewees<sup>30</sup>.

What is happening here, is that identity is being reconstructed in relation to the new context of power in Northern Ireland. Political insecurity is deepening after the Good Friday Agreement, but traditional political defiance is transforming into an isolated helplessness. This is because changing British government policies, unionist disunity and nationalist strength, mean that a strategy of defiance will not work. Furthermore, a traditional strong religio-political identity conflicts with new pluralist norms. Those 'politically separating' cannot assimilate or privatise, because they feel personally under attack by the policies of the Good Friday Agreement – whether these be equality (which is seen as reverse discrimination), power-sharing (with "unreconstructed" terrorists which is seen as morally wrong – confirmed by the lack of decommissioning of weapons), relationships with the Republic of Ireland (which is seen as a slippery slope to a united Ireland in which civil and religious liberties will be threatened) and so on. The political process does not have room for 'extreme' views like Helen's, and has continued to make progress despite the efforts of anti-Agreement unionists. As such, there is double exclusion – people exclude themselves because they do not approve, and they are in turn ignored.

A further form of political separation is that which is typified by the self-destructive defiance of an ideologically chaotic, violent, unpopular and highly unsuccessful combination of loyalists. This is the frustrated, disenfranchised underclass of Northern Ireland loyalism, and the remnants of religious

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<sup>30</sup> For example Alan, who says of Drumcree "it's like the final battle...if we don't go in here, we are finished" – once again – the final battle possibly with overtones of Revelations Alan also says that we are in the "end times", and his narrative has frequent apocalyptic overtones. For example, he argues that we are all under surveillance from CCTV cameras, and that our personal details are recorded on a database – controlled by the EU, which is on turn part of a Roman Catholic conspiracy for world hegemony. Sam says the only thing that can salvage the political situation after the Agreement is "divine intervention".

protestors. Again, this is defiance without hope of victory, as is epitomised by banned marches at Drumcree. Ideas of Britishness are again highly contradictory. There is an attempt to win back Britain's sympathy, as evidenced by slogans on loyalist t-shirts, 'Our only crime – loyalty', and by presenting failed marches and protests as victimisation<sup>31</sup>. However, the Britishness they hark back to is now a memory, and their actions – not talking, not listening, not compromising – very much separate them from not only the Catholic community, but many other Protestants and the British government. The Good Friday Agreement – proof of the reality of a pluralist and secular Britain – is too difficult to accept, so there is a parallel affiliation to an imagined idea of Britishness and rebellion against its very real actions. Again we see changes in the balance of power and policy mobilising politically separatist strategies and more ambiguous reconstructions of British identity.

These are then very ambiguous reconstructions of Britishness – taking on board the fact that there is no special place in Britain's heart for Ulster Protestants, and trying to square this with even more alienation from an Irish identity. Often this leads to a prioritisation of the Protestant faith – which can prop up an insecure British identity, providing explanation, justification and assurance of position. Both create a sense of difference from the mainstream. Neither have an influence on the current political process. This has resulted in, not only a sense that 'my voice is not equal to others', but also, that 'my voice is seen as extreme and unacceptable'. Once again, this gives a sense of reflexive identification – internalising, and reacting to, other people's ideas of oneself. As such, political, religious and social separation are intensified – to be true to our principles, because morality is zero-sum, because we are being attacked, and because no-body likes us anyway.

### **Privatisation**

Political privatisation describes those who evaluate politics after the Good Friday Agreement insofar as it relates only to their private lives. There is a tendency to focus on the personal benefits of peace, and not bother much about wider political issues unless they were to affect the way a person is accustomed to living their life. This group is characterised by people who are not very interested in

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<sup>31</sup> McKay cites one typically militant Portadown Orangeman's sense of political hopelessness regarding the banned Drumcree march, and his resulting craving for the status of victim, *When the British people see British subjects being battered on the streets of Portadown, when they see British blood running down the faces of people that is only looking to go down the Queen's highway, they will think, hold on, those people are right. This will be our Bloody Sunday* (2000, 119-20). She gives many examples of Protestants portraying themselves as "the real victims" of conflict, e.g. 156, 229, 249.

politics, those who prioritise peace on any terms, those who feel they are powerless to influence events anyway, and by those who find meaning more in the private than the public sphere.

Commonly, for those privatising, there is a persistence of British identity alongside acceptance of the idea that Britain does not really care – the idea that Britain's lack of enthusiasm for unionists is nothing new, and it does not make much difference. Some said that although they would not like a united Ireland, they would not be able to stop it, and would just get on with their own lives. Some even said in the light of Irish economic growth, unity may not be a bad thing. When asked, what do you associate with being a unionist, Jonathan<sup>32</sup> answers, *well, staying part of the union – with Scotland and Wales, even though they don't want us...being loyal to the Crown*. Donald<sup>33</sup> says, *I think the government would do anything to keep bombs out of London. I think that is the essence of political life in England. I think that as far as most of them are concerned, if Northern Ireland could be torn out into the Atlantic and sunk, they would be quite happy*. However, in both cases, a British identity was seen as the status quo, and was not really problematised in their narratives. Jonathan says "I think that's the big issue – people living", keeping busy with day to day issues and seeing beyond the big issues. In other words, as a young middle class professional, he feels it is possible for him to live his own life the way he wants after the Good Friday Agreement. He presents his social relationships as cordial, his job as rewarding and secure and 'trouble' as exaggerated. Interestingly, he says he learned at an early age not to talk about religion or politics to others, because it is not polite to risk causing an argument. Overall, what Jonathan, a self-styled "reasonable, middle of the road" Protestant, articulates is a political privatisation – a lack of ideological argument and a disdain for the big communal issues in favour of getting on with life and being reasonable.

Whilst Donald is more concerned about Protestant loss in the Good Friday Agreement, he voted for it, but as a peace agreement rather than a political agreement. Although he is unhappy about many details, he says that he does not know whether he would fight to stop a united Ireland as he is a pacifist, and people must look forward to the future. Interestingly, he says he would still vote yes.

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<sup>32</sup> Jonathan is a church-going professional from Co. Down in his late 20's. He says he is not overly interested in politics, but would vote for the UUP.

<sup>33</sup> Donald is now retired. He expresses little confidence in the political system and parties, but reluctantly voted yes for the Good Friday Agreement. He argues that voting yes is different from believing in it.

Again in Donald's narrative there is a shift from focus on Britain – whose lack of enthusiasm is taken for granted – and a corresponding increase in emphasis on peace in Northern Ireland. This is a highly rational response from unionists who are increasingly aware that the union is changing, that they cannot do much about this, but who feel reasonably secure in their individual situations. The perception is that the alternative to Good Friday Agreement would not be a restoration of direct rule, but some kind of Joint Authority – in which a traditional unionist position would be worse. As such, it is better not to oppose change, and instead make the most out of peace and one's own personal life.

Jane<sup>34</sup> expresses this same sense of Britishness, along with the idea that she cannot make a difference to the way things are going, and decides that getting on with her life is more important,

*I was born British and I want to remain British. But at the same time I can remain British, and if, god I hope it doesn't, it became an all Ireland, then I would still be British – on Irish soil – but I don't want to give up my own citizenship – I feel very strongly about that now, and not for political reasons, just for obvious reasons...I mean I suppose if it went either way – my husband would chop my head off if he heard me saying this – but at the end of the day as long as it doesn't affect me, I'm quite happy to live my life through that – as long as I'm happy.*

We see here, the possibility of a united Ireland being faced, and a response formulated. Jane is a privatised Protestant, who takes meaning in close relationships rather than in the political. She does not feel less British – on the contrary, we can see she continues to feel very strongly about her national identity. Neither is her idea of Britishness 'reconstructed', in the sense that in her overall narrative it is very much associated with traditional symbols like the Crown, the Union Jack, not being Irish and so on. It shares little with a New Labour-esque British identity. But at the same time, it has not become *more* oppositional. Rather, it is being transformed into a private identity. Jane does perceive Protestant loss in recent years – however, she continually refers back to "me and my own" as her first priority. Living in a Protestant housing estate which she describes as a "refugee camp", she has seen the consequences of violence first hand, and has concluded that Protestant politics, as

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<sup>34</sup> Jane is in her 40's and lives in a Belfast housing estate. She has no firm opinion on the Good Friday Agreement, disagreeing strongly with some things – like the sections on equality and the legitimising of Irish identity. However, she is also critical of unionists and loyalists, saying she feels let down by the political process in general, and that she has stopped caring.

well as communal politics, is ineffective and divisive. She therefore reassesses what would and would not affect her personal happiness, and makes her political decision (to not actively oppose political change) based on the assumption that the Good Friday Agreement has not the power to change her British identity, and the more important consideration of her private life and happiness.

Protestantism too has been transformed into a private identity for many. This is true for a very substantial number of people who still say they are Protestants, but have no formal connection with the churches. It is also the case for some Protestants with strong religious beliefs. It is a misconception that a strong religious identity leads inevitably to bad social and political relationships. In Fiona's<sup>35</sup> case, fears of a united Ireland on religious grounds are articulated – however, in general, hers is not a narrative concerned with politics or position. Her faith is strong, but she says she does not get "too fussed" about politics. She does not like the idea of a united Ireland because "there's no doubt about it", that they would "clamp down on the Christian Church big time" – she thinks it would be made harder for Protestants to go to church and practice their faith. However, she also says that she thinks there would be equal opportunities in a united Ireland and that as long as she can live her life as she does now she will not worry. She says everybody has the right to live as they wish. On politics:

*I just basically keep my mind on my life and my church and my football, and stuff the rest of it, until it actually happened and then I'll start to worry about it, you know. I just want to live my life day by day – you never know what's round the corner. I could be worrying about this united Ireland and walk out and be hit by a bus, so I just live my life as it is, I just live day by day.*

Her narrative then is one of political privatisation. In the social as well as the political, Fiona's strong views about her faith do not make conflict inevitable. She constantly repeats that she accepts other people's beliefs, that her friends accept hers, that if not for her parents she would have no problem dating a Catholic (and has done so in the past), and that "people are just people"<sup>36</sup>. She says she

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<sup>35</sup> Fiona is in her early 20's, lives in a loyalist area of Belfast, and has recently lost friends in the loyalist feud of summer 2000. Her narrative needs to be seen in the context of the chaos and loss of this period.

<sup>36</sup> A story Fiona tells about a family occasion demonstrates this well: I reproduce an extract here to pre-empt criticism that Protestant evangelicals may say they live easily with Catholics, but act in a very different way: *my*

used to think Catholics were “ginger-haired squinty eyed aliens” until she went on a cross-community trip to America, where she made many Catholic friends and realised that there was “no difference”. She now plays football for a Catholic team. She shares her faith with like-minded people around her, but says she studiously avoids getting into conversation about issues which may cause social conflict. In other words, her faith is a personal thing: it is not oppositional. Church for Fiona was a sanctuary from a life of drink and drugs and paramilitarism, and she uses words like "home, welcome, happy, security, safety, trust" to describe it. Her sense of place in the world then is positive. She refuses to adopt a political identity because she associates this with conflict – this association has been fostered by her experience of social relationships in her violent loyalist housing estate. She has no real view on the Good Friday Agreement, because she does not think that it affects her daily life. However, just as she thinks politics has failed her, she feels that faith has saved her.

Privatisation then is occurring at the level of both political and religious identities. For a large number of Protestants, the changing relationship with Britain is not welcomed, but accepted as reality, and strategies to deal with it are emerging – whether this is a focus on peace or on private life. Britishness is still an important aspect of identity, but is something which is seen to be less dependent on political reinforcement for many people. Furthermore, Protestant political identity can be muted and private even for those who have religious problems with the direction of change. To a large extent, these reconstructions of more privatised British and Protestant identities are made possible by people’s perceptions of others, and of their place in society after the Good Friday Agreement. None feel they really have access to power or can change the political situation – however, neither do they feel that change implies untoward personal loss. As such, peace, family and getting on with life are stressed at the expense of ideology and politics. In a way, political privatisation is a striving for a good life in a situation one cannot change.

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*cousin got married to a Catholic and he got snubbed something shocking by our family. They were really cruel to her. There was me and a few others who didn't mind...at my grandfather's funeral, he was really creaming it...and I went down in a Rangers top, and he sort of looked at me...and I changed it because I didn't want him to feel...I mean he was really nervous and I went over to talk to him and I says, don't worry, I've nothing against you. I was raging at my family. I talked to him for an hour and a half about the Celtic/Rangers game that weekend. He said you didn't have to take that top off, and I said but I didn't want to make you feel uncomfortable.*

## Conclusion

There is only one Good Friday Agreement, however interpretations of it, within just the Protestant community, are dramatically different. The differing political strategies adopted by Northern Ireland Protestants at the moment – assimilation, separation and privatisation – may seem to challenge the general assumption that there actually is a ‘Protestant community’ worth speaking about. Indeed, this fragmentation may be the direction in which social and political change is taking us. However, the Good Friday Agreement is in its infancy – and it remains to be seen if various policy changes will be followed through, never mind being effective. It may be that currently privatised Protestants may decide at a later date that they will not be able to get on with their own lives in the way they want if the Good Friday Agreement were to evolve into a wider set of changes – the indications are certainly present in this set of interviews. Those assimilating elites may find, as Trimble is finding now, that the language of pluralism sounds good but does mean making more sacrifices than perhaps is comfortable. On the other hand, if the effects of the Agreement appear to be more benign than expected, those politically separating may eventually be enticed in from the wilderness.

Also widely variable are the evolving definitions of Britishness and of Protestant identity. This is because although Northern Ireland Protestants comprise such a small community – they do not all share the same social world. Differing experiences, perceptions of power, social relationships – and choices based on these – have differing consequences for identification. A negative assessment of others and of place can lead to a sense of separation, confusion over British identity and often a purification of Protestant identity. A positive evaluation of one’s place in the midst of change in Northern Ireland, and good experiences of the other, generally fuses with an active assimilation to new pluralist ideas of Britishness and faith. A benign interpretation of change – that it is not a political gain, but it does not (yet) have a negative effect on my life and who I am – often results in the reconstruction of British and religious identity as private.

Despite this diversity, what is shared, to a large extent, are the *processes* of identification – the weighing up of one’s position in the light of substantial political change, evaluation of social relationships and experiences, the assessment of other people’s values and of their attitudes towards

oneself – do I feel accepted, or do I feel threatened? What we arrive at, is an understanding of Protestant identity as socially constructed, highly responsive to the political, and as such, neither a unitary nor fixed phenomenon. Internal struggles of unionism to define Britishness and Protestantism are taking place within the context of a new political process, the changing nature of Britain and Ireland themselves, global change and with an eye to international approval. As such, we see British and Protestant identity as challenged by, responsive to, and struggling to understand, self and group not only locally, but in the wider context of post-modernity.

## Appendix

### Methods

**Interviews:** this is based on a series of long episodic interviews with sixteen Protestants from Newry (predominantly Catholic), Banbridge (predominantly Protestant and Belfast (mixed) in the year 2000. these were a mixture of narrative and semi-structured forms of interviewing – where participants are invited to narrate/recount situations, episodes or experiences, followed up by more pointed questions, trying to draw out interviewees' subjective definitions and meanings. In other-words, situations are recounted and concepts are defined by linking narratives and question and answer sequences.

**Interviewees:** Sampling was not statistical, but neither was it wholly theoretical – in the sense that people were not handpicked for their relevance to the project. Rather, certain broad categories were designed – church-going, age, and geographic region – and evenly represented. Getting a range of political views and support for parties was another aim, but was not specifically written into the sample design. Interviewees were not pre-selected, rather invited to take part on an on-going process, according to who could practically be contacted, and the existing balance of categories. As the subject matter was often quite personal, in all cases, the priority was that someone was happy to participate, and that there was a degree of trust as a result of the avenues through which they had been contacted. As such, richer data could be generated.

**Data:** The data produced by these was sixteen long interview transcripts. In this text, all names have been replaced, and occupations changed to similar.

**Attitudes to me as perceived as a Protestant:** All these interviewees were approached through personal contacts, my own and those of family and friends. Whilst, if asked, I made my own views known, on account of the social networks and contacts I used, nearly all Protestant interviewees assumed I was also a Protestant (which is indeed part of my cultural background in Northern Ireland). Some interviews took on an unintentional, almost conspiratorial tone – and in most cases, particularly with locals with familiar faces, I think that the assumption that I was sympathetic to their point of view allowed for greater freedom of expression of sometimes controversial opinions.

**Analysis:** This is a narrative analysis, which examines how people talk about/present themselves, and how they present other people. We refrain from going outside the boundaries of what people have said themselves. We ask how context has influenced self-presentations and the reasons for a self-presentation – but we cannot say, what people 'really mean'. Therefore, this is a contextualised analysis of how people see themselves, see others, and see their place in the world. We look at people's narratives holistically, accepting their contradictions, piecing together different aspects of their stories. Texts frequently highlight actors, agents who perform actions – in other-words, self and other are often presented as active/passive, and very relevant in this case, as victors/victims. Also, we look at the type of language people use to talk about themselves, others and the political situation – and how this constructs values and identity. Some bigger chunks of text are footnoted here; most are smaller excerpts. Effort has been made to provide some background information about people, however space is too limited to allow room for more. For further details, see Claire Mitchell, *Religion in Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement*, PhD thesis, University College Dublin (forthcoming).

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