

**The Demographic Timebomb –
Are Northern Ireland's days in the United Kingdom numbered?**

by

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Map reproduced directly from:
http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/maps/ni_towns.gif on 8 Feb 06

ABSTRACT

Periodically it has been suggested that Northern Ireland's days in the United Kingdom are numbered because the Province's Roman Catholic population has been expanding faster than the Protestant population, pointing to a future Catholic majority and an inevitable vote for Irish unity. This paper reviews the Province's demographic trends, which in fact reveal that the two populations are on course to move into approximately equal numbers by mid-century with neither side gaining or retaining respectively a clear lead over the other. While 'tribal' voting habits would result in electoral stalemate between the Unionist and Nationalist blocs, the present trends overall indicate that there would not be an electoral majority for a united Ireland, although the result of a mid-century referendum would be closer than opinion polls indicate today. Finally, the paper examines Northern Ireland's constitutional future through a 'demographic lens', showing that the logic of the current situation is to proceed with efforts to make devolved power-sharing work within the current borders; there is no case for repartition today, but the idea should not be dismissed for all time and the paper postulates two future scenarios in which repartition could be appropriate.

GLOSSARY

APNI	Alliance Party of Northern Ireland
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
NILT	Northern Ireland Life and Times (survey)
NISA	Northern Ireland Social Attitudes (survey)
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party
SF	Sinn Fein
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party
WP	Workers Party

British rule in Ireland is coming to an end; it has a decade to run – no more. There is nothing speculative about that statement: it is based on the demography on the Six Counties. Sometime in the timeframe 2008-2010.....the Catholic Nationalist population will outnumber the Protestant Unionists. From that date, there will be no process of gerrymandering capable of delivering a Unionist majority in a referendum on Irish reunification.....It is extraordinary that, in an era when conferences on population are sponsored by the United Nations and when demography is regarded as a crucial science in mapping the future of the planet, so little attention has been paid to what must soon prove the decisive factor in the Northern Ireland issue. With the demographic clock ticking inexorably in the background, all constitutional proposals amount to little more than killing time.

Gerald Warner, 'Demographic Timebomb Ticking in Ulster', *Scotland on Sunday*,
12 August 2001

Depending on your viewpoint, this either alarmist or triumphant newspaper article illustrates the potential power of demography to generate the first change in the United Kingdom's borders since the state was created in its current form in 1920. But is Warner's argument correct, or is it a simplistic interpretation of some aspects of demography to illustrate a desired outcome? This paper aims to determine if Warner's central thesis is correct before reviewing Northern Ireland's constitutional future through a 'demographic lens'.

The first section will examine demographics Province-wide. Through reviewing the evidence of Census returns as well as changing birth- and death-rates, migration rates, and 'mixed marriages', we will see that the Roman Catholic population has indeed been increasing at a faster rate than that of the Protestant population in the six counties of Northern Ireland, but that the growth rates are now evening out between the two communities. Secondly, the paper will demonstrate the close correlation between vote share and population share between the Catholic-nationalist bloc and the Protestant-unionist bloc: thus, should the Catholic population gain a small lead on the Protestants, we could expect the nationalist political parties to be ahead in most elections. However, there is considerable evidence that, despite their votes for nationalist parties, not all Catholics share their parties' enthusiasm for a united Ireland; the third section will show that a future Catholic majority might produce enough pro-Union votes, to add to the almost completely solid phalanx of the Protestant Unionists, to keep Northern Ireland in Union with Great Britain. As a note of caution, however, it will only be possible to extrapolate the current evidence to suggest trends; these trends cannot be treated as a prediction because future demographic trends, voting patterns and constitutional preferences could be subject to further, unpredictable changes and influences. The current trend, however, would suggest a levelling out of the two populations mid-century with neither side obtaining

a clear lead, electoral stalemate between the nationalist and unionist blocs, but victory for the pro-Union side in a future 'border poll'.

Politicians and academics have postulated many possible future political constructs for Northern Ireland. The paper's fourth section will review these through a 'demographic lens', showing that the logic of the current situation is to proceed with efforts to make devolved power-sharing work, with direct rule continuing as an interim measure. However, the paper will also consider the border, showing the reasons for its current position and reviewing proposals for 'repartition'. While there is no case for repartition now, the possibility should not be ruled out for all time; the paper will postulate two circumstances in which repartition could be appropriate. A similarly-structured paper by Paul Compton in 1981¹ suggested similar trends, but his analysis of repartition options was written against the background of a terrorist campaign with potential to escalate to civil war; this paper updates the trends in the light of emerging evidence over the last 25 years and postulates different repartition options.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

It is incontrovertible that the proportion of Catholic-background people in the Northern Ireland population has been rising. The exact figures, however, are unknown. The 10-yearly Census provides the basis for study but, while the 1961 figures are believed by demographers to be accurate, the 1971 and 1981 Censuses were spoiled by a nationalist campaign against them which resulted in no-response rates on the question of religion by 10 and 20 per cent respectively and considerable under-enumeration overall in 1981. For 1991, nationalist politicians encouraged responses, and demographers believe that the 7.3 per cent no-response rate may have been composed of more Protestants than Catholics²; however, the 'no-religion' response became available for the first time and its popularity as an option increased in the 2001 Census (2.72 per cent). Nevertheless, the question of what religious background people had been brought up in was answered on many of the 'No-religion' and 'No-response' returns. Births and deaths are not registered by denomination, nor is there any completely reliable information about religion and migration; however, there are methods of cross-checking data, including the Northern Ireland Fertility Survey and study of baptismal records, notably the Vatican Statistical

¹ In Watt (1981), pp.74-92

² Compton (1995), p.163 and Compton (1996), p.268

Yearbook (the *Annuario Pontificio*).³ What can be stated with certainty therefore is the minimum number of Catholics (and Other Denominations) as stated on the Census returns; this can be qualified using a variety of techniques to produce adjusted, estimated totals for each denomination as shown⁴:

Census	% Stated Catholics – the absolute minimum total	Adjusted % to compensate for non-statements
1961	34.9	35.3
1971	31.4	36.8
1981	28.0	38.5
1991	38.4	41.5
2001	40.26	43.76

Figure 1. Total Catholic proportion of Northern Ireland population by Census.

To put these neat figures in perspective, however, by introducing the element of uncertainty, Compton's 1996 analysis shows the range of possible population breakdown as follows⁵:

Census	Adjusted Catholic %	Range %	Adjusted Non-Catholic %	Range %
1951	34.4		65.6	
1961	34.9		65.1	
1971	36.8	31.4-40.8	63.2	59.2-68.6
1981	38.7	28.0-46.5	61.3	53.5-72.0
1991	41.5	38.4-45.7	58.5	54.3-61.6

Figure 2. Range of possible denominational breakdown by Census.

Returning to the first set of adjusted figures, projecting forward the average 10-yearly increase in the Catholic proportion since 1971 (2.32 per cent) would suggest that a bare Catholic majority would appear in the adjusted total for the 2031 Census, with a voting Catholic majority appearing 10-20 years later as Catholic children reached voting age and deaths took a disproportionate toll of the oldest, Protestant-heavy, generations. However, a closer look at the adjusted figures will inject the first note of caution: while the rate of Catholic increase accelerated between 1981 and 1991, it slowed between 1991 and 2001. If that mathematical trend of a steadily reducing rate of increase were maintained, it would delay the Catholic majority by some years, if not produce a perpetual Protestant majority. As a

³ Compton (1995), pp.219-221

⁴ From Background Information on Northern Ireland Society – Population and Vital Statistics on <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/ni/popul.htm>; adjusted 2001 totals for Protestants (Presbyterian, Church of Ireland, Methodists and others) was 53.13%, Other Religions 0.39% and No Religion 2.72% out of the 1,685,267 total population.

⁵ Compton (1996), p.268; the adjusted figures are different from those on the website quoted above, reflecting slightly different analysis results.

second note of caution, Compton projected forward the change recorded between the Census figures of 1881 and 1891, during which the Protestant population was increasing slightly and the Catholic population declining markedly: the result was a projected 1991 population of 1.2 million, of which just 12 per cent would be Catholic⁶, showing that trends can change dramatically. To gain a clearer idea of what is happening than can be gleaned from the Census headlines, it is necessary to look in more detail at birth rates.

Historically, Irish birth rates have been exceptionally high by European standards. Total fertility rate (ie, average number of children per female) in 1970 in the Irish Republic was 3.87 and in Northern Ireland 3.25, compared with the Western European mean of 2.41.⁷ Within the Northern Ireland figure, Catholic total fertility rate was 4.1, compared with Protestants' 2.8⁸, and that is despite average later marriage ages and higher celibacy levels among Catholics than among Protestants. The result in the 1970s was that Catholic fertility was approximately 40-50 per cent higher than Protestant fertility. However, this pattern appears to have changed in the last 20 years or so as Irish Catholics (Northern and Southern) have come more closely into line with general European practices. Compton spotted in 1981 that Catholic fertility and family size were falling, but that the birth rate continued to be high as Catholic marriage age reduced and celibacy levels fell; however, he suggests that this represented a "once-and-for-all 'catching up process'" and expected that once it had worked its way through the system, fertility and rate of population increase would drop to the European average level.⁹ Indeed, Catholic birth rates dropped sharply from 24.0 per thousand in 1980 to 18.5 per thousand in 1992, a decline of over 20 per cent in a period when the Protestant equivalent birth rates declined by just 10 per cent; the changes in the Catholic birth rates mirror exactly the trend in the Irish Republic over the same period, but with a slight time delay.¹⁰ Ireland, North and South, appears to be on course to join other notable Catholic European countries, such as Spain and Portugal, towards the bottom of the world annual birth rate league, while Northern Ireland's Catholic and Protestant birth rates appear to be converging.

⁶ Compton (1995), pp.165-166

⁷ Coleman (1999), p.69

⁸ Ibid., p.92

⁹ Compton (1981), p.88

¹⁰ Compton (1995), pp.58-59

The best evidence for the future, however, is to examine the denominational profile of the population by age. Any future Catholic majority should appear first in those aged 0 and work its way through the system as time passes. Compton's analysis of the 1991 Census in these terms gives the following result¹¹:

Age at 1991 Census	Adjusted % Catholic	Adjusted % Non-Catholic
0	48.5	51.5
1	49.2	50.8
2	49.4	50.6
3	49.4	50.6
4	50.0	50.0
5	50.0	50.0
6	50.2	49.8
7	50.6	49.4
8	50.8	49.2
9	51.0	49.0
10	50.3	49.7
11	50.0	50.0
12	49.5	50.5
13	49.4	50.6
14	49.1	50.9
15	48.0	52.0
16	47.6	52.4
17	46.4	53.6
18	45.0	55.0
19	45.3	54.7

Figure 3. Denominational breakdown of population by age at 1991 Census.

Noting the potential inaccuracy resulting from these Census figures having to be adjusted, the trend here does not suggest a future clear majority for either denomination. While Catholic births pulled ahead of Protestant births in the early 1980s, the reversal of this trend, despite the growing number of potential Catholic parents in the 1980s, supports the view that underlying Catholic fertility has been falling¹², although it could also indicate Protestant fertility rising.

However, if birth rates were the only factor determining the future denominational make-up of the Province, the future would be relatively easy to project. Hayes and McAllister's broad-brush analysis of the denominational make-up of the Province by generation gives the whole picture as follows¹³:

¹¹ Compton (1996), pp.272-273

¹² Compton (1995), p.216

¹³ Hayes and McAllister (1999), p.469

Generation Title	% Protestants	% Catholics
'First World War'	72	28
'Depression'	69	31
'Second World War'	71	29
'Reconstruction'	64	36
'IRA Resurgence'	63	37
'Civil Rights'	59	41
'Abolition of Stormont'	59	41
'Hunger Strikes'	56	44
'Anglo-Irish Agreement'	51	49

Figure 4. Denominational breakdown by generation.

Although there is a suggestion that Catholic death rates might be higher than for Protestants due to “their less favourable socio-economic profile”¹⁴, the table shows that any such tendency will be more than offset by the effects of the much higher age profile of the Protestants; indeed the 1990 Catholic mortality rate of 9 per 1000 was exceeded by the Protestant rate of 11.5 per 1000.¹⁵ Overall, however, the data in this table is consistent with the evidence suggesting that the two denominations will level out in proportionate terms, assuming that total fertility rates in the ‘Anglo-Irish Agreement’ (ie, post-1985) generations have converged. The emerging demographic profile of the Province was also picked up in the 2004 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey, in which 50 per cent of respondents aged 18-24 were Catholic, between 41 and 46 per cent of the 25-54 age groups, 36 per cent of the 55-64s, and 28 per cent of those aged 65 and older.

The most difficult factor to calculate with any degree of accuracy is migration. The traditional view is that the high Catholic birth rate has been offset by high emigration rates; this view would fit with the almost identical proportions of Catholics seen in the 1951 and 1961 Censuses, and with the large Protestant leads in Hayes and McAllister’s generational table amongst the oldest generations. Denominational statistics on migrants are not collected, so it is impossible to be precise. However, research has suggested that before the 1961 Census around 60 per cent of all emigrants were Catholics, which thereby partly compensated for their fertility lead, while between 1971 and 1991 the proportion diminished to 50 per cent of all emigrants, still thereby reducing the Catholic population by slightly more in proportionate terms than the concurrent reduction by emigration from the larger Protestant population.¹⁶ The nature of the emigrants was different for each

¹⁴ Compton (1995), p.170

¹⁵ Compton (1996), p.270

¹⁶ Coleman (1999), p.93

denomination: the Catholic stereotypical emigrants were economically active young men seeking work overseas, when they could not be absorbed into the home labour market in periods of high unemployment¹⁷; the Protestant stereotypical emigrants were middle-class students leaving for higher education in Great Britain, which they are estimated to have done at the rate of 9,000 per year in the late 1980s with many not returning.¹⁸ Until 1991 immigration was an insignificant factor with the largest proportion (92.1 per cent) of Northern Ireland residents having been born there; of the remainder, 4.1 per cent had been born in Great Britain, 2.3 per cent in the Republic of Ireland and just 1.6 per cent elsewhere.¹⁹ The effect of these migration patterns, if sustained, would be to delay the time when the Catholic community became the majority, reduce that majority's scale and possibly, if fertility rates evened out between the communities completely and quickly, to prevent a future Catholic majority appearing altogether.

Migration rates in the 1990s, however, appear to have reversed the long-term trends. For the first time emigration totals were matched by immigration, with no significant net migration recorded in the 2001 Census. With the terrorist ceasefires holding, there was evidence of labour migration into Northern Ireland, while there was also evidence that outward movement of younger people seeking work and education was balanced by an inflow of older returnees.²⁰ Osborne has postulated that the adjusted proportion of Catholics in the 2001 Census was, at 43.76 per cent, smaller than hoped or feared respectively by the parties because many more Protestants than previously believed had returned to their homeland during the 1990s. He suggests that with fertility rates converging, migration would become the main determinant of population change, but warned that data would be hard to quantify.²¹

Other factors which could affect the denominational proportions of the population would be religious conversions and mixed-denomination marriages. There is little evidence of the former, although historically children of mixed marriages were brought up as Roman Catholics due to that church's relatively stricter

¹⁷ Bew et.al. (1997), p.137

¹⁸ Mulholland (2002), pp.152-153

¹⁹ Compton (1996), p.253

²⁰ Shuttleworth and Lavery (2004), p.6

²¹ Osborne, Professor Bob, University of Ulster School of Policy Studies (2002), 'Fascination of Religion Head Count', on BBC News website, 19 December 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern-ireland/2590023.stm accessed 17 Nov 05

instructions on this issue than its various Protestant sister churches.²² In the Republic of Ireland, the small Protestant community has long since accepted marriage with Catholics, partly because the community is so small that there is little choice and partly because the political implications of intermarriage are insignificant. By contrast, in Northern Ireland marriage between co-religionists is the norm: both communities are big enough to support separate existences and the consequences of intermarriage have negative political implications. Research suggests that fewer than 5 per cent of marriages in Northern Ireland cross the denominational divide²³, although the exact number and trends are difficult to quantify. Censuses only show present religion, rather than religion at the time of marriage if that was different, which could suggest an understatement of the total number of mixed marriages if they have led to one partner's conversion. There is also the increased possibility of mixed-marriage couples emigrating, intimidation having been an issue during the Troubles, while it has been speculated that mixed-denomination couples may be more likely to cohabit or not answer the Census religious question than same-denomination couples.²⁴ Whatever the answers to these questions, however, it would appear that the impact of conversions and mixed-marriages on the denominational proportions is statistically insignificant.

What these various demographic factors show overall is that the Catholic proportion of Northern Ireland's population has increased over the past 45 years by around 8-9 per cent. What the demographic factors do not show is what is going to happen in the future, for example whether the Irish total fertility rate will stabilize around the low levels of Catholic southern Europe or the moderate levels of geographically closer areas of northern Europe, or whether a low overall birth rate may end high unemployment and the emigration culture by creating a labour shortage.²⁵ The trends identified would suggest a convergence of the birth-rates of the two communities, with the possibility of a continued slight Catholic proportionate increase until the effects of the rapid expansion of the early 1980s have completely worked their way through into parenthood, although the Protestant lead in late-1980s birth rates would contradict this last suggestion. Mortality rates will, however, disproportionately affect the older-profiled Protestant community. The effect of migration is the greatest unknown, but if the 1990s trend is continued migration may

²² Compton (1981), p.77

²³ Moxon-Brown (1991)

²⁴ Compton (1996), pp.271-272

²⁵ Coleman (1999), p.99

have either a neutral effect, or at most only produce a moderate Protestant advantage in future, by contrast with the historically large Protestant advantage caused by large-scale Catholic emigration. Overall, the combined trends suggest that the two communities will move into approximately equal numbers by mid-century, with this position being reflected in the voting population 10-20 years later, but with neither side gaining or retaining respectively a clear lead over the other. Protestant-Unionist fears of being ‘outbred’, and thereby forced out of the United Kingdom, appear somewhat premature on demographic grounds, although what really matters is how the different communities vote in elections.

ELECTORAL EFFECTS

All evidence points to the main voting driver in Northern Ireland being ‘tribal’. For example, the votes in the 2005 General Election for the United Kingdom Parliament divided as follows²⁶:

Voting Bloc	Proportion of Vote (%)
Unionist	51.8
Nationalist	42.1
Others	6.1

Figure 5. Unionist/Nationalist bloc voting proportions – 2005 General Election

What is immediately obvious is how closely the 2005 voting figures match the adjusted, estimated proportions of the different religious denominations derived from the 2001 Census (Protestant - 53.13%, Catholic - 43.76%, Other/None - 3.11%). The result is not untypical for Northern Ireland elections. The following analysis of the 1983 General Election by constituency examines the relationship between the combined Nationalist vote and the estimated Catholic voting population for each seat taken from the 1981 Census²⁷:

²⁶ Figures derived from constituency results reported in *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 May 2005. The ‘Unionist’ bloc comprises the combined candidates’ votes for the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), and Conservative and Unionist Party, the latter being a non-sectarian party within a clearly Unionist tradition. The ‘Nationalist’ bloc comprises the combined candidates’ votes for Sinn Fein (SF), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and the Workers Party (WP), the latter included here because of its nationalist origins, although its 2005 programme emphasised its socialism and attempted to appeal across the denominational divide. ‘Others’ are the combined votes of all other candidates, notably an anti-hospital closure Independent, who accounted for a quarter of this bloc as runner-up in West Tyrone, and the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI) candidates, included here because their party’s *raison d’être* is non-sectarianism; there would also be a case for including the APNI in the Unionist column because they formally accept the Union, work within its mechanisms and sit in the suspended Northern Ireland Assembly’s Unionist bloc.

²⁷ Constituency results from Thomas (1983) and Catholic population estimates from Waller (1985)

Constituency	Catholic Proportion (%) - 1981 Census	Nationalist Vote 1983 (%) (SDLP, SF, WP, Ind - Fitt)	APNI Result	Difference Catholic %/ Nationalist Poll %
Antrim East	15	4.2	19.9	-10.8
Down North	10	1.6	22.1	-8.4
Belfast East	10	4.2	24.1	-5.8
Strangford	10	4.4	15.8	-5.6
Belfast North	35	32.6	9.1	-2.4
Down South	50	48.7	3.5	-1.3
Belfast South	15	13.9	23.9	-1.1
Antrim South	15	14.2	11.8	-0.8
Newry and Armagh	60	60.0		0
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	52	52.4		0.4
Antrim North	20	20.5		0.5
Londonderry East	33	33.7	4.7	0.7
Foyle	66	67.4	2.1	1.4
Lagan Valley	15	12.7	11.3	2.3
Upper Bann	30	32.8		2.8
Ulster Mid	55	57.9	3.2	2.9
Belfast West	70	89.2		19.2

Figure 6. Constituency comparison of vote share with Catholic population proportions – 1983 General Election

This analysis of a different election also shows the close relationship between the nationalist vote and the Catholic population estimate: excluding Belfast West²⁸, the combined nationalist parties under-pollled the estimated Catholic voting population by an average of just 1.6 per cent. This under-polling was greatest in four eastern seats, where the Catholic proportion was smallest and where the APNI, the only non-sectarian party fighting this election, had four of its best five results. Analyses of the 2001 and 2005 General Elections using the same methodology showed broadly similar results. In 2001 the combined nationalist parties over-pollled the estimated Catholic constituency proportions by an average of 3.3 per cent; however, these denominational estimates were based on the ten-year-old 1991 Census, so over-polling would be consistent with the nearly 2.3 per cent estimated rise in the total Catholic population over the decade, especially because the three greatest examples of over-polling were in three of the four Belfast seats where population change was believed to have been greatest during the decade. In 2005 the combined nationalists

²⁸ An aberration in 1983 because the sitting MP, Gerry Fitt, while technically a 'nationalist', had split from the SDLP over the party's direction: he wished to emphasise its socialism, while the new party leadership was following an openly nationalist agenda. The result was that Fitt is believed to have attracted many Protestant 'tactical votes' in a seat no Unionist could win in a (failed) attempt to prevent a SF victory.

under-pollled the Catholic estimates (based on the 2001 Census) by 2.5 per cent.²⁹ For both elections there was again a pattern of nationalists under-polling the Catholic estimates most in the eastern constituencies and where the APNI vote was strongest. The single exception was Upper Bann in 2005, where evidence suggests that around 6 per cent of voters were Catholics crossing the sectarian divide to support the pro-power-sharing UUP leader, David Trimble, against a strong (and successful) DUP challenge.

The 2004 NILT survey confirms the tribal pattern. When asked if they considered themselves to be generally 'unionists', 'nationalists' or 'neither', 71 per cent of Protestants said they were 'unionists' and 28 per cent 'neither'; Catholics split 57 per cent 'nationalists' and 40 per cent 'neither'. Remarkably, just one per cent of Protestants considered themselves 'nationalists' and a similar proportion of Catholics considered themselves 'unionists', with a further 3 per cent in the 'don't know' or 'other' columns.³⁰ These figures are broadly consistent with previous NILT surveys and their predecessor Northern Ireland Social Attitudes (NISA) surveys. Denomination is thus a good starting point in determining individual voting preferences; NISA surveys 1989-1994 suggest consistently that nearly 90 per cent of Catholics supported nationalist parties and nearly 90 per cent of Protestants supported unionist parties, with about 12 per cent of each community supporting the non-sectarian APNI³¹; overt support for all parties has subsequently fragmented, with 'tribal' support in the 2004 survey at around 66 per cent, the non-sectarian parties attracting around 5 per cent and the 'No Party' categories gaining around 25 per cent, although, as demonstrated in the 2005 General Election, tribal patterns still seem to appear in the polling booths.

Enoch Powell (UUP MP for South Down, 1974-1987) left anecdotal evidence of "cross-voting, negligible in the case of non-Catholics voting for anti-Union candidates, but really substantial in the case of Roman Catholics voting for pro-Union candidates" and reports "the necessarily impressionistic view of Unionist parliamentary candidates that in marginal seats they benefit significantly by Roman Catholic votes – and abstentions."³² The evidence examined so far suggests that Powell's opinion is certainly wrong as applied to the current situation, if indeed it was

²⁹ Excluding the West Tyrone result affected by the non-sectarian Independent candidate.

³⁰ The answers for those of No Religion were: Unionist – 21%; Nationalist – 10%; Neither – 66%.

³¹ Early-1990s NISA surveys accessed through Background Information on Northern Ireland Society – Religion in Northern Ireland on <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/ni/religion.htm>

³² Collings (1991), p.504

ever right. Possibly Powell read too much into having met some of the confessed 1 per cent 'Catholic Unionists'; if the phenomenon existed at all, the voting figures suggest that it was confined mainly to 'positive abstentions' rather than votes for Unionist candidates.

In terms of the Lipset-Rokkan model, Northern Ireland's politics divide almost exclusively along a centre-periphery (ie, unionist-nationalist) cleavage, with the other typical European cleavages (church-state; town-country; employer-worker) either subsumed within the unionist-nationalist cleavage (church-state, where the Roman Catholic Church has represented the 'opposition' and the Protestant churches the state) or confined to debate only within each of the communities (town-country; employer-worker).³³ For example, within the nationalist bloc, the SDLP has historically polled better than SF in rural areas and vice-versa in the towns³⁴, while the DUP³⁵ and SF have historically had more working-class profiles within their blocs than the UUP and SDLP respectively. However, the main debate is between the two blocs and this is shown by the fact that second-preference votes in Northern Ireland's elections by proportional representation are usually given to other parties within the 'tribal' bloc³⁶, however bitter the rivalry between these parties; the historical exception to this pattern was SDLP voters in the 1980s who were more likely to give their second-preference votes to the APNI than SF³⁷, but this occurrence may have reduced as SF has overtaken the SDLP as the leading nationalist party.

The recent 'radicalization' of the two blocs needs a brief examination, for the DUP has overtaken the UUP in the last decade, and SF has overtaken the SDLP, as the leading unionist and nationalist party respectively. Northern Ireland is a classic case of a 'double minority': within the Province, the Catholics are the minority; however, within the island of Ireland the Protestants are the minority. Whyte's psychological analysis of minorities is that, by definition, they are groups which feel threatened; that threatened groups "are liable to be hypersensitive; and that in Northern Ireland both groups display these characteristics."³⁸ The Protestants fear a 'sell-out' by the United Kingdom in which they will be forced into a united Ireland; the Catholics fear a return to the discrimination they feel they experienced under

³³ Evans and Sinnott (1999), pp.419-425

³⁴ Ibid., p.452

³⁵ Breen (1996)

³⁶ Girvin (1999), p.388

³⁷ Whyte (1990), p.74

³⁸ Ibid., pp.100-101

Protestant majority rule in the Province until the Stormont Parliament was prorogued in 1972. With this background, there is little room for a 'middle ground' and 'hypersensitive' voters will be inclined to vote for parties which will best defend their interests. The prolonged suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly has, perhaps temporarily, discredited the SDLP's main power-sharing platform, while the reason for the suspension has discredited the UUP's leadership of the body, in the eyes of their respective voters whose interests the parties are elected to protect. In these circumstances, nationalist voters have swung from the SDLP to SF, and unionist voters from the UUP to the more hard-line DUP, possibly in a repeat of the swing from moderate to hard-line Unionists in the February 1974 General Election. However, for the long-term, what type of unionists and nationalists are elected is less important than the overall proportions of each.

It has been demonstrated that the results of Northern Ireland elections in unionist-nationalist bloc terms mostly reflect the population share of the two main denominations, while the splits within each bloc reflect the latest positions of the respective competing parties. In first-past-the-post elections for the United Kingdom Parliament, the winner of a constituency usually comes from a party which represents the majority community within that constituency, although many elections produce an anomaly where an MP from the minority community is elected when the majority is split: the 2005 example was Protestant Belfast South, gained by the SDLP on 32.3 per cent of the vote, with the DUP and UUP coming in second and third with 28.4 and 22.7 per cent respectively, SF coming fourth on 9 per cent in this middle-class seat and the APNI only just saving their deposit in what was one of their worst ever general elections in the Province.³⁹ The main trend over time has been a gradual increase in the nationalist bloc from typically 25-30 per cent in the 1970s, to 40-45 per cent in recent elections, which is consistent with the rise in Catholic population of 8-9 per cent and the reduction in average votes gained by the non-sectarian bloc, shown by the analyses of the 1983 and 2005 elections; the decision of SF to contest elections since the early 1980s probably also attracted some voters who would otherwise have abstained.⁴⁰

The fact that the voting patterns have been so closely tied to the denominational population proportions indicates likely election results if the population trends identified are accurate. As the two communities move towards

³⁹ Result as reported in *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 May 2005

⁴⁰ Mitchell (1999a), p.103

approximately equal numbers by mid-century with neither side gaining or retaining respectively a clear lead over the other, so as this position is reflected in the voting population 10-20 years later, if the voting trend is maintained, both major blocs will move into approximate equilibrium. In proportional voting elections, the population proportions will be reflected almost exactly in the balance between the unionist and nationalist blocs, with the small non-sectarian parties possibly holding the balance of power if the population proportions are very close; for first-past-the-post elections, it will be the results of split-vote seats like Belfast South in 2005 which will determine which bloc 'wins'. If one side or the other has a small population lead, that will be reflected in election results, which raises the possibility of the nationalist bloc winning a small majority in the devolved Assembly, and amongst the Province's United Kingdom Parliamentary seats, if the Catholic population gains a small lead over the Protestants. But would this outcome result in a united Ireland?

CONSTITUTIONAL PREFERENCES

As former Prime Minister John Major said, "Northern Ireland will remain a legitimate part of the United Kingdom for as long as its people so wish."⁴¹ It is thus inconceivable that such a major constitutional change as a switch of sovereignty could be effected by a Parliamentary majority without the proposition being passed by 'the people' in a referendum. Indeed, the March 1973 Border Poll is a precedent for this question in Northern Ireland. Many nationalists have long hoped that the high Catholic birth rate would deliver an eventual Catholic majority, whose tribal voting would automatically deliver a referendum result in favour of a united Ireland. As United States President Bill Clinton is said to have put it to SF leader Gerry Adams: "Don't worry, Gerry, your numbers are getting better all the time!"⁴² There may have been some justification for this statement in the early 1990s, following the peak period of Catholic population growth shown in the 1991 Census, but the argument is still prevalent after the somewhat smaller growth shown in the 2001 Census; SF chairman Mitchel McLaughlin is quoted as saying: "The figures confirm what Sinn Fein has been saying all along. There is a steady demographic, political, social and economic change, undeniably pointing in one direction, towards support for a united Ireland."⁴³ Indeed one interpretation suggests that nationalists are increasingly

⁴¹ Major (1999), p.494

⁴² John Lloyd, 'Ulster Enters the Endgame – Sovereignty, Ireland and the United Kingdom' in *New Statesman*, 20 August 2001

⁴³ Rosie Cowan, 'Census Hits Republican Hopes', in *The Guardian*, 20 December 2002

behaving as if victory will eventually be theirs, while unionist behaviour is on the defensive, despite their continued advantage: "With only minimal effort, nationalists keep unionists pushed onto the back foot, their energy dissipated in rearguard actions with little strategic significance. In the jargon of the military, nationalists have infiltrated the unionist 'decision-making cycle'."⁴⁴

However, an opposite view is that "Catholics are free people in a democratic system, entitled to judge for themselves what suits them, and they have a right not to answer the call of the tribe."⁴⁵ Indeed, the NILT/NISA series of surveys, and other polls, consistently indicate that, despite their votes for nationalist parties, Catholics do not express overwhelming enthusiasm for a united Ireland: in 2004, Catholic support for a united Ireland was 47 per cent, slightly below the average, for that and the previous 11 surveys, of 50 per cent. With Protestant support for the Union solid at 85 per cent (the 12-survey range was 79-93 per cent) and just 5 per cent of Protestants (a typical figure) supporting a united Ireland, the overall percentage saying that Northern Ireland's long-term future should be unity with Ireland was 22 per cent (again a typical figure, with the 12-survey range being 17-28 per cent). By contrast, support for retaining the Union was 59 per cent overall (again close to the average, with the lowest figure having been 50 per cent). Within this 59 per cent, as usual, were a significant number of Catholics: in 2004, 24 per cent of Catholics said that the long-term future for the Province should be to remain in the United Kingdom. Once again, this was a typical response for surveys since 1994: while the lowest level of Catholic support for the Union was 15 per cent (in 2001, which was also the lowest year of Protestant support), a typical proportion was between a fifth and a quarter. As a note of caution, surveys in Northern Ireland do appear to over-represent moderate, and under-estimate extreme, opinions: SF, for example, normally does better in the ballot boxes than opinion polls like the NILT surveys. However, even allowing for this factor, there still appears to be a substantial number of Catholic 'unionists', even if they do not vote for Unionist parties.⁴⁶

The evidence presented is, of course, a series of snapshots: there is no guarantee that these results would be reflected in a future referendum. Indeed, there

⁴⁴ Fealty et.al. (2003), p.14

⁴⁵ Malachi O'Doherty in *The Guardian*, 13 April 2001

⁴⁶ Breen's 1996 analysis of NISA 1989-1994 surveys suggested that Catholic unionists' party support was: SDLP – 74%; APNI – 24%; SF – 2%; UUP/DUP – 0%. He further deduces that far from the SDLP, as the moderate nationalist party, being the mirror image of the UUP, the moderate Unionist party, it was actually the mirror-image of the APNI, with APNI supporters breaking 80:20 in favour of the Union, and SDLP supporters breaking 76:24 in favour of a united Ireland.

is evidence that Catholic support for remaining in the Union has reduced over time. Typical Catholic support for maintaining the Union in the 1990s NISA surveys was usually above one-third, compared with the fifth-to-quarter typical today, while a 1979 opinion survey commissioned by the Irish Government showed maintenance of the Union as the preferred future of half of Northern Ireland's Catholic voters⁴⁷ and a *Fortnight* magazine poll in July 1972 found that 41% of Catholics would vote against the unification of Ireland, and a further 26% would abstain.⁴⁸ Compton's analysis of the 1973 Border Poll result suggests that possibly as many as 25 per cent of the 591,820 voters in favour of the Union (58 per cent of the electorate) were Catholic⁴⁹, although the result could also be convincingly interpreted as a very large Protestant turnout (around 90 per cent) on this fundamental question, with almost all Catholics following their sectarian party leaders' advice to abstain (425,000 electors abstained and 6,483 voted for a united Ireland). Reasons for slippage in Catholic support for the Union can only be speculative. However, economic and social changes in the Irish Republic over the past 30 years or so could be a significant factor.

While the Republic has been stereotyped as a "priest-ridden, economically backward Catholic bastion"⁵⁰, the state has changed significantly. Irish per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was historically much lower than that of the United Kingdom, and Ireland's economy in the 1970s was characterised by high public debt, high taxes, low public spending and high unemployment. However, aided by massive European Union subventions, the 'Celtic tiger' economy's annual growth rates exceeded 12 per cent in the late 1990s and per capita GDP overtook that of the United Kingdom in 1997.⁵¹ The election of Mary Robinson as Irish President in 1990, and the succession of Mary McAleese in 1997, symbolized the ongoing appetite for social change in the Republic: a constitutional referendum on restricting abortion passed after a bitter campaign in 1983, but was overturned the next decade, while anti-homosexuality laws were relaxed, women gained equal rights and Bertie Ahern was accepted as Prime Minister in 1998 despite being separated from his wife. The Roman Catholic Church also began to lose its grip as young people turned away from religion, weekly church attendance falling below 50 per cent for the first time and recruits for the priesthood and other holy orders falling away.⁵² The effect of

⁴⁷ Collings (1991), p.504

⁴⁸ Darby (1976), p.189

⁴⁹ Compton (1981), pp.90-91

⁵⁰ Darby (1976), pp.29-30

⁵¹ Jackson (1999), pp.378-380, p.388 and p.416

⁵² Tanner (2001), pp.386-388 and p.429

these changes may be to make the Republic of Ireland a more attractive, or less unattractive (depending on viewpoint), state to join: with per capita wealth now greater than that of the United Kingdom and a now only slightly less liberal social regime, possible reasons for the relatively high levels of Catholic unionism in the past have dissipated somewhat, although there are still significant differences between the two states. The United Kingdom is a much bigger country, offering wider opportunities, has the world's fourth biggest economy and, despite recent changes in the Republic, is still more socially liberal.

The results of a future 'border poll' are thus more difficult to interpret than a simple analysis of population proportion and share of the vote for political parties would suggest. While current trends suggest that most Protestants will continue their solid support for the Union, Catholic support for a united Ireland is less solid. Breen's analysis of NILT/NISA surveys points out that in terms of constitutional preferences, national and constitutional identity, and party support, Protestants "cluster very tightly around a characteristic 'unionist' position"; within the Catholic community, by contrast, although they mostly see themselves as Irish and support nationalist parties, "between 25 and 40 per cent of their number (depending on the item in question)...depart from the characteristic 'nationalist' position."⁵³ In a referendum, in addition to 'tribal' drivers, the question 'Do I care?' will influence turnout and the question 'What's in it for me and my family?' will determine many votes, with voters judging the Union's performance against possible alternatives, comparing the relative attractiveness of Great Britain and the Republic as partners and following the leaders they find most personally persuasive.⁵⁴ All the evidence suggests, without committing to figures, that on current trends a substantial number of Catholics would support the maintenance of the Union and would comfortably exceed the small number of Protestants who would vote for a united Ireland, while Catholic abstentions would probably also exceed those of Protestants.

On these trends, therefore, Catholics would need more than a bare majority in the population to create the conditions for a nationalist referendum victory: mathematically, and working in an offset for 5 per cent of Protestant voters supporting a united Ireland, if the equivalent of 20 per cent of the Catholic population voted to maintain the Union (ie, the 2004 NILT opinion poll level), the Catholic proportion of Northern Ireland's population would need to exceed 60 per cent before

⁵³ Breen (1996)

⁵⁴ Fealty et.al. (2003), p.13

a nationalist victory would appear likely; if only the equivalent of 10 per cent of Catholics voted for the Union, then the Catholic population advantage would still need to exceed 55 per cent. Thus, with the current population trend suggesting that the two communities will move into approximately equal numbers by mid-century, with neither side gaining or retaining respectively a clear lead over the other, and with constitutional preference trends suggesting the maintenance of some Catholic supporters for the Union, the present trends overall indicate that there would not be an electoral majority for a united Ireland, although the result in mid-century would be much closer than opinion polls indicate today. If the Catholic population attains a small lead, Northern Ireland could thus face a situation akin to that of Quebec: governments led by nationalists twice failing to persuade the public to vote for nationalist referendum questions. Intuitively 55 per cent of Northern Ireland's population, with no significant denominational split, recognise that a united Ireland does not look likely, at least in the next twenty years⁵⁵, and United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair was correct when saying to a Unionist audience in 1998 that "none of us in this hall today, even the youngest, is likely to see Northern Ireland as anything but a part of the United Kingdom."⁵⁶ So, what are the future constitutional options?

NORTHERN IRELAND'S CONSTITUTIONAL FUTURE

Examining Northern Ireland's constitutional future through a demographic lens, this paper will not consider many of the possible options which have been proposed over the years but which do not pertain to the demographic debate. These options include the following: any form of independent statehood, which consistently receives only minority support in opinion surveys (typically around 10 per cent, interesting two-thirds of this from Catholics who, as the current minority, would have few safeguards against majority rule in an independent state⁵⁷); the detailed constitutional aspects of integration with Great Britain or the Irish Republic; any form of joint authority or condominium between the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic; any of the other possible forms of association with the Republic, such as federal or confederal constructs; unilateral British withdrawal, as suggested by United Kingdom Defence Minister Alan Clark in his diary for 30 January 1991 after visiting

⁵⁵ NILT 2004 survey.

⁵⁶ Dixon (2001), p.267

⁵⁷ Total wanting this solution in the 2004 NILT survey was 11%, breaking down to 15% of Catholic respondents and 6% of Protestants.

Belfast (“it is hopeless here. All we can do is arm the Orangemen – to the teeth – and get out.”⁵⁸); devolved government by appointed technocrats with no political involvement; and the involvement of external institutions, such as the United Nations or European Union in the Province’s government.

The logic of Northern Ireland’s current position is to proceed with efforts towards making devolved, power-sharing government work, with direct rule continuing in the interim. It has been suggested⁵⁹ that SF’s involvement in power-sharing, as established by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, was an interim measure for them, pending their consolidation as the leading nationalist party and Catholic demographic advance giving the party the position of more than just a ‘significant minority’ in the Assembly; further, that power within devolved government, even as an institution of partition, would be preferable to full Irish unity because SF has not made an electoral breakthrough in the South. It has also been suggested⁶⁰ that UUP leader David Trimble accepted power-sharing because the Catholic demographic advance was altering Northern Ireland’s character irreversibly and he wished to lock in as much power for the Protestants, perhaps the future minority community, as possible before it was too late. Taking this further, Malachi O’Doherty argues⁶¹ that the Catholic demographic advance achieved its ultimate point in 1972 when the institutions of majority rule were abolished, because the minority community had become too large and vocal to be ruled without their consent; moreover, the logic of this position is that even if a future bare majority of Catholics were to vote for a united Ireland, this would be no more acceptable than was Protestant majority rule because a new, large, vocal and wounded minority group would be entitled to consideration. Power-sharing is the only way to resolve this conundrum: even if they do not like it, both sides will have to continue to live side-by-side; the final defeat of one community by the other is not possible; either both sides will do well or, if conflict resumes, both will do badly.⁶² Thus while the subsequent history of the Good Friday Agreement may not have provided the “suitably Whiggish denouement.....– the happy ‘ending’ traditionally called for in histories of Ireland”⁶³, power-sharing is the only logical option. Indeed, Whyte’s 16-year-old survey of opinion polls suggests that power-sharing is the option which attracts most

⁵⁸ Clark (1993), p.395

⁵⁹ Jackson (2003), p.366

⁶⁰ Mulholland (2002), pp.173-175

⁶¹ In *The Guardian*, 13 April 2001

⁶² Fealty et.al. (2003), pp.17-18

⁶³ Jackson (1999), p.396

widespread support, usually as first choice for Catholics and, while only first choice for 10-30 per cent of Protestants, usually deemed 'acceptable' by 45-60 per cent of the present majority.⁶⁴ This position is broadly maintained in more recent polls: for the foreseeable future an accommodation must be made between a narrowing majority of Protestants and a large minority of Catholics, with the possibility of the proportionate majority switching, but only narrowly, in mid-century.

The final question to consider, as Northern Ireland is likely to remain as a permanent construct in some form, is the border. If Protestants had been distributed evenly throughout the island of Ireland, partition would have been impossible. It only became an option, and political necessity, because most of them were concentrated in the north-east. Even so, many traditional unionists, like the Hogg family, thought of the Union as being between Great Britain and the whole of Ireland and hoped that the artificial border would eventually wither away.⁶⁵ The original 1920 proposal for partition was for the nine counties of Ulster to be separated, but in such a construct the 1920 population balance would have been almost evenly divided, leaving little chance of long-term Unionist control. Instead, the Unionists demanded, and were granted, a province of six counties, which they felt they could safely control. Demography played little part in this: Counties Fermanagh and Tyrone had Catholic majorities. Compton regards this as an historic mistake: had the partition followed a demographically logical boundary, he believes that partition "might have stood a very good chance of settling the 'Irish question'"⁶⁶, although he recognises that a smaller Northern Ireland would still have had a Catholic minority even if some voluntary population moves had been encouraged.⁶⁷ Similarly, Kennedy's view is "that the tragedy was not partition per se but the clumsy manner in which it was executed."⁶⁸ Alternative options for the original partition would have been either to confine the new Province to the four Protestant-majority counties, or to take a smaller unit of division than the county, in which case some Protestant parts of Fermanagh and Tyrone might have been included in Northern Ireland, but some Catholic areas from Londonderry, Armagh and Down might have been lost. An opportunity to correct these demographic mistakes was lost when the 1925 Boundary Commission rejected a radical approach.

⁶⁴ Whyte (1990), pp.79-83

⁶⁵ Lewis (1997), pp.319-320

⁶⁶ Compton (1981), p.91

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.75

⁶⁸ Kennedy (1986), p.21

Politicians and academics have proposed repartition periodically since. Merlyn Rees, Northern Ireland Secretary from 1974 to 1976, ordered an official study of the possibilities⁶⁹ and after leaving office advocated the transfer of south Armagh.⁷⁰ Compton put forward three repartition options in his 1981 paper: a radical option reducing Northern Ireland to just the north-eastern Protestant heartland, a 'middle-way' option transferring Fermanagh, most of Tyrone, western Londonderry and south Armagh, and a minor option transferring only the most heavily Catholic regions coterminous with the existing border. The Irish politician and journalist Conor Cruise O'Brien also proposed the unilateral application of something similar to Compton's third option⁷¹, with compensation and resettlement for border Protestants who refused to accept the Republic's jurisdiction, for use if the United Kingdom lost control of Northern Ireland. Kennedy's 1986 study proposed four options not dissimilar to Compton's. Finally, United Kingdom Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher "requested a study of.....redrawing the existing border....My instinct was that there might be political and security gains from getting rid of the anomalies, in the event that our talks with the Irish came to nothing."⁷²

None of these proposals was pursued. Firstly, historical precedents were of mixed success: a new Swiss canton was carved out by plebiscite in 1974 to satisfy a minority, and several post-Great War boundaries were settled by plebiscite; however, none of these areas was experiencing a conflict like Northern Ireland's and the precedents of India, Palestine and Cyprus were not encouraging.⁷³ Secondly, determining the position of a new border would have been difficult: while there were many obvious border areas like the Bogside, Strabane and south Armagh which would probably have voted heavily for Irish unity, the general territorial division between Catholics and Protestants was not neat; the demographic map at Annex A showing the 2001 Census position demonstrates the problem. Any repartition would have stranded many people on what, for them, would have been the 'wrong' side of the new border, especially if that border was drawn straight enough for defensive purposes without branching out to accommodate outlying communities. Compton calculated that, although he would expect a significant voluntary population move in the event of a repartition being announced, his radical option would transfer 200,000 Protestants to the Republic, along with 300,000 Catholics, his 'middle-way' option

⁶⁹ Rees (1985), pp.100-101

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.351

⁷¹ O'Brien (1981), pp.180-181

⁷² Thatcher (1993), p.398

⁷³ Whyte (1990), pp.226-227

would transfer 250,000 Catholics and 125,000 Protestants, while even his minor option would transfer 30,000 Protestants along with 105,000 Catholics⁷⁴, which would not of itself be enough to make a significant long-term difference to the Province's demographic balance. It is fair to surmise that many Unionists forcibly transferred to Irish sovereignty would have been very angry indeed, while any passionate nationalists left behind amongst the at-least-one-quarter Catholic minority in the rump of Northern Ireland, and in west Belfast particularly, might have felt that their hopes had been dashed forever with a new and unassailable Protestant 'artificial majority' created. Thatcher's suggestion was suppressed on these grounds by Northern Ireland Secretary Douglas Hurd, who said that "ethnic cleansing on a brutal scale would have been needed if repartition were to have any effect."⁷⁵ Conversely, Unionists in the 'rump' might have felt that repartition was just a 'first instalment' ahead of another 'sell-out', despite their renewed majority based around the most economically viable part of the current Province. A third line of argument against repartition was that the Irish Republic's claim, before her 1999 constitution change, was for the whole of Northern Ireland. A 'rump' Northern Ireland still in the United Kingdom would have left the cause of conflict in place, and there would have been no guarantee that the Republic's government would have cooperated with any repartition plan.

Given these formidable objections, it is unsurprising that there is no significant backing for repartition. In a question that has only been asked occasionally, Whyte's 1990 survey of opinion polls found that fewer than 10 per cent of Protestants would find the idea of repartition 'acceptable', while backing from Catholics ranged between a fifth and a quarter, perhaps reflecting support in the border areas from those who might personally benefit.⁷⁶ Both Compton and O'Brien believed that their respective proposals were only appropriate in the event of civil war, which in 1981 did not seem too remote a possibility. O'Brien believed that if direct rule broke down through lack of support in Great Britain, a unilateral British withdrawal would result in civil war and forced repartition: his proposal for an organised repartition was designed for forestall this. As O'Brien said, "I would still dismiss [the repartition proposal as impracticable] *as long as continued direct rule is an available alternative*. If it is beginning to cease to be available, as I fear may be the case, it is time to look again"⁷⁷; even then, he

⁷⁴ Compton (1981), p.83

⁷⁵ Hurd (2003), pp.302-303

⁷⁶ Whyte (1990), pp.79-83

⁷⁷ O'Brien (1981), p.181

recognised that repartition might provoke rioting against it in Belfast by both communities simultaneously, albeit for different reasons. Repartition was thus an unattractive option which would have created as many problems as it solved. In the circumstances of 2006, there is even less of a case for it than there was in the 1980s: Northern Ireland is further from civil war than at any time since 1969, the terrorist campaigns have apparently ended, and the chance of making a power-sharing regime work is still available. Yet, repartition is not an option which should be dismissed forever: there are two circumstances in which it might be an appropriate way to proceed.

The first, and less likely, circumstance is a return to the impending civil war scenario. If the demographic trends identified in this paper are wrong and a future majority in Northern Ireland were to vote for Irish unity, there would undoubtedly be a significant minority of dissenters. The 2004 NILT survey indicated that the numbers of Union supporters saying that they would 'find it almost impossible to accept' a vote to become part of a united Ireland was the lowest ever at 11 per cent, with a noticeable age bias showing that the younger generations were less resistant to the possibility of change than the older generations. Nothing would give this 11 per cent minority, which may decline as a proportion as age takes its toll of the older generations, a democratic right to make a future Northern Ireland ungovernable if the Province voted for Irish unity, any more than the 2 per cent of unity supporters, who say that they would 'find it almost impossible to accept' if Northern Ireland never voted for Irish unity, have the right to make the Province ungovernable now. Yet democratic niceties aside, political reality might dictate otherwise. The traditions of "Ulster will fight, and Ulster will be right!"⁷⁸ and the original partition could reappear if the 'Orange card' were played; in the 1980s Margaret Thatcher expected "the worst civil war ever"⁷⁹ in the event of a united Ireland, while in the 1990s John Major believed that, if he had tried to 'deliver' the Unionists to vote for a united Ireland, "the Unionist majority would have made Northern Ireland ungovernable; we would have replaced one problem with a far bigger one."⁸⁰

United Kingdom policy has always attempted to treat the Province as a whole. The 1973 Border Poll result was only announced on a Province-wide level, while in the 1990s Major said: "If a clear majority of the people of Northern Ireland wishes to

⁷⁸ Lord Randolph Churchill campaigning against Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill.

⁷⁹ Thatcher (1993), p.398

⁸⁰ Major (1999), pp.441-442

leave the United Kingdom, we would not force them to remain, notwithstanding our deep attachment to the Union as a whole. But nor would we push them out. It was democracy at its purest: the people would decide.”⁸¹ Major was pointedly referring to the people of Northern Ireland as a whole. But while Major spoke from a convinced unionist perspective, abandoning this long-term attitude of treating the Province as a whole would also run counter to that strand of thought in Great Britain, which according to Hurd was “common among officials in the Foreign Office, that the unification of Ireland was in the long run in Britain’s interests.”⁸² A new partition could also provoke another republican terrorist campaign if it looked like repartition would delay the goal of a united Ireland for another century or more. Yet even this might be preferable to full-scale civil war.

The second, and more probable, circumstance in which repartition could be applied would be if the trends outlined in this paper come to fruition. With both populations settled into approximate equilibrium in mid-century and no discernible onward trend, or with possibly a small Catholic majority bringing nationalist electoral victories but, as we have seen, a future Border Poll probably not producing a vote for a united Ireland, the prospects of the ultimate nationalist goal being realised would be further away than ever. In these circumstances, consideration could be given to transferring territories near the current border, if they had voted for unity, to at least give some of the nationalist community the change of sovereignty they desired; of course, this would need to be done in a sensitive way, for example by allowing sufficient time for anyone who did not wish to be transferred to effect a move away from the affected region. Furthermore, it would require the results of a future Border Poll, unlike that of 1973, to be announced at the lowest possible level, realistically the local government ward level. Demographic changes over the past 45 years might make this proposition practicable. Compton’s study of the years 1971-1991 has indicated that the Catholic population increased in absolute terms everywhere in Northern Ireland by about 25 per cent, but that in the western areas the Protestant population fell by 4 per cent resulting in the Catholic proportion of the population in this region rising from 58 to 64 per cent; in the eastern area, by contrast, the Protestant population rose by 17 per cent resulting in the Catholic proportion here rising from 28 to 30 per cent.⁸³ These trends appear to be further reflected in the

⁸¹ Ibid., p.435

⁸² Hurd (2003), p.304

⁸³ Compton (1996), p.271

2001 Census.⁸⁴ While a wholesale transfer of western territory would be unlikely, Annex A shows several very heavily Catholic areas adjacent to the current border, which could be transferred to the Irish Republic relatively easily, should their populations so wish, if their hopes for the ultimate goal of Irish unity were dashed. Such a transfer might be seen a reward for the “IRA policy of ‘greening’ the frontier”⁸⁵ (alternative terms could be ‘ethnic cleansing’ or “genocide”⁸⁶). However, this would not be the fault of individuals living in these regions in fifty years’ time and such thoughts should not stop a territorial transfer if it was the settled wish of that population. The poll result would have proved that few Union supporters would be affected by the proposed transfer, and Unionists outside the affected areas would be right to welcome the move as strengthening the position of the slightly reduced Province within the United Kingdom.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed recent demographic trends in Northern Ireland, showing that although the Catholic population has been increasing at a faster rate than the Protestant, the growth rates are now evening out between the two communities. The combined demographic trends suggest that the two communities will move into approximately equal numbers by mid-century, with this position being reflected in the voting population 10-20 years later, but with neither side gaining or retaining respectively a clear lead over the other. The paper has demonstrated the close correlation between vote share and population share between the Catholic-nationalist bloc and the Protestant-unionist bloc; this raises the possibility of the nationalist bloc winning a small majority in the devolved Assembly, and amongst the Province’s United Kingdom Parliamentary seats, if the Catholic population gains a small lead over the Protestants. But this would not necessarily result in a united Ireland. Constitutional preference surveys have consistently shown, despite Catholics’ habitual voting for nationalist parties, the continuance of a significant minority of Catholic supporters of the Union, far outnumbering any Protestant nationalists, the vast majority of whose co-religionists are staunchly Unionist. The present trends overall indicate that there would not be an electoral majority for a united Ireland, although the result in a mid-century referendum would be much closer

⁸⁴ Osborne, op.cit.

⁸⁵ Tanner (2001), p.374

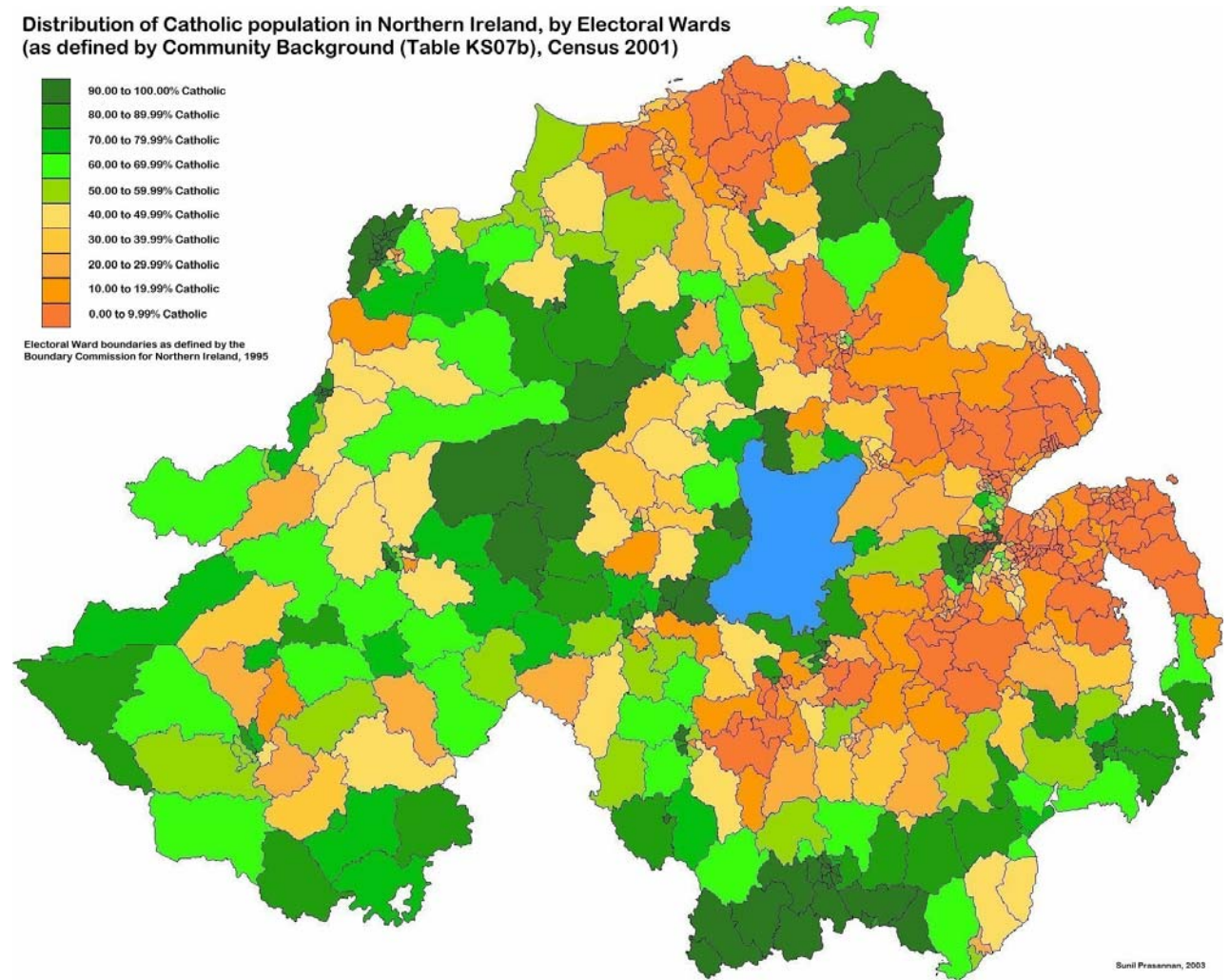
⁸⁶ Prior (1986), p.211

than opinion polls indicate today. Warner's opinion with which this paper started is thus wrong, not only in terms of timing, but also in terms of the likely final outcome.

John Major said that he had "never believed there would be a single defining moment at which the Irish question would simply be 'settled'."⁸⁷ Examining Northern Ireland's constitutional future through a 'demographic lens', the paper argues that the logic of the current situation is to proceed with efforts to make devolved power-sharing work, with direct rule continuing as an interim measure. The paper has also considered the location of the border. The demographic map shows that no repartition option could create a much more demographically logical Province than the present construct, and there is no case for repartition today. However, the paper supports Compton's 1981 thesis that repartition could still be an appropriate emergency response in the unlikely event of civil war threatening again. In addition, the paper suggests that a minor repartition, transferring the heavily nationalist border regions to the Irish Republic, could be an appropriate response if the demographic and electoral trends suggested in this paper come to fruition, producing an electoral stalemate with no prospect of long-term nationalist success: repartition would accommodate some nationalists' wishes, while entrenching the unionist majority. On present trends, the timescale for this might be mid-21st Century, but extrapolation of trends cannot be treated as a prediction. Statesmen of the United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland must be prepared to react to changing circumstances imaginatively to create a stable and peaceful environment in which people can prosper under a sovereignty with which the majority are content.

⁸⁷ Major (1999), p.493

**Distribution of Catholic population in Northern Ireland, by Electoral Wards
(as defined by Community Background (Table KS07b), Census 2001)**



⁸⁸ (c) Dr Sunil Prasanna, reproduced with permission from <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/maps/map12.htm>

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