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## **A Transient Transition: The Cultural and Institutional Obstacles Impeding the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) in its Progression from Informal to Formal Politics<sup>1</sup>**

By Cera Murtagh<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

Women have traditionally occupied a perilous position in Northern Irish politics, ultimately constrained from participating on their own terms by its dominant discourses of nationalism, conflict and realism. Alienated from the formal political structures which enshrine these discourses, many women have alternatively embraced the informal political sphere through extra-institutional grassroots and community networks which constitute the women's movement. Though this movement has largely conformed to the segmented structure of society, space has continually been harnessed for women of both national communities to converge on various issues and work across differences while remaining rooted within their own distinct national identities and communities. To the extent that it has emerged episodically, this style of transversal politics has been confined to collectives in the informal arena of politics. However, with the dawn of devolution and a new constitution for Northern Ireland, women recognized an opportunity to enter the formal political sphere and partake in the shaping of a new system. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) effected this transition into the 'parallel universe' of constitutional politics. However, just as the opening-up of the political structure underlies the seizure of this political space, political obstacles can account for its loss. The combined factors of inimical discourses, their institutionalization within the consociational system and the adverse political climate of polarization effectively denied the NIWC the space it required to progress and endure within formal politics, rendering its transition a transient phenomenon.

*Keywords:* Transversal politics; consociation; Northern Ireland

### **Introduction**

Democracy in Northern Ireland is a contested concept. The possibility of an integrated polity, with which democracy is normally associated, appears to be precluded by the national divisions riving society. In the context of relatively intractable conflict engendered by competing nationalisms, debates about democracy have tended to turn on the issues of peace and conflict resolution, involving the proposal of solutions that are focused exclusively on the factors which are most central to the conflict: the national divide and the region's constitutional future. The democratic model adopted after

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<sup>2</sup> Cera Murtagh wrote this essay while studying at Queens University, Belfast. She would like to thank Dr. Fiona Mackay for her valuable academic advice and support, and Prof. Rick Wilford, Bronagh Hinds, Ann Hope, Dr. Margaret Ward, Patricia Wallace, Prof. Elizabeth Meehan and Pearl Sagar for some very useful interviews. She would also like to thank the University of Edinburgh Development Trust for providing a grant to assist with the research conducted for this article.

devolution in Northern Ireland – consociation – arises from this perspective of conflict management via formal politics. Rather than attempting to transcend divisions, generate homogeneity or exclude extremes, consociation operates from a realistic recognition of society’s fragmentation and an appreciation of its dominant discourses of nationalism, conflict and realism. Through comprehensive inclusion, proportionate accordance of governing power to each community, and the introduction of safeguards to protect group rights and interests, it seeks to secure negative peace and group accommodation via elite persuasion.

However, within the informal sphere of Northern Irish politics, democracy warrants far broader consideration – a consideration that diverges from a singular focus on competing national factions and constitutional disputes. In particular, the women’s movement has often taken an alternative approach to the pursuit of peace and democracy. While most facets of the movement conform to society’s sectarian structure, certain factions have demonstrated the capacity to overcome national divisions and mobilize across differences in order to advance common objectives. Such collectives embody the principles of transversal politics, an alternative political ethos characteristic of heterogeneous coalitions which prizes openness, dialogue and unity of purpose amongst diverse identities. It thus models a form of democracy distinct from that conventionally espoused within formal politics in Northern Ireland. This paper refers to this component of the movement as ‘the transversal women’s movement’.

Despite occupying the informal spheres of grassroots, community and local politics, the transversal women’s movement has evidenced its capacity to *transcend* these boundaries and enter into the formal political arena. With the onset of devolution the movement exhibited vital agency, and seized the opportunity to assume a more central position within the new political institutions of Northern Ireland. Although a momentous achievement, this transition was not sustained. While the transversal movement possesses sufficient civic space to operate within the informal arena, the consociational institutions in place in Northern Ireland afford it little political space in which to develop and endure. The bipolar structure seeks to provide a mirror-image of society, enshrining the rights and interests of its two distinct communities. Such a system inevitably grants an institutional platform to the pre-existing political discourses of the divided society, demonstrating the prevailing ideologies which inform political interchange (Thomas and Wareing: 191). The transversal women’s movement thus failed to sustain their transition to formal politics due to the structural and cultural constraints engendered by the inimical discourses of nationalism, conflict and realism – constraints which have been further reinforced by the consociational system.

My aim here is to explore the NIWC’s transition from informal to formal politics, the obstacles it faced in this challenge and the factors which underlie its decline. This paper is thus structured in four parts. Part one introduces and theoretically explores the central concepts of this paper – transversalism and consociation. Part two examines the NIWC’s formation, transition to the formal arena and its political course therein. Part three analyses the direct and indirect structural barriers, while part four outlines the conflict between the established political discourses of Northern Ireland, as represented within consociational and transversal institutions respectively.

## Politics in Northern Ireland

Throughout its history, politics in Northern Ireland has been shaped by the dispute between its two principal national communities, and dominated by the question of conflict resolution. A democratic deficit thus becomes a permanent feature of its formal *politics* in terms of representation of the public's needs and interests. Women particularly bear the brunt of its inadequacies. However, far from succumbing to passive victimhood, women have exhibited remarkable agency, seizing power for themselves on their own terms within the informal arena. Moreover, collectives within the women's movement have episodically employed their own distinctive style of politics in response to these undemocratic conditions: transversal politics constitutes one such form of feminist political organization.

Since 1922 formal politics in Northern Ireland has been largely determined by the all-encompassing rivalry between nationalism and unionism. It has also, of course, been dominated by the constitutional question. In this contested territory, the issues surrounding the relatively uncertain constitutional future of the region permeate every aspect of institutional politics. Political parties approximate national divisions, as voter preferences are determined largely on the basis of the party's constitutional stance, precluding swing voting to any significant degree (McGarry, 2001: 116). This has the effect of reducing the scope of the parties' incentives to issues relating to the nationalist question. In this sense, many non-sectarian social issues such as health, welfare and education are often neglected by politicians, subordinated to the national question (see Wilford, 1996b: 55). This creates a severe disconnect between citizens and the political system, which is known as the 'democratic deficit'.

Such marginalization doubly afflicts women, to whom those basic welfare issues remain more pertinent. The findings of the Opsahl Commission, an independent citizens' inquiry conducted from 1992-93 attest to this (Hinds: 112). The gravity of the constitutional question and national conflict has particularly discriminated against women's rights issues, effectively legitimizing their political sidelining. Historically, moreover, women have been vastly underrepresented in Northern Ireland's formal politics (Brown *et al*: 76). Political parties have, additionally, displayed reluctance to promote women as candidates for election or for higher positions within party ranks (see Wilford, 1996a). The conflict ensuing from this territorial dispute remains inseparable from the politics. In fact, Wilford refers to Northern Irish politics as a veritable 'proxy war', in which certain parties retain strong links with paramilitary organizations and power is perceived as *zero-sum*, with one side's loss amounting to the other's gain (Wilford 1996b: 43-44). Such an apparently undemocratic, male-dominated and confrontational system not only inhibits those women who are willing to participate but also deters the majority from the very consideration of involvement.

Women's relative absence, until recent years, from the formal political scene contrasts sharply with their preeminence within the informal political sphere of grass-roots, voluntary and community organizations. There are, after all, over 1000 women's groups in existence in Northern Ireland today (Fearon, 1999: 3). Far from 'crossing over', however, these informal and formal spheres remain considerably autonomous, each taking place, according to Galligan and Wilford, 'within the structures of parallel universes' (163). This distinction is, predictably, highly gendered: informal political space is 'feminine', while formal political space is conspicuously masculinized. This

apparently contradictory pattern of women's peripheral presence within formal politics and dominance within fluid networks and short-lived groups is perhaps more comprehensible in the context of the democratic deficit and the national conflict which has shaped Northern Irish politics (see McCoy: 3-12).

### *Transversal Politics*

Della Porta and Diani define social movements as 'informal networks based on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about conflictual issues through the frequent use of various forms of protest' (16). The 'women's movement' in Northern Ireland thus refers to women's collective mobilization as women within extra-institutional, informal spaces, as it has taken place since the early 1970s. Strands of this movement have been informed, periodically, by the principles of transversal politics. First coined by Nira Yuval-Davis, and used synonymously with coalition and alliance politics, this term refers to the formation of alliances between women of diverse identities and distinct national communities (25). Cockburn identifies such alliances as based upon common principles and objectives rather than common identity, as identities are not fixed or singular but multiple, and apt to shift over time (211). The boundaries of these coalitions are, therefore, established, as Yuval-Davis articulates, 'not in terms of "who" we are but in terms of what we want to achieve' (126). It thus allows women of distinct national communities or contrary political beliefs to work together for a shared purpose.

Such diverse coalitions refrain from espousing one unified stance on issues for which such consensus is impossible – for example, regarding the constitutional future of an nationally divided territory. Transversal theorists, rather, emphasize the value of dialogue in debate through which knowledge is acquired and perceptions modified (Roulston, 2000: 41). Endeavours must be made to empathize with the perspective of the other side without forfeiting one's own identity, through a process of 'rooting' and 'shifting' (Yuval-Davis: 130). Each participant in the dialogue remains rooted in her own identity and community membership, while simultaneously shifting into the ideological positions of those who hold alternative views. Transversal politics arises from the school of second wave feminism which advocates non-hierarchical, bottom-up activism, otherwise termed 'participatory' or 'antagonistic' democracy (Roulston, 2000: 26; Porter 2000: 157). Through democratic process at the micro-level, solutions become apparent and people become empowered; their political fates are no longer determined by belligerent elites and paramilitaries.

Since the beginning of the women's movement, many organizations have effectively embodied the principles of transversalism, withstanding the divisive potential of diversity. The Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement, the Women's Resource and Development Agency, and the Women's Support Network provide ample illustration of this ethos. Each of these organizations is, after all, open to women of all denominations and national allegiances, and each refrains from adopting a definite constitutional position (McWilliams: 30). Furthermore, much trans-community activism has been born out of necessity, as a consequence of practical and material issues that have been of concern to women across the region. The Mothers of Belfast campaign, in which women from both communities converged in protest against the government's cessation of free school milk, furnishes an example of such joint action (McWilliams: 22).

### ***Consociational Democracy***

The constitution of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 provided for an elected 108 member Power-Sharing Assembly with executive and legislative authority (see *The Belfast Agreement*). The structure of this Assembly was based upon the model of consociational democracy

advocated by Arend Lijphart, in which all the elected parties – both unionist and nationalist – comprise two distinct blocs and share power proportionately. Lijphart maintains that societal division and democracy can be reconciled through consociation (1977: 1). Rather than focus solely upon the individual as the primary unit of the polity, as is the case in conventional liberal democracy, consociation necessitates a recognition of the distinct groups that comprise society (McGarry and O’Leary, 1990: 282). Lijphart thus endorsed the political cooperation of segmental elites as a means of accommodating these groups and achieving a balance of consensus. The system should assume the form of a ‘grand coalition’, in which the political leaders of each bloc share power in governing the region (Lijphart, 1977: 25). In a polity that is fragmented along national lines, where widespread consensus and social homogeneity are absent, representation of the people as a whole via the majority proves unfeasible, resulting in majority tyranny (Lijphart, 1984: 23). Consociation is therefore designed to ensure group rights and proportional representation through protective mechanisms. This form of governance operates from a realistic appreciation of the sectarian divisions of society, and focuses on conflict management and peaceful coexistence as opposed to integration.

### ***Transversal Politics and Consociation: An Incompatible Coupling?***

Theoretically, consociation and transversalism present two fundamentally distinct approaches to democracy in divided societies. Transversal politics prize social plurality, and tend to view communities as heterogeneous entities, comprising individuals with multiple identities (Roulston, 1999a: 14). Consociation, alternatively, takes the group as its primary focus. It holds identity, particularly that of nationality, to be relatively fixed, and understands national blocs as largely homogenous, thus endorsing segregation within the political system in order to grant political expression to community rights and identity. Consociation thus grants priority to national identity, allowing little space for the expression of other facets of identity, such as gender. Furthermore, unlike transversalism, which seeks to generate a more integrated, just society through the development of civic relationships, consociation enshrines a ‘negative’ form of peace, focusing on the separation of conflicting groups (Lijphart, 1977: 47). Finally, while transversal politics advocates a ‘bottom-up’ approach to democracy, with civil society at its foundation, consociation prescribes a distinctly top-down method, with elite groups playing the most cardinal roles. In essence, then, consociation relies heavily upon the ability of the leaders of each segment to control their ‘followers’ (Kellas: 183). In stark contrast, transversalism upholds participation, fair process and cross-community confidence building as means of consolidating democratic principles.

### **The Informal-Formal Transition**

As the women’s movement has advanced over the last three decades in Northern Ireland, its focus has progressively shifted from civic, social and economic to political rights. Any accurate chronology of the movement, however, depicts not a linear

development but a tumultuous narrative punctuated by a series of divisions, reflective of its encompassing political environment. Amidst these rifts, some space has, intermittently, been secured for united action. This transversal space emerged with the dawn of devolution: women here recognized their historic opportunity to straddle the informal-formal gap and enter constitutional politics in the form of a women's political party.

The women's movement boasts an immense contribution to civil society in Northern Ireland, largely underscored by its widespread disinclination towards hierarchical 'formal' politics. Despite this fact, the power to effect political change still lies, ultimately, within the formal political sphere. Fearon thus owns that '[o]ther non-institutional activities are empowering to the individual but the ability to exert influence and assert change over and for others is limited' (see Fearon, 1996). This limited capacity became apparent during the peace process of the 1990s, in which negotiations took place behind closed doors between the two governments, politicians and paramilitaries. Such inaccessibility proved particularly disempowering for women, many of whom possessed a wealth of experience in political activism that might have been used to assist in the process (Sales, 1997: 200). Following the announcement of all-party talks, scheduled to begin in 1996, the centrality of the constitutional arena to the negotiations became all the more apparent. Rather than remain external to the process, however, women pragmatically chose to adjust the style and scale of their political engagement and sought to transcend the boundaries of the informal realm.

Women within the movement were, furthermore, aware of the momentous opportunity that devolution, and the forthcoming new constitution, presented for entry to the formal sphere. For Social Movement theorists, the 'political opportunity structure' – the degree of openness of a political system to a movement's demands – is vital to that system's effectiveness (Galligan: 10). Dobrowolsky likewise identifies 'state reconfiguration' as an opportunity for women's movements to intervene at the foundational stage of institutional formation (2003: 117). Women in Northern Ireland thus seized the unprecedented chance to enter politics at the point of conception, prior to the rigid institutionalization of norms.

### ***The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC)***

The realization that the input of the informal sector into the impending political agreement would be minimal functioned to mobilize women from several organizations to debate the issue between themselves. Understanding the unresponsiveness of political parties to lobbying as an indication of their level of commitment to women's inclusion, these women had no alternative but to form their own party to contest the upcoming elections to the Forum for Political Dialogue and Multi-Party Peace Talks (Fearon, 1999: 3-11). In April 1996 the NIWC was formed from pre-existing chapters within the women's movement. An alliance of women from distinct religious, national and activist backgrounds, the NIWC assumed the form of a non-hierarchical coalition; it was, essentially, a 'transversal' party. Espousing inclusion, equality and human rights as its three core principles, the NIWC advocated a radically new type of politics (see *NIWC 1998 Northern Ireland Assembly Election Manifesto - A New Voice for New Times*). With an informed belief in the power of civic engagement to foster greater social cohesion, the NIWC intended to transpose the lessons of community politics into the formal sphere



(Ridden: 115). Though a political party, the NIWC sought to remain true to its grassroots origins. While its members harboured divergent opinions regarding national identity, the Coalition itself assumed a categorically open position (see *NIWC 1998 Northern Ireland Assembly Election Manifesto*).

After much lobbying by the NIWC, an unusual form of List System Proportional Representation (PR) with regional top-up was adopted for the elections to the Forum and Multi-Party talks in 1996. It functioned so that each of the ten parties with the most votes across Northern Ireland elected another two representatives, presenting the NIWC with a crucial opportunity at the entry level of formal politics. It gained two seats on account of this top-up formula (see Whyte).<sup>3</sup> Delegates Monica McWilliams, a Catholic, and Pearl Sagar, a Protestant, assumed these seats at the Forum and later at the talks, where they negotiated with other parties in the formulation of the Good Friday Agreement. Confronted with the less conducive electoral system of PR with Single Transferable Vote (STV), it secured two Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs), Monica McWilliams and Jane Morrice, a Protestant, to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998. However, the party's mandate declined considerably in the years following the Agreement's implementation, culminating in its loss of both Assembly seats in the 2003 election, in which it scraped only 0.8% of the vote, a 50% drop from 1998. Similarly its last enduring foothold in the formal sphere dissipated in 2005 when its one remaining Councilor, Patricia Wallace, lost her seat. With no remaining elected representatives, the party disbanded in May 2006 after ten years in operation.

After entering the Assembly, the NIWC deteriorated steadily, indicating its susceptibility to opportunities and obstacles in its navigation of the formal political terrain. The party faced both structural barriers, relating to the institutional character of the Northern Irish Assembly, and barriers relating to the dominant discourses at play within Northern Irish politics.

### **Structural Barriers**

The first obstacle to the advancement of the NIWC manifested itself prior to the party's official entrance to the Assembly, during the electoral process itself. While the list-system of proportional representation (PR) with regional top-up chosen for the Forum elections in 1996 worked to the advantage of the NIWC, the preferential system of PR with Single Transferable Vote (PR-STV) adopted for the 1998 Assembly election indisputably disadvantaged the party (Dobrowolsky, 2002: 314; Wilford and Wilson: 23). Horowitz has usefully outlined the structural handicaps of such a system in relation to the NIWC's size, its cross-community nature and the geographical distribution of its support base (2002: 208). Under STV, it is relatively easy for parties to win a seat; dominant parties are thus placed at an advantage, leaving little space for new parties to break through (Horowitz, 1993: 180).

This system also promotes potential electoral pacts between parties that advocate similar policies. This was another factor in the marginalization of the NIWC – a party that occupied a small cross-community territory with a limited capacity to form cross-party alliances. Monica McWilliams criticized this practice in the run-up to the 2003 Assembly elections, during which SF and the Ulster Unionist Party appealed to voters to

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<sup>3</sup> For all electoral statistics see Whyte.

transfer firstly to nationalist and unionist candidates respectively and then to pro-agreement candidates (see Moriarty, 2003). Horowitz hence identifies STV as ‘a system perfectly compatible with the maintenance of ethnically based parties and not particularly supportive of multi-ethnic coalitions’ (2001: 100). It is a system, after all, that renders vote transfers across ethnic blocs, and between ethnic and non-ethnic parties, highly unlikely. In terms of Local Government, this feature of the electoral system made a conspicuous contribution to the NIWC’s loss of Councilor Wallace’s seat in North Down Council in 2005, where she faced competition from eight DUP candidates – one of whom gained very few first preferences but almost all of the transfers (see Ward, 2006). Furthermore, given the high regional dispersion of the party’s supporters, PR-STV damaged the NIWC in terms of its territorial constituency basis (Horowitz, 2002: 208). The particular electoral system adopted was thus a significant factor in the party’s polling performances.

Having gained entry to the Assembly despite such inauspicious electoral circumstances, the NIWC immediately encountered further institutional marginalization. In order to preserve the principles of cross-community consensus, and the guarantees upon which the institutions were founded, elected representatives were obliged to register at Stormont as ‘nationalist, unionist or other’, in order that votes might be counted accordingly (The Belfast Agreement, 10 April 1998: 8). Key decisions within the Assembly and the Executive required either ‘parallel consent’, meaning majorities within both nationalist and unionist blocs, or a ‘weighted majority’ of at least 60% of all voting members, plus 40% of each bloc (Horowitz, 2002: 194.). Furthermore, the Agreement entails ‘petition procedures’ enabling thirty or more MLAs to present a ‘petition of concern’ on any vote taken in the Assembly. In this sense, the institutions ensure a group veto to each community, thus upholding the Agreement’s central tenet of ‘parity of esteem’ (McGarry and O’Leary, 2006a: 45). However, in so doing, cross-community parties which defy dualistic categorization are relegated to the periphery in terms of decision making. Ridden attests to this inequality, stating that although the NIWC could influence debate, ‘their votes can have little or no impact on the outcome of contested legislation’ (112). With respect to certain decisions, the votes of the excluded ‘others’ simply do not count. Additionally, their collective number grants them little leverage within the Assembly. They can be easily out-voted by any majority and lack sufficient numbers to elicit a petition of their own (McGarry, 2004: 271). Such marginalization not only disempowered the NIWC in real terms but also in terms of public perception, harming its purported image as an effective agent for political change. Even prominent advocates of consociation, such as John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, admit to this inherent discrimination, owning that ‘[t]here is an incentive for voters to choose nationalists or unionists, as members from these groups will, *ceteris paribus*, count more than “others” or be more pivotal’ (2006b: 272). McGarry, however, attempts to justify double standards in his earlier work: ‘The “Others” . . . have not been at the heart of the conflict. It is therefore not surprising if they are not at the heart of the resulting pacts, though it is not accurate to claim that they are excluded from the Agreement’ (2004: 272). This statement reflects the inimicality of consociation to the reconfiguration of power relations, and also illuminates its bias against non-ethnic parties. This system effectively presents cross-community parties as political lightweights, less significant and effectual than their nationally aligned counterparts. The NIWC initially responded to this

system of rigid designation by defining itself as ‘inclusive other’ (Fearon and McWilliams: 68). In 2001, however, in reaction to an institutional crisis and the potential collapse of the Agreement, the party’s two MLAs pragmatically re-designated as one ‘unionist’ and one ‘nationalist’, in order to ensure the return to office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (see ‘Looking Back... Looking Forward’). The NIWC were thus compelled to compromise their transversal principles to adapt to their polarized political environment.

### ***Indirect Barriers: Polarization and Shifting Space***

Throughout the course of devolution the complex political arena of Northern Ireland remained wrought not only with divergent political nationalisms simmering beneath the surface, but also with fear and mistrust regarding the other side’s true intentions. The continual crises and suspensions that marked its existence thus appear unremarkable. Within such a fractured political landscape, the newly-founded transversal space claimed by the NIWC in 1998 dissipated as the climate became more polarized, culminating in the organization’s loss of both seats in the 2003 Assembly election. This election, which elicited a dramatic reconfiguration saw the ‘extremes’, DUP and SF, assume majority status in their respective blocs. Various theories exist to explicate this phenomenon, including voter disillusionment with the Agreement and the new appeal of the DUP and SF to the middle-ground electorate. A combination of these factors undoubtedly underlies this electoral shift, extensive analysis of which exceeds the scope of this paper. A more defensive mentality is certainly apparent from the impetus for change which accompanied the Agreement. This outlook manifested itself in voting behaviour in these elections. As Wilford asserts, the elections ‘became a battleground between the political heavyweights’, resulting in the current four-party dominance (2006). He identifies ‘defensive voting’, for example, on the part of unionists, who were prompted to vote for the DUP in response to the growth of SF (ibid; Horowitz, 2001: 101). Similarly, Ann Hope recounts that while canvassing for the NIWC in 2003, many voters who had previously given it their first preference, now perceiving the political stakes to be higher and the situation more volatile, stated their intention to vote for one of the four major parties. Motivated additionally by the characteristic instability of the institutions, and the uncertainty of their future, many voters undoubtedly disaffiliated from the NIWC in response to circumstances in which many felt only the major parties could play a role. This climatic shift from optimism, as heralded by the signing of the Agreement, to cautionary insularity was a determining factor in the NIWC’s loss of political space and power.

### **Conflicting Discourses**

Since the late 1960s, political discourse in Northern Ireland has been dominated by the nationalist question. Society fractured along nationalist lines into two distinct communities, possessed of divergent beliefs, which could not be reconciled within the existing political system. Though such a clear-cut binary division patently represents an over-simplification of attitudes and identities at the micro-level, at the macro-level this cleavage remains determining. Formal politics approximates the dualistic segregation of society to such an exaggerated extent that one’s stance on the constitutional question constitutes the central axis around which all political affairs revolve. Politics is thus

characterized by oppositional discourses. Nationalism, as Wilford asserts, 'is propelled by an "us and them", insider/outsider, inclusive/exclusive dynamic, [and] can be carried to exaggerated and dangerous extremes in divided societies' (1998: 2). Northern Ireland provides ample illustration of such extremes, as the preservation of each 'nation', and its respective cause, is sought through the segregation of 'us' from 'them', which not only fixes and homogenizes each group, but also objectifies and exploits 'the Other' (Porter, 1998: 40). Within such hostile conditions, difference is feared and treated as a negative antagonism (Porter, 2000: 143). While differences between groups are accentuated by national elites, solidarity within groups is prized as bolstering the potency of their cause. Elites seek to further consolidate their agenda by assuming a highly fixed stance and a steadfast, intransigent negotiating style (McCoy: 20).

### ***Women within Nationalist Discourse***

The salience of nationalist discourse within Northern Irish politics has had a conspicuously negative impact upon women's participation. Anthias and Yuval-Davis identify the various roles assigned to women within nationalist discourse, one of which is to function as a signifier for national differences (313). While men act as national agents, women are the national symbols of loyalty, maternal self-sacrifice, passivity and victimhood (Aretxaga: 146). In this sense, feminism and women's mobilization – on non-nationalist lines – runs contrary to the ideologies of the nationalist movements. Rachel Ward documents this discord within the unionist movement, which views feminism as a rival to its conservatism and its desire to maintain the constitutional status-quo. She situates feminism as 'something of a dirty word in unionism', affirming that '[w]omen are unionists first and women second' (2004: 17). The perilous position occupied by women in this discourse is replicated in nationalist politics and works to the detriment of all women's political participation, particularly within transversal women's politics.

### ***Conflict and Violence***

The hostility between these two competing factions is further intensified, and the political dynamics complicated, by the use of violence by paramilitary groups on both sides. Such violence has had a profound effect on formal politics in the region, escalating tensions and polarizing allegiances. Force, utilized by these movements for the purpose of political gain, has become somewhat indivisible from constitutional politics, epitomized by Sinn Fein's alleged dual employment of 'the armelite and the ballot box' (Hayes and McAllister: 912). The ubiquity of violence has infused the political arena with a 'masculine', martial discourse, as parties characteristically conduct political interchange in this aggressive style (Wilford, 1996: 44). The political territory in Northern Ireland is, as a result, a much-contested one, offering little sanctuary to the non-confrontational actor espousing values traditionally viewed as 'feminine': non-violence, dialogue and compromise.

### ***Realism***

In such an environment of conflict, the discourse of realism constitutes a determining force. In a divided society in which the balance of power is unequal (historically tilted in favour the 'unionist' community), acute realism informs all political acts. Power thus manifests itself as a negative and zero-sum construct (Wilford, 1996:

44). Elites assume a causal link between their opponents' loss and their own profit and rationally calculate decisions on this basis. Furthermore, sectarian antagonism, and the implied capacity to resort to force, retain currency in elite negotiation and are often considered the most effective means of achieving political ends. Public spaces and political power in Northern Ireland have thus become highly gendered.

### ***Consociation: Institutional Recognition of Dominant Discourses***

The devolved political institutions designed to regulate conflict in Northern Ireland were conceived from a realistic understanding and recognition of its bipolar sectarianism. While a shift towards the recognition of differences and the discussion of injustices creates a more level playing field, it also marginalizes other factors of identity and alternative sources of inequality (Lijphart, 1977: 49). The most overt institutional manifestation of this imposed 'either/or' classification was the requirement that MLAs at Stormont declare their national allegiance to ensure cross-community consensus (Horowitz, 2001: 89). In so doing, consociation has not only institutionalized sectarianism by consolidating each nationalist bloc, but has also privileged national identity over other factors, such as gender (Cowell-Meyers: 87).

In addition to nationalist opposition, consociation enshrines the discourse of realism. In fact, its structures are developed from an appreciation of the salience realism boasts within divided societies, prompting McGarry and O'Leary to term it 'responsible realism' (2006b: 254). In recognizing each community's divergent interests, and assuming the capacity of each to exert hegemonic power over the other, it comprises a multitude of safeguards and minority rights. Consociation resists attempts to moderate or integrate group interests; it does, however, acknowledge the zero-sum nature of power in the divided polity, and tries to take account of all the various positions that exist within the segregated political structure. In this sense, it seeks to regulate conflict rather than to transcend or transform it.

### ***Transversalism: An Alternative Discourse in an Inhospitable Environment***

The consociational institutions were, as I have already mentioned, informed by pre-existing discourses, which served to further ingrain these dynamics in the political system, as opposed to attempting their transformation. Such discourses evidently stand in diametric opposition to the transversal discourses espoused by the NIWC. Firstly, in terms of national allegiance the NIWC represented a multi-partisan entity, which was contrary to the dominant bipolar discourse of the consociational system. Furthermore, it advocated individual autonomy and freedom of allegiance, and emphasized human rights and equality, rather than focusing solely on national group rights. The party's most unconventional feature, however, was its lack of a coherent stance on the constitutional future of Northern Ireland. While other parties defined themselves almost entirely on this issue, the NIWC contested the efficacy of political nationalism, arguing, as Roulston stipulates, 'that these were out of date questions in the late twentieth century when sovereignty and statehood are being transformed and renegotiated' (1999: 9). Representing members of both nationalist groups, plus members of neither, it appreciated the subjectivity of each national aspiration, and acknowledged the irreconcilability of both in their absolute forms. Instead of subscribing to unrealistic visions of the future, then, the NIWC alternated their focus between productive dialogue and 'here and now'

political issues, such as welfare, health and education.

The prevailing realist discourse of the political system proved inimical to the NIWC's principles of positive power. The party entered public office with a determination not to simply defeat other parties or reproduce existing power relations, but to build alliances across parties for the advancement of its objectives. For example, on the issue of equal representation, it campaigned for the inclusion of women in all parties. Likewise, in terms of inter-party relations, during the Forum and Multi-Party talks, it often acted as a conduit between parties that were not yet ready to meet face to face (ibid). Fearon similarly documents how the NIWC's proposals during the talks were often subsumed and later reproduced in different guise by other parties. This pattern elicited little resentment from the NIWC; its members were simply content that such issues had reached the agenda (1999: 92). Such generous, non-competitive behaviour epitomizes the 'politics of care' with which the NIWC hoped to infuse the new institutions and replace the zero-sum discourse (Porter, 1998: 31). Winning was never the NIWC's primary objective; they were interested, rather, in advancing the political culture beyond this binary 'winner/loser' mentality.

As a consequence of such incompatible discourses, the NIWC encountered much miscomprehension and often outright opposition from other parties within the Assembly. Primarily, by virtue of its non-aligned constitutional stance, it evaded conventional dualistic categorization and evoked suspicion and confusion amongst elites institutionalized by the nationalist 'either/or' discourse. Indeed, so alien were many of its transversal principles, that they were misunderstood and misrepresented by other elites and the media. Given the centrality of the constitutional question to Northern Irish politics, the issue has become almost synonymous with politics itself. A political entity without a fixed stance on the nationalist issue is thus regarded as apolitical, and as extraneous to serious political affairs. Due to their open position, then, the NIWC were widely portrayed as disorganized and ineffective. Even academics such as Rachel Ward disseminate this image, alleging that the NIWC 'had no clear policies and refused to be drawn on the *broader issue*' (Ward, 1997: 151; emphasis added). A similarly dismissive attitude can be discerned in the response of Seamus Mallon (of the SDLP) to the NIWC's election to the Forum:

This won't be about setting differences aside, this will be about facing differences that we have in this community, facing them full-frontal and dealing with those differences. What we must realize is that these negotiations which are going to take place are going to be very hard-nosed and they are going to be real'. (Mallon qtd. in Fearon, 1999: 17)

Many of the NIWC's peers evidently failed to take them seriously as real political players, and thus depicted them as ineffectual novices shortly to be crushed by the 'real' political game. Similarly, given the embedded nature of violence within political discourse, Wilford asserts that the association of transversal women's groups with non-violence and compromise 'can be interpreted as a measure of powerlessness' (1996a: 49). This sentiment is evident in the remarks made by Peter Robinson (of the DUP) about NIWC members: 'they haven't been at the forefront of the battle when shots were being fired or when the constitution of Northern Ireland was in peril' (Robinson qtd. in Fearon,

1996: 14). Such violent imagery is commonplace in political language in Northern Ireland, and is often used to validate political actors as credible contenders in the ongoing 'battle'. In this adversarial political culture Meehan affirms that 'compromise is a word that is taken to denote weakness instead of strength' (5). Furthermore, the NIWC's multifaceted, fluid character served to supplement this image of weakness. As Wilford cautions, 'the power of diversity has as its mirror image and companion the powerlessness of fragmentation' (1998: 8). Juxtaposed with such cohesive, internally structured and easily definable nationalist parties, the NIWC appeared as something of a foreign body within the Northern Irish Assembly.

### ***Opposition from Other Parties: Nationalist Interests***

Another force fuelling such negative representations was nationalist interests. Nationally aligned parties widely perceived the NIWC as a threat to their political agendas. In accordance with nationalist discourse concerning women, the NIWC were cast as disloyal defectors from each national cause, repeatedly accused by various parties of 'poaching women' (Hinds qtd. in Dobrowolsky, 2003: 139). McWilliams attests to this resentful suspicion: '[w]e're representative of both communities – that confuses them, they don't like it, and it makes us the brunt of hatred, the brunt of venom' (McWilliams qtd. in McKittrick). Moreover, while the NIWC resisted participating in the other parties' competitive zero-sum game, these parties continued to view it as a potential rival. Due to its separate party status, Brown *et al* argue that 'a situation arose in which other parties could attack it and its objectives with little fear of alienating their own women members' (81). In a similar vein, Sagar asserts that 'some (parties) understood us too well and encouraged misunderstanding'. Accordingly, the NIWC suffered chauvinistic abuse within the political arena, most notably in the Forum where Sagar was once told to 'Sit down and shut up' by Jim Rogers of the UUP, while Monica McWilliams was 'mooed at' by the DUP's Ian Paisley Junior (Fearon, 1999: 55-62). The level of tolerance and legitimacy which surrounded such aggressive, misogynistic behaviour exposes the salience of regressive nationalist discourse in Northern Irish politics.

Given such sectarian opposition from other parties, the potential for the cross-party alliances the NIWC had hoped to achieve remained unrealized. Despite its efforts to build bridges across entrenched party divides, other parties proved simply unwilling to move beyond their insular, sectarian positions (Brown *et al*: 80). It similarly failed to generate links between women from different parties (Cowell-Meyers: 87). In fact, many women actively resented the NIWC as the 'Janey come lately's', monopolizing media attention and overshadowing their earlier progress (Fearon, 1999: 16). Many also begrudged its alternative 'feminine' style of politics which they viewed as ineffectual and inappropriate to the 'hard-nosed' politics of Northern Ireland. A tradition of strong internal party discipline and segregation, informed by the nationalist and realist discourses discussed and reinforced by the consociational institutions, largely precluded any cross-party women's caucus from emerging. One female SF MLA's account of her experience of being heckled in the Assembly clearly illustrates this point: 'when we were getting heckled, Iris Robinson (DUP) was in there giving it all she had . . . She didn't see us as women or somebody she had empathy with - we were Sinn Fein and our gender didn't come into it' (Ward, 2004: 15). Gender boasts little unifying capacity in an environment where national allegiance is so important. Patricia Wallace reflects that

despite private cordiality, such stringent party discipline often deterred other parties – even those of the moderate middle ground, such as the Alliance – from publicly supporting the NIWC. Lacking the numbers, the formal political experience, institutionalization, and established structural power of its rival parties, the absence of cross-party support proved highly detrimental to the NIWC.

## **Conclusion**

The unsteady transition from informal to formal politics negotiated by the ‘transversal women’s movement’ is one marked by both opportunities and obstacles. The course of the NIWC conveys a regressive sequence from the opening up of a transversal political space to the progressive contraction of that space and its eventual demise.

The conflicting discourses embodied within the consociational institutions ultimately hampered the NIWC’s development by three principal means – in terms of its entry to the formal arena, its power, its influence, and its ability to maintain its position therein. Firstly, with regard to entry or transition, this paper has illustrated the negative impact of the electoral system of PR-STV adopted for the Assembly elections. This system proved conducive to the interests of the major parties, reflecting consociation’s prioritization of established parties as representatives of each national bloc. Secondly, in terms of progress, the power to exert influence, and the ability to advance its agenda, the structure of the consociational institutions transpired to be inimical to the NIWC. Founded upon recognition of the division of society into two autonomous pillars, consociation offers little accommodation to more pluralistic identities and imposes this ‘either/or’ distinction on all political actors. The designative voting system within the Assembly clearly reflects such enforced categorization. Moreover, as a new, relatively small and unconventional party, much of the NIWC’s capacity to exercise influence depended upon its ability to build alliances and linkages with other parties. However, the extreme fragmentation of Northern Irish politics rendered alliance formation a difficult task. The ‘institutionalized sectarianism’ and mutual mistrust between parties created little opportunity for the NIWC to generate the linkages and support networks it required to adequately promote its policies within the Assembly. Rather, the NIWC often found itself subject to harsh derision from ‘rival’ parties. Finally, the endurance of the NIWC as a party within formal politics relied heavily upon its encompassing political circumstances. As illustrated, the party’s elected delegates diminished progressively throughout its course and disbanded in 2006. Its diminishing mandate strongly correlates with the increasing polarization of Northern Irish constitutional politics. The political space it acquired during the pre-Agreement period of hope and enthusiasm shrank rapidly as the institutions staggered from crisis to crisis and tensions heightened. Replacing that positive impetus for change prevalent in 1996 and 1998 was an atmosphere of regressive apprehension in 2003. Defensive voting and sectarian insularity characterized these elections which heralded the beginning of the end for the NIWC as it lost both of its Assembly seats.

The transversal women’s movement has demonstrated its determinacy and transformative capacity by transcending the boundaries of informal politics amidst constraining circumstances. It triumphed over these structural constraints initially as it transmitted its civic principles to this new-found political space. It actively maximized this space, challenging Northern Ireland’s traditional discourses of nationalism and



realism, as well as the passive, supplementary political roles they ascribe to women. However, the movement has failed to sustain this transition due to a combination of cultural and structural obstacles supplemented by specific circumstances. Given the above obstacles, the party could not possibly withstand the loss of this space and in the final instance dissolved. The political discourses of Northern Ireland's divided society, embedded within the consociational system, inevitably inhibited the NIWC's political progress and endurance, rendering the movement's transition to formal politics a transient phenomenon.

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