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# Great hatred, little room Northern Ireland and the European Union: Attitudes, perspectives and the role of religion

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## **Abstract**

Little academic attention has been given to the study of Northern Irish Euroscepticism despite the fact that it is a unique and interesting example of citizens' relationships with the EU. Northern Irish Euroscepticism is defined by the divergence in attitudes towards European integration between Catholics and Protestants. This is a divide that is rooted in historical and religious interpretations of the project, as well as the widespread belief that membership of the EU will somehow lead to a united Ireland. Membership in the EU has not had a significant political impact on Northern Ireland, with citizens' attitudes being largely characterised by a clear lack of interest in the project. Participation at the European level provided limited opportunity for cooperation by both sides while it may be argued that European elections contributed to the sectarian divide.



Despite the Euroscepticism<sup>1</sup> of Northern Ireland's political representatives in the European Parliament, little academic research has been undertaken into examining attitudes towards the European Union (EU) in this corner of the United Kingdom. There are several reasons for this. The concentrated academic study of British Euroscepticism, particularly over recent years, is certainly warranted by the real possibility of an imminent British exit (Brexit) from the EU given the shock election of a majority Conservative government and the subsequent announcement that a referendum would be held before the end of 2017. However, the Northern Irish weight of the vote in such a referendum is so insignificant that for those who wish to arrest the rise of Euroscepticism in the UK by firstly understanding the causes of it, studying the particular case of Northern Ireland is not worth the effort.

There is then the more significant obstacle of what many outsiders consider to be the baffling nature of Northern Irish politics. Pro-Europeans often attack the English Eurosceptic class as being "little Englanders", delusional remnants of the British imperialist mind-set. Nonetheless, from an academic point of view, the thinking of the "little Englander" is much more accessible than any analysis into what governs attitudes towards the EU in Northern Ireland, a region where thinking in many ways appears not to have moved on from the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The protests and accompanying violence that took place in Northern Ireland during 2013 over the decision to fly the union flag over Belfast City Hall only on designated days may be bewildering to many outsiders, but it is nonetheless indicative of the unique mentalities which propel Northern Irish politics, and which consequently are at the roots of Northern Irish beliefs and opinions about the EU and European integration.

In Harmsen and Spiering's analysis of the various manifestations of Euroscepticism throughout the EU, *Euroscepticism: Party Politics, National Identity and European Integration*, Spiering limits his investigation into the Northern Irish case to a brief footnote in the British section: "Due to the special situation there, this article does not

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis will use the definition of Euroscepticism given by Taggart; "an encompassing term" which "expresses the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration." The thesis shall also draw on the distinction defined by Taggart and Szczerbiak between "hard" Euroscepticism (a principled opposition to EU membership) and "soft" Euroscepticism (an opposition to particular policies or supranational control over particular areas). P. Taggart and A. Szczerbiak. *The Party Politics of Euroscepticism in EU Member and Candidate States. Opposing Europe Research Network Working Paper 6*. Brighton: Sussex European Institute, 2002.

investigate Euroscepticism in this part of the United Kingdom”.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, major studies into the impact of Europeanization on national political parties such as those of Ladrech<sup>3</sup> and Mair<sup>4</sup> have ignored Northern Irish parties. Even analyses into “ethnoregional” parties such as that of De Winter and Gómez-Reino examine UK regional parties such as Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party, but ignore the Northern Irish parties,<sup>5</sup> while none of the recent major surveys conducted into the possibility of a Brexit have included a sample from Northern Ireland, with most making it clear that Northern Ireland has not been included.<sup>6</sup>

However, the Northern Irish case is neither irrelevant nor should it be ignored. As a British referendum on EU membership approaches, Northern Ireland finds itself in a particularly precarious position. The consequences of a Brexit are magnified in the case of Northern Ireland, which is in a unique position not only because of its particular recognition under the EU funding model but more crucially through the fact that it is the only part of the UK which shares a land border with another EU member state. Similarly, an issue which as of yet appears not to have registered in the British debate on leaving the EU is the impact that this would have on a Northern Irish society, whose latent tensions have far from disappeared despite the outward appearance of a nation at peace with itself. Of course, it is a worst-case scenario that a British exit from the EU could provoke a return of the type of violence which killed over 3,000 people in 25 years. Nonetheless, a decision to leave the EU would have a significant impact on Northern Ireland.

This paper will investigate the factors driving Northern Irish attitudes towards the EU. Firstly, the paper will analyse the reasons behind the religious divide present in Northern Ireland regarding attitudes towards the EU. The paper will then examine the impact membership of the EU has had on the attitudes of Northern Irish politicians and citizens.

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<sup>2</sup> M. Spiering, ‘British Euroscepticism,’ in R. Harmsen and M. Spiering (eds.), *Euroscepticism: Party Politics, National Identity and European Integration*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2004, p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> R. Ladrech, ‘Europeanization and political parties: towards a framework for analysis,’ *Party Politics*, 8(4), 2002, pp. 389-403.

<sup>4</sup> P. Mair, ‘The limited impact of Europe on national party systems,’ *West European Politics*, 23(4), 2000, pp. 27-51.

<sup>5</sup> L. De Winter and M. Gómez-Reino, ‘European integration and ethnoregionalist parties,’ *Party Politics*, 8(4), 2002, pp. 483-503.

<sup>6</sup> D. Phinnemore, Jean Monnet Chair in European Studies, Queens University Belfast, written correspondence, 31 April 2015.

This paper will use party manifestos, newspaper reports, interviews, election data and survey results as well as the academic literature on the subject to establish the dominant factors in the Northern Irish relationship with the EU.

## **1. Religion as a factor in attitudes towards the European Union**

The Northern Irish conflict is highly complex, and this paper does not intend to analyse the causes of it and the issues at stake. However, for the sake of clarity, the terms Catholic and Protestant which will be used throughout the paper, at times interchangeably with nationalist and unionist, must be explained. This is not to see the conflict in Northern Ireland as a religious conflict, but merely to view religion as an identifier for the two communities.<sup>7</sup> As Mitchell explains, “the central argument is that religion is an ethnic marker, but that it is not generally politically relevant in and of itself. Instead, ethnonationalism lies at the root of the conflict.”<sup>8</sup> This is a conception of the conflict which appears to represent an academic consensus.<sup>9</sup> McGarry and O’Leary in *Explaining Northern Ireland* argue that “there is nothing innate about religious or cultural differences which makes people disagree, rather, that these are just signs which could be substituted with anything else, and which exist simply to distinguish group members from non-group members.” Additionally, they point out that “whilst there was a clear decline of church attendance and traditional morality since the 1960s, conflict escalated” and that “there is no correlation between the areas most affected by conflict and the intensity of religious convictions.”<sup>10</sup>

Historically, Irish Catholics have generally sought independence from the United Kingdom while Irish Protestants have sought to maintain British sovereignty. Above all, group solidarity exists within each of the two communities. This paper will firstly analyse the reasons behind the religious divide present in Northern Ireland regarding attitudes towards the EU.

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<sup>7</sup> This paper will make frequent references to “the two communities”; Catholics and Protestants.

<sup>8</sup> C. Mitchell, *Religion, identity and politics in Northern Ireland – boundaries of belonging and belief*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2006, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> J. McGarry and B. O’Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995, p. 5.

## Catholics in favour, Protestants opposed

Even before the British accession to the EEC in 1973, there was a clear cleavage between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland over support for membership. An opinion poll carried out in 1967 found that, when the “don’t knows” were removed, 80 per cent of Catholics were in favour of joining the “European common market”, while protestants were marginally opposed.<sup>11</sup> This is a pattern that would be repeated in the 1975 referendum on British membership of the EEC<sup>12</sup> while in 1992 a survey carried out by the BBC found that Northern Irish Catholics were overwhelmingly in favour of the UK remaining in the EU (a majority of six to one), while significantly fewer protestants (two to one) were in favour.<sup>13</sup> The most recent survey was carried out in 2002 and identified the two communities as nationalist and unionist rather than Catholic and Protestant; however, the same pattern was evident with 36 per cent of unionists responding that the UK should either leave the EU or reduce its powers compared to only 16 per cent of nationalists. Similarly, the nationalist community was twice as likely to be federalists, with 13 per cent of nationalists believing in a single EU government compared to only 6 per cent of unionists. Issues such as the single European currency saw an even greater divide with 60 per cent of nationalists in favour of a British adoption of the euro compared to only 20 per cent of unionists.<sup>14</sup>

Although there have been numerous analyses of what causes support for European integration, as Eichenberg and Dalton explain, “The dominant theme of the literature is now the primacy of economic and utilitarian concerns”.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, throughout Europe there is evidence of some relationship between religion and support for European integration. This relationship has been the focus of several studies. The next section will analyse attempts, led by Nelsen and Guth, to explain differences in attitudes towards European integration on religious grounds and assess their relevance for Northern Ireland.

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<sup>11</sup> D. Kennedy, ‘The European Union and the Northern Ireland question’, in B. Barton and P. Roche (eds.), *The Northern Ireland Question: Perspectives and Policies*, Aldershot, Avebury, 1994, p. 166.

<sup>12</sup> D. Phinnemore, L. McGowan, C. McCall and P. McLoughlin, Northern Ireland – 40 years of EU membership – European Parliament Report, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> D. Kennedy, ‘The European Union and the Northern Ireland question’, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-167.

<sup>14</sup> L. McGowan and S. O’Connor, ‘Eurovision: Attitudes towards the European Union’, 2003, in Ark Research update. (19 ed.). ARK, retrieved on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2015, [http://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/files/10784035/Euro\\_Vision.pdf](http://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/files/10784035/Euro_Vision.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> R. Eichenberg and R. Dalton, ‘Convergence and Divergence in Citizen Support for European Integration, 1973-1996’, paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, 28-31 Aug. 1997, Washington, DC, p. 6.

## **A pan-European religious interpretation of the European Union**

In their investigation into religious attitudes towards the EU, Nelsen and Guth observe that throughout the EU “Catholics are most supportive of integration efforts, orthodox believers slightly less so, and Protestants lag significantly behind.”<sup>16</sup> Consequently, Nelsen and Guth argue that the economic explanations for support for European integration put forward by Milward and Moravcsik only go so far towards explaining the hesitance of Britain and the Lutheran Nordic countries towards the European project. Instead, they assert that the religious experience of EU member states remains central in forming their differing approaches to integration.<sup>17</sup> They argue, in *Religion and the Struggle for European Union*, that pro-Europeanism among Catholics is driven by the universality of the Catholic Church which sought the unity of Christendom.<sup>18</sup> Protestant attachment to the nation state stems from the sixteenth century and “the struggles between Roman spiritual and political hegemony” which “fostered the Reformation’s reliance on the nation state, created a distrust of international Catholicism and encouraged a link in the Protestant mind between national sovereignty and true religion.”<sup>19</sup> This historical memory was central to Protestant resistance to the dominantly Catholic (particularly in the early years) EU as a reassertion of Catholic hegemony.<sup>20</sup>

### **European integration – a Catholic project**

The literature examining religious attitudes in Northern Ireland, as well as the approaches taken by political leaders, in particular unionists, concurs to a large extent with the theory of Guth and Nelsen. Richard Rose, in his 1971 book *Governing Without Consensus*, identifies the predominance in Northern Ireland of the belief that the European project was largely a Catholic project. A preponderance of Catholicism among the

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<sup>16</sup> J. Guth and B. Nelsen, ‘Religion and Attitudes toward the European Union: The New Member States’, European Union Studies Association Ninth Biennial International Conference, Hyatt Regency Austin, Austin, Texas, 31<sup>st</sup> March – 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2005, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> B. Nelsen, J. Guth and B. Highsmith, ‘Does Religion Still Matter? Religion and Public Attitudes Toward Integration in Europe,’ *Religion and Politics Section of the American Political Science Association*, 2010, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> J. Guth and B. Nelsen, *Religion and the Struggle for European Union*, Georgetown, Georgetown University Press, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> B. Nelsen, J. Guth and R. Fraser, “Does Religion matter? Christianity and Public Support for the European Union,” *European Union Politics*, Volume 2(2), 2001, p. 194.

<sup>20</sup> J. Guth and B. Nelsen, ‘Religion and Attitudes toward the European Union: The New Member States’, *loc. cit.*

founding member states, with four of the six nations signing the Treaty of Rome being overwhelmingly Catholic,<sup>21</sup> as well as the fact that calls for unification had been led by devout Catholics such as Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schuman and Alcide de Gasperi,<sup>22</sup> was considered by many Northern Irish Protestants to be a sufficient reason to steer clear of any sort of integration.<sup>23</sup> The dominant role in integration played by Catholics is a trend that has hardly disappeared: in more recent years staunchly Catholic politicians such as former Commission President Romano Prodi, Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Guterres and the former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl have all been strong proponents of European integration.<sup>24</sup>

Although Dinan identifies the connection between Catholicism and European integration during the initial stages of European integration,<sup>25</sup> something that would later be disputed by Milward<sup>26</sup> among others, there does not appear to be a clear link between the religious beliefs of later politicians and their attitudes towards European integration. However, the central role played by religion in Northern Irish politics, where a politician's religious identity plays a far more dominant role than any other element of his or her political persuasion, means that the Northern Irish public may have found it difficult to divorce a European politician's religious identity from his or her political beliefs. Of course, it is unlikely that every Northern Irish citizen, or even a significant number of them, knew what religion Romano Prodi was and had independently formed a connection between his religion and his views on European integration. However, as this paper will demonstrate, this would not be necessary for such ideas to become widespread. Such was the indifference towards the EU in Northern Ireland that all it required was for prominent politicians to make these connections for these ideas to be diffused.

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<sup>21</sup> R. Rose, *Governing without Consensus*, London, Faber and Faber, 1971, p. 489.

<sup>22</sup> B. Nelsen, J. Guth and C. Fraser, 'Does Religion Matter? Christianity and Public Support for the European Union', *European Union Politics*, 2(2001), p. 193.

<sup>23</sup> D. Kennedy, 'The European Union and the Northern Ireland question', *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>24</sup> Nelsen *et al.*, *loc. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> D. Dinan, 'The Historiography of European Integration', in D. Dinan (ed.), *Origins and Evolution of the European Union*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 297-324.

<sup>26</sup> A. Milward, 'History and Theory', *The European Rescue of the Nation-State*, London, Routledge, 1992, pp. 1-20.

## Northern Irish Protestants – a particular case

As has been mentioned, Northern Irish Protestants are not the only group which appears to subscribe to such a large extent to religion-based theories of European integration; sections of Norwegian revivalists,<sup>27</sup> Dutch Calvinist sectarians<sup>28</sup> and Swedish evangelicals<sup>29</sup> hold similar views. However, there is no other member state in which such ideas could be said to have permeated the political mainstream to the extent that they have in Northern Ireland. Of course, being Protestant does not necessarily mean having an ingrained aversion to the idea of European integration. As Davie points out, there is significant variation between European Protestants in their attitudes towards European integration,<sup>30</sup> while Philpott and Shaw give the example of Protestant communities in Germany and the Netherlands that have been easily won over to the idea.<sup>31</sup> However, the role of religion in Irish history and Northern Irish Protestants' historic attachment to their identity make the Northern Irish case particular.

Additionally, the role of Ian Paisley (leader of the largest political party in Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party) in the propagation of a religious interpretation of the EU should not be underestimated. Paisley, whose religion was so central to his political beliefs that his Church described him as God's "specially anointed" leader while his wife compared him to Moses,<sup>32</sup> used his significant rhetorical skills as a constant and loud reminder of protestant opposition towards the EU, instilling among many protestants who might otherwise have been open to the idea of European integration a conception of the European project as a religious construction; this may take long to fade.

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<sup>27</sup> J. Madeley, "The Antinomies of Lutheran Politics: The Case of Norway's Christian People's Party", in D. Hanley (ed.), *Christian Democracy in Europe: A Comparative Perspective*, London, Pinter, 1994, p. 151.

<sup>28</sup> P. Lucardie, 'Conservatism in the Netherlands: Fragments and Fringe Groups', in B. Girvin (ed.), *The Transformation of Contemporary Conservatism*, London, Sage, 1998.

<sup>29</sup> M. Hagevi, 'Religiosity and Opinion on the European Union among Individuals in Sweden', paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (19-22 Oct. 2000), Houston, Texas.

<sup>30</sup> G. Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945*, Sussex, Blackwell, 1994, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., pp. 106-108.

<sup>31</sup> D. Philpott and T. Shaw, 'Faith, Freedom and Federation: The Role of Religious Ideas and Institutions in European Political Convergence,' in T. Byrnes and P. Katzenstein (eds.) *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 34-64.

<sup>32</sup> E. Moloney, *Paisley: From Demagogue to Democrat?*, Dublin, Poolbeg, 2008, pp. 502-503.

## United Ireland in a united Europe?

The opposition of Northern Irish Protestants to Irish independence has played a central role in the history of the region since the Plantation of Ulster, the mass colonisation of the province beginning in the seventeenth century by Scottish and English Protestants. Since the creation of Northern Ireland in 1921, followed by the independence of the southern part of Ireland in 1922, Northern Irish politics have been dominated by the question of Irish unity. More specifically, a Protestant majority has sought to avoid at all costs the reunification of Ireland. Northern Irish Protestant opposition to Irish independence has been more than a blind allegiance to British sovereignty. The slogan of Irish protestant opposition, originally used during the late nineteenth century, that “Home Rule is Rome Rule”, expressed the fear that an independent Irish state would be some sort of satellite state of the Vatican and would result in the end of the religious and civil liberties enjoyed by Protestants. Certainly, the dominant role played by the Catholic Church during the first decades of Irish independence makes it is hard to refute this claim entirely.

Catholics, on the other hand, have traditionally been in favour of Irish independence. Having historically represented the religious underclass, discriminated against by law, they viewed independence as a righteous cause. However, what is the link between the struggle for Irish independence and membership of the EU?

Rose identifies “the belief among Protestants and Catholics that the lowering of national barriers between the United Kingdom and the common market countries would inevitably be followed by moves to unify Ireland.”<sup>33</sup> These were by no means vague theories, with prominent nationalists openly discussing the benefits that membership of the European Economic Community would give to their cause during the early years of European integration. Indeed, Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Seán Lemass had justified Ireland’s application to join the EEC in 1961 by arguing that it would be a means to reunification. Others pointed out that economic arguments for partition put forward by many Protestants, namely a dependence on trade with the rest of the UK, would no longer remain valid, as within the EEC Northern Ireland would still have access to the British market even if it left the UK.<sup>34</sup> Dennis Kennedy highlights the irony of a European project initiated in an attempt to eliminate nationalism throughout Europe becoming seen as the

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<sup>33</sup> Rose, *loc. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> G. Fitzgerald, *Towards a New Ireland*, London, 1972, pp. 102-113.

vehicle for Irish nationalism to achieve its objectives.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, the threat appeared to be real; any reduction in national sovereignty that would arise through EEC membership would consequently be a reduction in British sovereignty over Northern Ireland, the single most important issue for the two major unionist parties as well as a large proportion of Northern Irish protestants. Kennedy outlines how these fears were compounded by perception throughout the EU “that Irish unity is morally right and progressive in the same way that many people regard European integration as a “good thing””.<sup>36</sup>

### **The Irish position – a factor for Catholics?**

It seems likely that many Northern Irish Catholics who view the future of Northern Ireland as being part of a united Ireland are influenced by the strong pro-European current in Irish politics, as well as the success story that many consider Irish membership of the EU to be. Ireland’s swift economic recovery has won praise from European leaders, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel describing Ireland as the “growth engine of Europe” in April 2015.<sup>37</sup> The Irish position has become increasingly important recently as a potential British exit of the EU approaches with pro-European Irish voices using the media to express their opposition to a Brexit including Taoiseach Enda Kenny who has said a Brexit would have “very serious consequences for Northern Ireland.”<sup>38</sup>

### **A physical border?**

In the case of a Brexit, given the public concern over immigration, it would appear that any acceptable outcome of a renegotiation of Britain’s relationship with the EU would have to permit the UK to have control over its borders. Consequently, the border between Northern and Southern Ireland would become an external border of the EU. Given that the Republic of Ireland would still be subject to EU freedom of movement rules, nothing less than a physical border would ensure that the UK remained in control of the number of EU immigrants entering. Although the question of a potential border between the North and South of Ireland has received little media attention, it is an issue which would have dramatic consequences for the region. A physical border would open up all sorts of

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<sup>35</sup> D. Kennedy, ‘The European Union and the Northern Ireland question’, *loc. cit.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>37</sup> Bloomberg, ‘Merkel calls Ireland “growth engine” of EU’, *The Irish Times*, 22 April 2015.

<sup>38</sup> M. Devenport, “Scottish and EU referendums: The effect on Northern Ireland”, *BBC News*, 6 February 2014.

questions about how the nationalist community would react given Northern Ireland's fragile state of peace; Mark Leonard, Director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, describes how it could reignite the Troubles.<sup>39</sup> It is a time-bomb that has been recognised by the Irish government, which recently established a new unit within the Department of the Taoiseach to prepare for a potential British exit of the EU.<sup>40</sup> The reluctance of Northern Irish politicians to tackle these issues is noteworthy, and is perhaps indicative of the fact that Northern Irish politics is not governed by the progressive nature of new challenges, but remains rooted in historic hostilities where votes have traditionally been won by whichever party proves to be the best guarantor of interests for a specific community.

## **2. The impact of the European Union on Northern Ireland**

Any study into Northern Irish attitudes towards the EU must address the question of what effect membership has had on the province, both from the point of view of domestic politics as well as for citizens. Most Europeans feel that EU membership has altered their country in some way, yet in Northern Ireland the dominance of domestic political issues has often drowned out potential debate over the EU's impact on the region. This section will examine Northern Irish politicians' apparent willingness to work together at the European level, the impact of European elections on Northern Ireland, John Hume's attempts to involve the EU in the Northern Irish peace process as well as the financial support received by Northern Ireland from the EU. The section will finish by assessing the approach of the media in Northern Ireland to the European question.

### **An opportunity for cooperation?**

Compared to the dysfunctional relationship between the various parties which often seems to characterise Northern Irish politics, Laffan<sup>41</sup> and Meehan<sup>42</sup> point out that at the

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<sup>39</sup> J. Harris, 'This way to the Brexit: what would happen if Britain left the EU?', *The Guardian*, 10<sup>th</sup> October 2014.

<sup>40</sup> F. Kelly, 'Kenny's department to prepare for possible UK exit from EU', *The Irish Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

<sup>41</sup> B. Laffan, 'The European context: a new political dimension in Ireland, Northern and South,' in J. Coakley, B. Laffan and J. Todd (eds.), *Renovation or Revolution? New Territorial Politics in Ireland and the United Kingdom*, Dublin, UCD Press, 2005, pp. 166-184.

European level the three Northern Irish MEPs have generally been able to cooperate on matters related to Northern Ireland, such as agriculture, fisheries and structural funds. Perhaps their greatest success was the lobbying efforts of Hume, Paisley and Taylor during the 1990s that resulted in the establishment of the EU's Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (PEACE funding).<sup>43</sup> According to Julian Priestley, Secretary-General of the European Parliament between 1997 and 2007, Paisley (who based his political persona in Northern Ireland around the word "No", refusing to cooperate in any way with nationalist politicians) behaved in a much more accommodating manner in Brussels. He was willing to work with both nationalist Northern Irish politicians as well as MEPs from the Republic of Ireland. It was the impression in the European Parliament that the Northern Irish MEPs, far from the glare of the domestic media, used the European level for "off-the-radar" discussions over the situation in Northern Ireland.<sup>44</sup>

Was this, however, indicative of a shift in Northern Irish politics or simply an aberration from the tradition of bitter hostility? A more likely explanation for the cooperation of the Northern Irish MEPs in the European Parliament was firstly the necessity to do so in order to gain funding for Northern Ireland and secondly the absence of media scrutiny into their actions in the European Parliament. It should be remembered that the two major political parties currently predominant in Northern Ireland rose to prominence on the basis of a policy of no compromise; the DUP by refusing to share power with nationalists, and Sinn Féin as the political wing of the IRA. Willingness to compromise may have been seen in Northern Ireland as a sign of weakness rather than being a political necessity.

### **European elections as a distraction from tribal politics?**

Cooperation between the three MEPs at the European level may have represented a break from the historic inability of politicians from the two communities to work together, but European elections have brought about little change in the attitudes of Northern Irish

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<sup>42</sup> E. Meehan, 'Europe and the Europeanization of the Irish question,' in M. Cox, A. Guelke and F. Stephen (eds.), *A Farewell to Arms? From 'Long War' to 'Long Peace' in Northern Ireland*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, pp. 199-213.

<sup>43</sup> Laffan, 'The European context: a new political dimension in Ireland, North and South,' *op. cit.*, p. 175.

<sup>44</sup> J. Priestley, Former Secretary-General of the European Parliament, interview, Bruges, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

voters with no evidence of European issues having had any effect on voter preference. The occurrence of another election every five years in Northern Ireland which, like Westminster elections, has turned out to be nothing more than a “tribal head-counting competition”<sup>45</sup> has done little to reduce traditional Northern Irish hostilities. According to Phinnemore et al., “EP elections have generally only added to the polarisation within society between the two predominant communities.”<sup>46</sup>

The European elections offered not only another opportunity for confrontation between the major political parties but a chance for publicity outside of the province. For Kennedy, this was an unfortunate consequence of direct elections to the European Parliament: “the decision by the British government to make Northern Ireland one three-seat constituency, with the single transferable vote PR system, opened the way for the first Euro-election to become a presidential-type contest between the province’s political heavyweights.” Kennedy goes on to argue that “Paisley’s ability to top the poll in successive European elections has helped give him a personal status well above any that his party’s performances in national or local elections [until the DUP’s breakthrough in national elections] would have merited.”<sup>47</sup> The amplification of Northern Irish sectarian issues to the European level has done little to increase the chances that Northern Ireland might somehow escape from the tribalism that had for so long dominated its politics.

### **Hume – the European thorn in the backside of unionists**

John Hume’s popularity and influence with many MEPs drew cynicism and mistrust from the unionist community. Hume’s party, the SDLP, was a member of the European Confederations of Socialist Parties, the largest group in the EP. Hume was the groups’ treasurer and sat on the front benches. He appeared to use his influence to initiate a formal EC investigation into the situation in Northern Ireland, resulting in the 1984 Haagerup Report, which in turn seemed to influence Margaret Thatcher’s decision to support the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. The report would find much opposition among the unionist hierarchy, many of whom were cynical about the fact that the report seemed to be in line with the SDLP’s solution to the Northern Irish conflict: power-sharing between nationalists and unionists and the involvement of the British and Irish governments to

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<sup>45</sup> E. West, ‘Can Northern Ireland ever work? History suggests not’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 June 2010.

<sup>46</sup> Phinnemore et al., *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> D. Kennedy, ‘The European Union and the Northern Ireland question’, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

reach a compromise.<sup>48</sup> The SDLP's attempts to involve the EU in the Northern Irish situation would again infuriate unionists in 1992 when the SDLP submitted their *Agreeing New Political Structures* document to the Mayhew talks. The paper proposed that the EU play a central role in the governance of Northern Ireland, suggesting that a delegate from the Commission sit on a regional executive alongside representatives of the British and Irish governments as well as locally elected politicians, a plan which unionists immediately dismissed.<sup>49</sup> Unionist politicians, many of whom saw it as their priority to resist stubbornly and aggressively any attempts to involve representation of the Republic of Ireland in the Northern Irish situation, were alarmed at the suggestion of the involvement of the European level, something that presumably contributed to the hostility much of the protestant community felt towards the EU.

### **The European Union and the peace process**

The EEC would, however, provide a forum for the transformation of the relationship between two of the key players in the Northern Irish problem. Dennis Kennedy points out how the mutually distrustful relationship between the British and Irish governments began to improve during the initial decades of EEC membership through cooperation at the European level, in particular in the Council of Ministers, where "British ministers and diplomats could see their Irish counterparts as clever partners in Europe."<sup>50</sup> EEC membership gave British and Irish representations a neutral space in which to reshape their relationship at a time when relations were highly tense over the Northern Irish situation.<sup>51</sup>

There is evidence that the EU did have some influence on the transformation of the Northern Irish political scene. Phinnemore et al. argue that the Haagerup report influenced Thatcher's decision to support the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, "which drew on EC-inspired notions of transnational governance".<sup>52</sup> The Good Friday Agreement, which instated Northern Ireland's current devolved system of governance and was the basis on which the present period of relative peace in Northern Ireland, was established was signed

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<sup>48</sup> Phinnemore *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> D. Kennedy, "Europe and the Northern Ireland problem", in D. Kennedy (ed.), *Living with the European Union: The Northern Ireland Experience*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, pp. 156-158.

<sup>50</sup> D. Kennedy, 'The European Union and the Northern Ireland question', *op. cit.*, p. 177.

<sup>51</sup> Phinnemore et al., *loc. cit.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

in 1998. Many of the key actors in the peace process identified the influence of the EU (in particular the principles of the EU and its treaties) in the Good Friday Agreement.<sup>53</sup>

Although the argument that EU membership has played a crucial role in achieving peace in Northern Ireland should be avoided, given that violence continued for two decades after Northern Ireland's entry into the EEC, there is evidence that EU membership, despite in some ways fuelling distrust between the communities, has contributed to the Northern Irish peace process.

## European Union funding

Any investigation into attitudes towards the EU in Northern Ireland must take into account the significant economic benefits EU membership has brought the region. Notwithstanding the economic benefits brought to the UK as a whole through membership of the single market, which Hugo Dixon claims has increased British GDP by approximately 4-5 per cent,<sup>54</sup> Northern Ireland has benefited from numerous specific funding schemes. As recently as February 2015, the adoption of the European Commission's new cross-border co-operation programme has made €283 million available for Northern Irish projects.<sup>55</sup> The extended period over which Northern Ireland has received EU funding means that many volunteer groups are now dependent on this funding.<sup>56</sup>

Northern Ireland has received €1.3 billion since 1995<sup>57</sup> as a result of the EU PEACE programmes<sup>58</sup>, while numerous other schemes have been created to attempt to aid the region to emerge from its difficult past. In May 2007 Commission President José Manuel Barroso set up a Task Force for Northern Ireland run by the Commission to maximise the opportunities on offer for the province.

Northern Ireland has consistently been a major beneficiary of funds received through the CAP with Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny stating in 2014 that "Ulster [ie. Northern Irish] farmers have been big winners from the Common Agricultural Policy".<sup>59</sup> For the period 2014-2020 Northern Ireland will receive direct payments of €2.3 billion as well as €227

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Dixon, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

<sup>55</sup> *BBC News*, "Northern Ireland projects to tap into £208m worth of new European funding", 23 February 2015.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> European Commission, Northern Ireland in Europe – Report of the European Commission's Northern Ireland Task Force 2007-2014, Ronald Hall, Luxembourg, 2014, p. 25.

<sup>58</sup> Phinnemore *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Devenport, *loc. cit.*

million through rural development. Although the regional allocation of the UK's CAP allocation is agreed in Westminster, Northern Ireland consistently does relatively well compared to the other UK regions.<sup>60</sup> Consequently, according to Kennedy, the farming community is largely pro-EU. However, this does not affect voting patterns within the farming community, either in Westminster or in European elections, where voting remains tribal, regardless of the benefits brought to the farming community through the CAP.<sup>61</sup>

Under the EU's cohesion policy, Northern Ireland was an Objective One Region for more than two decades (GDP is less than 75 per cent of the EU average), as one of the poorest regions of the EU. After the accession of many poorer countries in Eastern Europe Northern Ireland fell out of the category and is currently classified as a "transition region". Cohesion policy has funded numerous major projects in Northern Ireland, including the "Peace Bridge" in Derry which united both sides of the River Foyle and received over €11 million from the European Regional Development Fund.<sup>62</sup>

Despite the large amount of funding Northern Ireland has received from the EU, an analysis into the effect that this has had on public opinion is difficult, with no evidence that the receipt of funds has led voters to reject tribal voting at European elections. More relevant, perhaps, is the question of funding for the two communities, where receipt of funds could certainly not be said to explain the divergence in attitudes towards EU membership. Nationalists may have a significantly higher level of support for the EU but it could not be argued that this is due to receiving a disproportionate benefit from EU funding. In April 2012 the Orange Order, the Protestant fraternal organisation, was granted almost £900,000 of EU funds<sup>63</sup> while in October 2012 the organisation received a £3.6 million grant from the PEACE programme.<sup>64</sup> These are only two of several payments that the unionist organisation has received from the EU.

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<sup>60</sup> European Commission, Northern Ireland in Europe – Report of the European Commission's Northern Ireland Task Force 2007-2014, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>61</sup> D. Kennedy, Irish Times Journalist, former Head of the European Commission office in Belfast, written correspondence, 30 March 2015.

<sup>62</sup> European Commission, Northern Ireland in Europe – Report of the European Commission's Northern Ireland Task Force 2007-2014, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>63</sup> M. McHugh, 'Orange Order receives £900,000 EU grant', *The Belfast Telegraph*, 17 April 2012.

<sup>64</sup> *BBC News*, 'Orange Order to get £3.6 million grant from European Union peace programme', 31 October 2012.

## The role of the media

A central role in the detachment of the Northern Irish public from the EU is played by the media.<sup>65</sup> Traditionally, the British media has been influential in Northern Ireland, in particular the London tabloids such as the Daily Mirror (which traditionally outsold both the Irish and other English dailies), the Sun, and the Express.<sup>66</sup> The dominance of the British press goes a long way to explaining the lack of interest in the EU in Northern Ireland; three-quarters of British newspapers sold are Eurosceptic,<sup>67</sup> while the remaining quarter, although they could be categorised as “pro-European”, are still often critical of the EU.<sup>68</sup>

Historically, the Belfast Telegraph has been the only Northern Irish newspaper to have been able to compete with the English dailies; however, in recent years its circulation has fallen to less than 50,000 (from a peak of 200,000 in 1959). The Belfast Telegraph’s reporting of European issues is similar to that of Northern Irish radio and television; little coverage of the relevance of European issues and little debate on Northern Ireland’s position within Europe. A significant factor in Northern Irish indifference to the EU has been what Dennis Kennedy describes as “tabloid” radio; phone-ins with listeners able to express ill-informed opinions about the EU, with presenters who know little more directing proceedings.<sup>69</sup> The scale of the media’s neglect of European level politics was revealed in 2002, when a survey indicated that only 40 per cent of Northern Irish citizens had read or heard something about the EU over the preceding twelve months.<sup>70</sup>

Although an analysis into the impact of the media on the religious divide in attitudes towards the EU is problematic, given that no studies have been carried out into the newspaper reading habits of the two communities, the low quality of media coverage on the EU can be seen as a reason why the religious divide is so evident, with few having the necessary information at their disposal to draw their own conclusions.

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<sup>65</sup> D. Kennedy, Irish Times Journalist, former Head of the European Commission office in Belfast, written correspondence, 30 March 2015.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Charles Grant’s analysis of the British press influence on British attitudes towards the EU highlights the combination of highly tendentious reporting with the regular printing of falsehoods about the EU.

<sup>68</sup> C. Grant, ‘Why is Britain Eurosceptic’, Centre for European Reform, p. 3. Retrieved on 26 February 2015, [http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/essay\\_eurosceptic\\_19dec08-1345.pdf](http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/essay_eurosceptic_19dec08-1345.pdf)

<sup>69</sup> Dennis Kennedy written correspondence 30<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

<sup>70</sup> L. McGowan and S. O’Connor, *loc. cit.*

## Conclusion

Significant divergences between the two communities in Northern Ireland regarding attitudes towards European integration have existed since before the British entry into the EEC. This division is not unique to Northern Ireland, even if it is significantly more pronounced than it is in other parts of Europe. Guth and Nelson's analyses of a religious basis for the formation of attitudes towards European integration appears to conform with the situation in Northern Ireland, with Catholics throughout Europe being more in favour of integration than Protestants. However, the extent of the divergence of opinion between the two communities requires a more complex explanation; the belief that EU membership would ease the path toward Irish reunification would be the major factor in the development of different attitudes among the two communities. This fear was coupled with the idea that the EU was in some way "on the side" of Irish reunification. Although difficult to prove, it seems likely that Northern Irish Catholics are influenced by the tradition of pro-Europeanism in the Republic of Ireland, something that has become increasingly relevant recently as Irish politicians have spoken out in favour of the UK remaining in the EU. Importantly, the multitude of unanswered questions about what a Northern Ireland would look like post-Brexit as well as the potential stability of a future arrangement have largely been ignored by the Northern Irish political class.

The Northern Irish MEPs' willingness to cooperate in the European Parliament has been in stark contrast to the dysfunctional political situation in Northern Ireland. This cooperation was, however, neither based on an enthusiasm for the European project nor on the adoption of new perspectives on Northern Ireland but simply on its necessity in order to procure funding for Northern Ireland. The absence of any media scrutiny into the action of Northern Irish MEPs, primarily due to the indifference of the Northern Irish public, meant that it was politically possible for the unionist MEPs to cooperate in Brussels. European elections, instead of providing a relief from the domestic political situation, have further contributed to sectarian hostilities. The apparent influence of Hume and the SDLP in the European Parliament, and the consequent European Parliament investigations into Northern Ireland, did little to improve the unionist perception of the EU. Although there is some evidence that the EU played a role in the Northern Irish peace process, this role should not be exaggerated, given the fact that Northern Ireland was a member of the EU for two decades before any peace settlement was reached. Northern Ireland has benefited significantly from financial assistance from the EU. Importantly, EU financing cannot be

considered to explain the sectarian divide in attitudes towards EU membership. Finally, the low quality of the Northern Irish media reflects the public's indifference to, and disengagement from, the EU.

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