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Introduction

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Conceptions of democracy and ideas about democratic practice lie at the heart of debates on and about Northern Ireland. They have inspired violence and continue to precipitate division, confounding those who seek to explore non-conflictual ways of filtering antagonism. In this regard, Richard Bourke has argued that '[t]he case of Northern Ireland highlights the existence of a shortfall between our basic political aspirations and what in actual fact transpires in the world we have inherited' (2003: 7). *Sunningdale, the Ulster Workers' Council Strike and the Struggle for Democracy in Northern Ireland* aims to explore this disconnect by focusing on the first attempt to implement a power-sharing democratic framework in Northern Ireland and analysing, from a number of perspectives, reactions to that framework at the time and in subsequent years. Those reactions spoke to foundational ideas about democracy including how we think about and implement notions of inclusion, transparency, justice, fairness, accountability and plurality. The aim of this book, then, is to examine how the lessons that actors took from the 1973–74 'experiment' of these notions impacted upon the experiment itself and later attempts at trying to reach a political settlement.

The arguments and ideals that characterised the Sunningdale era, of course, continue to resonate in contemporary Northern Ireland – often in violent

and aggressive ways. For example, Loyalist protestors besieged Belfast city centre in early December 2012 to vent their anger at the removal of the Union Flag from the top of the city hall. The issue had been debated within the council chamber and on the streets for a number of weeks beforehand. The city's Unionist community, who tend to favour maintaining the constitutional link with the United Kingdom, held that the question represented the crystallisation of their fears that their identity was being eroded in the public sphere. On the other hand, the city's Nationalist population, who tend to favour a reunification with the Irish Republic, believed that the flag should be removed completely since it represented for them an alienating presence in their city. In actuality, the 3 December decision by Belfast city council's elected representatives was to curtail the flying of the flag to 'designated days' of historic and symbolic importance. This option was suggested by the cross-community, middle-ground Alliance Party, as a compromise between removal and having the flag flying every day. Despite a decade and a half of peaceful politics, the flags protest spiralled into violence: politicians (particularly from the Alliance Party) and journalists were issued death threats and their homes and party offices were targeted with nail bombs and shooting; the police were subject to attack from petrol bombs and by the New Year the rioting and road blocks that brought the city to a standstill had resulted in over a hundred arrests and had been estimated at costing up to £15 million in lost revenue, police time and clean-up operations.

While it criticised the violence, the protests were immediately framed by the Belfast *News Letter* (a daily whose readership is mainly Protestant and Unionist) as being about a battle over democracy. Thus, its editorial argued that '[t]he current crisis over the Union Flag has its origins in nationalist intransigence. The consent principle recognises Northern Ireland's place in the UK, yet Britain's flag is objectionable' (*News Letter*, 10 December 2012). While the *News Letter's* allusion to the consent principle spoke to the idea that a majority within Northern Ireland advocate maintaining the constitutional link with Great Britain, the allusion itself speaks to and brings to light (even if by way of deferral) distinctions in how democracy is conceptualised and practised in Northern Ireland. This point about distinctions in thought and practice was evident in a series of short position pieces by Belfast city councillors that had appeared in the same paper the previous day. Tim Attwood of the moderate Nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), for example, pointed out that while his party favoured a policy of flying no flags, the idea of restricting the Union Flag to flying on designated days represented 'an honourable and reasonable way forward'. Consensual politics, he said, were possible in a divided city like Belfast, pointing to agreements reached between Nationalist and Unionist

councillors about how to commemorate events from the critical period 1912–22; however, people needed to focus on important issues that effected everyone such as economic regeneration. Attwood’s message was reiterated by the Alliance councillor Máire Hendron, who argued that ‘instead of sending out a message to the world that yet again Northern Ireland has retreated to traditional tribal positions, we should demonstrate clearly that we can act in a mature manner on such a sensitive issue’ (*News Letter*, 10 December 2012). A contrary view was offered in a retrospective analysis by the Ulster Unionist Party counsellor Alderman Jim Rodgers who accused Alliance and the Nationalist parties of the SDLP and Sinn Féin of betraying the people of Belfast. The restriction of the flying of the flag, he argued, ‘was a blow against consensus politics and very much represented the politics of the past ... [The] decision created untold anger and impacted community relations in a way that hasn’t been seen for years ... the out-workings of which continue right up until today’ (*News Letter*, 3 December 2013). In such ways are differences over ideas about consent and voice often masked by or worked through attributions and allegations of blame and responsibility: the lessons taken from events therefore often reaffirm pre-existing ideological and ethnic sentiments.

Linked in with these battles over symbolism was a sense of illegitimacy that was linked to a similar concept that loyalists used in 1974. Despite the fact that the flags’ decision was taken by democratically elected councillors, the protestors argued that the Loyalist community has stopped voting and is effectively disenfranchised from the political process. Since 1998, turnout in elections has steadily fallen from around 70 per cent to 54.5 per cent at the 2011 Assembly election. In recent elections despite the tendency for people from working-class communities to vote there are proportionately around 10 per cent more Catholics voting than Protestants (Garry, 2011). This in effect bolsters Sinn Féin while eroding support for Loyalist parties like the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP). The declining turnout and demographic shifts have turned what used to be a solid Unionist majority into a hung council with Nationalists holding a slight edge. This loss of a majority and the removal of the Union Flag fuelled the narrative of a culture war against the Loyalist community by what they perceived as an illegitimate decision. This sense of disengagement was in large part what gave the protestors justification to adopt similar methods to the Ulster Workers’ Council (UWC) of blocking roads at peak times during the day. A mural in East Belfast showing Loyalists celebrating the collapse of the 1974 power-sharing Executive illustrates the resonance of these lessons of alienation, disenfranchisement and contested legitimacy that continue to underpin Loyalist claims-making today.

Agreeing to disagree?

This politics of claims-making often circles around feelings of justified grievance and the allocation of blame. As Alvin Jackson has pointed out, the problems of causation and blame intersect with analysis and explanation, giving rise to a central question ‘why did the power sharing executive fall, and who carried the responsibility?’ (2003: 268). The Sunningdale Communiqué of December 1973 has often been described as an ‘agreement to disagree’ – resolution of key issues surrounding the establishment of cross-border bodies and police and justice reform was postponed and instead devolved power sharing was established. The parallels with the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement are not simply in the fact that the latter covered much of the same ground (hence its description as ‘Sunningdale Mark II’ or, more infamously, by Seamus Mallon of the SDLP and a former Deputy First Minister, as ‘Sunningdale for slow learners’). Several contributors to this book explore the implications of Mallon’s somewhat scathing remark – targeted, as it seemed to have been, against republicans – and the logic that lines of thought and policy can be drawn across time (see, for instance, Aughey, Campbell, O’Kane and Hennessey). Parallels might also be found in the political choreography in which ‘wicked’ questions concerning constitutional frameworks, policing, prisoner release and victims’ rights were dealt with, fudged or left aside; certainly, as several contributors point out, the ambiguities surrounding what was actually agreed and what was left to be agreed or ratified at a later date helped to establish power sharing but also worked to undermine its legitimacy – particularly in the eyes of the unionist community (see, for instance, Gillespie and Aveyard and McDaid). Indeed, the ‘Agreement’ that was reached in December 1973 between the two governments, the Ulster Unionists, the SDLP and the Alliance Party, was actually a ‘communiqué’ that, in effect, noted a consensus on the fundamentals but deferred full implementation.

The sudden fall of the power-sharing Assembly in May 1974 amidst a general strike organised by the paramilitary-backed UWC has tended to overshadow consideration of what might be called the democratic lessons contained in the ‘Sunningdale experiment’. Instead, historical and political debate has centred on questions of blame and counter-factuals surrounding Sunningdale as some kind of tragic missed opportunity. A populist history by McKittrick and McVea, for example, ambles around the question of whether Sunningdale was a ‘new beginning’ had it not been for the ‘schizophrenic Unionist attitude towards law and order and legitimate protests’ (2001: 108). As Aughey points out, the notion of missed opportunity was at the core of debate in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the executive.

It is, as McKittrick and McVea's reflections demonstrate, ultimately tautological as it is derived from an idea that Sunningdale was an idea before its time. The politically toxic atmosphere that existed over bodies such as the Council of Ireland and North–South ministerial meetings was nearly erased by 2007 as the then First Minister and leading opponent of the Sunningdale Agreement, Ian Paisley, gave a warm public embrace of the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern. Speaking about the event Paisley spoke about the 'release' of emotions that had built up over time. Likewise, O'Donnell points out how it was politically difficult for the then party leader, Jack Lynch, to get the Fianna Fáil party to give its support to Sunningdale due to concerns over constitutional recognition (2007a: 12). Yet in 1998, with a great deal of ease, Ahern managed to remove the territorial claim on Northern Ireland from the Irish constitution but also reform the party's policy platform on Northern Ireland.

Seemingly, the lesson of this is that legitimacy is linked to, or defined by, what is politically viable. The point is arguably underscored by Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, a senior civil servant at the time of Sunningdale and adviser to the Unionist leader, Brian Faulkner. Bloomfield pointed out that the actual text of the Communiqué was especially formatted so as to have one side of the page devoted to the Irish government's position on the agreement and the other to the British government (1994: 193). This failure to agree on some of the most fundamental issues such as the constitutional position of Northern Ireland is the first thing that becomes apparent within the Communiqué as the first three substantive paragraphs set out the failure to agree a common policy, instead recognising the right of the Irish government and the SDLP to aspire to Irish unity alongside the Unionists' desire to remain British. What was a selling point for the Irish government, to say that no compromises had occurred in relation to ideological aspirations, was in reality detrimental for Faulkner as fears around the border and security issues were the main drivers of opposition within the Unionist community from 1970 onwards.

While the Agreement fudged the issue of constitutional recognition; it none the less made provision for the establishment of a Council of Ireland, which would facilitate the harmonisation and consultation of joint initiatives in areas such as tourism and electricity. The Council would be run by a Council of Ministers (seven members from each government) with a consultative assembly for advisory and review functions. In reality, the Council had very limited scope or real power. Maurice Hayes, a Northern Irish official, for example, recalled that trying to assign tasks to the new body in 1974 was a particularly slow process as government departments were reluctant to cede too much power or control (1995: 174).

On the critical issue of border security, the Communiqué recorded the concerns of the Unionist and Alliance parties that those who were committed to violence be brought to trial. The Irish government shared a similar concern and agreed to undertake legal steps to ensure that people who had been accused of murder in Northern Ireland would stand trial. The Communiqué noted that ‘problems of considerable legal complexity’ were involved in this area. All that was agreed, however, was that a commission set up by the British and Irish governments would examine proposals from all parties and recommend the most effective way of dealing with those who had committed crimes. Gillespie notes the early failure of this approach as the Irish Justice Minister, Patrick Cooney, just three days after the signing of the agreement, promised only limited changes to the Irish Republic’s existing laws (1998: 104).

Recriminations over the collapse of the executive began immediately. The *Irish News* (a nationalist daily), for example, argued that ‘Power-sharing was possibly the last hope for the Six Counties [Northern Ireland] of political survival ... Inevitably now, this area [Northern Ireland] would seem to be facing a lengthy period of direct rule. At the end of it – what?’ The paper’s editorial set out a number of options – try again with power-sharing, integrate Northern Ireland into the rest of the UK or reunification. While its preferred option was the latter, it was in no doubt where the blame for the failure of power sharing lay: ‘The truth is now out in the open. Protestants do not want power-sharing with Catholics. They have shown that they have little feeling for reconciliation ... they persist in believing themselves to be superior and separate from the United Kingdom, although they bray about their Britishness, their loyalty and their belief that the sundered six counties of Ireland possess the mythical autonomy of a province of Britain’ (*Irish News*, 1974).

The *Belfast Telegraph* meanwhile was concerned with Northern Ireland’s reputation within the United Kingdom (‘[t]he British Government has its responsibilities here but if Northern Ireland consistently forgets its responsibilities to Britain, it will be pushed increasingly out into the cold’), but argued that the failure of power sharing was due to overreach:

Power-sharing is a hazardous and difficult operation, and there must be disappointment, but not despair that the first experiment has failed. Next time, politicians on both sides may be prepared to lower their sights, and settle for a lot less, to achieve a better consensus. (*Belfast Telegraph*, 1974)

Of course, the question remained as to why overreach occurred and why it proved to be so detrimental to fostering consensus. For unionist politicians, it was the insistence on the Council of Ireland as an evolutionary body that

scuppered the possibility of power sharing working within Northern Ireland. One example of this thinking is contained in the memoirs of Basil McIvor, a Faulknerite and member of the Assembly. It was, in McIvor's opinion, the attachment of the SDLP and in particular its key personality, John Hume, to the Council of Ireland that was at fault for the collapse:

[Hume's] part in the Sunningdale Agreement spelt disaster for the survival of power-sharing. To me, he was the man who, at Sunningdale, blew out the light at the end of the tunnel. His insistence on the promise of a Council of Ireland, which he must surely have anticipated would arouse fierce opposition amongst the majority of Protestants, wrecked the prospects of an otherwise excellent and hopeful power-sharing arrangement. (McIvor, 1998: 104)

However, Robert Ramsey, one of Faulkner's closest advisers, believed that the failure of Sunningdale came in part from serious miscalculations by Faulkner during negotiations about the level of opposition that could be aroused within the Unionist community over the Council of Ireland. Faulkner, who was always in favour of cross-border co-operation, viewed the creation of a North–South body as a natural part to facilitate good governance between the two Irish states. This slightly detached view and the underestimation of Unionist opposition is recalled in Ramsay's memoirs as a key reason for the agreement's failure:

I think that he underestimated the fear of the Council of Ireland provisions would engender in the wider unionist community. He was personally relaxed about enhanced cross-border co-operation, not believing it to be a constitutional threat, but the slogan 'Dublin is only a Sunningdale away', coined by opponents within his own party, proved to have a far greater resonance within unionism than he had expected. (2009: 123)

On the other hand, Merlyn Rees, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, believed that the blame should be shared among unionist and nationalist politicians. Alluding to the idea of a 'missed opportunity', Rees commented in his memoir that:

it may be that the executive could have worked if it had been given the time. It was what I had hoped. Even so, many of its members did not behave sensibly: too many of Faulkner's men wasted time in tittle-tattle against their leader; and too many of the SDLP members spent too much time in Dublin, thus reinforcing the distrust of loyalists. The adverse reaction of loyalists to the Council of Ireland might have been overcome if the SDLP in general had acted with more flexibility, and if its elected members had recognised earlier that the concept could not be proceeded with until there had been another assembly election. By the time it was realised and accepted, it looked like a victory for UWC pressure. (Rees, 1985: 89)

Rees had settled early on this narrative at an early stage during the aftermath of the UWC strike, for example, writing to Wilson on 31 May about his

perceptions of an emerging ‘Ulster nationalism’ and concluding that since ‘the British [Government] cannot solve the Irish problem ... it would be better to let them have a shot at it themselves’ (The National Archives (UK) (TNA) 1974 PREM 16/148). The point resonated in Whitehall; Wilson’s press secretary, Joe Haines, for instance, later remarked that

The strike had demonstrated that the government’s writ did not run in Ulster if the Protestant workers decided they were not going to man the power stations. It put a permanent, recognisable limit on the power of the British government. From then on, we were not even refereeing the fight, only holding the coats while the religious factions go on with it. We could only do such things in Ireland as the organised Protestant population were prepared to agree with, acquiesce in, or tolerate with reluctance and grumbles. (Haines, 1977: 133)

Arguably, the fallout precipitated a process of withdrawal from Northern Ireland by both governments but also from the idea of a co-ordinated governmental approach (see also Coakely and O’Kane’s chapters below). Thus, the Northern Ireland Office began exploring a policy of what it called ‘distancing,’ by which it meant ‘the reduction of our commitments in Northern Ireland ... and the relegation of the Northern Ireland problem to a place of lesser importance than it currently occupies on the British political scene’ (cited in McGrattan, 2010: 110). Perhaps the most radical expression of this sentiment was to be found in Harold Wilson’s so-called ‘Apocalyptic note’ of January 1976 – a memorandum with limited circulation to senior civil servants and cabinet members outlining options for withdrawal from the province (see McGrattan, 2010: 108–9). In his autobiography Garret FitzGerald speculates about whether the ‘uncertainty’ that this kind of thinking generated was either deliberate or the product of ‘confusion and muddle’ (1991: 268). Certainly, it sowed something like panic in Dublin and, he asserts, ‘for a period at least, a greater degree of trust and confidence existed between many of the leaders of both communities in the North and our Government than existed between any of these politicians and the British government at that time’ (1991: 267). However, Sunningdale marked a degree of maturation of governmental relations – particularly surrounding security (see Craig, 2010, and chapters by Coakley, Edwards and Hennessey in this volume). It would, however, arguably, take years – until the 1980s and the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, in fact, and gradually after that into the peace process of the 1990s – for a similar coming-together would occur (Aughey and Gormley-Heenan, 2011).

Paddy Devlin emblematises the SDLP’s belief that it was the British government’s failure to confront the UWC that led to the breakdown of the power-sharing experiment. He argued that the Northern Irish pro-Sunningdale parties had emphasised the rule of law and the inability of

Britain to face-down the Loyalists represented a betrayal of the democratically elected Executive:

We reckoned that the loyalists were largely the products of a law and order community and would not operate outside the law once it was established that they were in breach of it. This was never really understood by Rees or Wilson at any time during the stoppage. (Devlin, 1975: 21)

The SDLP struggled to come to terms with the fall of the executive. A depressed atmosphere lingered throughout much of the later 1970s, a trace of which may be found in the choice of 'Nadir' as a chapter title for the period in Austin Currie's autobiography. Currie alluded to the prevailing sentiment, claiming that 'whatever might be said about how successful the Power-Sharing Executive had been, the harsh reality was that it took two to tango, and there was now no group on the unionist side willing, or able, to share power with the SDLP. Nor was there likely to be for the foreseeable future' (2004: 281). The mood was captured at the time in a civil service memorandum prepared by Maurice Hayes that argued that Catholics were 'gloomy ... disillusioned [and] frightened'; they felt 'bitter' about the collapse of the executive, about the extent to which 'employment in heavy industries was dominated by Protestants', and about the 'reluctance of the British army to face the situation'. Hayes went on to warn that the lack of trust in the British government together with the 'severe psychological blow [dealt] by the apparent withdrawal of Dublin support' could produce 'total alienation', leading Catholics to abandon the SDLP for 'abstention or Sinn Féin' (cited in McGrattan, 2010: 94).

Within the Irish government, disillusionment about the SDLP's approach towards the agreement, particularly John Hume's, was led by the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, Conor Cruise O'Brien. O'Brien believed that Hume had overplayed his hand in the negotiations which effectively pushed Faulkner into an unworkable deal. He later argued that the fall of the Executive and the Irish government's support of the SDLP during the talks were all based on this notion that Hume simply got the politics and tactics 'spectacularly wrong'; however, Hume was, he explained, 'in no way discredited in the eyes of public opinion in the Republic by having got it all wrong, and having misled others, including the Dublin government' (O'Brien, 1998: 352).

For O'Brien, the SDLP narrative of blaming a weak, indifferent British government for not standing up to the UWC Strike was a 'grotesque version of the facts'. The then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Garret FitzGerald, admitted that in hindsight O'Brien judged the Unionist reaction to the agreement much better than he and others (1991: 198). Yet, this narrative of the failure

of Wilson and Rees to take action against the UWC is perhaps the dominant one in memoirs of the period. For example Hayes has delivered a scathing representation of British betrayal:

Wilson was a gnostic figure, Rees, the new secretary of state, was a haverer who found it hard to make up his mind on anything. From their point of view, Sunningdale had been designed to bring peace, it had not done so. The Provo's were still active, and now the Protestants were up in arms. The new government's attitude was at best *laissez faire*, if the executive survived, well and good, if not, there would be no great effort to provide a lifeline. (Hayes, 1995: 176)

For Paul Bew, the Faulknerite Unionists were the biggest losers from the failure of power sharing – under pressure to compromise on constitutional and security issues from all sides, the loss of confidence from middle, liberal Unionism in Faulkner was devastating, contributing as it did to the backlash of Loyalist mobilisation in May 1974 and to Faulkner's sudden fall from power (2007: 512). Arguably, Unionism had to wait two decades before it had another leader who was articulate enough to tackle the theoretical and practical issues involved in building institutions to support a movement away from violence into a form of democratic peace. For Bew, the key lesson that the British government took from Sunningdale was the need for disengagement – intervention, it seemed, only enabled Nationalism and Unionism to indulge their worst fears and maximalist hopes. This trend of thinking was elaborated by the Prime Minister himself, who, against the continued advice of his officials and ministers, continued to entertain thoughts of an outright withdrawal. The effect of which was, in some ways, similar to intervention – fears and suspicions were raised on all sides, not least among the Dublin political establishment and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) who seemed to believe that their 1974–75 ceasefire was a prelude to the British Army withdrawing.

Evaluating Sunningdale

Academic appraisals of the Sunningdale experiment are still somewhat divided over the nuances of what ideas or whose actions (or omissions) should be emphasised. Gordon Gillespie has tackled the idea that the power-sharing experiment might have worked had it not been for an adverse and unpredictable series of events:

the Sunningdale package has, wrongly, been described as a missed opportunity for the long-term settlement of the Northern Ireland conflict. In 1974, however, neither unionists nor nationalists at large were prepared to make the compromises necessary to make such a political settlement work. (2004: 141)

The stress put on the Council of Ireland has led some commentators to argue that consent was being assumed rather than requested by Dublin and the SDLP (Farrington, 2007; McGrattan, 2009). A recent survey of the period has suggested that this thesis depends on too much congruence between the two Nationalist groupings, which did not in fact exist. Indeed, writes Shaun McDaid, there was no unanimity within the Irish government to use the Council of Ireland as a stepping stone to reunification:

The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) sought a strong Council with the potential to become an all-Ireland government. The DFA, however, was isolated and to a large extent ignored by the other Irish departments. The evidence also suggests that the proposed Council was not a particular divisive issue for the power-sharing administration, and that the executive was in no danger of collapsing because of it. (2013: 74)

Several authors in this book refer to the (in)famous remarks of a prominent SDLP Assembly member, Hugh Logue, to the effect that Nationalists believed that the Council of Ireland would ‘trundle’ unionism into a reunited state. Coakley qualifies the remarks by referring to McLoughlin’s research on Hume in which he points out that the quotation did not appear in any of the main Dublin newspapers the day after it was supposed to have been made. The quotation nevertheless quickly became entrenched in the Unionist imagination and acted as fuel for the anti-Sunningdale sentiments, for example appearing prominently on the United Ulster Unionist Council’s General Election advertisements (see *News Letter* 22 February 1974).

The Sunningdale period has been reimagined as a first or prototype peace process (Dixon, 2001; Kerr, 2011). Typically, this reasoning reads Sunningdale as preparing the way, or setting out a framework that was more substantially and successfully completed in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998. As Wolff argues:

The Sunningdale agreement was not a treaty between two states, but an agreement reached between two states and a selected number of political parties. In order to work, it would have required substantial support for those partners in the agreement who were most volatile to pressures from within their own communities: the pro-agreement parties in both blocs who were vulnerable to outflanking by extremists. That this support for pro-agreement politicians was not forthcoming was one of the major reasons for the failure of this early attempt to resolve the Northern Ireland conflict. (2003: 7–8)

Of course, there is an unfathomable condescension at play in this kind of logic that sees the majority of the Unionist electorate as somehow mystified or duped by ‘extremists’ – a logic that Aughey, in his chapter, relates to the traditional Nationalist view of Unionism and describes as Rousseauian. However, it can be acknowledged that the language is imprecise: Wolff

could also be read as claiming that Unionist majority were themselves extremists. A clarification to these arguments is found in the work of Tonge, who states that

Most accounts, not unreasonably, concentrate upon the role played by unionists in ensuring the demise of the agreement. Nonetheless, it should be noted that even if greater unionist support had been forthcoming, continued republican violence would have placed the agreement under great strain. (2000: 43)

Indeed, although 1972 was the high watermark for killings (496), 1973 and 1974 were also extremely violent (263 and 303 deaths respectively (McKittrick et al., 1999: 1473)). The rise in Republican violence had an important impact on how the moderate SDLP sold the agreement. McLoughlin argues that the radicalisation of the Nationalist people due to events like internment and Bloody Sunday caused the SDLP to 'adopt a more dynamic language, which portrayed the negotiation of a new political settlement as an incontrovertible process towards a united Ireland' (2007: 17). He goes further, arguing that the environment at that time led the party away from its founding principles to misrepresent the agreement which, in effect, debased it within Unionist opinion. Like O'Brien above, McLoughlin suggests a certain degree of ignorance of Unionist opinion as he notes that for a time it appeared that constitutional Nationalism believed that Unionism had no right to hold back moves towards reunification (2007: 18).

Outside of the Irish government forces were conspiring within Irish Nationalism that would place a great deal of pressure on the agreement and Faulkner's position at the head of the executive. A former Fianna Fáil minister, Kevin Boland, in January 1974 began proceedings to have the Sunningdale Agreement and the government's recognition of Northern Ireland declared unconstitutional. Boland's actions forced the Irish government into a position where it had to declare that its earlier declaration that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland could not be changed without the consent of the population was not a part of the agreement. Furthermore, the government argued that the declaration was merely a statement of policy about how a united Ireland might come about rather than a substantive change in a country's constitutional outlook. The damaging aspects of this on Faulkner's position have been noted by FitzGerald, who recalled that 'the subtle legal arguments used to defend the agreement were not merely lost on Unionists; they totally destroyed the value of the declaration, undermining Faulkner's already shaky position' (1991: 226). The total divergence in political priorities for Unionism, Nationalism and the British and Irish governments confirms McLoughlin's thesis of the inability for big compromises to be made in such a politically toxic environment.

Sunningdale and Northern Ireland's struggle for democracy

While the 'blame game' surrounding the collapse of the Sunningdale executive can be summarised, what is more difficult to assess is the ramifications of those recriminations. It is that effort at assessment that this book takes as its starting point. This book attempts to fill the gap in the market regarding a seminal period in Northern Irish history and its implications for the struggle to achieve a peaceful, stable, democratic settlement in the region. While there have been a number of history books that examine the 1970s in Northern Ireland, this is the first attempt to look at the ideas behind the 1973–74 power-sharing experiment (the so-called 'Sunningdale' Assembly and/or Executive) and its collapse amidst the May 1974 UWC strike. It is also the first attempt to analyse systematically what became of those ideas.

The questions that surround the power-sharing experiment continue to resonate within Northern Ireland today. As the flag protest continues to demonstrate, issues to do with inclusion and exclusion of voice and experience remain central to debates in Northern Ireland; discussions over procedures and trust lie at the core of studies and commentaries surrounding increasing voter apathy; and differing perceptions over what exactly constitutes 'agreement' abound in contemporary arguments over political developments.

The 'blame game' might, arguably, be seen to work against clarity in terms of placing Sunningdale in a political context. As alluded to above, the 'blame game' speaks implicitly to this context along the logic that according to a particular version or image of democracy a decision made by another person or group is read as damaging democracy. Where that damage is seen as fundamental and irrevocable then a radical fissure between the contending parties (and, ultimately, their images of legitimacy) occurs. Those fissures and images are underpinned by ideas about what actually occurred and are given effect in the lessons that politicians 'take'. The importance of this process of lesson learning for politics and efforts towards democratization has been elucidated by Bermeo:

What are the ideas that must be affected by political learning if democracy is to be reconstructed? At the most basic level, critical elites must change their assessments of the relative effectiveness of democratic institutions for the fulfilment of group goals. In order for this to happen, at least one of four subsidiary changes must take place. Elites must change their evaluations of the alternatives to democratic rule; they must change their evaluations of democracy itself; they must change the ordering or nature of group goals; or they must change their perceptions of one another. (1992: 274)

The key seems to be what kind of lessons are taken from a particular event. If, following Wolff, the key lesson from Sunningdale was that power sharing

was the only option and that the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement squared the circle about how to achieve it, then an immediate follow-up question relates to why it took so long. Was it simply a case that Sunningdale was too little too late? If it is the case that ending violent conflict requires a fundamental repositioning of state ‘orientations, prioritisations and policies’ (Todd, 2013: 1), was Sunningdale simply too ‘internalist’, too much focused on Northern Ireland? A related question might be: why did it take the political leaders in Northern Ireland so long to recognise the necessity for power sharing (Dixon, 2001: 157)? One answer might be that there were different ways to achieve power sharing and different ways to conceive of it and put it into practice; yet the context in which those became salient and congruent did not emerge until the 1990s. Yet, this in turn, gives rise to queries relating to causality and chronology – in other words, what happened to the first ideas that they took so long to return, and what happened to them in between that caused them to be more palatable at the later date? What changed? And how and why did the change occur? The reason for the time-lag might be down to the fact that, as Aguilar argues, within political learning and decision-making,

the kind of decision that led to failure tends to be avoided, without considering the consequences that would have ensued if a different policy had been implemented. Nevertheless, what is certainly true is that those who take political decisions tend to place excessive emphasis on the lessons which derive from their own personal experience and undervalue the lessons which derive from the experience of others. (2002: 21–2)

Another answer might be that the ‘ripe moment’ had not been reached – that it took three decades and countless suffering to build up an urgency for peace (see O’Kane, 2006, for a critique of this form of argument). Another answer might be to avoid answering and instead warn of the dangers of an overly teleological approach to history that sees processes in terms of pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that can slowly be worked into place: The process cannot be predetermined, is the logic of this position. As Bermeo, again, explains: ‘[u]nless the range of negotiable issues expands, the divisions that produced the breakdown of democracy in the first place will simply emerge again. This is why the change of mind intrinsic to political learning is so important’ (1992: 277). Whether or not a ‘change of mind’, or what Bermeo goes on to refer to as a ‘discrediting’ of old ideas, occurred in Northern Ireland between 1973 and 1998 is, again, a matter for debate.

A final point might be raised as regards the light that Sunningdale throws on Northern Irish politics: namely, that the ‘blame game’ can, arguably, be seen as deferring consideration of the *type* or *quality* of democracy that is

conceptualised and practised. While power-sharing and institutional innovations such as the Council of Ireland (or its later reinvention as the 1998 Agreement's Strand Two and Strand Three provisions for cross-border and inter-archipelagic bodies) may improve the breadth and variety of democratic practice, they may not necessarily lead to increased access to the decision-making apparatus, improved transparency of how decisions are made and/or implemented, or greater ease of accountability. The distinctions over how the flag protests are framed and the blame game over Sunningdale point to the same under-researched topic: namely, the confusion between the *width* and the *depth* of democracy (Papadopoulos, 2013). The idea of congruence between representatives and their voters as constituting a test of democratic practice (Stoker, 2006) does not really apply to an ethnically divided society such as Northern Ireland's (unless a quasi-Marxist notion of false consciousness is deployed) where 'elites' and the ordinary population often share similar political, social and religious or normative beliefs. The necessity for switching from procedural notions of democracy to more substantive ones then becomes clear – and, arguably, it is this impulse that lies at the heart of the efforts to facilitate and restore power sharing in Northern Ireland: that is to say, a basic desire to cultivate ways and means of doing politics that are not filtered through the violence that marred the society for so long. Extrapolating from this point can bring us back to the sanguinity necessary for avoiding a 'direct-line' teleological approach to history: the best of motivations may not always result in optimal products – or, more simply, the best of intentions may merely be paving the road to hell.

Conclusion

Sunningdale therefore poses unsettling and unsettled historical and political questions; the contributors in this book seek to tackle these head-on from a number of perspectives. Frequently debate over the past in general in Northern Ireland is emotive and personal, and as a result history might be seen as some kind of Rorschach blot into which individuals can read whatever occurs to them. A key aim of this book is to explore alternative ways of working within and through a divisive event by focusing on the interpretations, the available evidence and the divided and progressive legacies that Sunningdale bequeathed, but what the chapters, taken together, suggest is that the period represented no kind of 'missed opportunity'. Indeed, if any kind of straight line can be discerned in the historical analyses that follow, it must relate to the seeming inevitability of power sharing coming up short – unable, as the

policy proved, to square the demands of Nationalist overreach, Unionist division against the backdrop of a grave and bloody campaign of violence.

Mallon's aphorism about slow learning raises the missed opportunity counterfactual. As such, a question continues to linger over the period that relates to whether Sunningdale was indeed an honourable compromise that had the potential to win consent (Fisk, 1975); and whether, over a period of time, and without the February 1974 Westminster General Election (in which anti-Sunningdale Unionist forces won 51 per cent of the vote), the new arrangements might have taken root. This may, indeed, be a useful way to conceptualise political developments. However, the chapters also broaden the analysis beyond this somewhat restricted historical vision to taken into account the implications of the context that Northern Ireland was facing: namely, a range of problems, some of which lay outwith the remit of the Sunningdale framework but which nevertheless had the potential to impact upon political negotiations.

The point of departure, then, for this book is to try to situate Sunningdale in this broad historical context and, in so doing, to try to draw out what lessons, if any, the period offers for Northern Ireland today and for peace-building and the deepening and widening of democracy in general. These lessons may, arguably, be seen to fall under the following questions:

- An aim of Sunningdale was to widen democracy through power sharing: to what extent did it fail to deepen democracy?
- To what extent did the differing lessons that protagonists took from Sunningdale regarding what they saw as legitimate political behaviour colour later policy agendas for Northern Ireland and shape attitudes towards political dialogue?
- What, if anything, can we learn from the Sunningdale period about how to deal with groups who feel alienated from mainstream politics and/or who believe that violence remains an option for remedying those sentiments?

The book tries to deliver an overview of the findings of political historians and political scientists working on Northern Ireland and on the Sunningdale era. In so doing, it hopes to offer some preliminary answers to the above questions. Gordon Gillespie, for example, provides a detailed overview of the historical context, which places events in Northern Ireland against the background of international unrest. Teasing out the intricacies of the development of the anti-Sunningdale movement, he argues that it was the combination

of national, local and international factors that combined to create a ‘perfect storm’ for peaceful power sharing in Northern Ireland in 1974. Arthur Aughey, meanwhile, in the third chapter, addresses the interpretative legacies of Sunningdale. Referring to Scott’s notion of a ‘fantasy echo’, he explains that historical references seem to echo present concerns and experiences as the past continues to impact on contemporary decision-making. Aughey traces how these echoes resonated throughout Nationalist and Unionist thinking during the ensuing conflict and turmoil in Northern Ireland and cites Gillespie’s argument that a reality of 1974 that has been hard to come to terms with is that it ‘would have taken miracle for the Sunningdale deal to have survived’. Other ‘lessons’ persisted, however, and Aughey asserts that the rhetorical interventions made by Nationalism in 1974 regarding Unionist obduracy worked to limit the seriousness in which subsequent Unionist concerns and arguments were received by other political actors.

The series of chapters beginning with John Coakley’s addresses the role of different groups of actors in the period. Coakley’s own chapter on the Irish governments’ role(s), for example, traces the ‘policy shifts and learning’ that took place in Dublin’s approach to Northern Ireland. Drawing on a wide range of theoretical and empirical sources, Coakley’s conclusions point to the importance of what might be termed bureaucratic politics in shaping outcomes: in this case, the resistance by Irish civil servants to cede powers to the putative Council of Ireland. Eamonn O’Kane, meanwhile, engages with the ongoing debates over what exactly the British government ‘learned’ from Sunningdale that it applied in its later approach to Northern Ireland. He argues that clear British objectives developed but that Britain was often constrained by the complex and changing nature of events in Northern Ireland when trying to put those into practice. As such, O’Kane suggests that it was not the case of ‘slow learning’ on the part of the British that prevented the development of peaceful politics until into the 1990s, but rather a process of policy adaptation and construction. Aaron Edwards’s chapter on security responses to Sunningdale also argues for looking at subterranean political dynamics in tracing the development of lesson-drawing by political elites. He points out that, while discussion about Sunningdale tends to circle around issues to do with power sharing and the Irish dimension, the agreement actually reflected the British government’s concern with the deteriorating security situation – evidenced in the fact that it included nine clauses relating to security policy.

Stuart Aveyard and Shaun McDaid examine the dynamics within Ulster Unionism during the Sunningdale era. ‘The failure of unionism to compromise’, in 1974, they argue, ‘only served to reinforce Westminster’s reluctant acceptance of direct rule’. Aveyard and McDaid map Unionist responses to

Sunningdale and its collapse with careful attention to the primary sources and suggest that a key problem that Unionist leaders faced was how to avoid being seen as a type of second Faulkner: namely, a figure so predisposed to compromise that he lost the backing of his own electorate. Tony Craig addresses the forces that lined up against Faulkner in 1974 and charts the history of the Labour MP Stanley Orme and his negotiations with Loyalism to try to build a newly politicised Protestant working class in Belfast to try to direct workers away from Loyalist terror organisations. Again, echoing Gillespie's arguments in his earlier chapter, Craig suggests that a range of national and international factors – the collapse of the IRA's 1975 ceasefire and the decline of shipbuilding in Belfast, for example – stymied these attempts to address the underrepresentation of fringe politics in Northern Ireland.

Sarah Campbell's and Henry Patterson's chapters look at Northern Irish nationalism. For her part, Campbell draws on extensive primary archival material to appraise the position of the SDLP. She argues that the '1974 deal was a pivotal turning point for the party and saw it move from being a party of repudiation to a party willing to participate in the Northern Ireland state'. The reason for this transition was, as Campbell explains, that the Sunningdale agreement was emblematic of the SDLP's two policy goals of power sharing within Northern Ireland and a strong place for the Irish government in the administration of the country. One major dividing line within Northern Irish nationalism has been over the question of violence – the 'constitutional nationalism' of the SDLP versus the 'physical force' nationalism of the republican movement. Patterson's chapter explores the somewhat underresearched dimension of the responses within Republicanism to the Sunningdale period. Patterson argues that one aspect of the IRA's violence and its capacity for destroying political progress was the unintended consequence of forcing a 'reconstruction' of the 'British connection and a resigned acceptance that the British state was in for a long haul'.

The final two chapters provide overviews of the enduring ramifications of the Sunningdale experiment on Northern Irish society, politics and culture. Connal Parr, for instance, uses Stuart Parker's 1987 play about the strike, *Pentecost* (Parker, 1989), to reflect on the issues that the strike brought to the fore in terms of violence, democracy and political participation. In the concluding chapter, Thomas Hennessey looks at the legacy of the central ideas behind the Sunningdale agreement and maps their progress and development throughout later Northern Irish political discussions.

Individually, then, the chapters in this book focus on particular aspects of the Sunningdale experiment and its ongoing legacies for Northern Irish politics. Points of divergence appear surrounding the emphasis placed on

particular events and/or actors by the individual chapters but a picture emerges of detailed complexity. Many of the chapters are based on hitherto unpublished research and archival evidence and draw on a wide range of sources and interpretations. The governmental papers for this period have been open to researchers for a number of years and the authors present their findings. In addition, several authors draw on private collections of individuals and parties that supplement existing understandings. However, taken as a whole, the book aims for breadth and depth: contributors complement and challenge existing accounts – academic, journalistic and autobiographical. The goal of the book is to draw together lessons from different academics, different viewpoints and different sources to begin to tackle in a serious, informed and even-handed fashion the important and enduring questions that the Sunningdale period posed for peace-building, democratisation and division in Northern Ireland.