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UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF PEACEBUILDING: IRISH LANGUAGE
REVIVALISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND

MA Thesis

Supervisor: Eiki Berg, PhD

Tartu, 2025

Declaration of Authorship

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Abstract

Northern Ireland has struggled to come to terms with the violence that engulfed its society throughout latter half of the 20th century. The foundational issues surrounding the conflict have not only gone largely unresolved, but they have seemingly become entangled with other phenomena that had previously not been directly related to the conflict. Principal among these is language, particularly Irish, which since the 1990s has gradually come to the fore in Northern Irish politics. Despite there being a shared history of the language's presence in both unionist and nationalist communities, it has become widely regarded among the unionists as being an innate expression of Irish national identity. As a result of this association, attempts to provide recognition to the language have caused relations between both communities to become tumultuous, marked by extremely fierce debates that often verge on sectarianism. This study sought to establish how and why Irish became associated with Irish national identity, and the effects this has had on the wider peace process. It established that the post-conflict agreements and legislation that sought to address issues relating to language have inadvertently caused more polarisation within Northern Irish society, particularly through their treatment of the language debate in the same manner as the root causes of the conflict, namely ethno-nationalist identity. By effectively prescribing Irish to the nationalist community, the agreements and legislation have ultimately legitimised the othering of the language by the unionist community which has in turn greatly disrupted the power-sharing arrangement.

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List of Abbreviations

Critical Discourse Analysis	CDA
Democratic Unionist Party	DUP
Department of Education	DE
Education Authority	EA
European Union	EU
Freedom of Information	FOI
Good Friday Agreement	GFA
Irish Medium Education	IME
Irish Republican Army	IRA
Learning Leaders Support Scheme	LLSS
Loyalist Communities Council	LCC
Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association	NICRA
Police Service of Northern Ireland	PSNI
Red Hand Commando	RHC
Traditional Unionist Voice	TUV
Ulster Defence Association	UDA
Ulster Unionist Party	UUP

Introduction: A War of Words

The impetus for this study arose from the University of Tartu's trip to Belfast in September 2024 in fulfilment of the *Practical Field Research in the Conflict Areas* course. It was an extremely pertinent location; between 1968-98, Northern Ireland was rocked by major intercommunal violence between the predominantly unionist Protestant majority and the predominantly nationalist Catholic minority. The loss of life and material damage in proportion to Northern Ireland's relatively small population meant it was one of the most devastating internal security crises Europe experienced in the post-war period.¹ There, the class was confronted with the lingering legacies of the conflict which was illustrated most bluntly by the stark social division between the unionist and nationalist communities who live in a state that has been described as a form "self-imposed apartheid".² What also became apparent during the trip was the politicisation of language, illustrated by the prevalence of tri-lingual signs in public buildings which had been translated into English, Irish and Ulster-Scots. Language, as the class came to discover, had become an incredibly polarising topic since the conflict had ended, and was in many ways an expression of the highly divided nature of Northern Irish society that it continued to experience almost 30 years later the peace agreement. What made the debate even more peculiar was that language had played little – if any – role in the outbreak of disorder in the Autumn of 1968; few Irish nationalists in the north ever learned Irish.³ It has nonetheless metamorphosed into a make-or-break sticking point for Northern Ireland's ongoing fraught peace process. If the genesis of the conflict had not revolved around language, it begged the question as to how and why Irish ended up taking centre stage in attempts to end it in the late 1990s, and why the language continues to provoke fierce disagreements that often verge on sectarian.

Hostilities between Ulster Protestants and Catholics is generally considered to have begun with the Scottish and English colonisation of Ulster and Munster in the early 17th century.⁴ Following the colonisation a Protestant landlord class emerged called the Protestant Ascendancy which would go on to wield the island's political, economic and social power for

¹ Fact Sheet on the conflict in and about Northern Ireland, *Conflict and Politics in Northern Ireland – Ulster University*, 21/07/2006. Accessed 05/03/2025:

https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/victims/docs/group/htr/day_of_reflection/htr_0607c.pdf

² Calame, J. & Charlesworth, E. *Divided Cities: Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, and Nicosia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) p 162

³ O'Reilly, C. C. *The Irish Language in Northern Ireland: The Politics of Culture and Identity*, (Great Britain: Palgrave MacMillan, 1999), p 5

⁴ Foster, R. F. *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972*, (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p 77

centuries to come.⁵ Their hold would continue in Northern Ireland decades after the Free Irish State was established in 1922 where Catholics continued to live in a state of widespread discrimination. Social tensions reached boiling point when in the 1960s the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) began campaigning on behalf of the Catholic minority for electoral, policing and housing reform, all of which heavily favoured the Protestant unionist population.⁶ The Northern Irish authorities responded heavy-handedly, culminating in the major Derry riots of 1969 which resulted in the deployment of the British Army to restore order. Despite the fact that most of NICRA's objectives were achieved by 1969, intercommunal violence and polarisation continued to worsen.⁷ The newly formed republican Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), which sought to reunify Ireland through a military struggle, and the loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), which sought to maintain Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom, began carrying out indiscriminate bombings and assassinations which further destabilised Northern Irish society and resulted in a much more aggressive British military policy.

Attempts to curtail the violence was a long-drawn-out process which began in 1973 with the failed Sunningdale Agreement and the clandestine talks between the British government and Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Provisional IRA, from the late 1980s. The first major step was the 1993 Downing Street declaration between the governments of the UK and Ireland which for the first time acknowledged "the right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish."⁸ Most of the serious violence eventually subsided with the signing of the 1998 Belfast Agreement, colloquially known as the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), which, among other things, assured parity of esteem between nationalists and unionists through executive power sharing. The GFA was preceded by an unprecedented island-wide referendum in which both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland electorate overwhelmingly voted in favour for it. Yet sectarian division is still pervasive in Northern Irish society. Unionists and nationalists remain divided along national – and increasingly – linguistic lines.

⁵ Whan, R. "Irish Presbyterians and the Quest for Toleration, c. 1692–1733" in Costella, K. & Howlin, N. (eds) *Law and Religion in Ireland, 1700-1970* (eBook: Palgrave MacMillan), p 157

⁶ Kennedy, L. *Who Was Responsible for the Troubles: The Northern Ireland Conflict*, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 41

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Joint Declaration 1993 (Downing St. Declaration). Accessed 04/02/2025:

<https://www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/alldfawebsitemedia/ourrolesandpolicies/northernireland/peace-process--joint-declaration-1993.pdf>

The objective of this thesis is to assess the peace process of the conflict by shedding a light on how subsequent agreements and laws have engendered debates over language vis-à-vis national identity. The specific focus will be put on how said agreements and laws have legitimised the gradual association of the Irish language with Irish national identity – and by extension the underlying trigger points of the conflict – and how the unionist community has responded to this development. The consequences of the phenomenon of language recognition being used to resolve an ethno-nationalist conflict will be analysed through the prism of critical discourse analysis (CDA) which will elucidate the myriad and sometimes contradictory responses of unionist leaders and activists as Northern Irish society drastically evolves.

The first chapter will provide a conceptual overview of the prevailing theory that underpinned the peace process in Northern Ireland – consociationalism – and how its legitimising of mutually exclusive group identities has solidified the continued social division between unionists and nationalists. In doing so, it will highlight the wide range of views of its effectiveness as a tool in post-conflict settings before moving on to its application in Northern Ireland specifically. The second chapter will delve into the justifications for the selected empirical data, sources and methodology employed to carry out this study. Lastly, the third chapter will present and analyse the empirical data itself, namely the agreements and Acts that have brought Irish to the fore, as well as the underpinning principles therein; the implementation of the agreements and Acts; and samples of unionist opposition from both the upper and lower stratum of that community. Rather than take unionist opposition at face value, the study will attempt to frame it as illustrative of the difficulties a regime such as parity of esteem may face when imposed on extremely divided societies.

The hypothesis of this study is as follows: The theories and principles underpinning post-conflict agreements and legislation have unintentionally contributed to the Irish language's transformation into an expression of exclusively national rather than a shared linguistic identity. In doing so it has incorporated the Irish language as an element into the ongoing ethno-nationalist debate, even though the genesis of the Northern Irish conflict had very little to do with linguistic rights. The language's association with Irish nationalism has in turn provoked a considerable degree of push back from the unionist political elite, particularly those in the power-sharing arrangement, who have at various stages come to view the language as a threat to the well-being of the unionist community at large. Such sentiments have subsequently been replicated among the lower strata within the unionist community.

Chapter 1: Consociationalism and Divided Societies

As stated in the introduction, the central theoretical premise of this thesis revolves around the theories of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, the foundational starting point of which is consociationalism. John McGarry defines consociationalism as the understanding that in “deeply divided societies, where divisions are longstanding and when there is intra-group violence—it is more realistic to accept that different groups will continue to exist than to seek the ‘deconstruction’ of group ties.”⁹ These “group ties” are the ethno-religious divides of the conflict, which continues to define contemporary party politics within Northern Ireland. To this end, the peace process has attempted to reconcile the validation of nationalist and unionist identities with conflict resolution through power sharing and parity of esteem. This is embodied by the Northern Irish Assembly where representatives must “register a designation of identity—nationalist, unionist or other.”¹⁰ Such a system ostensibly ensures that voices from all segments of Northern Irish society are represented at a legislative level.¹¹

Consociationalism as a theory emerged in the mid-20th century during the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the European empires in Africa and Asia. The power vacuum left behind by the former colonial rulers unleashed a whirlwind of inter-communal violence that engulfed entire societies. Many post-colonial states initially struggled to form stable governments due to the destabilising effects of the violence, much of which continues to this day. Scholars therefore sought to develop theoretical frameworks which would help facilitate members of these “deeply divided societies” to overcome such divisions.¹²

The theory is attributed to the Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart. Lijphart used the Dutch method of overcoming intercommunal competition as a theoretical model for addressing similar issues in other diverse societies.¹³ At the base of consociationalism was the understanding that even though there “are centrifugal tendencies inherent in a plural society”, they could be “counteracted by the cooperative attitudes and behavior of the leaders of the different segments of the population”.¹⁴ Consociationalism was therefore from its very conception strongly leader-centric in terms of its top-down approach to conflict resolution.

⁹ Rupert, T. ‘Northern Ireland: Consociation or Social Transformation?’ in McGarry, J. (ed), *Northern Ireland and the Divided World: The Northern Ireland Conflict and the Good Friday Agreement in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p 37

¹⁰ Ibid, p 38

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Lustick, I. S. Lijphart, Lakatos, and Consociationalism, *World Politics*, 50:1, 1997, p 96

¹³ Lijphart, A. *Democracy in Plural Societies* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), p 2

¹⁴ Ibid, p 1

Though successful consociational governments varied in character, Lijphart argued they generally shared the following characteristics. At a state governance level was a form of power-sharing called “grand coalitions”, through which political elites from different “segments” – or competing communities – coalesced and collaborated; the principles of “group autonomy”, whereby matters that affected all groups would be discussed and decided on collectively, and “proportionality”, through which there would be “the basic standard of political representation, public service appointments and allocation of public funds”; and lastly “minority veto”, which would act as ‘the ultimate weapon that minorities need to protect their vital interests.’¹⁵

For consociationalism to be effective, a specific set of criteria had to be filled. Firstly, there had to be a power “balance, or an approximate equilibrium, among the segments, and... the presence of at least three different segments.”¹⁶ Secondly, a consociational political framework required electoral “multiparty systems.”¹⁷ Thirdly, Lijphart argued that smaller states were agreements would be easier to make and require fewer segmental elites. This would in turn would promote a stronger and more intimate professional working relationship among them.¹⁸ In addition, it is in the political elites’ interest to maintain social cohesion and control as smaller states are often the most at risk to external threats.¹⁹ Fourthly, a consociational agreement required the presence of “social cleavages”, namely religious, ethnic, and linguistic identities.²⁰

The importance of segmental political elites in a post-conflict consociational setting cannot be overstated; it is the bedrock upon which any consociational agreement is established. On the one hand, through a power-sharing arrangement segmental political elites can express the needs, desires and ambitions of the segment they are representing and act, as it were, as a voice of their respective communities. On the other hand, the degree to which power-sharing between segmental elites is successful can, as consociational theorists contend, trickle down and create the conditions for over-arching identities such as class, religion or members of

¹⁵ Lemarchand, R. Consociationalism and Power Sharing in Africa: Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, *African Affairs*, 106:422, 2007, p 3

¹⁶ Lijphart, A. Ibid, p 56

¹⁷ Ibid, p 61-62

¹⁸ Ibid, p 65

¹⁹ Pappalardo, A. The Conditions for Consociational Democracy: a Logical and Empirical Critique, *European Journal of Political Research*, 9:4, 1981, p 376

²⁰ Lijphart, A. Ibid, p 71; p 75

specific localities, to develop.²¹ These over-arching identities would mitigate ethnic or national identities and create a greater sense of social cohesion.

The acceptance of group differences as a given is in stark contrast to liberal methods of conflict resolution which seek to dilute them.²² However, even though some authors emphasise that whilst consociationalism is not inherently at odds to the establishment of new identities, the pre-eminence of an ethno-nationalist divide renders any attempt at doing so largely obsolete. John Nagle and Mary-Alice C. Clancy argue that in such cases trying to modify or reshape entrenched ethnic identities in post-conflict divided societies is unlikely to succeed.²³ This argument is the crux of consociationalism – group identities, particularly ethno-nationalist identities, which gave way to conflict are a reality which must be accepted and that it is ultimately much preferable to work within this prism through frameworks such as power-sharing. Consociational advocates postulate that alternative approaches to resolve the conflict between segments with diametrically opposed identities, such as for instance via integrationism, is simply not feasible either due to the long-standing nature of the historical grievances or discrepancies in socioeconomic power.²⁴ As consociationalism cannot change or resolve the root causes of a given conflict (e.g. ethno-nationalism), it can at the very least provide mechanisms to regulate relations between traditionally hostile communities by promoting mutual recognition and legitimisation of their identities.²⁵

Consociationalism has nonetheless been subjected to criticism for its perceived “Primordialist or essentialist view of [conflict resolution] and consequently prescribes ‘segmental autonomy,’ or ‘voluntary apartheid’ and authoritarian rule by ‘elite cartel.’”²⁶ Whilst the criteria set out by Lijphart are necessary for a successful consociational system, critics argue that they are just as conducive to an “integrationist” system that would overcome social

²¹ Sisk, T. D. & Stefes, C. ‘Power sharing as an interim step in peace building: lessons from South Africa’ in Roeder P. G. & Rothchild. D. (eds.), *Sustainable Peace: Power and Democracy After Civil Wars* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), p 346

²² Peleg, I. ‘Transforming Ethnic Orders to Pluralist Regimes: Theoretical, Comparative and Historical Analysis’ in Guelke, A. (eds), *Democracy and Ethnic Conflict Advancing Peace in Deeply Divided Societies*, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p 19

²³ Nagle, J. & Clancy, M. A. ‘Constructing a shared public identity in ethno nationally divided societies: comparing consociational and transformationist perspectives’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 18:1, 2012, p 80

²⁴ Butensch, N. A. Conflict Management in Plural Societies: The Consociational Democracy Formula, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 8:1-2, 1985, p 100

²⁵ O’Flynn, I. Deliberative Democracy, the Public Interest and the Consociational Model, *Political Studies*, 58, 2010, p 572

²⁶ Dixon, P. Power Sharing in Deeply Divided Societies: Consociationalism in Wonderland and the Northern Ireland Peace Process, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 2023, p 2

division.²⁷ Similar to the deterministic nature of consociationalism, another major point of contention was Lijphart's attempt to apply the Dutch experience of constitutionalism to other, and at times far more violent and polarised, societies. This is clearly not applicable to all conflicts, especially so in post-colonial conflicts where one group often holds a monopoly on the state's political and economic levers or, in the case of Northern Ireland, one where sectarian division is deeply embedded in the socio-political makeup.

That being said, advocates of the consociational method do not necessarily believe that such divisions will continue in perpetuity. "Proponents of consociationalism", Adrian Guelke observes, "argue that the peace that a consociational settlement is intended to establish, does in the long run allow for a reduction in communal divisions, so that eventually its mechanisms are no longer required."²⁸ As is common with consociational theory, such a position is considerably vague. No signifiers are offered that could suggest a shift to a post-division society, nor is a timeframe suggested. Many post-conflict states that adopted – or adopted something approximating – a consociational model in the mid-20th century have still failed to reject social divisions. On the contrary, they have on several occasions slipped back into civil conflict along those same sectarian lines or continue to be on the precipice of doing so.

1.1 Consociationalism and Northern Ireland

To consociational advocates, Northern Ireland's political, demographic and geographical landscape fulfils most of the conditions set out by Lijphart. Northern Ireland is a considerably small state, the smallest of the four countries within the United Kingdom; has the fewest political representatives in its devolved legislature; and there is a power-sharing agreement between the two segments. Though it does not have a strict multi-party system, the political landscape has drastically changed post-GFA, and previously minor parties such as the anti-sectarian Alliance Party have come to the fore. Likewise, the Northern Irish electoral system uses the single transferable vote (STV) method which ensures representation at the Assembly is proportional.²⁹ However, there are only two segments – as opposed to the minimum of three recommended by Lijphart. The other criterion that has seemingly failed to materialise is the presence of 'overarching loyalties' between Irish Catholics and Protestants.

²⁷ Dixon, P. Is Consociational Theory the Answer to Global Conflict? From the Netherlands to Northern Ireland and Iraq. *Political Studies Review*, 9:3, 2011, p 312

²⁸ Guelke, A. 'Conclusion: Democracy and Ethnic Conflict' in Guelke, A. *Ibid*, p 243

²⁹ Kelly, B. B. *Power-Sharing and Consociational Theory*, (eBook: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), p 300-302

Lijphart, as it happens, made specific reference to Northern Ireland. Writing as the Troubles was at its height, he argued that the British government's attempts to impose consociationalism onto Northern Irish society once the conflict began was unlikely to succeed as it was "alien" to the adversarial British political system. Unfamiliarity with power sharing was exacerbated further by the fact the unionist-dominated Stormont routinely resorted to gerrymandering and malapportionment to weaken Catholic political power. Furthermore, Lijphart was critical of reinstating STV as opposed to other forms of proportional representation as "it maximizes the voters' choice and consequently diminishes the power and flexibility of the segmental leaders."³⁰ As a consequence of this choice, there would be little chance of developing 'overarching loyalties' between the two communities. But most of all, Lijphart was emphatic that it would not succeed so long as one segment – in this case the largest segment – refused to even consider power sharing.³¹ Though both unionists and nationalists eventually did agree to power share, as will be discussed later in this study, it is precisely the political elites of these segments who continue to engender division and polarisation. The initial unwillingness and current apprehension nationalist and unionist parties have towards power sharing may indicate the reason why such 'over-arching' loyalties between the respective groups has not occurred.

Despite these prescient critiques, Lijphart was not against applying the model to Northern Ireland in *principle*. On the contrary, he stressed that the problem with "a consociational solution for Northern Ireland is not that it is theoretically inapplicable-in fact, it is the only logical solution short of partition-but that it cannot be imposed against the will of one of the segments, especially if it is a majority segment."³² Though the majority of people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland voted in favour of the GFA, Protestants have grown increasingly frustrated. A 2002 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey found that 52% of Protestants would have voted against the GFA had there been another referendum (in contrast to 57% polled in 1998 who claimed they would vote for it), whereas only 3% of Catholics would have done so.³³ Protestant discontent in post-GFA Northern Ireland evidently inexorably grew and was expressed most recently by the extremely violent 2021 Belfast riots.

³⁰ Lijphart, A. Ibid, p 136

³¹ Ibid, p 137

³² Ibid

³³ Hayes, B. C. & McAllister, I. Protestant Disillusionment with the Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 13:1, 2004, p 118

Other scholars have since expanded upon Lijphart's theories and have attempted to tweak them to fit the peculiarities of Northern Irish society; the most distinguished being John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary who began writing about the topic during the Troubles. Like Lijphart, McGarry and O'Leary contend that consociationalism is, at its core, an acceptance of the reality of group differences. In fact, McGarry and O'Leary go as far to describe consociationalism "as responsible realism", dismissing "integrationist" viewpoints as being inherently flawed.³⁴ They identify four main integrationist arguments against consociationalism within the Northern Irish setting:

"*Civic republicans* who reject the Agreement argue that unionism is a superficial identity, maintained by the presence of the British state in Ireland . . . *Civic unionists*... who reject the Agreement [and] maintain that most Catholics would be happy to be citizens of the United Kingdom, provided their individual rights and culture were protected . . . [and] *Post-national transformers*... [who] blame regional divisions on social segregation, economic inequality, and ethnocentric appeals by elites in both communities [sic]. They call for policies to promote social integration, increased public spending to tackle the 'material basis' of sectarian identities, and demand that sectarian elites on both sides be challenged by civil society . . . *Electoral integrationists*... which is also sympathetically received by the second and third approaches, emphasizes engineering political institutions to promote integrated identities"³⁵

Naturally, opponents of consociationalism exist across the nationalist and unionist divide. Though the substance of their argumentation differs, the sentiment is surprisingly similar. While civic republicans and civic unionists do not endorse extremist violence, they nonetheless delegitimise the national identity of the other, viewing it either as, in effect, an inauthentic national identity or as a knee-jerk denial of their authentic national identity. These are somewhat condescending arguments, and it is difficult to see how using such rhetoric would engender cross-community support, let alone foster integration. Post-national transformers on the other hand provide a much more nuanced perspective on the causes of sectarian divides. They argue that consociationalism overlooks the fact that it is often the

³⁴ O'Leary, B. and McGarry, J. *The Northern Ireland Conflict: Consociational Engagements*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp 19-20

³⁵ O'Leary, B. and McGarry, J. 'Consociational Theory, Northern Ireland's Conflict, and its Agreement 2. What Critics of Consociation Can Learn from Northern Ireland', *Government and Opposition*, 41:2, 2006, pp 251-252

political elites themselves who engender polarisation and that systematic approaches to bridging social divides are required as opposed to cementing the division as a given.

Paul Dixon has argued both against the effectiveness of consociationalism as a method of conflict resolution and against the contention that the GFA represents consociationalism in action. Indeed, the enthusiastic acceptance of consociational theory in Northern Ireland is a relatively recent phenomenon. Dixon notes that until that consociational advocates had previously held a generally negative outlook on the likelihood of a consociational-based resolution to the conflict, opting instead for a framework that entailed joint authority or repartition. It was only when the Provisional IRA declared a ceasefire in 1994 did they begin exploring this avenue.³⁶ Even so, Dixon argued, the inherently ambiguous nature of consociationalism as a concept has allowed advocates to selectively apply Lijphart's criteria to a wide spectrum of different cases, including Northern Ireland, where it may not have fully applied. This has allowed consociationalism to arbitrarily claim successes as it were when not all Lijphart's criteria could be observed or when the parties in question – particularly those involved in the GFA negotiations – may not have even been influenced by consociational theory at all.³⁷ Though Dixon rejected the belief that consociationalism influenced the rationale behind the peace process, the Northern Ireland Assembly educational literature states that it was the central theory underpinning the peace process.³⁸

Brian Barry likewise notes that consociationalism was initially conceived to address issues in a specific niche of countries. He warned against inappropriately applying the model in other settings as it would potentially exacerbate rather than address communal tensions: “What worries me at present is that attempts to apply the ‘consociational model’ outside its original areas (especially in divided societies such as Northern Ireland or Canada) may make things worse.”³⁹ Barry questioned the wisdom behind electoral reform and using political elites from both communities to form ‘grand coalitions’ in a state founded explicitly along sectarian lines as they generally harnessed the division for their own gain. This was not restricted to Northern Ireland; Barry cites 1956 Sri Lanka “where politicians exploited the ethnic issue (Sinhalese hostility to the Tamil minority) in order to win an electoral advantage and then

³⁶ Dixon, P. Why the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland Is Not Consociational, *The Political Quarterly*, 76:3, 2005, p 360

³⁷ Ibid, p 361-362

³⁸ Northern Ireland Assembly. ‘Power-sharing’. Accessed 26/03/2025: <https://education.niassembly.gov.uk/post-16/snapshots-devolution/belfastgood-friday-agreement/power-sharing>

³⁹ Barry, B. The Consociational Model and Its Dangers, *European Journal of Political Research*, 3, 1975, p 395

found that the powerful communal sentiments they had aroused could - not be contained.”⁴⁰ Such a model would not ease tensions, but would merely reflect the already existing divisions: “it is unrealistic to expect any electoral system to do anything except mirror it (proportional system) as against exaggerating it (single member system).”⁴¹ That the two major parties elected via proportional representation in Northern Ireland – the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein – represent relatively hardline polar opposite positions would appear to attest to this.

Nonetheless, it is evident that there was a significant shift in rhetoric used by the DUP and Sinn Fein after the power sharing agreement had been implemented. Both parties were – and sometimes still are – deeply associated with the bitter sectarian violence of the conflict, but they still generally express a willingness to engage with the other. Kelly notes that the firebrand unionist “[Ian] Paisley focused for decades on provoking violence and promoting hatred against nationalists. However, after becoming one of Northern Ireland’s two executive leaders, he ‘morphed into [a] smiling, avuncular devotee of peace and harmony.’”⁴² Furthermore, Sinn Fein, a party that was widely regarded as having been the ‘political wing’ of the Provisional IRA and which consistently refused to condemn Republican atrocities, would quickly distance itself from the post-GFA Omagh car bombing by dissident Republicans.⁴³ The moderating effect power-sharing has had on discourse between unionist and nationalist parties will be briefly explored further down below, but it nonetheless represent one of the major successes of consociationalism within Northern Ireland.

Critics argue meanwhile that whilst consociationalism may be able to cool the conflict, it has ultimately been ineffective in establishing a permanent peace.⁴⁴ Indeed, whilst the era of car bombings and sectarian massacres is over a quarter century in the past and with no real prospect of returning, the prevalence of sectarian division has not dissipated. On the contrary, a 2018 report from Queen’s Belfast University found that “Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided society” with little demographic changes by way of integration.⁴⁵ Attempts to

⁴⁰ Ibid, p 402

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Kelly, B. B. Ibid, p 311

⁴³ McDonald, H. Sinn Fein breaks with past to condemn 'disgusting' act, *The Guardian*, 16/08/98. Accessed 28/03/2025: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/1998/aug/16/northernireland.henrymcdonald2>

⁴⁴ Jarrett, H. Peace and Ethnic Identity in Northern Ireland: Consociational Power Sharing and Conflict Management (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), p 50

⁴⁵ Duncan, M. Sectarianism in Northern Ireland: A Review, *Ulster University*, 2018, p 25. Accessed 29/03/2025: https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/410227/A-Review-Addressing-Sectarianism-in-Northern-Ireland_FINAL.pdf

proactively tackle the segregation through, for example, integrated housing developments are significantly hindered due to a worry that it may provoke a paramilitary backlash.⁴⁶

In light of this reality, O’Leary and McGarry retort that ethnic division has been cemented within the Northern Irish political system for so long that any alternative system to consociationalism would face insurmountable challenges.⁴⁷ It is not simply that Sinn Fein and the DUP represent something of a caricature of the nationalist and unionist communities, rather they represent views that are commonly held by the electorate. Such sentiment is illustrated most clearly by the prominence of the Orange Order and Gaelic Athletic Association in Northern Irish society.⁴⁸ Even though O’Leary and McGarry dismissed anti-sectarian centrists as a minor force in Northern Irish politics, in recent years “Other” parties that fall outside the nationalist-unionist orbit have seen the biggest jump in vote share. The Alliance Party has undoubtedly been the most successful of the “Other” parties and has since grown to become the third largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly.⁴⁹ What this suggests is that there is in fact potential for a non-sectarian alternative that could transcend the political deadlock.

O’Leary and McGarry do concede that there are clear limitations with consociationalism. They observe that “voluntary consociation cannot work effectively where the rival communities are fundamentally divided over their national as opposed to their linguistic or religious identities, and where they are divided over the legitimacy of the state.”⁵⁰ This perhaps explains the emotive nature of the Irish and Ulster-Scots debates within Northern Ireland and how, rather than bringing unionists and nationalists together, it has allowed political elites to exacerbate tensions between the two communities. Language is not merely a linguistic signifier but has instead morphed into a proxy battle over national identity and the “legitimacy” of the British presence in Northern Ireland.

It is however questionable if national consciousness holds consociationalism back, or if it is precisely consociationalism that engenders national consciousness. Consociationalism in the Northern Ireland context accepts nationalist and unionist identities as a given but does not

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ O’Leary, B. and McGarry, J. Ibid, p 255

⁴⁸ Ibid, p 257

⁴⁹ Tonge, J. Beyond Unionism versus Nationalism: the Rise of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, *The Political Quarterly*, 91:2, 2020 pp 461-462

⁵⁰ O’Leary, B. and McGarry, J. *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) p 304

inquire what brought them into being nor what fuels them. The nuanced history of Protestants, particularly Ulster Scot Presbyterians, organising and leading Irish republican movements⁵¹ is largely swept aside and replaced with one that equates Protestantism with Ulster unionism. Some unionists see no contradiction in referring to themselves as either Irish or Northern Irish and British, yet consociationalism in effect pigeonholes them into one of the two identities. Furthermore, whilst consociationalism is predicated on the assumption that segmental elites will positively influence their own communities to create a more orderly and harmonious society, it has little to say when the same segmental elites cascade down divisive rhetoric.

The overt emphasis of national identity in the peace process has also led to the development of some peculiar identities. In post-GFA Northern Ireland there has been an uptick in what Smithey describes as “highly localised” ethnic identities leading to the creation of elaborate ethnic myths. This has been particularly so for the intersecting nature of Scottish and Irish identity in Ulster.⁵² One UUP politician, for instance, claimed that Scots who moved to Ulster during the Plantation could not have been colonists as they were already descendants from the Irish Gaels who arrived in Scotland in the 5th century.⁵³ Ulster unionists, the rationale goes, were therefore as ‘indigenous’ to Ireland as were the Irish. Post-colonial rhetoric that is often promoted by Irish nationalists is thus subverted and applied to legitimise Ulster unionism.

In contrast to Lijphart’s conception of consociational cleavages which encompasses class, ethnicity, language, and religious identity, consociationalism in Northern Ireland revolves almost exclusively around issues of national identity. This is not in of itself problematic as ethnic polarisation and religious sectarianism are interwoven with the national question. However, in doing so consociationalism dismisses other potentially useful analyses of the conflict, such as class-based or liberal interpretations.⁵⁴ Both academics and former members of paramilitaries have commented on the intersection of class politics and paramilitarism. For instance, former UVF commander Gusty Spence condemned what he saw as the unionist political elite’s mobilisation of the loyalist working class, accusing them of abandoning those

⁵¹ Smithey, L. E. *Unionists, Loyalists, and Conflict Transformation in Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p 54

⁵² Smithey, L. A. *Ibid*, p 164

⁵³ *Ibid* p 163

⁵⁴ Rupert, T. *Ibid*, p 39

whom they had incited once the violence had become unpalatable.⁵⁵ Scholars have observed the link between worsening economic conditions and paramilitary violence within post-GFA Northern Ireland. Kaufmann observed how austerity measures following the 2008 financial crash precipitated a rise in paramilitary activity. Drastic cuts to public spending created a vacuum which was subsequently filled by community welfare programmes initiated by paramilitaries such as the Ulster Defence Association (UDA).⁵⁶ A 2024 report commissioned by the British Parliament further found that paramilitary activity significantly increased “during... the Covid-19 pandemic and, more recently, the cost of living crisis.”⁵⁷ The report added that paramilitary illegal money lending disproportionately targeted “households with low incomes and/or other debts” because they “are more vulnerable to exploitation by paramilitary groups and to problem debt because they are often unable to access cheaper forms of borrowing.”⁵⁸ Thus the legitimacy of paramilitarism in certain areas may not just solely stem from an ideological impetus, but also from a perceived inability to receive support from official channels. Likewise, current local opposition to public funding of Irish and Ulster-Scots initiatives coincides with the ongoing cost of living crisis which could just as easily suggest there is a degree of economic alienation rather than it solely arising from ethno-nationalist sentiment. Yet consociationalism has little to say about the class dynamics of the conflict, and it is quite possible that by limiting itself to an analysis of national identity it inadvertently strengthens and legitimises national identity-based polarisation.

The potential of consociationalism engendering division is relevant to the notion of there being ‘unintended consequences of peacebuilding’ vis-à-vis the promotion of the Irish language and perhaps may show the limits of supporting cultural and linguistic identities through the prism of ethno-nationalist identity. As will be explored further below, attempts to give Irish official recognition and financial support was often met by unionist hostility who accused activists of prioritising Irish identity over British identity. Even though most nationalists do not speak Irish, and most unionists do not speak Ulster-Scots, both forms of speaking have become synonymous with their own respective national identities. This has in large part been due to the GFA’s principle of parity of esteem, whereby any concession given

⁵⁵ Garland, R. *Gusty Spence* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 2001), pp 271-72

⁵⁶ Kaufman, E. The Northern Ireland Peace Process in an Age of Austerity, *The Political Quarterly*, 83:2, 2012, p 205

⁵⁷ Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, The effect of paramilitary activity and organised crime on society in Northern Ireland, *House of Commons*, 24/01/2024, p 14. Accessed 28/03/2025:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43124/documents/214542/default/>

⁵⁸ Ibid

to one group was to be counterbalanced by a concession to the other. Ultimately, the British government acquiesced to unionist demands by including recognition of Ulster-Scots as a ‘minority language’ in the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022⁵⁹ whilst at the same time designating Irish as an ‘official language’.⁶⁰ Despite the recognition, the debate has not waned. What was once an issue of national identity has now become a dispute over what unionists see as the Irish language’s preferential treatment. What this could potentially suggest is that peace overtures have addressed specific problems in isolation rather than as parts of a greater whole. For instance, unionist arguments against the funding allocated to the Irish language could indicate that the class-related issues of the conflict have not yet been addressed.

1.2 The End of Consociationalism?

The extent to which consociationalism has been successful in Northern Ireland can possibly be gauged by the fact that O’Leary, despite having been one of the most prolific advocates of the theory, has since seemingly distanced himself from it. In a recent publication he came out in support of Irish reunification, suggesting that Northern Ireland would either be incorporated into the Republic of Ireland as a devolved government, likely similar to Northern Ireland’s current position in the United Kingdom, or it would be fully integrated.⁶¹ Such a suggestion is all the more ironic considering he had been fiercely critical of integrationists. Certain aspects of unionist culture – particularly the Ulster-Scots language – would have to be protected, O’Leary argues, but the support would be predicated on it being a minority group rather than an equal segment as is the case currently in Northern Ireland.⁶²

O’Leary’s shift from consociationalism to potentially embracing integrationalism is in some ways symptomatic of what Allison McCulloch and Joanne McEvoy describe as “the ‘(possible) end’ stage of” consociationalism-based democracies. They argue that once power-sharing between competing segments reaches an irreconcilable impasse it is likely a sign that it is approaching the end of its “life-cycle”. This is not restricted to academic conjecture; on the contrary, Haughey and Loughran note how “three of the five largest political parties in

⁵⁹ Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, s 3 (78s). Accessed 16/11/2024: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/45/section/3>

⁶⁰ Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, s 2 (78j). Accessed 16/11/2024: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/45/section/2>

⁶¹ O’Leary, B. *Making Sense of a United Ireland: Should it Happen? How Might it Happen?* (eBook: Penguin Books, 2022), p 131; p 140

⁶² *Ibid*, pp 289-292

[Northern Ireland], for example, have called for an end to so-called ‘mandatory coalition’.⁶³ This was a rather surprising move considering power-sharing is the most central principle underpinning the GFA. That being said, whilst public support for power-sharing has wavered slightly, nationalists and unionists generally prefer it over direct rule from Britain.⁶⁴

Such pessimism over the continued feasibility of consociationalism could be justified. Since the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union (EU) in 2015 there has been a significant increase in public disorder, particularly among the unionist and loyalist communities. A bone of contention that quickly developed was the question of the soft border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland that was enshrined under the GFA. As the Republic of Ireland is an EU member state, a problem emerged regarding the EU’s protectionist trade policy. To overcome this the British and Irish governments adopted the Northern Ireland Protocol which ensured there would be no land border between the Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, but it in effect created a de facto sea border between the island of Ireland and Britain. Feeling under threat that they were being separated from the United Kingdom, loyalists engaged in rioting and physical violence. However, the main targets of their ire were not nationalists or Catholics, but the police and security forces.⁶⁵

Consociationalism may well have been an effective means to bring order back to Northern Irish society in the aftermath of the conflict, but it has thus far been unable to effectively address the core issues of the conflict vis-a-vis national identity. True, consociationalism has succeeded insofar as regulating relations between the two communities and providing a mechanism through which dialogue can be facilitated, however the society nonetheless remain very polarised. Indeed, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, consociationalism has inadvertently introduced new dimensions to the Northern Ireland conflict precisely due to its prioritisation of mutually exclusive group identities. Issues relating to language, which were originally not a defining feature of the conflict, have since been appropriated by actors on both sides and have been framed as if they were an integral component to its cause and

⁶³ Haughey, S. & Loughran, T. Public opinion and consociationalism in Northern Ireland: Towards the ‘end stage’ of the power-sharing lifecycle?, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relation*, 26:1, 2024, p 188

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Police Service of Northern Ireland, Update on Belfast disorder, *PSNI*, 03/04/21. Accessed 13/05/2025: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210403150425/https://www.psnipolice.uk/news/Latest-News/030421-update-on-belfast-disorder32/>

perpetuation. Overall, the often-toxic debates related to language have added yet another layer on top of almost 30 years of entrenched and legitimised ethnic division.

Chapter 2: Research Design and Data

This chapter will explain the methodological process behind the study. To begin with, it will clearly lay out the goals and projected results of the study. Following on, the chapter will justify the use of adopting a single-case study, the method of analysis, and the time-period form which sources of the study have been collated. In doing so it will provide a quick non-exhaustive critical overview of these sources by identifying their strengths and weaknesses.

2.1 Research Question and Expectations

In short, this study seeks to ask: how and to what extent has the status of the Irish language in Northern Ireland gained more prominence throughout the course of peacebuilding since 1998? To this end the study will be split into three interconnected areas of analysis. The first will trace the post-conflict legal development of Irish language recognition. The second area will provide a quantitative overview of Irish language initiatives, specifically Irish-medium schools and bilingual road signs, within Northern Ireland. Lastly, the third area will provide a qualitative analysis of unionist opposition to such initiatives, highlighting the common themes in their arguments and how they shifted in response to the legal and political developments. It is to be expected that Irish has in fact become more prominent since the signing of the GFA and that notions of parity of esteem have inadvertently fuelled divisive and vitriol discourse.

2.2 Methods

This study intends to look at the peace process of the Northern Ireland conflict as a single case. The peace process in Ireland had many similarities to other contemporary ethnic conflicts, but the way in which the authorities have attempted to resolve the violence has also had its own peculiarities. The Northern Ireland peace process has been quite peculiar in relation to other concurrent conflict areas such as Rwanda and Bosnia. In Bosnia, for instance, a system of de facto political, ethnic and educational segregation in the form of “constituent peoples” was imposed.⁶⁶ At the other extreme end, the post-genocide Rwandan government made a concerted effort at unifying the country and people which entailed,

⁶⁶ OSCE Mission to Bosnia. ““Two Schools Under One Roof”: The Most Visible Example of Discrimination in Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, 2018, pp 7-8. Accessed 15/10/2024: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/8/404990.pdf>

among other things, the outlawing of Hutu and Tutsi ethnic categories.⁶⁷ Whilst segregation continues to permeate throughout Northern Irish society, it has not, as mentioned above, been forced upon the population. A significant feature of the peace process was that Northern Ireland was to remain part of the United Kingdom, albeit with a single devolved power-sharing government. At the same time, the peace process reaffirmed the legitimacy of the unionist and nationalist ethno-political identities, and pursuant of the peace agreements, beginning with the Downing Street Declaration, Northern Ireland residents had a right to hold a petition on reunification provided there was a democratic mandate to do so.⁶⁸ In a sense, neither nationalists or unionists could claim victory, nor could they concede defeat. Some of their objectives were met, though a reunited Ireland and the destruction of the Republican movement proved incapable to achieve. Considering this, a cross comparison between Northern Ireland and other post-conflict divided societies – such as Bosnia – could and have been made, but as the author lacks the ability to read Serbo-Croat, such an analysis would be superficial at best. Fortunately, as almost the entirety of the debate in Northern Ireland is in English, this allows for a much deeper analysis. This adds yet another dimension to the puzzle relatively unique to Northern Ireland – why are people whose mother tongue is English, and who by and large do not speak Irish, so passionate about recognition? Perhaps, as suggested above, Irish does not just merely signify a linguistic identity but is considered to be a central component of a much wider ethno-nationalist identity.

Two methods of interpreting the raw data will be used. To make sense of the statistics of IME enrolment and funding, as well as to a lesser degree bilingual street signage, descriptive statistics will be applied to clearly lay out the trajectory of state support for Irish language. This will identify trends which can then be extrapolated more widely. Secondly, critical discourse analysis (CDA) will be utilised to highlight how unionist actors have reacted to the state's endeavours to promote Irish. It will be an effective tool to analyse both how political parties interpret the political landscape and how they convey their worldview. Sources of qualitative analysis can include political speeches, manifestos, policies, interviews, political advertisements and speeches.⁶⁹ However, CDA is an effective tool to analyse other mediums

⁶⁷ Moreno, M. 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Approaches to Ethnicity in the Ethiopian and Rwandan Peacebuilding Processes', *Princeton University*, 26/05/23. Accessed 14/10/2024: <https://jpia.princeton.edu/news/dont-ask-dont-tell-approaches-ethnicity-ethiopian-and-rwandan-peacebuilding-processes>

⁶⁸ Joint Declaration 1993 (Downing St. Declaration). Accessed 04/02/2025: <https://www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/alldfawebsitemedia/ourrolesandpolicies/northernireland/peace-process--joint-declaration-1993.pdf>

⁶⁹ Herman, M. G. "Chapter 10: Content analysis" in Klotz, A. and Prakash, D. (Eds.), *Qualitative methods in international relations: A pluralist guide* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p 152

such as newspapers articles, whether they be op-eds or editorials, as it can tap into the socio-political stimuli behind the way in which they frame information for public consumption.⁷⁰ CDA is predicated upon understanding “how social and political inequalities are manifest in and reproduced through discourse.”⁷¹ This is especially appropriate as unionists who traditionally had dominated Northern Irish politics and society have frequently used many mediums – newspapers, speeches, electoral campaigns, interviews – to express alarm at the supposed dangers recognition of the Irish language would bring to wide audiences, and later using the same mediums to criticise the amount funding allocated to supporting the Irish language initiatives once those dangers failed to materialise. They fear, as it were, an inversion is taking place whereby their previous dominance is being usurped by the meteoric rise of republican parties such as Sinn Fein.

2.3 Data

The period of analysis will be between 2017 – the second collapse of Stormont – to 2024. This will provide a rich and wide array of viewpoints without being diluted by the sheer overwhelming quantity of discourse. It is an especially pertinent timeframe as it will elucidate the evolving nature of Unionist opposition, particularly their arguments that were used against proposed National Assembly legislation that would have granted Irish official status, and how it has shifted since the British Parliament passed the Identity and Language Act 2022 on the Assembly’s behalf.

A wide array of sources has been utilised in pursuit of researching the topic at hand. The main primary sources of analysis include international agreements and domestic legislation; newspaper editorials and op-eds by leading Northern Irish politicians; and statistics from the Department of Education (DE) and Education Authority (EA) and Belfast City Council. Though not utilised to the same extent, the analysis is supplemented with party publications such as manifestos, as well as parliamentary speeches and debates, and official government departmental reports. As the issue at hand is ongoing, journalistic reportage has also been used to reflect the wider debates and the rhetoric that is used by those who opposed Irish language recognition and who continue to oppose state support for Irish language initiatives.

⁷⁰ Dirks, U. Critical Discourse Analysis of the Iraq Conflict in the British and Germán 'Quality' Press', *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, 19, 2006, pp 102-103

⁷¹ Wooffitt, R. *Conversation Analysis & Discourse Analysis: A Comparative and Critical Introduction* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), p 137

The legal starting point of this study is the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998 which is widely regarded as the framework that put an end to the Troubles. However, between 2002-2007 Stormont collapsed and another framework called the St Andrews Agreement OF 2006 was implemented which again reaffirmed the Northern Ireland's Assembly obligation to uphold the stipulations of the GFA. Following the second collapse between 2017-2020, a final agreement was signed called New Decade, New Approach which in many ways served as the basis for a language act. In terms of domestic legislation, the two main legislative sources will be the Northern Ireland Act 1998 – which codified the GFA's stipulations into British law – and the Identity and Language Act 2022 which granted Irish official recognition.

The paper intends to measure state support for Irish by tracking the development of state support for Irish in the public sphere. This will entail looking at the number of Irish Medium Education schools built, the number of students enrolled in them, and the amount of state funding from Northern Irish bodies that has been allocated to them. It will also, to a lesser degree, look at other public expressions of Irish, namely bilingual road signs though this will be restricted to Belfast as the local council, which oversees the construction, appears to be the only one (out of 11) that has publicly laid out its implementation of this area. Though it is relatively restrictive, the East-West sectarian divide in Belfast makes it a very appropriate case study. Yet, given that the data is somewhat hard to come by its inclusion will largely serve as a means to illustrate how wide-encompassing promotion of Irish in the public sphere is. Statistics on the number of schools and enrolled students are held by the DE, whereas public funding is overseen by the EA. EA funding is not easily accessible, though a Freedom of Information (FOI) request by the author has been utilised vis-à-vis funding of IME and a copy of the response will be included in the annex below.

Measuring unionist responses to these endeavours requires consulting a wide array of sources, from newspaper editorials, op-eds, interviews, and Parliamentary speeches. Northern Ireland has a rich array of national and local news outlets that reflect the wide spectrum of social opinion ranging from republicanism to somewhat sympathetic to loyalism. Unionist Northern Irish daily newspapers with considerably different editorial stances will be the consulted. Principal among them will be *News Letter*. It is the oldest English-language daily general newspaper in the world and had a daily circulation of 5,590 in 2024.⁷² It has

⁷² Maher, B. Ibid

repeatedly published articles on or by members of the Loyalist Communities Council loyalist which represents loyalist paramilitaries such as the UDA, UVF and Red Hand Commando (RHC).⁷³ Whilst the newspaper does not explicitly embrace loyalism or paramilitarism, it is more than willing to provide a platform for it. It is also noticeably more hostile to Irish language recognition, heavily reporting on the DUP's past and the Traditional Unionist Voice's (TUV) current opposition to recognition and funding of it. That being said, the newspaper also routinely publishes 'letters' from readers who express disagreement with their opinion pieces and editorials, including those on the Irish language.⁷⁴ The second newspaper that will be looked at is the *Belfast Telegraph* has traditionally been one of the largest daily newspapers in Northern Ireland, though it stopped having its daily sales officially audited several years ago.⁷⁵ In 2020 its digital content had 8,500 paid subscribers and 500,000 daily page views by 2022.⁷⁶ Compared to *News Letter*, it is considered to hold moderate unionist editorial stance and is thus widely circulated among the unionist and nationalist communities.⁷⁷ Despite its unionist stance, it is strongly critical of loyalist paramilitarism and of sectarianism in general. As *News Letter* appears to be almost exclusively aimed at the unionist community, most of the unionist media responses will be sourced from here. In addition, Parliamentary speeches and political manifestos will also be consulted, though the latter will mostly be applied in a supplementary role. To further contextualise and scrutinise unionist responses, reports commissioned by government departments and local education institutions (Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University) will also be referenced.

The sources that will be used in Chapter 3 to measure both the implementation of Irish language initiatives and unionist responses vary in reliability. On the far end of reliability are the statistics provided by official government departments and local councils, both those that

⁷³ Campbell, D. Loyalist Communities Council chair: 'Tories need to know our patience with Protocol has worn thin', *News Letter*, 06/10/2021. Accessed 21/03/2025: <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/politics/lcc-tories-must-realise-patience-over-protocol-has-worn-thin-3409232>

⁷⁴ Maloney, T. An outrageous and hyperbolic opinion piece on the Irish language, *News Letter*, 13/07/2017. Accessed 21/03/2025: <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/opinion/an-outrageous-and-hyperbolic-opinion-piece-on-the-irish-language-1100624>

⁷⁵ McDonald, G. Irish News maintains position as UK and Ireland's best-selling regional daily newspaper, *Irish News*, 04/03/2025. Accessed 18/03/2025: <https://www.irishnews.com/news/business/irish-news-still-leads-sales-race-with-7m-copies-6KKBMLQARVAFLIVG4LL4U4IB2A/>

⁷⁶ Majid, A. Paywalls in UK local news: How two publishers are breaking the mould, *Press Gazette*, 23/02/2025. Accessed 18/03/2024: <https://pressgazette.co.uk/paywalls/paywalls-uk-local-news-belfast-telegraph-highland-news-and-media/>

⁷⁷ Wilson, R. Democratic Dialogue Papers: The Media and Intrastate Conflict in Northern Ireland, *Conflict and Politics in Northern Ireland – Ulster University*. Accessed 10/03/2025 <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/dd/papers/media.htm>

are publicly available and those which the author requested through the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000. FOI request can be considered broadly accurate insofar as they illustrate what it is the researcher is looking for. Furthermore, government departments and bodies are legally obligated to provide the requested information if it is deemed to be in the public interest. However, the researcher must know what it is they are asking for when making such a request. If they inadvertently omit a piece of information, then they will not receive as full a dataset, and there is no obligation for the department or body to go above and beyond of what has been asked of them. On the other end are the op-eds, editorials, interviews and party publications. Naturally a much higher degree of shrewdness is required when analysing these documents. One must be incredibly wary of how their political bias influences their perception of events but also be conscious of the fact that it is not the researcher to whom they are addressing. Exaggerations, hyperbole and ambiguity are hallmarks of any political medium when communicating with their own audiences. Fortunately, the accuracy of what these actors say is not a central point of analysis in this study – though it will be contextualised and at times challenged through empirical data – but instead the sentiment behind it.

This study seeks to operationalise the research question through two methods. Firstly, the study will look at post-conflict agreements and legislation and how they have cemented the association of the Irish language with Irish national identity. It will also look at how these agreements and legislation have been implemented in its most controversial aspects, namely the state funding of Irish language initiatives. Secondly, the study will assess unionist responses to these initiatives, comparing their statements to official datasets, but also analysing the rhetoric used and how they themselves have come to frame Irish as a component of Irish national identity along with offering explanations as to why they have done so.

Chapter 3: Analysis

The two previous chapters laid out the theoretical and methodological foundations of this research. Now begins the fundamental analysis of how and why the Irish language has become increasingly prominent in the peace process. To that end, the following chapter seeks to briefly document the deeply complex relationship between the Irish language and Ulster Protestant community since the mid-19th and early 20th century. In doing so, it will show how the language has become an increasingly defining feature of the divide between the nationalist and unionist communities, even though this had not previously been the case. From there, the chapter will delve into how post-conflict arrangements have themselves played a decisive role in legitimising the language's current framing in the divide, and how the stipulations of the agreements and legislation have been implemented. Finally, there will be an analysis of the rhetoric unionist politicians and activists have amplified against recognition and state support of the Irish language, and how this influenced their perception of Irish in relation to Irish nationalism.

3.1 Irish, Unionism and Nationalism

The process of legislating the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act was a result of 5 years' worth of political deadlock. The rift was precipitated by the Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness's resignation in 2017 due to a separate political scandal, though it quickly snowballed into a wider debate on the Irish language. Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams refused to find a replacement for McGuinness without the DUP's support for an Act that would grant official recognition to the Irish language.⁷⁸ With both sides becoming increasingly entrenched Stormont subsequently collapsed, and it was only with the 2020 "New Decade, New Approach" agreement that a new power-sharing executive was formed which the signatories pledged to put their backing behind a framework to push for legislation to promote Irish.

Debates over the Irish language did not appear from a vacuum; for centuries Irish has had an ambivalent relationship with Ulster Protestants. The Penal Laws which disenfranchised the indigenous Irish Catholics also attacked expressions of their cultural identity, including the expressions of their language. By the end of the 17th century the Catholic clergy was

⁷⁸ Dunlevy, D. A. Learning Irish amid controversy: how the Irish Language Act debate has impacted learners of Irish in Belfast, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 2023, 44:10, pp 998-99

essentially banned, and Catholics' freedom of worship was severely curtailed.⁷⁹ Likewise, the Irish language was marginalised, and it was eventually made illegal to use it in a court of law, the legislation for which was only finally revoked in 2025.⁸⁰

However, throughout the 19th century – following its revival - many Ulster Protestants would go on to incorporate the Irish language into their own identities. Indeed, the language was likewise embraced by the Northern Irish Presbyterian Assembly, which in 1833 referred to it as “our sweet and memorable mother tongue” and by the 1840s Presbyterian ministers in training were required to learn it.⁸¹ So common had the language become that by 1900 the British government allowed the language to become an elective subject in Irish schools.⁸² Even so, interest in the Irish language amongst even loyalist paramilitaries during the Troubles continued. Some imprisoned progressive loyalist paramilitary men learned the Irish language during their incarceration and wore their Fáinne badge – a mark of language proficiency – with pride.⁸³ Most peculiarly, the loyalist paramilitary organisation RHC adopted the Irish moto “Lámh Dearg Abú” (Red Hand to Victory).⁸⁴ It appears then that for some loyalists the Irish language has at least an important place alongside their British identity.

The association of the language with Irish nationalism – often by people who did not speak Irish – became most acute in the 1990s, and it is within this context that the GFA and subsequent agreements put more focus on its supposed relation to the conflict. Based on research primarily conducted between 1993 and 1995, one study found that a central “belief held by many Gaeilgeoiri [Irish speakers] is that language is the single most important element of national identity. This belief has a powerful symbolic dimension, so much so that monoglot native English speakers describe Irish as 'my native tongue'.”⁸⁵ Though it should be stressed that Irish speakers represented a minority, such a shift had a significant impact on the

⁷⁹ McGrath, C. I. “The Penal Laws: Origins, Purpose, Enforcement and Impact” in Costella, K. & Howlin, N. (eds), *Ibid*, p 16

⁸⁰ Ó Caollaí, É. British government repeals penal-era law banning Irish language in courts, *Irish News*, 26/02/2025. Accessed 15/03/2025: <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2025/02/26/british-government-repeals-penal-era-law-banning-irish-language-in-courts/>

⁸¹ Coinnigh, M. M., Ervine, L. & Deeds, P. “The Irish language in Belfast: The role of a language in post-conflict resolution” in Evans, M., Jeffries, L. & O’Driscoll, J. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Language in Conflict*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2019), p 563

⁸² Mac Ionnrachtaig, F. *Language, Resistance and Revival: Republican Prisoners and the Irish Language in the North of Ireland* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), p 69

⁸³ Garland, R., p 32

⁸⁴ Coinnigh, M. M., Ervine, L. & Deeds, P. *Ibid*

⁸⁵ O’Reilly, C. C. The Irish Language- Litmus Test for Equality? Competing Discourses of Identity, Parity of Esteem and the Peace Process, *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 6, 1996, p 158

way in which unionists – and particularly loyalists – began to perceive Irish. Another study carried out in Derry in 1994 found an overwhelmingly negative response towards the language from the loyalist community. When one interviewee was asked if they had ever been interested in learning the language they replied in the negative, describing it instead as “Taig [an ethnic slur for Irish Catholics] talk.”⁸⁶ The interviewee added that their hatred of Irish speakers stemmed from their belief that “they’re all in the IRA and I’m a loyalist, and that’s the story.”⁸⁷ Following the enthusiasm and optimism of the signing of the GFA in 1998, tempers appeared to cool. An additional survey in 2000 “found that only 21% of Ulster Protestants regarded the Irish language and culture as ‘very offensive’ or ‘fairly offensive.’”⁸⁸ Since this honeymoon period unionists’ perceptions of the Irish language have significantly deteriorated, with many either viewing the language as a front for republicanism – and by extension reunification – or accusing the post-conflict arrangement of prioritising Irish – and Irish identity – over what they see as their own cultural identifiers. Some unionists however continue to champion it, the most prominent being activist Linda Ervine, the sister-in-law of the leading UVF and PUP figure David Ervine.⁸⁹ It is noteworthy that unionist responses to Irish correlated with what they perceived was a weakening of their political standing within Northern Ireland; the post-GFA pushback to the Irish language has coincided with an increasingly cynical viewing of the agreement by large segments of the unionist community. Brexit has further exacerbated tensions, and a feeling among the unionist and loyalist communities of having been given the short end of the stick in comparison to their nationalist counterparts vis-à-vis the Northern Ireland Protocol has also likely contributed to a much more hostile reception to support for the language. The source of such feelings will be explored and analysed in the analysis of unionist responses to Irish language initiatives.

3.2 Parity of Esteem

Parity of esteem is the central theme underpinning the GFA, Northern Ireland Act 1998; the 2006 St Andrews Agreement; the 2020 New Decade, New Approach Agreement; and the Identity and Language Act 2022. No succinct definition of what parity of esteem entails is provided by any of the aforementioned documents. Rather, it is somewhat provided as a given which has led to a degree of confusion and arguably contributed to the intersection

⁸⁶ Mac Póilin, A. “Taig Talk” in Ní Bhaoill, R. (eds) *Our Tangled Speech: Essays on Language and Culture* (Ulster Historical Foundation: eBook, 2018), p 20

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p 21

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p 23

⁸⁹ Fox, R., Cronin, M. & Ó Conchubhair, B. *Routledge International Handbook of Irish Studies*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), p 89

of the Irish language with Irish national identity. The concept is explicitly mentioned four times in the GFA and once in the Identity and Language Act 2022. The GFA primarily focussed on the principle in the context of power-sharing and fair consideration in policy matters which affected both communities, declaring:

“that whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, the power of the sovereign government with jurisdiction there shall be exercised with rigorous impartiality on behalf of all the people in the diversity of their identities and traditions and shall be founded on the principles of full respect for, and equality of, civil, political, social and cultural rights, of freedom from discrimination for all citizens, and of parity of esteem and of just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos and aspirations of both communities...”⁹⁰

Parity of esteem therefore covered a wide range of socio-political, cultural and – by extension – linguistic identities that the signatories promised to both promote and treat equally. The concept however was not without its critics. The desire to promote parity of esteem between one community whose identity is intimately linked with a particular state and another community whose identity is linked with another has proven to be difficult to reconcile. Richard English was one such early critic who argued that it would be difficult to disentangle cultural recognition that parity of esteem sought to establish with the political ambitions of the unionist and nationalist communities: “In Northern Ireland, to accord respect (or to give support) to cultural traditions is to give support - in varying degrees - to political aspirations and instincts.”⁹¹ There were several reasons for this. Firstly, English argued that cultural identity was interwoven with national identity: “For the state to accord equal legitimacy on the one hand to a tradition whose instinct and drive is to support and maintain the state and, on the other, to a tradition aiming at some form of dismemberment of the state seems to me fundamentally incoherent.” Parity of esteem in such a context would ultimately mean that any concessions would be inherently more beneficial to the Nationalist community as it implied the legitimacy of the British state could feasibly be questioned. Secondly, he questioned the

⁹⁰ The Belfast Agreement: An Agreement Reached at the Northern Ireland Multi-Talks on Northern Ireland, p 28. Accessed 30/04/2025: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/619500728fa8f5037d67b678/The_Belfast_Agreement_An_Agreement_Reached_at_the_Multi-Party_Talks_on_Northern_Ireland.pdf

⁹¹ English, R. 'Cultural Traditions' and Political Ambiguity, *The Irish Review* (1986-), 15, 1994, p 99

wisdom behind promoting British-branded cultural pluralism in a society that was as extremely divided in Northern Ireland:

“The conditions within which diversity can be relished rather than feared are either those in which the minority cultures do not exist in a hostile relation to the state or those in which they are simply not strong /numerous enough to pose a serious threat to the stability of that state. Neither of these conditions obtains in Northern Ireland. The notion that pluralism on the British model can work in Northern Ireland seems to me to be extremely naïve...”⁹²

As will be discussed further below, this has become especially pertinent in relation to the issue of Irish language recognition. Through parity of esteem, Irish (and Ulster-Scots for that matter) has ceased to be merely a linguistic signifier but has since become increasingly perceived as an expression of Irish national identity. This in turn has led to the Unionists’ semi-successful attempts to counterbalance Irish recognition with Ulster-Scots recognition which they view as more authentically British. Such sentiment was elucidated as far back in the 2003 UUP manifesto which explicitly called for “parity of esteem for Ulster Scots”, presumably in relation to that of Irish.⁹³

The concept of parity of esteem was finally enshrined in British parliamentary law in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 under Part 7A National and Cultural Identity. Continuing on from the stipulations of the GFA, it held:

“A public authority must in carrying out functions relating to Northern Ireland have due regard to the national and cultural identity principles... The “national and cultural identity principles” are... the principle that public authorities should encourage and promote reconciliation, tolerance and meaningful dialogue between those with different national and cultural identities with a view to promoting parity of esteem, mutual respect and understanding, and cooperation.”⁹⁴

The effect of this Act was incredibly influential. Not only were the British and devolved Northern Irish governments to “encourage and promote reconciliation, tolerance and

⁹² Ibid, p 101

⁹³ Ulster Unionist Party. “Ulster Unionists Manifesto 2003”. *Conflict and Politics in Northern Ireland*. Accessed 16/11/2024: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/uup/uup03man.pdf>

⁹⁴ Northern Ireland Act 1998, Part 7a. Accessed 22/04/2025: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/part/7A>

meaningful dialogue between those with different national and cultural identities with a view to promoting parity of esteem” as had been agreed under the GFA, but so too were local city authorities. This too was precedent-setting as local authorities now hold a significant amount of sway over the promotion of Irish in the public sphere.

Parity of esteem is not specifically mentioned in the St Andrews Agreement of 2006, though its sentiment is still apparent. The 2006 Agreement was made after the 2002 Stormont collapse when Sinn Fein’s offices were raided by the police over allegations that they were being utilised by a Provisional IRA spy ring.⁹⁵ As a result the DUP pulled out of the power-sharing agreement. Naturally, the St Andrews Agreement was much more focussed on reinstating the power-sharing in Stormont rather than promoting national and cultural issues. Regardless, the Agreement still reaffirmed that “The British Government... agreed to take forward a number of measures to build confidence in both communities and to pursue a shared future for Northern Ireland in which the culture, rights and aspirations of all are respected and valued, free from sectarianism, racism and intolerance.”⁹⁶ As would be a common feature in many of these agreements, there was a degree of strategic ambiguity.

The power-sharing agreement collapsed yet again in 2017, this time when Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness as a result of failed energy project.⁹⁷ It was the 2020 New Decade, New Approach agreement which revived the power-sharing agreement again and reaffirmed the importance of parity of esteem, though it did so in the context of “national and identity” rather than governance:

“The parties affirm the need to respect the freedom of all persons in Northern Ireland to choose, affirm, maintain and develop their national and cultural identity and to celebrate and express that identity in a manner which takes into account the sensitivities of those with different national or cultural identities and respects the rule of law. They also affirm the need to encourage and promote reconciliation, tolerance and meaningful dialogue between those of different national and cultural identities in

⁹⁵ McEvoy, J. *Power-Sharing Executives: Governing in Bosnia, Macedonia and Northern Ireland*, (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015) p 85

⁹⁶ Agreement at St Andrews, Human Rights, Equality, Victims and other issues, s. 8. Accessed 25/04/2025: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7b17bee5274a319e77cf89/st_andrews_agreement-2.pdf

⁹⁷ Heenan, D. & Birrell, D. Exploring Responses to the Collapse of Devolution in Northern Ireland 2017–2020 through the Lens of Multi-Level Governance, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 75, 2022, p 597

Northern Ireland with a view to promoting parity of esteem, mutual respect, understanding and cooperation. These principles will be reflected in legislation.”⁹⁸

The last sentence is especially essential in understanding how the Identity and Language Act came into being as it was through the New Decade, New Approach that the framework for a language Act was established. The power-sharing agreement was therefore brought down largely because of issues relating to language, but it was also ironically revived due to a pledge by both parties to legislate something that would give both communities the ability to “celebrate and express... different national and cultural identities.” The Identity and Language Act of 2022 was consequently a combination of all previous post-conflict agreements. It incorporated the parity of esteem of the GFA and Northern Ireland Act 1998 – particularly Part 7A which it copied verbatim.⁹⁹ However, this time it was exclusively focussed on national and cultural identity. The implications this has had on the wider language debate will also be explored in the next section. What is quite clear though is that from its conception parity of esteem did not seek to establish a “shared identity”, instead, as Nagel and Clancy point out, it sought to create a framework for a “co-identity” in which both nationalist and unionist identity could exist alongside from one another, albeit with relative independence.¹⁰⁰

3.3 Language and Ethno-nationalism

If the conflict was primarily over ethno-national identity, it begs the question as to why and how a language that had previously been accepted and spoken by members of both communities became gradually embroiled within the wider debate over Irishness and Britishness. Below it will be argued that the international agreements and domestic legislation that sought to end the conflict unwittingly cemented the gradual polarisation between the nationalist and unionist communities vis-à-vis Irish particularly through the notion of parity of esteem. Furthermore, it will be shown that by counterbalancing Irish recognition with the recognition of Ulster-Scots as a means to navigate parity of esteem, the Act in effect ultimately associated the languages with the nationalist and unionist communities respectively in a mutually exclusive manner.

⁹⁸ New Decade, New Approach, 2020, p 15. Accessed 28/04/2025: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e178b56ed915d3b06f2b795/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf

⁹⁹ Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, Part 1, National and Cultural Identity and Language. Accessed 25/04/2025: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/45/part/1>

¹⁰⁰ Nagel, J. & Clancy, M. C. Ibid, p 84

The GFA was instrumental in bringing about political parity of esteem which has, despite several collapses of the power-sharing framework, remained in place. The Agreement however was the first in many documents to erroneously cement the Irish language as a factor of the conflict that had to be redressed alongside that of the political settlement. Along with the protection of national identity and parity of esteem, section 3 of the GFA puts specific focus on the importance of Irish and Ulster-Scots:

“All participants recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland.”¹⁰¹

What is particularly noteworthy about this section is that it was the first explicit acknowledgment of Irish and Ulster-Scots in the context of parity of esteem. Irish and Ulster-Scots were not just languages in of themselves with which both communities had a shared history of using but were instead recognised by the signatories as a mutually exclusive central component of nationalist and unionist national identities. Section 4 of the GFA goes onto explain the obligations and responsibilities of Westminster and Stormont in relation to the two languages:

“In the context of active consideration currently being given to the UK signing the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the British Government will in particular in relation to the Irish language, where appropriate and where people so desire it... take resolute action to promote the language; facilitate and encourage the use of the language in speech and writing in public and private life where there is appropriate demand...”¹⁰²

The 2006 St Andrews Agreement took the issue of language a step further. It held that Westminster would “introduce an Irish Language Act reflecting on the experience of Wales and Ireland and work with the incoming Executive to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language” and acknowledged “the need to enhance and develop the Ulster Scots language, heritage and culture and will support the incoming Executive in taking this

¹⁰¹ The Belfast Agreement: An Agreement Reached at the Northern Ireland Multi-Talks on Northern Ireland, p 19. Accessed 02/04/2025: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/619500728fa8f5037d67b678/The_Belfast_Agreement_An_Agreement_Reached_at_the_Multi-Party_Talks_on_Northern_Ireland.pdf

¹⁰² Ibid, p 19-20

forward.”¹⁰³ Though the government’s declaration was clear in support of Irish (and Ulster-Scots), it was still nonetheless considerably vague in terms of the when and how.

The Identity and Language Act was therefore a culmination of what had been established in successive agreements and legislation of the previous 24 years. Based on the unanimous opposition to the Act by Unionist parties in Northern Ireland – including the UUP which had championed the GFA – it would be easy to believe the Act was in fact a direct attack on Unionist identity. It is worth, then, to briefly analyse the relevant stipulations of the Act itself. Like the GFA, the Act acknowledged:

“the principle that everybody in Northern Ireland is free to... choose, affirm, maintain and develop their national and cultural identity, [...] express and celebrate that identity in a manner that takes account of the sensitivities of those with different national and cultural identities and respects the rule of law, and... the principle that public authorities should encourage and promote reconciliation, tolerance and meaningful dialogue between those with different national and cultural identities with a view to promoting parity of esteem, mutual respect and understanding, and cooperation.”¹⁰⁴

A shrewd reader will observe that this is largely a verbatim extract from the New Decade, New Approach agreement from 2 years previously, presumably because it was believed representatives of the DUP and Sinn Fein had already signed it and therefore there would be less chance of there being opposition. In any case, from the get-go “national and cultural identity” – not linguistic identity – was understood to be the central focus underpinning the Act, the expressions of which was principally through language. Most pertinently, it provided official recognition of the Irish language which entailed “the appointment of an Irish Language Commissioner” whose “aim... in exercising functions... is to enhance and protect the use of the Irish language by public authorities in the provision of services to the public or a section of the public in Northern Ireland.”¹⁰⁵ Through parity of esteem the Ulster Scots language was also given similar – though importantly not the same – concessions despite the fact the GFA made no reference to an Ulster Scots ‘language’ per se. However, rather than

¹⁰³ Agreement at St Andrews, Annex B. Accessed 05/04/2025:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7b17bee5274a319e77cf89/st_andrews_agreement-2.pdf

¹⁰⁴ Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 s 2 (78l). Accessed: 03/04/2025:
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/45/section/2>

¹⁰⁵ Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 s 2 (78j). Accessed: 03/04/2025:
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/45/section/2>

being a separate *sui generis* identity, Ulster Scots was instead amalgamated with the much wider “Ulster British tradition”. Like Irish, there would be “a Commissioner for the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition”, but it would focus specifically on Ulster Scots to “enhance and develop the language, arts and literature associated with the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition in Northern Ireland (in this Part referred to as “the relevant language, arts and literature”).”¹⁰⁶ Unlike Irish, however, Ulster-Scots would not be recognised as an official language in its own. The motives and implications of equating Ulster Scots with an “Ulster British” identity will be explored further below, but it nonetheless cemented the association of the Irish language with the nationalist community and Ulster-Scots with the unionist community despite the fact the communities had a shared heritage of using both Irish and Ulster-Scots.

3.4 Implementation

Since the signing of the GFA there has been a remarkable uptick in public displays of Irish alongside that of English. This has taken two main albeit highly politicised forms of implementation: bilingual street signs and IME. Though the revival of the Irish language – including IME – in Northern Ireland can trace its origins to the 1970s, the foundational document that underpins its revival and promotion at a state level is the GFA. Pursuant of the GFA, through which several educational reforms were passed. The Education (Northern Ireland) Order of 1998 was the first which conferred authority to the UK Department of Education “to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education”.¹⁰⁷ Later that same year, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 devolved powers such as education to the Northern Irish Assembly and similarly held that the executive was to “adopt a strategy setting out how it proposes to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language.”¹⁰⁸ The Department of Education (DE) was originally tasked with overseeing the construction and funding of IME, though the Education Authority took over this role in 2015. The DE still allocates the EA the funding to carry out this role.

According to Belfast City Council, between 1998 and July 2022 229 bilingual street signs were installed throughout non- Gaeltacht (non-Irish speaking) areas of Belfast. Of these, 226

¹⁰⁶ Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, s 3 (78s). Accessed 16/11/2024: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/45/section/3>

¹⁰⁷ Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, s 89 (1). Accessed 15/10/2024: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1998/1759/article/89/made>

¹⁰⁸ Northern Ireland Act 1998, s 28d (10). Accessed 16/10/2024: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/section/28D>

were Irish and English bilingual street signs, whilst three were Ulster Scots and English.¹⁰⁹ Since July 2022, a further 228 street signs were installed with another 999 applications awaiting to be processed.¹¹⁰ The rate with which they have been installed has thus significantly accelerated with almost as many in just three years having been installed as the total number put in place 24 years previously. This was very likely to have been facilitated by the passing of the Identity and Language Act which, as explained above, codified the objectives of the GFA and St Andrews Agreement into British law, namely the obligation for devolved and local authorities to promote the Irish language in public spaces.

At the same time, 15 applications – all Irish language – were rejected after proposals to install the signs failed to meet the 15% threshold of occupancy consent.¹¹¹ However, it appears that no further Ulster-Scot and English bilingual signs were installed from at least March 2023. Though the city council does not provide a language breakdown of street signs between July 2022 and March 2023, even if one assumes that some Ulster Scot bilingual signs were installed during this period, it is highly improbable that the number of Ulster Scot sign applications approach the considerably high number of Irish applications. Despite the fact Belfast City Council’s total expenditure is not published, ongoing maintenance for them has been. Bilingual road signs are frequently subjected to defacement and other forms of vandalism usually by loyalists who resent their presence. A Freedom of Information request by the BBC found that nearly £60,000 “was spent by councils repairing and replacing the damaged signage” between 2020 and late 2024 involving 209 acts of vandalism throughout all Northern Ireland, 23 of which were committed within Belfast.¹¹² Such acts of criminal damage are frequent and high profile enough to merit a public PSNI response and which are deemed serious enough to be classed and investigated as a form of “sectarian hate crime”.¹¹³

The EA’s funding of IME encompasses two main areas: maintenance expenditure and capital expenditure. Maintenance expenditure includes the delivery of IME and the maintenance of education establishments, whilst capital expenditure entails the funding of modular buildings,

¹⁰⁹ Belfast City Council, Street naming and building numbering, [belfastcity.gov.uk](https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk), 17/04/2025. Accessed 02/05/2025; <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/Planning-and-building-control/Building-control/Street-naming-and-building-numbering#>

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ Ibid

¹¹² Hughes, B. Ibid

¹¹³ Police Service of Northern Ireland, Two dual-language street signs damaged in south Belfast, PSNI, 18/04/2024. Accessed 13/05/2025. <https://www.psni.police.uk/latest-news/two-dual-language-street-signs-damaged-south-belfast>

educational equipment and furniture. The below table provides a total estimate of EA expenditure on IME from financial year (FY)¹¹⁴ 2017 to 2024.

	2023/24 FY (£)	2022/23 FY (£)	2021/22 FY (£)	2020/21 FY (£)	2019/20 FY (£)	2018/19 FY (£)	2017/18 FY (£)
Irish medium recurrent maintenance expenditure	25,666,000	25,965,000	24,085,000	22,081,000	19,704,000	17,589,000	16,946,000
Irish medium capital expenditure	393,000	4,090,000	1,846,000	343,000	897,000	1,722,000	663,000
Total	26,059,000	30,055,000	25,931,000	22,424,000	20,304,000	19,311,000	17,609,000

Figure 1: EA Annual Expenditure on IME¹¹⁵

As can be observed, EA IME funding has significantly fluctuated in recent years. Up until financial year 2022 the total departmental expenditure was incrementally rising, though there was a dramatic drop in capital expenditure between 2019 and 2021. This was likely due to COVID-19 restrictions and the increase of virtual distanced learning which did not necessitate the use of classroom/building equipment and furniture. Furthermore, the massive increase in capital expenditure funding between 2021 and 2023 coincides with both the return of classroom teaching and the passing of the Identity and Language Act in December 2022.

The amount of maintenance expenditure broadly correlates with the increased demand of IME. The census shows that by 2023 7,310 students were enrolled in IME, with 5,718 in Irish medium schools alone.¹¹⁶ Whilst this is a considerably small number compared to English

¹¹⁴ The UK financial year is from 1 April to 31 March

¹¹⁵ Education Authority FOI Request 15742, 11/04/2025

¹¹⁶ Department of Education, 'Irish Medium Education', NI Gov UK, 2023. Accessed 16/10/2024:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Irish%20Medium%20Education%202022.23.pdf>

medium schools, the statistics show that this number has been on a consistent gradual rise since 2018. However, overall funding has significantly dropped since the end of FY 2022.

	2022/23 ¹¹⁷	2021/22 ¹¹⁸	2020/21 ¹¹⁹	2019/20 ¹²⁰	2018/19 ¹²¹
Irish Medium Settings (schools and units)	83	83	85	87	86
Irish Medium students	7,310	7,232	7,064	6,816	6,519

Figure 2: Irish Medium establishments and student enrolment

The closure of 4 IME establishments between 2020 and 2022 likely reflects the wider financial crises that the UK experienced, though it is noteworthy that within the same period the number of enrolled students continued to climb. This phenomenon has been replicated in other areas related to IME, such as the Learning Leaders Support Scheme (LLSS), the objective of which is to “provide bespoke professional learning to Irish Medium educators in key areas of need that have been identified by the Sector.”¹²² The sudden loss of close to £4 million in total IME expenditure between 2023 and 2024 despite the pattern of increased enrolment also represents a much wider phenomenon of cuts to public services in Northern Ireland in response to the ongoing cost of living crisis.¹²³ The only IME funding which has consistently remained at the same level throughout this period is the £12,000 grant that is

¹¹⁷ Department of Education, ‘Irish Medium Education’, Ibid

¹¹⁸ Department of Education, Irish Medium Education, *NI Gov UK*, 2022. Accessed 16/10/2024:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Irish%20Medium%20Education%20202122.pdf>

¹¹⁹ Department of Education, Irish Medium Education, *NI Gov UK*, 2021. Accessed 16/10/2024:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Irish%20Medium%20Education%20202021.pdf>

¹²⁰ Department of Education, Irish Medium Education, *NI Gov UK*, 2020. Accessed 16/10/2024:

https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/irish-medium-19_45600949.pdf

¹²¹ Department of Education, Irish Medium Education, *NI Gov UK*, 2019. Accessed 16/10/2024:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/irish-medium-education-201819.pdf>

¹²² FOI Request 15742

¹²³ Press Release, *Northern Ireland Fiscal Council*, 28/03/2023. Accessed 09/04/2025:

<https://www.nifiscalcouncil.org/files/nifiscalcouncil/documents/2023-03/The%20NIO%27s%202022-23%20Budget%20for%20Northern%20Ireland%20-%20Press%20Release%2028.03.23.pdf>

provided by the EA to each of the 10 IM units attached to English-medium grant-maintained schools.¹²⁴

Year	Allocated Resource (£)	Actual Spend (£)
2017/18	53,000	45,000
2018/19	53,000	34,000
2019/20	53,000	33,000
2020/21	53,000	5,000
2021/22	53,000	18,000
2022/23	37,000	37,000
2023/24	37,000	37,000

Figure 3: Annual funding allocated to LLSS¹²⁵

Notwithstanding budget cuts, looking at the statistics on funding in proportion to enrolment and establishments in isolation would at first appear to lend credence to unionist claims that a vastly disproportionate amount of public funding is spent on IME at the expense of the Unionist community. However, when compared with the *total* expenditure on education a slightly different picture emerges:

“In 2023-24, the Department [of Education]’s total expenditure (outturn) of £3.3 billion included capital funding of £276 million (8.4 per cent), of which £243 million was spent on major (new build and refurbishment) and minor works programmes. The annual resource expenditure for maintenance was £28.4 million. In addition, schools’ delegated budgets, calculated via the Common Funding Scheme (CFS), included a total of £77 million estate related funding (however, outturn statements indicate that only £5 million is spent on maintenance).”¹²⁶

The amount of public funding spent on IME maintenance expenditure and capital expenditure for financial year 2023-24 thus amounts to 9.2% of the DE’s budget. Again, on the surface this seems like a tremendous amount of funding for a student body that consists of just over

¹²⁴ FOI Request, Ibid

¹²⁵ FOI Request 15742

¹²⁶ Comptroller and Auditor General, Managing the Schools’ Estate, *Northern Ireland Audit Office*, 12/12/2024, p 12. Accessed 10/04/2024: <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/documents/2024-11/NI%20Audit%20Office%20Report%20-%20Managing%20the%20Schools%27%20Estate.pdf>

7,000 people. However, the issue of overspending is not exclusive to IME students. A report by the University of Ulster found that £226 million extra was spent by the DE in FY 2023 – roughly £600,000 per day – due to the sectarian division of the Northern Irish education system.¹²⁷

Though it is a considerably small pre-school, the debate over the funding provided to Scoil na Seolta, which will be briefly elaborated further down below, offers a micro perspective on the much wider debate on IME vis-à-vis funding (inequality), integration, and the reception of Irish in predominantly unionist areas. Contrary to what the school's opponents argued, most of the school's initial funding was not provided by the EA but by the Irish government. According to the Irish Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media Patrick O'Donovan, an initial grant of €55,000 was provided to the school "to develop a business plan for an Irish language education campus in East Belfast".¹²⁸ By the end of January 2024 a total of €208,668 had been invested into the pre-school by the Irish government.¹²⁹

3.5 2017-2022: A Trojan Horse for Reunification?

The increasing association of the Irish language with Irish nationalism incensed unionist politicians in Northern Ireland. This became especially apparent during the three-year Stormont collapse between 2017 and 2020, and up to the legislating of the Identity and Language Act in 2022. Targets of unionist criticism were not just the usual suspects – namely Sinn Féin and other republicans – but also the British government whom they accused of effectively acting against the interests of the unionist community in its support and eventual legislating of Irish recognition. The following subsection will thus outline unionist arguments against Irish recognition before the Identity and Language Act and how these arguments changed following its passing in the British Parliament. In doing so it will show the subsequent effects of cementing the association of Irish with Irish nationalism has disrupted the political scene within Northern Ireland. It will also show how concepts such as parity of

¹²⁷ Roulston, S. & Milliken, M. The Cost of Division in Northern Ireland, *Ulster University*, p 9. Accessed 11/03/2025: https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/118288754/TEUU_Report_18_Divided_Society_Divided_Education.pdf

¹²⁸ Irish Language Dáil Éireann Debate, Thursday - 18 May 2023, Oireachtas. Accessed 15/04/2025: <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-05-18/258/>

¹²⁹ Parliamentary Questions, Wednesday, 31 Jan 2024 Written Answers Nos. 47-69, Oireachtas. Accessed 15/04/2025: <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-01-31/section/96/>

esteem in relation to language recognition have been upended and have instead been used by certain political actors to engender further division in Northern Irish society.

During a Parliamentary debate on the Identity and Language Act in 2022, the DUP Member of Parliament Carla Lockart accused the British government of jeopardising stability in Northern Ireland by attempting to legislate the bill on the Assembly's behalf. "The legislation", Lockart argued, "will only result in language and identity being a more potent weapon, that causes greater damage to community relations and cohesion at a time when many of us wish to see a more united community, focused on healing division, not aggravating it."¹³⁰ In the very next paragraph, Lockart touched upon what could be described as the existential fear many Unionists have developed towards the Irish language: "there is a deep lying, and justified suspicion within the Unionist community that the unfettered and undemocratic powers in this Bill that are given to the Secretary of State have only been taken, and will only be used, to appease the demands of the most vociferous, and the most divisive elements within the language and identity lobby."¹³¹ Who these "divisive elements" were is not explicitly stated, though it can be inferred that she was most likely referencing her party's power-sharing partner Sinn Fein and other Republicans who have staunchly supported official recognition of Irish. Lockart's speech is peculiar as it was not just centred on recognition of the Irish language and Northern Ireland's post-conflict social polarisation but also cut deep into the heart of the Unionists' ambivalent relationship with Westminster. What it showed was that Unionist opposition was not coming from a position of domination, but from an intense feeling of vulnerability and, to a large extent, isolation.

The DUP's opposition to the Identity and Language Act was emblematic of a pattern of thought processes from unionist politicians from at least the 1990s that hold expressions of Irishness are an existential threat to Protestant-unionist culture and identity. This 'threat' the language posed usually manifested itself in several ways, ranging from fears of preferential treatment to outright reunification. In a 2018 interview with the BBC, then-DUP leader Arlene Foster refused to put her party's backing behind what she saw as a "standalone" Irish

¹³⁰ Lockart, C. Language and Identity Bill another example of contempt for devolution – Lockhart, *DUP*, 12/10/2022. Accessed 25/03/2025: <https://mydup.com/news/language-and-identity-bill-another-example-of-contempt-for-devolution-lockhart>

¹³¹ Ibid

language Act, in effect accusing such hypothetical Act of giving Irish primacy over Ulster-Scots.¹³²

In a rare showing of solidarity with the DUP and, despite existing on the comparatively more liberal wing of unionism, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) also expressed their disapproval of any legislative act that would grant Irish equal status with English. Party spokesperson Doug Beattie acknowledged “that the campaign for an Irish Language Act is a fair and honest campaign” but believed that it had instead “been hijacked by Sinn Fein to promote - not equality - but a form of cultural supremacy.”¹³³ Recognition of Irish in the current political context, the DUP and UUP argued, would ultimately have disrupted the post-conflict equilibrium between Unionists and Nationalists, and would have potentially been contrary to the principles of parity of esteem.

Whilst the other unionist parties, perhaps due to their role in executive power sharing, shied away from explicitly targeting the Irish language and culture, instead framing their opposition to recognition as an attempt to safeguard the uneasy peace in Northern Irish society, the TUV on the other hand was arguably the most hardline in their outright refusal to even concede the language had a place within unionism. TUV party spokesperson John Gordon argued in an opinion piece that the “language is not a ‘shared heritage’ of the citizens of Northern Ireland for the simple reason that it is not a language that unionists hold to be part of their political or cultural identity – it is not a ‘marker’ of what distinguishes them as unionists.”¹³⁴ Here Gordon draws a clear parallel between language and national identity; though he goes further, arguing that Irish nationalists cannot claim ownership of it either as “only 3.91% [nationalists can] ‘speak, read and write and understand Irish’ – a figure that is probably a gross over-estimation because it is based on self-assessment.”¹³⁵ Despite this, Gordon continued to warn that recognition would ultimately lead to the “gaelicisation of Northern Ireland as part of the nationalist strategy for ‘Irish unity’”.¹³⁶

¹³² Moriarity, G. ‘Arlene Foster ‘will not accept’ standalone Irish language Act’, *The Irish Times*, 01/08/2018. Accessed 24/10/2024: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/arlene-foster-will-not-accept-standalone-irish-language-act-1.3582987>

¹³³ Ulster Unionist Party, ‘Irish Language Act campaign about cultural supremacy not equality – Beattie’, *UUP*, 02/02/2018. Accessed 27/10/2024 <http://archive.uup.org/news/5374/Irish-Language-Act-campaign-about-cultural-supremacy-not-equality-Beattie>

¹³⁴ Gordon, J. The Irish language is not part of our unionist culture, *News Letter*, 18/12/22. Accessed 27/03/2025: <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/opinion/letters/the-irish-language-is-not-part-of-our-unionist-culture-3924520>

¹³⁵ Ibid

¹³⁶ Ibid

Gordon's opinion piece elucidated the other existential Unionist fear – that of reunification – as well as the paradoxical arguments unionist parties resorted to using against Irish language recognition. On the one hand, Irish was a language spoken by an extreme minority of people in Northern Ireland – even within the nationalist community itself – and therefore did not merit the time, finances or effort that would have to be spent in pursuit of recognition. Yet on the other hand, despite the acknowledgement that few people spoke it, recognition would have still nonetheless posed a threat to Protestant-unionist culture; a stepping stone towards reunification as it were.

Such sentiment was echoed by then-UUP leader Robin Swann who described Sinn Fein's Irish language strategy as a "smokescreen" in that "Having politicised the language in Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein are using it as a weapon in a cultural war."¹³⁷ Swann implied further that the intent behind Sinn Fein's support for Irish recognition was to use it as a trojan horse – a continuation of the Republican struggle from the late 18th and early 19th centuries which had also used the language to legitimise their separatism from the predominantly English-speaking UK. Thus, this was not just a matter of linguistic rights but was an integral part of the Republican movement's – and by extension the IRA's – Long War against British rule.

The issue of street signage in Irish exacerbated Unionist discontent further which often took the form of loyalist defacement and vandalism. Some Unionists – and it must be stressed that it was an extreme minority – refused to condemn loyalist acts of vandalism. One figure in particular was former UUP MLA and UKIP Northern Ireland leader David McNarry who defended the vandals as he "[did not] know what reason they've had for doing it except that they may have just been standing up for what they think are their own rights and their own British dimension."¹³⁸ DUP officials on the other hand were quick to denounce the vandalism, but still nonetheless attempted to rationalise it. DUP councillor Clement Cuthbertson explained that "Whilst damage to council property is wrong, the use of the Irish language on all signage throughout Mid Ulster Council has been forced upon residents and

¹³⁷ Swann, R. SF are using Irish language as weapon in a cultural war, *News Letter*, 27/07/2017 Accessed: 01/04/2025 <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/politics/sf-are-using-irish-language-as-weapon-in-a-cultural-war-1095788>

¹³⁸ News Letter, McNarry: I cannot condemn attack on Irish language road sign, *News Letter*, 22/02/2018. Accessed 25/04/2025: <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/mcnarry-i-cannot-condemn-attack-on-irish-language-road-sign-345464>

ratepayers by republicans and, by its very nature, was intended to be divisive and confrontational.”¹³⁹

Opposition to Irish language recognition did not just emanate from the political class but in fact was seen at all levels of the unionist community. Unionist tabloids and local groups such as the Orange Order, the largest fraternity organisation in Northern Ireland, made their opposition known. In a 2015 submission to the Department of Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Orange Order expressed its opposition to any hypothetical Act that would put Irish on par with that of English, holding that any “measure attendant upon the Irish language is going to be seen as principally directed towards a section of the Roman Catholic community”. This is despite the fact that within the same response the Orange Order acknowledged its own role in promoting the language in the early 20th century.¹⁴⁰ Five years later the Orange Order would again argue against an Irish Language Bill, this time stating in an interview with the BBC that Irish “was being used as a political weapon... to further the Irish identity in a way that puts it above the British identity.”¹⁴¹

The issue of recognition inexorably became intertwined in other contemporary issues. A 2022 editorial from the right-wing unionist newspaper *News Letter* entitled “If the Irish language gets a pledge today so must an overhaul of the NI Protocol” attempted to link the passing of the Act with the post-Brexit agreement with the EU vis-à-vis the customs arrangement between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.¹⁴² For many unionists the Protocol was perceived as a betrayal for it created a de facto sea border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. Thus, the Unionists argued, if the nationalists were to be conferred a concession that brought them closer to the Republic, it was only right under parity of esteem that a concession be conferred upon the unionist community by renegotiating the sea border.

3.6 Making Sense of the Threat

In any case, the Bill received the royal assent and became law in December 2022. As of yet Northern Irish society has not been ‘gaelicified’ as warned, nor is there any real

¹³⁹ Ibid

¹⁴⁰ County Fermanagh Grand Orange Lodge, Consultation on Proposals for an Irish Language Bill, *Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure*, 01/05/2015. Accessed 29/05/2025: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dcal/Irish%20Language%20Bill%20consultation%20-%20Response%20-%20County%20Fermanagh%20Grand%20Orange%20Lodge.PDF>

¹⁴¹ BBC, Orange Order reiterates Irish language act opposition, *BBC*, 07/01/2022. Accessed 01/05/2025: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-51018980>

¹⁴² Editorial, If the Irish language gets a pledge today so must an overhaul of the NI Protocol, *News Letter*, 10/05/2022. Accessed 01/04/2025: <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/opinion/if-the-irish-language-gets-a-pledge-today-so-must-an-overhaul-of-the-ni-protocol-3687178>

indication that it was merely a trojan horse by nationalists to shoehorn Northern Ireland into the arms of the Republic. On the contrary, by all measures Irish continues to be a minority language within Northern Ireland. The 2011 Northern Irish census – which is carried out every 10 years – found that 184,898 people (10.7% of the population 3 years of age and above) “had some ability in the Irish language.”¹⁴³ By 2021, this had slightly increased to 228,000 (12.6% of the Northern Irish population 3 years of age and above).¹⁴⁴ Thus, over a 10 year period there was a slight increase in speakers of around 44,000, or a jump in just under 2% in proportion to the total population. A similar story emerges with Ulster Scots; within the same date range and demographics, 140,200 people (8.1%) “had some ability in the Ulster-Scots language” in 2011 which subsequently increased to 190,600 (10.4%) by 2021. In short, just over 1 in 5 Northern Irish citizens had any knowledge of either Irish or Ulster-Scots. What is especially worth bearing in mind however is that “some ability” does not equate to fluency or everyday use. The 2021 Census found that only 0.2% of responding households completed the questionnaire that had been translated into Irish, and 0.1% forms translated into Ulster-Scots had been submitted.¹⁴⁵ The number of people who can speak either language fluently will very likely be considerably lower than what the census suggests.

If, as the statistics show, Irish speakers are a minority within Northern Ireland, it begs the question as to why traditionally competing unionist parties uncharacteristically found common ground with one another in their vehement opposition to the language’s recognition. The unionist political elite’s consensus against the Identity and language Act in some ways mirrored the sentiment some unionist politicians expressed against the GFA. It was not just a matter of Irish recognition being an inexorable step closer towards reunification, but there was also a feeling of betrayal, a perception that the Unionist community had been ‘stabbed in the back’ by the British government. An infamous example of this sentiment was the DUP’s campaigning against the GFA in the run-up to the 1998 referendum. One of their pamphlets alleged that in brokering a peace with Republican paramilitaries the British government had “bowed the knee to Dublin” because “The deal was already decided by the two governments before the Talks had started”, supposedly without the Unionist community’s consent.¹⁴⁶ Like

¹⁴³ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, Main statistics for Northern Ireland Statistical Bulletin Language, 22/09/2022, p 6. Accessed 05/04/2025 <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-main-statistics-for-northern-ireland-phase-1-statistical-bulletin-language.pdf>

¹⁴⁴ Ibid

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p 9-10

¹⁴⁶ DUP, It’s Right to Say “No”, Accessed 05/04/2025: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/dup/dup220598.pdf>

the discourse surrounding the British government stepping in to legislate the Identity and Language Act on the Assembly's behalf, there was an apparent perception that the unionists had been blindsided. This feeling of isolation, of being trapped between a state which allegedly sought to forcibly incorporate the unionist community into it and another other state which wilfully ignored the concerns of the unionist community likely contributed to the Unionist parties unanimously opposing the Act.

Such sentiment is part of a much more deeper feeling that the unionist community has both been overlooked and has not gained as much from the peace process as their nationalist counterparts. It should be emphasised, however, that unionist support for the peace process – especially the GFA – has always been considerably more cautious. In fact, the very heated disagreements surrounding it in many ways precipitated the polarisation of post-GFA Northern Irish society. Whilst 95% of nationalists in Northern Ireland voted in favour of the Agreement, only 57% of unionists did so.¹⁴⁷ And as briefly mentioned further above, that pessimism surrounding the peace process has coincided with a much more vocal discontent with the post-Brexit settlement, particularly vis-à-vis the Northern Ireland Protocol. A poll from February 2022 found that less than 10% of those who identified as “strong unionist” supported statement that “The Protocol is on balance good for N.Ireland”, meanwhile over 90% of those who self-identified as “strong nationalist” agreed with it.¹⁴⁸ The subsequent Windsor Agreement sought to tie up the loose ends left behind by the Northern Ireland Protocol, and polarised unionist responses were to a degree repeated. Another poll, this time from February 2024, found that 70% of “strongly unionist” and 37% (down from 50% in previous polling) of “slightly unionist” believed the Agreement would be detrimental to Northern Ireland's place within the Union.¹⁴⁹ It is within this context then that unionist outlets such as *News Letter* attacked legislation to recognise the language.

However, there was a clear difference in rhetoric between the DUP and UUP, who are part of the power-sharing executive, and the TUV, who are not, suggesting that power-sharing had at least to some extent moderated the former's rhetorical responses to Irish language

¹⁴⁷ Finn, D. *One Man's Terrorist: A Political History of the IRA* (London: Verso, 2021), p 208

¹⁴⁸ Phinnemore, H. & Hayward, K. ‘What do people in Northern Ireland really think about the Protocol?’, *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 10/02/2022. Accessed 11/05/2025: <https://eu.boell.org/en/2022/05/10/what-do-people-northern-ireland-really-think-about-protocol>

¹⁴⁹ Phinnemore, H. & Hayward, K. ‘What do voters in Northern Ireland think about the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, Windsor Framework and ‘Safeguarding the Union’ deal?’, *Queen's University Belfast*, Feb 2024. Accessed 11/05/2025: <https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/post-brexit-governance-ni/ProjectPublications/OpinionPolling/TestingTheTemperature10/>

recognition. As noted above, the UUP and – despite its historically hardline stance – the DUP were reluctant to explicitly frame the Irish language or culture as a threat in of itself. Rather, they sought to portray the activism surrounding it as having been coopted by the Republican movement, sometimes clarifying that the Irish language campaigners themselves were oblivious to this and were otherwise sincere in their activism. The TUV meanwhile were quite open in their hostility to any expression of Irish culture, regarding it as being completely separate from the Unionist community. Notwithstanding the collapse of Stormont in 2017, what this suggests is that whilst consociational grand coalitions are at best defective when confronted with competing national identities within a single state, they can nonetheless potentially moderate and cool down the discourse surrounding it. However, as seen with the TUV, this moderating effect appears to not apply to parties that fall outside of the grand coalitions.

Though Unionist politicians routinely alleged that the Republican movement had weaponised and politicised the Irish language by associating it with Irish national identity, it can easily be argued that they themselves had done so with the Ulster-Scots language by demanding that the proposed ‘Irish Language Commissioner’ be counterbalanced with a ‘Commissioner for the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British Tradition.’ A recent Council of Europe report found the Act had serious deficiencies, including of potentially exacerbating intercommunal tension precisely by equating Ulster-Scots culture with that of British national identity, adding “the naming of a commissioner for Ulster Scots as for the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British Tradition unnecessarily conflates this minority identity with a distinct political one...”¹⁵⁰ As has been shown, it was not the Act that had created the association between the Ulster-Scots language and British national identity, rather it was merely a reflection of discourse between Unionists and Nationalists that had predated it by a number of years. Yet, by codifying the equation in legislation it legitimised and cemented such association.

Certainly, however, not all the criticisms levelled by unionist politicians were as outlandish in tone, and in some cases were even somewhat prescient particularly when it came to the Act’s impact on social cohesion. The specification within the GFA of promoting Irish in public life “where appropriate and where people so desire it” has perhaps been the source of many ongoing bitter disputes between unionists and Irish language activists. Whilst the GFA

¹⁵⁰ Fifth Opinion on the United Kingdom: Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, *Council of Europe*, p 5. Accessed 05/04/2025: <https://rm.coe.int/5th-op-uk-en/1680ab55b4>

reaffirmed the importance of using Irish in public life, there was no threshold to measure such desire that deemed it appropriate. Rather than provide clarification, the Identity and Language Act more or less incorporated it verbatim. For example, bilingual signs in traditionally unionist areas have provoked fierce opposition which has ranged from local pressure groups demanding to the local authorities for their removal to vandalism and defacement.¹⁵¹ Some local councils acting on extant legislation, such as the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, have implemented referenda in their areas which require at least a slight majority of 51% of residents to agree with bilingual road signs before they can proceed.¹⁵² Others, such as Belfast City Council, require only 15% of residents in a given street to support the proposal for bilingual signs.¹⁵³ Unionist media outlets frequently publish articles on this, particularly when it concerns areas where it is quite apparent that a majority of residents do not support such signs, but yet they are still installed regardless.¹⁵⁴ To some unionists there is a lacuna of consideration for people who do not ‘desire it’.

3.7 2022-2024: Irish and “speaking out for the material needs of our community”¹⁵⁵

The shift in rhetoric from portraying recognition as a threat to social cohesion and the Union to an endeavour that both disproportionately favoured the Nationalist community and was financially unsustainable occurred quite quickly. After the Identity and Language bill had passed its third and final reading in the House of Commons, DUP MP Carla Lockhart again delivered another speech, this time decrying the amount of funding that had been allocated to the Irish language in comparison to Ulster-Scots:

“Currently, it is a conservative estimate to say that for every £1 spent on Ulster-Scots, at least £10 is spent on Irish. Moreover, the Government announced on 25 May of this year that they were awarding An Ciste Infheistiochta Gaeilge £4m to develop Irish language infrastructure. In light of the census findings in terms of ability in both Irish and Ulster

¹⁵¹ Hughes, B. Irish Street sign vandalism cost councils £60,000, *BBC*, 02/12/2024. Accessed 05/04/2025: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp35g9qv0glo>

¹⁵² Mid Ulster Council, Dual Language Street Name Plate Policy, *Mid Ulster Council*. Accessed 03/05/2025: <https://www.midulstercouncil.org/resident/building-control/street-naming/street-naming-and-dual-language-signage-policy>

¹⁵³ Belfast City Council, *Ibid*

¹⁵⁴ Kenwood, M. Belfast council votes to install Irish dual language signs on four streets – despite more residents opposing than supporting moves, *Belfast Telegraph*, 05/03/2025. Accessed 25/04/2025: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/belfast-council-votes-to-install-irish-dual-language-signs-on-four-streets-despite-more-residents-opposing-than-supporting-moves/a1740331170.html>

¹⁵⁵ Kula, A. Public meeting hears of opposition to Irish language school in east Belfast, *News Letter*, 26/07/2024. Accessed 06/04/2025: <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/politics/public-meeting-hears-of-opposition-to-irish-language-school-in-east-belfast-4718377>

Scots, it begs the question how anyone would consider such an award for one language offers equality of opportunity without a reciprocal funding award to Ulster-Scots?”¹⁵⁶

Funding of the Irish language was not just incredibly costly, Lockhart argued, but it also ran the risk of such funding prioritising one community over the other. This too was echoed by TUV leader Jim Allister around the same time who insisted in an opinion piece that a “cavalier approach to public money is totally unacceptable”, adding “there is the fact that Irish is associated with one community and that implementing these proposals will have a discriminatory impact on the Protestant /unionist community...”¹⁵⁷

Discussions on funding of the Irish language became even more pressing as the financial burdens of COVID-19 and the effects of the ongoing cost of living crisis deepened. Unionist frustration that other public services were being neglected whilst money was supposedly being generously spent on Irish was encapsulated in a 2023 *News Letter* editorial. Writing on the apparent expenditure on Irish language services within the Assembly during COVID-19 lockdowns, the newspaper argued “Even in normal economic times it would be troubling that the cost of having an Irish translation service for Stormont is approaching £100,000 a year. That that is the cost when Stormont has been dormant for a year makes it appalling.”¹⁵⁸

A particular source of ire for some Unionists has been the funding that has been allocated to Irish Medium Education (IME). Such criticism does not generally attack the concept of IME itself but usually revolves around issues of proportionality (in terms of their demand and funding) and the location of the schools themselves. The heated debates on the east Belfast IME school Scoil na Seolta encapsulated the multifaceted nature of Unionist opposition. What made the school particularly noteworthy was that despite being built in a traditionally loyalist area of East Belfast, it combined integrated education with IME.¹⁵⁹ In addition, it is run by a renowned Unionist and Irish language activists Linda Ervine. It was therefore in

¹⁵⁶ Lockhart, C. Lockhart secures Equality Commission commitment on Ulster-Scots funding disparity, *DUP*, 17/11/2022. Accessed 27/10/2024: <https://mydup.com/news/lockhart-secures-equality-commission-commitment-on-ulster-scots-funding-disparity>

¹⁵⁷ Allistar, J. Public should speak up against uncostered plan to squander money on Irish language, *News Letter*, 26/11/22. Accessed 06/04/2025: <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/opinion/letters/public-should-speak-up-against-uncosted-plan-to-squander-money-on-irish-language-3932533>

¹⁵⁸ Editorial, Even in a financial crisis, funding for the Irish language seems to be ring-fenced, *News Letter*, 04/12/2024. Accessed 06/04/2025: <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/opinion/editorial-even-in-a-financial-crisis-funding-for-the-irish-language-seems-to-be-ring-fenced-4014219>

¹⁵⁹ Dungan, I. Irish language integrated school planned for east Belfast, *BBC*, 07/01/2024. Accessed 06/04/2025: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-67872545>

theory meant to cater to pupils from both Unionist and Nationalist backgrounds, though this seemingly had little impact on the debate.

The campaign was spearheaded by a local group called 'Clonduff Concerned Residents'. The group clarified their stance as not being against IME per se, but that:

“it was mostly about the lack of local community need or desire for an Irish language school on the proposed site, which is meant to be preserved for business purposes that will materially benefit the local area... there have also been multiple school closures in east Belfast over the past number of years, not least Cregagh pre-school which has been forced to close this year due to lack of funding... this is just the first step in a process of speaking out for the material needs of our community and challenging the unfair prioritisation of political projects over local community needs and services”¹⁶⁰

A perceived discrepancy in community funding therefore largely served as a catalyst for the opposition. Tensions were exacerbated further when loyalist activists unravelled a banner outside of the school that read “Relocate Irish school to where it is needed. Relocate Irish school to where it is wanted.” The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) subsequently announced that they would be investigating the banner as a “sectarian hate incident”.¹⁶¹

Most concerningly, debates surrounding the establishment of Scoil na Seolta caught the attention of loyalist paramilitaries. The Loyalist Communities Council (LCC), an organisation which includes representatives of the major loyalist paramilitaries, held a meeting with the DUP Education Minister Paul Givan in late 2024 expressing their misgivings to the new school that was to be built in East Belfast. Minutes of a meeting between the LCC and Givan show that the group opposed the opening of the IME establishment on the grounds that there was a “lack of support” in the plans “which [are] causing polarity and volatility in the community.”¹⁶² It is especially noteworthy that the meeting included references to RAISE, a programme by the Department of Education that

¹⁶⁰ Kula, A. Ibid. Accessed 06/04/2025: <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/politics/public-meeting-hears-of-opposition-to-irish-language-school-in-east-belfast-4718377>

¹⁶¹ Gouveia, F. Banner calling for east Belfast Irish language school to relocate being treated as ‘sectarian hate incident’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 31/10/2024. Accessed 28/04/2025: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/banner-calling-for-east-belfast-irish-language-school-to-relocate-being-treated-as-sectarian-hate-incident/a416209141.html>

¹⁶² Department of Education. Meeting with Loyalist Communities Council to discuss education underachievement in loyalist communities, *NI Gov UK*, 24/09/2024. Accessed 24/10/2024: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/DE%202024-0132%20of%20Meeting%20-24%20September%202024.pdf>

seeks to improve academic attainment in economically deprived areas in Northern Ireland. Though not explicitly stated in the minutes, it is very likely the LCC's opposition to the new school was at least partly in relation to it being built in what they saw as a deprived Unionist area. In a follow-up interview with the *Belfast Telegraph* this appeared to have been the case as the LCC Chairman explained the "meeting with Paul Givan dealt primarily with the subject of educational underachievement and inequality in loyalist areas, particularly in relation to loyalist teenage boys".¹⁶³ It can therefore probably be inferred that a supposed discrepancy in funding for IME establishments in relation to schools in which children from Unionist backgrounds attend was a topic of discussion between the LCC and the Education Minister. Not all unionist politicians, however, thought this meeting should have taken place. Some expressed outrage that an organisation with links to paramilitarism was involving itself in the discussion on IME, with former UUP leader Doug Beattie mocking the group for having been "threatened by: A temporary nursery, a primary school and a soft play area", adding "I do not believe this represents the majority view of the loyalist community".¹⁶⁴ Be that as it may, the involvement of a local grassroots movement suggests that it was at least a significant minority of loyalists within Clonduff were receptive of the group's message.

The DUP likewise were noticeably more reserved in their response to IME given their vehement opposition to the Identity and Language Act several years prior. However, this may not have solely stemmed out of a change of opinion. It was noted that the Givan's meeting with the LCC occurred having failed to meet any Irish language advocacy organisation.¹⁶⁵ He subsequently justified meeting the LCC on the grounds that it was no different from other contentious aspects of the peace process: "Some of the people criticising me for meeting with the LCC are the same political parties who campaigned to release terrorist prisoners into our communities."¹⁶⁶ In any case, Givan reaffirmed his party's support for IME, stating he would "be very clearly governed by the legislative framework."¹⁶⁷ This comment could potentially

¹⁶³ Reid, K. Loyalist Communities Council told Education Minister east Belfast Irish language school is causing 'volatility', *Belfast Telegraph*, 01/10/2024. Accessed 30/03/2025: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/loyalist-communities-council-told-education-minister-east-belfast-irish-language-school-is-causing-volatility/a2057322421.html>

¹⁶⁴ Ibid

¹⁶⁵ Coyle, C. Paul Givan declined meeting with Irish language group but heard loyalist complaints about a Gaelscoil, *Irish News*, 26/09/2024. Accessed 28/04/2025: <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/education-minister-declined-meeting-with-irish-language-group-but-heard-loyalist-complaints-about-a-gaelscoil-7GJYESNGLZA4BBNDVKAB4XQCRM/>

¹⁶⁶ Taylor, A. Givan defends meeting with loyalist paramilitaries, *BBC*, 04/10/2024. Accessed 28/04/2025: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czxdg5v31z6o>

¹⁶⁷ Ibid

indicate why the DUP has now put its backing behind IME – it is not that it has abruptly radically altered its perception of Irish, rather the party is merely following its legal responsibilities as a partner of the power-sharing agreement pursuant of the Identity and Language Act.

3.8 Inequality and Identity

Unionist responses to the implementation of the Identity and Language Act 2022 are considerably less apocalyptic than the arguments that had been used against Irish recognition in the run up to the Act being legislated. They have shifted from portraying Irish as a language that is, at worse, a front for republicanism to something that is either financially unsustainable or unfairly prioritises what they see as something innately Irish over their own British culture. In a sense, parity of esteem has become something of a double-edged sword in that whilst it has legitimised expression of British and Irish national identity as intended, it has also engendered a sense mutual exclusivity of said expressions. Irish is seen as having been awarded more concessions, and by extension so has the Irish nationalist movement at the expense of the British unionist community. This is arguably part of a much wider feeling among the unionist community that they have not benefited as much from the GFA as the nationalist community, and which ties in with the widespread feeling among unionists that the Republican movement's alleged ongoing relationship with paramilitarism has been "rewarded with a Language Act" rather than censured.¹⁶⁸ The unionists therefore see recognition and ongoing support of Irish as transactional, undoubtedly a reflection of the prevailing parity of esteem approach to regulating relations between the two communities.

In some respects, opposition to the implementation of the Identity and Language Act has become something of a proxy for unionists to express discomfort at the evolving nature of inequality within Northern Irish society since the GFA. Irish, as acknowledged by the Orange Order of all institutions, has a shared history of use between both the nationalist and unionist communities, but support for it is not registered as something that benefits unionist interests. Since the GFA the political power of the nationalist community has indisputably been strengthened. Likewise, so too has the social standing of the Catholic community at large. These advances have created a degree of envy within some parts of the unionist and loyalist communities as they do not feel there has been a reciprocal level of support for their own communities.

¹⁶⁸ Fox, R., Cronin, M. & Ó Conchubhair, B. Ibid, p 88

One of the areas within which Catholics have made the most gains is in employment. Catholics traditionally experienced considerable discrimination on the employment front and consequently faced a significantly higher rate of unemployment, an issue which NICRA heavily campaigned on in the early years of the Troubles. According to Daniel Finn, by “1971, Catholic men were two-and-a-half times more likely to be out of work than their Protestant counterparts”, and those who were employed were usually relegated to non-managerial blue-collar roles.¹⁶⁹ 50 years on, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland found that of those in employment, “245,419 (43.5%) were Protestant, 245,070 (43.4%) Roman Catholic, and 73,807 (13.1%) were Non-Determined”.¹⁷⁰ Thus, employment in Northern Ireland has become increasingly level.

Changes in inequality have also been reflected in academic attainment. A 2019 report from the Community Relations Council concluded that even though “there is under-achievement among working class pupils generally - and this is worse among boys - working class Protestant boys continue to have lower educational attainment than Catholic boys.”¹⁷¹ Furthermore, a 2022 Freedom of Information request found that for the first time self-identified Catholic academic staff at Queen’s University Belfast, the largest and most prestigious University in Northern Ireland, outnumbered self-identified Protestant academics.¹⁷² Two revealing observations can be taken away from this: firstly, it is clear that through the peace process Catholics have achieved much more by way of a wider range of employment – especially positions of authority – than was previously the case. Secondly, Catholics have likewise benefited from a comparatively more supported education system that has allowed them to academically excel, notwithstanding the dysfunctional nature of the Northern Irish education system as a whole, whilst academic attainment among Protestant working class boys has stagnated. Within this context, opposition to Scoil na Seolta can be construed as a microcosmic expression of frustration which members of that specific loyalist

¹⁶⁹ Finn, D. Ibid, pp 36

¹⁷⁰ Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, Fair Employment Monitoring Report No.32, *Equality Commission for Northern Ireland*, 2021, p 7. Accessed 09/05/2025.
<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/FETO%20Monitoring%20Reports/No32/MonReport32.pdf>

¹⁷¹ Gray, A. M., Hamilton, J., Kelly, G., Lynn, B., Melaugh, M. & Robinson, G. Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report Number Five, *Community Relations Council*, 10/01/2019, p 13. Accessed 08/05/2025:
<https://www.community-relations.org.uk/files/communityrelations/media-files/NIPMR-10-key-points.pdf>

¹⁷² Dunbar, C. Low number of Queen’s University Belfast academics from a Protestant background a ‘cause for concern’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 07/02/2022. Accessed 08/05/2025:
<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/low-number-of-queens-university-belfast-academics-from-a-protestant-background-a-cause-for-concern/41305412.html?flow=subscribe®istration=success®=true>

community perceived as an example of the nationalist community receiving yet another concession whilst feeling they had not been provided with anything in return.

That is not to say Catholics – and by extension nationalists – are benefiting at the expense of Protestants, though many unionists would appear to frame it that way. Traditionally majority nationalist areas are still nonetheless disproportionately affected by higher levels of poverty than majority unionist areas. The 2024 Community Relations report found that of the 18 parliamentary constituencies, the predominantly nationalist West Belfast constituency had the highest level of child poverty rate of 28.5%, meanwhile the predominantly unionist East Belfast – the constituency where Scoil na Seolta was built – had a rate of 18%, the fifth lowest.¹⁷³ What this suggests is that, rather than one group taking precedence over the other, a comprehensive levelling of post-conflict Northern Irish society is taking place; Ulster unionists observe their nationalist compatriots make stride gains in the political, employment, and academic sectors but feel that they have not received any reciprocal returns.

Combining all these outward projections together is the underlying belief that Irish is not a part of unionist history or culture, a notion which the post-conflict agreements and Acts of Parliament have implicitly reaffirmed. Indeed, it is within this context that the unionist demand for an increase of state support for Ulster-Scots – which they see as an authentic expression of British culture – to counterbalance support for Irish emerges. Investment into Irish learning or public use is not seen as an investment into unionist communities even when, in the case of Scoil na Seolta, these initiatives are established precisely within unionist communities and are designed for pan-sectarian use. Likewise, the shared history of the language is often ignored or, at best, briefly mentioned as a thing of the past that is no longer applicable to the modern day. If post-conflict agreements and legislation have implicitly associated Irish with Irish national identity, and explicitly associated Ulster-Scots with British national identity, it stands to reason that under parity of esteem unionists would wish to see an equal level of support for it.

The issue, however, is that the post-conflict agreements and Acts of Parliament have created something of a false equivalence between the two which has rendered any real chance of a true reciprocal relationship near-impossible. The unionist community's perception of Ulster-

¹⁷³ Gray, A. M., Hamilton, J., Kelly, G., Hetherington, G., Grainne, K., & Lynn, N. Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report Number Six, *Community Relations Council*, 07/03/2024, p 119. Accessed 09/05/2025: <https://www.community-relations.org.uk/files/communityrelations/2024-01/CRC-peace-monitor-report-6-web.pdf>

Scots is complicated and mired with classist bias. Many unionist urbanites have traditionally viewed Ulster-Scots disparagingly, referring to it as a language that was instead spoken by the uneducated “provincial *culchies*, *bogtrotters* or *mountainmen*” which Frank Ferguson describes as “an Ulster form of cultural cringe.”¹⁷⁴ In the absence of what they see as an authentic representation of British culture, it appears then that a desire to have parity of esteem of Ulster-Scots with Irish is largely politically symbolic rather than a belief based on historical fact. For example, DUP MLA Ian Paisley Jr described the inclusion of Ulster-Scots to counterbalance Irish during the peace process as having been “largely reactionary, to be honest.”¹⁷⁵ Much like Irish, Ulster-Scots only came to the fore in Northern Irish politics at the tail-end of the conflict.¹⁷⁶ It is not to suggest that unionist support for Ulster-Scots is insincere, rather it elucidates the extent to which the post-conflict agreements and settlements have inadvertently cemented and attempted to resolve relatively recent dimensions to the conflict which only ever became prominent during the peace process itself. Before the peace process, Irish had never previously been widely regarded as having intrinsically ‘belonged’ to Irish nationalists any more than Ulster-Scots had previously been regarded as a symbol of unionism.

¹⁷⁴ Ferguson, F. ‘Introduction’ in Ferguson, F. (eds), *Ulster-Scots Writing: An Anthology*, (England: Four Courts Press, 2008), p 2

¹⁷⁵ Young, C. *Unlocking Scots: The Secret Life of the Scots Language*, (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2023), p 256

¹⁷⁶ Ibid

Conclusion

The overarching objective of this study was to assess the extent to which Irish has become more prominent throughout the course of the peace process. To this end, the study detailed the recent development of how Irish became gradually intertwined with Irish national identity, how post-conflict agreements and Acts of Parliament framed it in relation to the conflict, and how unionists have responded to efforts by the state to promote the language in the public sphere pursuant of the aforementioned agreements and legislation. The hypothesis was that the principles underpinning post-conflict agreements and legislation, namely parity of esteem, have unintentionally contributed to the transformation of the Irish language into an expression of national rather than linguistic identity. In doing so, they attempted to resolve issues relating to language as though it had been a trigger for the conflict (e.g. ethno-national identity) when this had not been the case. As a result, such efforts to promote and support Irish under parity of esteem have engendered greater polarisation between nationalists and unionists. The first chapter presented a general outline of consociationalism, the theory upon which the Northern Ireland peace process was predicated, highlighting how it emerged as a response to the post-colonial conflicts that birthed extremely divided societies. It illustrated consociational arguments for the separation of traditionally competing groups, or segments, with political power-sharing mechanism to develop a stable society. The chapter stressed however that ‘stabilising’ did not translate to ‘resolving’ hostile relationships as consociational advocates reaffirm that it is often an insurmountable task. Critiques of this viewpoint were also introduced, namely their arguments that legitimisation of elite rule from separate segments coupled with the acceptance of hostile identities as a given cannot create a permanently stable society. Following on, the chapter explored how consociationalism has been applied in the Northern Irish setting by legitimising unionist and nationalist group identities whilst imposing a power-sharing arrangement through segmental elites.

The second chapter showcased the methods and data used. A single case study was justified on the grounds that Northern Ireland presents a unique and complex puzzle vis-à-vis conflict resolution especially with the degree to which a language comparatively few people speak has become a central pillar in the peace process. Critical discourse analysis was chosen as a suitable method to analysis and contextualise the wide array of sources which included newspaper editorials, op-eds, interviews, and parliamentary speeches. The implementation of state support of Irish in the public sphere was the installing of bilingual roadsigns and the

state investment into IME, which tracked the annual development of IME establishments, student intake and funding.

The third chapter began with providing a timeline of the central agreements that were signed during the peace process and the subsequent statutes that were legislated through Parliament. In doing so, it put specific focus on how the principle of ‘parity of esteem’ within the agreements and Acts associated Irish with Irish nationalism, as well as Ulster-Scots with unionism. As a result of this association, it argued that state support for Irish did not translate as support for unionist communities which resulted in greater polarisation between the two communities. Two examples of state support pursuant of the agreements and legislation were laid out – bilingual road signs and IME. Opposition to these endeavours was illustrated by presenting responses from senior unionist political figures as well as low level activists such as the Orange Order and Clonduff Concerned Citizens pressure group. It showed that unionist opposition came in two distinct stages: before the legislating of the Identity and Language Act 2022, and after. Pre-2022 responses at times explicitly associated Irish with militant republicanism with arguments frequently alleging recognition of the language would harm Northern Ireland’s place within the union. As the Identity and Language Bill was approaching the final stages in Parliament, the rhetoric changed from portraying Irish as a front for republicanism to alleging state support would contravene the principles of parity of esteem as it would, in their eyes, favour the nationalist community at the expense of unionists. The chapter also sought to contextualise unionist opposition by suggesting that such opposition may have stemmed from disillusionment of the British government vis-à-vis Brexit as well as a wider feeling that the unionist community had not gained as much from the peace process as their nationalist counterparts. This tied in further to a realisation by unionists that Northern Irish society is experiencing a levelling in which unionist power and influence is becoming increasingly less dominant.

Based on the analysis of the texts, two conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, it is indisputable that the Irish language has become increasingly prominent in discourse surrounding the ongoing divide between the nationalist and unionist community in post-GFA Northern Ireland. This has been seen in its increased prominence in post-conflict agreements and legislation and is also reflected in the often-toxic rhetoric exerted by members of the unionist political elite and other lower-stratum unionist organisations. Secondly, agreements and legislation that sought to bring peace to the society have inadvertently introduced new dimensions to the conflict via their association of Irish with Irish national identity. This has

been a decisive mishap, no less because language was not a trigger or common feature of the conflict and especially so given that both communities had a shared heritage of using it. By associating the Irish language with Irish national identity, it has driven a wedge between those who see themselves as Irish and those who see themselves as British. Opposition, as observed, was largely reflective of the radical changes that are taking place in Northern Irish society. Unionism, which was once the premier political movement in Northern Ireland, has been effectively dethroned due to the power-sharing arrangement. Previously minor parties such as Sinn Fein and, to a lesser extent, the Alliance Party have increasingly become a political force to be reckoned with. That is not to suggest unionism is thrashing about in its death throes, but what it does suggest is that the continued levelling of Northern Irish society could lead the country to a different path; a future which unionists are cognisant of.

There were of course several limitations to this study. That it is a single case can raise reasonable questions about the applicability in other post-conflict consociational settings such. However, a cross-comparison critical discourse analysis between Northern Ireland and other post-conflict divided society requires a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the spoken languages. Likewise, there is also the extent to which views of the lower stratum of unionist society were influenced by unionist political output. As Barry observed in Sri Lanka, whilst it is possible for segmental elites to influence their communities as consociational advocates contend, it could also be possible that the anger and frustration with which the unionist political elite have approached the language debate is merely a reflection of the community they represent.

Though it was briefly touched upon in the study, the impact power-sharing has had on discourse is something worth exploring further. Political parties involved in grand coalitions, including those from extremist backgrounds, have impressively moderated their rhetoric. Sinn Fein and, to a lesser extent, the DUP have a history of associations with paramilitarism and political violence, though they have shown to be adept by at least appearing to extend an olive branch to the other side. This is in comparison to parties such as the TUV – which is not part of the power-sharing agreement and emerged only nine years after the signing of the GFA – but which nonetheless holds considerably far more hardline views and are overall relatively hostile to the peace process. What this could suggest is that consociationalism has been successful insofar that the framework it has imposed has effectively facilitated the management of discourse.

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Annex A: Education Authority FOI Request Ref 15742



Sent by email on: 11th April 2025

Dear Applicant,

Re: Your Freedom of Information Request dated 17th February 2025, Our Reference FOI 15742

I write further to your recent request for information which the Education Authority received on 17th February 2025, and subsequently clarified on 27th February 2025, for information relating to the Irish language/Irish Medium Schools.

Section 1(1)(a) of FOIA requires the Education Authority (EA) to inform a requester whether it holds the information specified in their request. I write to confirm, by virtue of Section 1(1)(a) of the Freedom of Information Act, that the EA holds some of the information requested. Please see our response below:

- 1. An annual breakdown of public funding the Education Authority has allocated to the maintenance (including funding for the delivery of education within Irish Medium Schools, but also funding for the construction/literal maintenance of the buildings) of Irish medium schools from 2017 to 2024.***

The EA can confirm, by virtue of Section 1(1)(a) of the Freedom of Information Act, that it holds the information requested.

Please see the table below, detailing the relevant expenditure for the following financial years (FY):

	2023/24 FY	2022/23 FY	2021/22 FY	2020/21 FY	2019/20 FY	2018/19 FY	2017/18 FY
	£	£	£	£	£	£	£
Irish medium recurrent maintenance*	25,666,000	25,965,000	24,085,000	22,081,000	19,407,000	17,589,000	16,946,000
Irish medium capital ** expenditure	393,000	4,090,000	1,846,000	343,000	897,000	1,722,000	663,000
TOTAL	26,059,000	30,055,000	25,931,000	22,424,000	20,304,000	19,311,000	17,609,000

**recurrent maintenance refers to funding for the delivery of education within Irish Medium Schools and for the maintenance of buildings*

***capital expenditure includes primarily provision of Modular Buildings associated Minor Works and Furniture and Equipment*

2. An annual breakdown of public funding the Education Authority has allocated to Irish-medium units attached to English-medium Integrated/Controlled schools from 2017 to 2024.

The EA can confirm, by virtue of Section 1(1)(a) of the Freedom of Information Act, that it holds some information within the scope of your request.

The EA can confirm that the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DE) provides an annual budget of £121,000 to the Education Authority (EA) for Irish-medium units, which is then directly allocated by the EA to all 10 Irish-Medium Units.

Please note, however, that all 10 of these Irish-Medium Units are attached to English-medium Maintained/Grammar schools; there are no Irish-medium units attached to English-medium Integrated/Controlled schools.

Each of the 10 Irish-Medium Units, attached to English-medium Maintained/Grammar schools, receives an annual allocation of £12,100 that is to support the additional needs associated with the Unit. This figure is set out in the Letter of Allocation received from DE and the impact of the resource is evaluated by DE.

The EA can confirm that this allocation has remained consistent, at £121,000 per year, from the 2017/18 Financial Year to the 2024/25 Financial Year.

3. And, if possible, an annual breakdown of public funding the Education Authority has allocated to providing Irish language as a subject in English-medium/Integrated/Controlled schools from 2017 to 2024.

The EA can confirm, by virtue of Section 1(1)(a) of the Freedom of Information Act, that it does not hold this information.

The EA can confirm that it has not allocated specific funding for the provision of Irish Language as a subject in English-medium Integrated/Controlled schools from 2017 to 2024.

The EA can, however, provide information regarding the Learning Leaders Support Scheme (LLSS). The LLSS helps provide bespoke professional learning to Irish Medium educators in key areas of need that have been identified by the Sector and has been made available by the EA since 2017/18 to all educators within Irish Medium Settings.

The scheme, as initially intended, was for teachers to access a bursary which could be used to develop any area of focus that they felt would have improved their own practice, language skills and experience for pupils in their classroom. Three years ago (since 22/23), the resource was adapted to also focus also on key areas of learning that the sector had identified. This has included maximising the resource to support capacity building and language development of educators in the sector.

Please see the below table for information regarding the resources allocated by the EA for the LLSS:

Year	Allocated Resource	Actual Spend
2017/18	£53k	£45k
2018/19	£53k	£34k
2019/20	£53k	£33k
2020/21	£53k	£5k
2021/22	£53k	£18k
2022/23	£37k	£37k
2023/24	£37k	£37k
2024/25	£37k	£37k

If you are dissatisfied with any aspect of this response or the way we have handled your request, you have the right to complain, within 40 working days of the date of this response, by writing directly to:

Information Governance Unit (IR)

Education Authority

40 Academy Street

Belfast

BT1 2NQ

Or by emailing: infogov@eani.org.uk

In that event we will conduct an internal review of our response, the outcome of which you will be notified of upon conclusion of the internal review.

If, after conclusion of the internal review process, you are dissatisfied with the outcome of your complaint, you have the right to complain further to the Information Commissioner's Office at the address below:

The Information Commissioner

Wycliffe House

Water Lane

Wilmslow

Cheshire

SK9 5AF

Tel: 01 625 54 57 45/0303 123 1113, website: www.ico.org.uk

Please be aware that the Information Commissioner will be unlikely to make a decision until you have been through our internal review process first.

The EA uses your personal information such as name and email address in order to comply with our legal obligations to respond to your FOI request. For further information on how and why EA collects and processes your personal information please see the detailed Privacy Notices on our website <https://www.eani.org.uk/about-us/privacy/ea-privacy-notices>.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to discuss your request further. I may be contacted using the details provided below. Please quote reference number FOI 15742 in all communications to help us to deal with them more promptly.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Hughes

Stephen Hughes | Assistant Information Governance Officer

Information Governance Unit | Corporate Services | Human Resources and Corporate Services Directorate



Education Authority

Grahamsbridge Road, Dundonald