A shared future: territoriality, pluralism and public policy in Northern Ireland

Brian Graham a,*, Catherine Nash b,1

a School of Environmental Sciences, University of Ulster, Cromore Road, Coleraine, Northern Ireland BT52 1SA, UK
b Department of Geography, Queen Mary, University of London, Mile End Road, London E9 7HA, UK

Abstract

This paper addresses the making of post-conflict public policy in Northern Ireland. In particular it considers an extended consultation process, A Shared Future: Improving Relations in Northern Ireland, initiated in January 2003 by the Community Relations Unit of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, as a response to the statutory requirement to further ‘good relations’ as specified in the 1998 Belfast Agreement and the subsequent Northern Ireland Act (1998). This public consultation process invited responses to a set of core principles for a plural but socially cohesive society and a series of policy options for fostering ‘good relations’. In this paper we discuss the Shared Future process within the context of the consociational underpinnings of the 1998 Agreement and the ways in which it foregrounds ideas of cultural diversity and pluralism but fails to engage adequately with the temporal and spatial dimensions of identities in Northern Ireland. Secondly, we explore both the difficulties of making policy that will encourage a pluralist but cohesive polity in a context in which territoriality dominates identity at state, local and even individual scales, and the problems of the ways the Shared Future policy seeks to replace ethnocratic or ethno-nationalist markers with those of ‘normal’ identities in ‘normal’ capitalist material space. We conclude with reflections on the limitations of consociational democratic practices in a society that has democratically mandated political parties promoting territorially-based ethno-nationalist ideologies.

© 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Community relations; Consociation; Equity; Pluralism; Policy; Space; Territoriality

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 2870 323399; fax: +44 2870 324411.
E-mail addresses: bj.graham@ulster.ac.uk (B. Graham), c.nash@qmul.ac.uk (C. Nash).
1 Tel.: +44 20 7882 3153; fax: +44 20 8981 6276.

0962-6298/$ - see front matter © 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
Introduction

Significant changes in governance and legislative frameworks have resulted from the implementation of the 1998 Belfast Agreement (henceforth, Agreement) that established the basis for a new power-sharing devolved administration for Northern Ireland. Despite the suspension of the devolved Assembly in 2002, the re-organized government departments continue to follow through the terms of the Agreement under direct rule. The establishment of new statutory bodies such as the Equality Commission, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, and the production of a Programme for Government by the Northern Ireland Executive (2001) is a reflection of this. Despite the impasse over the reinstatement of the Assembly, the ongoing implementation of the Northern Ireland Act of 1998 exemplifies the combination of intractably opposed political positions and the push towards alternatives that characterizes all political and cultural debate in Northern Ireland. This paper focuses on one significant public consultation process that sought to elicit widespread public engagement in a debate about the principles that should underpin a future post-conflict society in Northern Ireland, and the policies through which it should be achieved. A Shared Future: Improving Relations in Northern Ireland was launched by the Community Relations Unit of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in January 2003 (henceforth, OFMDFM, 2003). Over 500 written responses from groups and individuals were received over the following nine months (these can be accessed at www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/listresponses.htm). These responses, together with the proceedings of a conference held in January 2004 to discuss them, later informed The Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland made available in draft form in December 2004 before final revision in 2005 (henceforth, OFMDFM, 2004). The overarching aim of this paper is to examine the tensions between this state-led policy and the reality of a divided society that remains dominated by entrenched political positions and affiliations which contest the legitimacy of the state.

The establishment of Northern Ireland in 1921 resulted from an attempt to guarantee an electoral majority for those who wished to remain in the United Kingdom (UK) but created a (large) minority for whom the existence of Northern Ireland violated the ‘natural’ unity of the ‘Irish nation’. Ostensibly, this constitutional issue was resolved by the 1998 Agreement in that Northern Ireland will remain part of UK until a majority agree otherwise, while the Republic of Ireland subsequently repealed its constitutional claim to the six counties. Yet, while unionists/loyalists believe that the national question is now settled, for nationalists and especially for republicans both Northern Ireland and the Peace Process can be seen as interim arrangements on the road to a united Ireland. In this paper we explore the contradictions of policy measures intended to promote both pluralism and participatory democracy in this unagreed polity in which pluralist alternatives to ethno-nationalism lack any effective democratic mandate. Instead, the electorate has endorsed its antagonism to ideas of pluralism, hybridity and diversity. Nevertheless, the aspirations of A Shared Future also reflect the broader and longer-term ‘public interest’ in creating a society that can contain ethnic conflict.

In Northern Ireland the classical tensions between ideals of equality and claims to difference, and between individual liberty and collective rights, are inflected by conflicting ethno-national perspectives on the meaning of the good, the just and the right. Identity remains vested in traditional principles of ethno-nationalism that locate cultural belonging and citizenship in a ‘living space’ defined by clearly demarcated boundaries and zero-sum models of space and place. Senses of belonging correspond to a geography of territoriality that is both the basis of the most essentialized group identities and the potent focus of national mobilization.
In general terms, territoriality is put into practice through four mechanisms that combine a mixture of consent and coercion (Agnew, 2002; Graham, 1998a): a popular acceptance of zero-sum classifications of space that support hegemonic control over space; the integration of past and present into narratives that create a sense of place and identity and underpin the legitimacy of political ideologies; territorial markers and boundaries which act both as symbols of internal cohesion and external warning; and an enforcement of control over space by surveillance and policing which, in this context, includes the activities of paramilitary organizations. Territoriality works at a variety of scales and policies from the workplace and home to the world as a whole (Sack, 1986). Nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist relationships to place in Northern Ireland are often read simply in terms of respective narratives of native dispossession and settler mission to civilise and stay in the face of resistance. While these narratives may shape attitudes to the meaning of place in Northern Ireland, the microgeographies of segregation and struggles for territorial control are between communities that are themselves differentiated by class, lifestyle and gender and by the internal fragmentation, particularly of unionism/loyalism, but also nationalism/republicanism.

In this paper we take up a recent call for geographical attention to democracy’s routine procedures and policy matters, as well as the normative underpinning of processes of representation and participation (Barnett & Lowe, 2004), by exploring governmental policy measures designed to promote both pluralism and participatory democracy. As Barnett and Low (2004: 8) attest, democracy invites a geographical analysis since: the relationship between democratic participation and democratic decision making turns on the problem of how to institutionalize effective citizen participation in functionally complex, socially differentiated, and spatially and numerically extensive societies.

In Northern Ireland this usual ‘paradox of scale’ is deeply complicated by a situation in which the usual principles of majoritarian democracy do not resolve conflict nor guarantee a minimal level of acceptance of the legitimacy of the state. Here we consider a state-led policy initiative in a context in which the state itself is the subject of fundamental dispute. If democracy is best understood, as Barnett and Lowe (2004) suggest, as that mobile, mutating and essentially contested political form, what counts as productive and what counts as destructive contestation in the context of Northern Ireland? If the state can furnish a useful structure for the democratic negotiation of competing interests, in what way can contestation be channelled to allow the necessary degree of political stability in a context in which the state is itself the subject of apparently irreconcilable political differences? How can effective citizen participation be achieved in a society that is both socially differentiated and structured through political discourses that are openly antagonistic to pluralistic ideas of hybridity and diversity?

While Northern Ireland is not a state per se but a devolved constituent region of the UK, some of the recent literature concerning the persistence of ethno-national states or ethnocracies provides pertinent perspectives. Yiftachel and Ghanem (2004: 651) argue that ethnocracies are driven ‘by a concerted collective project of exerting ethno-national control over a territory perceived as the nation’s (exclusive) homeland.’ Similarly, Paasi (1999) points to the ways in which the interconnection of identity and territory is fundamental to dominant political orders and their mechanisms of control, while, among others, Sibley reiterates the long-understood argument that the nation—state is sustained by a myth of cultural homogeneity, it also being convenient ‘to have an alien other hovering on the margins’ (Sibley, 1996: 108). Although all these writers are focusing at the scale of the state, Northern Ireland is one among a number
of territories that demonstrates the functioning of ethno-nationalism at the sub-state scale as competing micro-ethnocracies attempt to carve out exclusive territories which essentially function as alternative worlds, each with its own myth of homogeneity but enforced by ‘ethnic cleansing’, alternative ‘policing’ by paramilitary organizations and demarcated by parallel cultural, social and educational structures.

While the hegemony of ethnocratic control is complicated by class, being most starkly apparent in working-class areas, the principal political parties in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), both espouse ethnocratic ideologies. When interpreted through this prism of ethno-nationalism, the term ‘shared society’ is shaded by ambiguity, referring equally to agreement on living apart as well as living together but differently.

Although the Shared Future process follows through the terms of the Agreement, which was democratically endorsed both by political representatives and by referenda in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, voting patterns since suggest an erosion of support and continued or worsening division. In the 2003 Northern Ireland Assembly elections, Sinn Féin (23.5 per cent of the vote), with its historical legacy of ‘physical-force’ republicanism, eclipsed the nationalist Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP; 17 per cent) as the leading political force in one community, while the anti-Agreement DUP with 25.6 per cent of the vote replaced the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP; 22.7 per cent) as the dominant party in the other. In 1998, the UUP and SDLP, the principal supporters of the Agreement, were in the ascendancy. The Alliance Party, which consciously appeals to a cross-community constituency, received only five per cent of the vote in 2003. The same pattern of Sinn Féin/DUP domination was repeated in the 2004 European Parliament elections and, although the SDLP maintained its position in the 2005 UK General Election, the DUP eradicated the UUP which was left with only one member of parliament.

The electoral primacy of Sinn Féin and the DUP can thus be read as the democratic endorsement of a form of apartheid. The Shared Future process has to be situated in this context of deeply rooted segregation and zero-sum ethnocratic politics. Those drafting policy are thus required to both fulfil the terms of the Agreement and satisfy political leaders and their electorate, unionists in particular, who are now less supportive of the Agreement. Thus, while a ‘divided society’ of fear, distrust, antagonism and sectarian division, reflected in sub-state segregation and territoriality, is the focus of the attempts to legislate for the development of a plural society and ‘neutral’ public space, patterns of territoriality simultaneously challenge this process. Since both residential segregation and the cultural marking of public space are the most overt indexes of division in Northern Ireland, developing a policy towards residential segregation and the territorial marking of public space are prominent aspects of the consultation and resulting strategy documents.

Our discussion of these documents and selected responses to them is divided into four sections. The first outlines the development of A Shared Future within the context of the consociational underpinnings of the 1998 Agreement and the ways in which the process necessarily foregrounds ideas of cultural diversity and pluralism. It is argued that it does so at the expense of a sustained engagement with the temporal and spatial dimensions of identities in Northern Ireland. Secondly, we use the concept of territoriality to explore the difficulties of fostering a pluralist but cohesive society in a context in which territoriality dominates identity at state, local and even individual scales. Thirdly, the paper considers the ways in which A Shared Future seeks to replace ethnocratic or ethno-nationalist markers of identity with those of ‘normal’ capitalist material space, before concluding with an assessment of the limitations of
consociational democratic practices in a society that has democratically mandated political parties which espouse ethno-nationalist ideologies vested in territoriality.

Towards a shared future

The 1998 Agreement

The origins of the Shared Future consultation lie in the extended history of political negotiation based on the principle of consociation, a form of government that seeks to hold together divided societies by accommodation at the elite level (Tonge, 2005), that underpin both the 1998 Agreement and subsequent Northern Ireland Act. As O'Leary (1999) argues, the Agreement meets all four of Lijphart’s (1977) criteria on a consociational agreement:

- cross-community collective power-sharing;
- proportionality rules throughout the governmental and public sectors;
- community self-government and equality in cultural life; and
- veto rights for minorities.

In general, consociational agreements are ‘often the equilibrium outcomes of bargains or pacts between the political leaders of ethnic or religious communities’ (O’Leary, 1999: 68). In the present context, the third criterion is of particular significance in that ‘consociational agreements avoid the compulsory integration of peoples: instead they seek to manage differences equally and justly’ (O’Leary, 1999: 76). To this end, bi-nationalism lies at the core of the Agreement, a characteristic which means, however, that it can be held to institutionalise and freeze national and sectarian identities. As critics have argued, parity of esteem could cement the existing blocs and thus become a charter for apartheid rather than transition. O’Leary (1999: 78) admits to the merit of this criticism:

Utopianism is evident in the axiom that identities as historically developed as those in Northern Ireland can be rapidly channelled into more desirable individualist or class identities. Nevertheless he contends that:

consociational settlements can, and indeed should, be transitional — by protecting and making secure the most presently dominant identities they may assist in diminishing their public salience, and permitting a deeper pluralism to flourish (O’Leary, 1999: 78).

While there were always obvious caveats to the Agreement — decommissioning of paramilitary organizations and their weapons; demilitarization; police reform; and prisoner release — O’Leary’s optimism can be tempered by four further factors which are relevant to this analysis of A Shared Future. These centre on the wider dilemma that political processes — and, as Marston (2004) has argued, also political geography — often fail to engage with cultural questions in theorising the state. As Painter (1995) has observed, state processes are symbolic as well as material, as much about invocations of meaning and performance as policy and legislation.

First, issues concerning responsibility for the past were subordinated in the Agreement to the forging of a consociational political consensus. Van Dusen (2004: 29) argues that ‘culture acts without regard to rights, and the state acts to mediate cultural conflicts, in terms of rights’. Although this comment is not applicable to ethnocracies where the state and culture are ostensibly
as one, the mediating role of the state can also be undermined by sub-state ethno-nationalism. As Bell (2003: 1144) contends, the inherently elitist consociational ‘Agreement was fashioned so as to avoid the need for a societal narrative’. It contains ‘no mechanism for dealing with past abuses, or “truth-telling”’ (Bell, 2003: 1097). Simultaneously, however, the Agreement exacerbated other problematic elements of Northern Irish politics, most notably the reification of the hegemonic status of the ‘two traditions’ paradigm through using the legacy of the past to make what could be seen as an ‘exemption for one group … into a universal right that applied to all’. The obvious example is the right to communicate in a language other than English, equal status being given to Irish and Ulster-Scots so that there were ‘alternative languages for everyone’ (Little, 2004: 81).

Secondly, a significant if unforeseen result of the Agreement has been a ‘depoliticization of society’ matched by an escalating stress on identity and culture:

at the expense of the old contesting politics of national sovereignty, self-determination and independence. As the constitutional question arising from these contests has diminished, the focus has shifted to the problem of sectarianism (Tonge, 2005: 7).

Although the ‘politics of national sovereignty’ are obviously about competing models of cultural nationalism and their expression through the nation-state, presenting the problem of Northern Ireland as sectarianism rather than the legitimacy of the state, reductively locates the source of conflict in religious differences alone. Sectarianism, which can be defined as ‘religious bigotry, the promotion of one’s religion or religious background at the expense of the alternative’ (Tonge, 2005: 192), is a common defining characteristic of the ethnocratic state. Nevertheless, religion, while marginalized in other contexts, remains ‘an accepted and sometimes overpowering agent’ (Little, 2004: 76) in Northern Ireland, yet it has always overlapped with secular forms of conflict more accurately defined as ethnic or nationalist (Coulter, 1999) to encourage ‘separatism, intolerance and chauvinism, patriarchalism and authoritarianism’ (Fraser, 2000: 108). In Northern Ireland, the attempt to deal with sub-state patterns of ethno-sectarian antagonism though principles of parity of cultural respect and esteem has inadvertently created a legitimating vocabulary of ‘culture’ and ‘cultural rights’ for antagonistic expressions of separatist difference. In this context, an attentiveness to the cultural in political geography entails exploring the effects of a pervasive but differently inflected discourse of politics as culture.

Thirdly, while the Agreement addresses the political geography of Northern Ireland in terms of state jurisdiction, it fails to address the territoriality embedded in Northern Ireland politics and society and the ways in which identities remain firmly vested in ethnically-defined and often very local places (Graham, 1998b). The social construction of scale by the actions of groups and individuals has been explored by Flint (2004) through the terminology of ‘spaces of hate’ which seems appropriate to the ethno-nationalist politics of Northern Ireland. Drawing upon Sack (1986), he observes the continuing importance of territoriality for ‘hate groups’, which delimit and assert control over geographic areas and support ideas of enclosed or sealed places. Thus border construction and maintenance are important to this pursuit of territorially defined politics, which is ‘a feature of politics within places rather than the preserve of international affairs’ (Flint, 2004: 8). Gallagher’s (2004) comment regarding the US Militia Movement that the ‘last line of defence’ is the scale of the local has also distinct resonances with territoriality in Northern Ireland which is concerned as much with internal control of ethnic territories as with their bounded delineation. As Paasi (2003) observes, identities and differences are actualized in many ways on several spatial scales and localized identities, especially when configured
through ideas of race, gender, religious or class difference (Harvey, 1993), and ‘are among the most dynamic bases for both progressive political mobilization and reactionary, exclusive politics’ (Paasi, 2003: 476).

Finally, the concept of equality between the ‘two traditions’ embodied in the Agreement is undermined by the inability of fragmented unionism and loyalism to match the ideological certainties espoused by republicanism and particularly by Sinn Féin. While the history of republicanism does not necessarily conform to the smooth, linear narrative often claimed by the movement, it clearly is characterised by a more centrally controlled ideology and coherent infrastructure than is loyalism. Arguably, these different mindsets are reflected in the varying capacities of loyalist and republican politicians to control their communities, a factor quite crucial in the realisation of the goals of A Shared Future.

Community relations policy in a consociational context

In line with its consociational principles, the Agreement and subsequent legislation has established statutory responsibilities to address issues of equality and ‘good relations’ and to implement the terms of the Act through new government department structures, legislation and policy. Building upon existing community relations policy and practice whose original framework had been developed in the late 1980s, inter-communal division has been addressed through the funding, policy-making and advisory functions of the Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU), Community Relations Council (CRC) and District Councils Community Relations Programme. In addition, educational policy initiatives include the cross-community contact schemes for schools and sports, youth, community groups, support for integrated education and curriculum attention to education for mutual understanding and cultural heritage (Nash, 2005a). The Harbison Review of Community Relations Policy (Harbison, 2002) concluded, however, that, despite limited achievements, community relations policies have not resulted in any lessening of division as measured by greater integration of housing and education.

A Shared Future (OFMDFM, 2003) is clearly informed by this conclusion. It opens by advancing a vision of Northern Ireland as a ‘peaceful society in which everyone can freely and fully participate, achieve their full potential, and live free from poverty’ with ‘a fair and effective system of government, underpinned by rights that are guaranteed for all, and responsibilities that all must share’. It emphasizes government support for ‘dialogue’ and desire to ‘foster mutual understanding and respect for diversity’ (OFMDFM, 2003: np). However, this positive vision of Northern Ireland is followed immediately by a stark summary of present patterns of deep division, including: segregation in housing, work, leisure and schooling; new patterns of racism; as well as intra- and inter-communal antagonism and violence at interfaces between deprived communities. Yet, this explicit admission can serve different sorts of political arguments about the nature and cause of division. While presented as evidence of the need to address separation, the conclusions pointing to the limited achievements of community relations policy were welcomed — albeit from different perspectives — in the subsequent responses of both Sinn Féin and the UUP. For the former, it confirms their traditional antipathies to the CRC which they see as misdirecting attention away from the role of the illegitimate state in creating division. Moreover, republicans accuse the CRC of perpetuating the idea that the conflict was between ‘two traditions’ whereas the British state was a full party to the ‘war’ and remains committed to attacking republicanism by other means including the ‘active reproduction of sectarianism’
(Sinn Féin, 2003: np). The UUP is critical of the CRC for funding groups antagonistic to the state and in particular to what they take as the tenet of CRC policy which supports republican claims for ‘equality’. This critique is expressed, however, in terms of the language of pluralism that, superficially at least, mirrors the language of consociational consensus:

Community relations policy has been based on the wrong premise ... that ... being an undefined notion of “equality” in the sense of a policy designed to achieve “neutrality” as opposed to one of tolerance and mutual respect in a truly pluralist society (UUP, 2003: np).

Tensions between respect for collective identities, freedom of expression, social cohesion, cultural difference, collective rights, individualism and equality are threaded through A Shared Future and foregrounded in many responses to it. The original consultation document was structured by a series of statements of aims, objectives and principles. Respondents were invited to engage with these statements and comment on a range of choices for reorganizing local, regional and central government policy, support and measures addressing division, all within the context of one overarching objective:

Our strong belief is that Northern Ireland must become a society where there is equality, respect for diversity and a recognition that we are interdependent on each other. We believe the aim of policy must, therefore, be to develop a more shared and pluralist society (OFMDFM, 2003: np).

This statement was framed by a choice between accepting, stabilizing and managing division or promoting rapid progress towards ‘a more integrated and shared society’. Thus A Shared Future posed the question of the nature of a desired future and also the appropriate temporality of change.

A series of specific policy aims were proposed for consideration which were intended:

- to support the development of integrated/shared communities where people wish to learn, live, work and play together; to encourage communication, tolerance and trust in areas where communities are living apart; to promote respect, encouragement and celebration of different cultures, faiths and traditions; to eliminate sectarianism and racism and to enable individuals to live and work without fear or intimidation; to reduce tension and conflict at interface areas; and to shape polices, practices and institutions to enable trust and good relations to grow (OFMDFM, 2003: np).

Respondents were similarly invited to consider a set of proposed principles on which the promotion of good relations in Northern Ireland could be based. Drawing on the recommendations of the Harbison Review, these were:

- the need to acknowledge the prevalence and problem of division ‘between and within communities’;
- the need for leadership;
- the need for ‘long-term, cross Government and co-ordinated action’;
- ‘widespread ownership and engagement’;
- the importance of local action;
- targeted support on areas with ‘a high incidence or history of poor relations and conflict and deprivation’ as well as young people and support to communities that ‘have developed … good practice’;
and strongly reflecting the terms of the Agreement;

- the need to situate community relations throughout Northern Ireland within ‘a broader complex of relationships, cross-border, North–South and East–West’.

A constructive ambiguity?

The nature of the document and the responses to it, points to the particular difficulties of establishing democratic forms of governance in post-conflict contexts, and wider debates about adjudicating between competing claims within and about the nature of a pluralist ‘shared society’ and ‘shared space’. Such tensions frame the aspirational nature of *A Shared Future*, a document criticized as being ‘high in pious sentiments’ and ‘vague statements of goodwill’ (*ICTU, 2003*: 2), but lacking — perhaps intentionally — any working definitions of key terms. Prominent among these are: sectarianism; racism; conflict; reconciliation; criminality; integration; and sharing. With one or two notable exceptions (for example, Alliance Party, Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition), this same definitional elusiveness is mirrored in the submissions. In contrast, the Alliance Party’s approach is to define sectarianism as an essentialist understanding of identity, in which the individual is defined by the community into which she/he is born. In Northern Ireland, this is most likely to be a religious community which, as we have seen, overlaps with secular ethnic markers more often defined as ethnic or nationalist (*Coulter, 1999*). This attempt to define the central terms is lacking in *A Shared Future* which also does not distinguish between conflict management, conflict transformation and conflict resolution. It addresses only the former (*Ultach Trust, 2003*) whereas conflict transformation refers literally to methods that alter the nature of the conflict from violence to some other means (*Lederach, 1997*). In helping transform the relationships, interests and discourses which support the continuation of violent conflict, these methods operate at a number of levels from the individual to the state and can involve structural change addressing injustice and inequality in the social structure as a whole. Conflict transformation is not synonymous with conflict resolution, which, logically, is an unattainable goal in these circumstances as the outcome would be to make Northern Ireland either entirely British or entirely Irish.

Rather, *A Shared Future* envisages a future Northern Ireland in which conflict is replaced by pluralism (defined by the *Alliance Party, 2003* as being the state in which difference is no longer a major issue), even if this future can only be fostered rather than enforced (*CRC, 2003*). In trying to implement the statutory responsibility to address ‘good relations’ as set out in Section 75 of the Agreement and produce public policy in a context in which there is profound disagreement over the nature of the state, the document necessarily de-emphasises the fundamentally opposed political positions which such integration might replace. *A Shared Future* thus follows the ‘constructive ambiguity’ of the ‘key documents of the peace process’ which ‘could be interpreted in various ways to suit the receiving audience’ (*Dixon, 2002*: 736). This constructive ambiguity may, however, have equally uncertain outcomes. In remaining conceptually superficial and keeping to the relatively safe language of pluralism in order to avoid alienating any one group, it could prompt an engagement that ultimately leads to progressive change, or it may allow resistance to change to be expressed through a legitimised language of pluralism. The difficulty for the civil servants drafting policy that can meet the approval of elected political leaders from opposed positions, is how to ‘keep groups on board’ through constructive ambiguity while, simultaneously, clearly elucidating the focus, objectives, principles and strategies
of an effective ‘good relations’ policy. The responses to A Shared Future indicate what is at stake in achieving consensus in a contested state and divided society.

**A shared space?**

In extending the debate on a shared but plural society, but one viewed through the countervailing prism of territoriality, this third section of the paper focuses on the impediments to the ways in which such a vision could be translated into new geographies of identity, residence and social life within Northern Ireland at state, local and even individual scales.

**From ‘divided society’ to ‘shared society’?**

A central aim of the consultation process summarised in the Draft Strategy Document (OFMDFM, 2004) was to seek agreement on policies and perspectives that could effectively address the geographical segregation and division that characterize society in Northern Ireland. Alternative spatialities to deeply divided and antagonistic senses of identity and territorial geographies of belonging are being explored, for example, in local history projects (Nash, 2005b) feminist visual art and other cultural forms and social movements (Reid, 2004, 2005). Nevertheless, segregation, the territorial nature of community identity at the local level and the ethno-nationalist and sectarian cultural marking of public space are likely to persist for some time in Northern Ireland. This makes it extremely difficult to envisage how an effective vision of pluralism and diversity might inform and refigure the everyday geographies of human life.

In the post-Agreement era, the conflict in Northern Ireland remains inherently territorial and the ‘ground’ a key political resource. Territoriality reflects the continuing importance of place to social networks and mental and emotional bindings while control of space is still regarded as being crucial to identity, power and politics. It also remains a key factor in the conflict in general, ‘a symbol of political domination and political practice’ (Shirlow, 2001: 69), being most acutely experienced at interfaces and through the ‘chill factors’ which they both help symbolize and define, but also through the minutiae of daily routine, travel patterns and social networks (Shirlow, Mesev, & McMullan, 1999). Identities in Northern Ireland remain constructed around territoriality which essentially replicates nationalist ideologies at the local scale. The republican metanarrative is ostensibly much stronger than that of fragmented loyalism, which is seen by the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP: the political wing of the Ulster Volunteer Force, 2003) as one repercussion of a British government programme to ‘demonise/criminalise all loyalists’ and so protect the UUP. While the Shared Future and Draft Strategy documents address residential segregation and the public marking of identity and territory in their focus on social policy, institutional structures and monitoring, the key question remains: how can a cultural policy advocating pluralism and diversity be implemented when territoriality defines the dominant set of values within the divided communities and marks their irreconcilable or, at best, intractable differences?

Few responses raised the issue of dealing with representations of the past and their role in legitimating territorial myths. Since 1998, the rival territorial ideologies have imposed their own narratives of time and place onto the cultural landscapes of Northern Ireland. These processes have become institutionalized as inadvertent outcomes of ‘single identity work’ and funding for ‘community building capital’, policies which have been premised on the idea that meaningful alternatives to division depend on firstly building up community confidence and self-understanding (Nash, 2005a). Nevertheless, A Shared Future (OFMDFM, 2003)
does not raise the question of historical understanding and it is thus unsurprising that the responses and subsequent Draft Strategy Document (OFMDFM, 2004) also have little to say concerning the significance of the interconnection of territoriality and representations of the past to ‘good’ (and poor) relations. The Presbyterian Church submission provides a rare exception in arguing that we have to deal with the past not in the sense of being trapped in it but moving on: ‘We do not, however, believe that the past can be left to deal with itself’ (Presbyterian Church, 2003: np). The PUP links the past with class betrayal, arguing that nationalists:

seek to ghettoize society by labelling the history and culture of another community as illegitimate. The [unionist] middle classes that have sought to distance themselves from their own history ably support them (PUP, 2003: np).

While neglecting the deep relationships between historical memory, territorialized space and community identity, the consultation and strategy documents embody the idea that ‘a shared society’ stands as an alternative to a divided society. A Shared Future argues that:

We should aim for: a shared society in which people are encouraged to make choices in their lives that are not bound by historical divisions and are free to do so; and a pluralist society, with respect and tolerance for cultural diversity, where people are free to assert their identity (OFMDFM, 2003: np) [emphasis in original].

A ‘shared society’ is figured here in terms of choice and freedom from the constraints that are the product of ‘historical division’ and, by implication, of territoriality, and of a pluralism that accommodates the freedom of people to express their identity as individuals, and implicitly but importantly, as groups. This represents an attempt to negotiate the tensions between individualism and communal identities, fidelity to cultural particularity and freedom of expression. Yet, the assurances that follow this statement suggest the ways in which arguments about diversity and pluralism can be interpreted through a model of the social based either on separatist difference or the assimilation of difference. The authors acknowledge this and attempt to allay anxiety about the basis of a new and shared society:

No one is arguing for an artificially homogenous Northern Ireland, and no one will be asked to give up or suppress his or her chosen identity. We recognise the views of those who do not wish to have closer integration of communities. However, we believe that a shared and pluralist society should be encouraged, and people who want to live in such a society should have that choice — a choice that is currently limited (OFMDFM, 2003: np).

This reassurance that arguments for pluralism do not stand for an idea of an ‘artificially homogeneous Northern Ireland’ and that pluralism does not entail anyone giving up or suppressing their ‘chosen identity’ are directed to the widespread and differently inflected concerns about the costs of any accommodation of difference. In a zero-sum model of pluralism in which the recognition of the value of another tradition is read as undermining the value of one’s own, achieving a shared set of social values will inevitably mean loss of respect, recognition or status for one group and gain for another. The solution to division can only be assimilation, separatism or minimalist consociation. Behind this paragraph with its telling foregrounding of the problems of recognizing separatist positions that reject pluralism and closer integration in favour of culturalist difference within a plural society, are years of political negotiation between two broad constituencies both opposed to their ‘assimilation’ as subordinate minorities into a majority culture of the British or Irish state. This is illustrated, perhaps unintentionally, by
A Shared Future’s visual motif — a photograph of Maurice Harron’s statue, ‘Hands across the divide’, sited at the western end of the Craigavon Bridge which connects Londonderry’s Protestant Waterside to Derry’s almost entirely Catholic Cityside. This dramatic depiction of two figures almost but not quite touching outwardly stretched hands sums up the ambiguity of division in Northern Ireland. Conventionally, the artwork is interpreted as an optimistic if guarded step towards reconciliation by the people of this divided city. Equally, though, it can be read as saying, ‘this far and no further’, by people who regard their differences as irreconcilable but are agreed on seeking a means at state, sub-state and individual scales of living together but apart that eschews the violence of the Troubles.

The contested state: sharing and pluralism

Although there was widespread general acceptance of the need to address division and work towards a shared society in responses to the consultation document, the divergence of views on what sharing and pluralism might mean and how they could be achieved reflects wider political perspectives. As Darby and Knox (2004) observe, this is a major issue as different people and groups are using the language of a shared future in different ways. Some republican critiques of multiculturalism, especially when framed by civic unionist claims about the tradition of tolerance of difference in the British state, argue that the language of tolerance and diversity is used to encourage Northern Irish Catholics to accept the political legitimacy of Northern Ireland. For the republican former prisoner umbrella group, Coiste Na n-larchimí (Coiste), community relations are part of a British government and Northern Ireland Office (1998) strategy to try to delegitimize republicanism by criminalizing it (Coiste, 2003). Republicans contend that community relations policy has figured conflict in Northern Ireland as the product of internal division and so absolved the state’s responsibility for colonialism, imperialism, partition and post-partition discrimination, and repression under unionist leadership and under direct rule. In turn, arguments for the recognition of diversity and espousal of pluralism can be read as attempts to encourage Protestants to feel included in, and thus support, the ideal of a plural but united Ireland.

For some, A Shared Future espoused pluralism but failed to set out the plural and conflicting patterns of political and cultural identification, and so effectively failed to acknowledge them. Its attempt to create a set of shared values in a context of conflict and division by avoiding the territorial question was read as support for the current condition of devolution which nationalists regard as an interim arrangement. Sinn Féin’s response to A Shared Future is strongly critical of its explicit failure to acknowledge nationalist perspectives. The party advocates amending the overall aim of policy on good relations ‘to promote equality, value diversity and to recognise inter-dependence of all individuals and communities across the island of Ireland.’ Sinn Féin argues that unionists ‘would find nothing inimical in the consultation paper’, whereas the absence of reference to nationalist aspiration, the Irish government and the Irish language imposes a model of ‘homogenization’, here understood as the neutralization and assimilation of nationalist identities into a majority unionist culture, in place of the ‘consociationalism that is at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement’; ‘[t]he fact that nearly half the population do not have a vision for “Northern Ireland” beyond a new constitutional island wide settlement is not mentioned.’ (Sinn Féin, 2003: np).

In contrast, the Alliance Party challenges the ‘benign Apartheid’ of this consociation of ‘separate but equal communities’ (Alliance Party, 2003: 6), questioning not only the understanding
of Northern Irish society in terms of ‘two communities’ because of the way it elides cross-community commonalities and misrepresents the complexities of identification, but also arguing for the ‘creation of some overarching loyalties’ (Alliance Party, 2003: 27). Whereas the consultation document avoids the idea of shared identity, using instead the potentially less potent term, ‘shared society’, the Alliance Party posits two models of shared identity. One is a minimalist approach, characterized by a mosaic of groups in a multicultural society with ‘little sense of common interest’. Conversely, the ‘maximalist approach’ envisages a ‘common, umbrella identity for the people of Northern Ireland […] civic in nature’; ‘consistent with the ideals of equal citizenship and universalism, in that identity would be essentially privatized, with the group dynamic removed’ (Alliance Party, 2003: 27). Promoting Northern Ireland as ‘a distinct region within a decentralizing British Isles and emerging Europe of the regions’ (Alliance Party, 2003: 28) would, the party argues, provide the basis for a level of shared identification that might accommodate a range of other loyalties and identities. This could avoid both the ideal of the (impossible) neutrality of the public sphere, and the absolute privatization of cultural identity. The Alliance Party alone acknowledges that achieving a shared society based on a shared identity and shared civic values would involve some revision or relinquishing of established patterns of identification.

Finding meaningful, effective and acceptable alternatives to territorial versions of collective identity is fundamental to any realization of the society envisaged in the consultation document in which cultural identity and attitudes to citizenship and civil rights, both group and individual, are no longer interlinked in zero-sum, ethno-nationalist discourses. Conflict transformation depends on effecting changes in the nature of socio-spatial relationships between loyalists and republicans, unionists and nationalists. Republicanism, however, locates all its aspirations in a pan-Ireland state. While Sinn Féin is a traditional ethno-nationalist organization, the party is correct in claiming that the nationalist aspiration is omitted from A Shared Future which focuses exclusively on Northern Ireland and does not address the role and agency of the British state within the conflict. Thus the party proposes a Forum for National Reconciliation to be undertaken ‘through a participative process of political and civil engagement’ in order to ‘build good relations across the island’. It advocates a Commission on National Reconciliation that would examine and identify barriers to a wide set of relations: ‘between the communities of people on the island of Ireland’; ‘within those communities in the border communities where relations have been fractured by partition’; ‘between communities within the north of Ireland’; ‘within communities throughout the north of Ireland’; ‘with communities abroad which have experience of political conflict’; and ‘most importantly at this juncture relations between the institutions of the state and those communities which have been alienated and marginalized from those institutions’ (Sinn Féin, 2003: np).

Given, however, that these proposals are clearly intended to alienate unionists, it is impossible not to read Sinn Féin’s vision of a shared future as agreement on living apart until changing demographics allows majoritarian democracy to deliver a united Ireland. Sinn Féin’s linking of citizenship and cultural identity in an all-Ireland state is matched by unionist and loyalist ideologies that locate both in the UK or Northern Ireland:

Yes … we can’t live apart because it isn’t feasible. However Republicans don’t want us to have a choice, they have promoted and encouraged polarization (Castlereagh Borough Council, 2003: np).

This statement, taken from the submission of a DUP-controlled local council, is, of course, actually an argument for living apart but blaming the (culpable) other. Of the two principal
unionist parties, the DUP did not respond to the consultation process, which might be taken as an indication of its attitudes to community relations and their cognate institutional structures, while the UUP submitted a fairly perfunctory document that makes a commitment to a more shared society but does not explore how this might be attained. It does acknowledge that due to the legacy of violence and political uncertainty:

> there are many within our society unable at this point to endorse … [the] aspiration [of a shared society] … These views are legitimate and must be respected but equally these must not constrain others who are willing and able to develop a more shared society (UUP, 2003: np).

This is scarcely a ringing endorsement of a shared future and given the disinterest or partiality of the other principal political parties, the question is stark: where is the democratic mandate for living together? As we have argued, in voting for Sinn Féin and the DUP, the Northern Ireland electorate has mandated political parties that espouse ethno-nationalist ideologies at the expense of both the more pluralist SDLP and UUP. This raises profoundly difficult but important questions as to the ‘democratic deficit’ implied in promoting diversity and pluralism in a society which, explicitly, has rejected those concepts in successive democratic forums.

Furthermore, while the Draft Strategy Document (OFMDFM, 2004) also reflects input from those responses that argued for the need to consider the significance of young people and women in relation to questions of conflict, equality and reconciliation, it also reveals the limits of its approach to diversity. In responding to the need to consider racism, the document argues strongly for the economic and cultural value of diversity. However, in prefacing a section on the value of new migrant workers and the need to address racism with the statement that: ‘Northern Ireland is no longer a bipolar society — it is enriched because it is becoming more culturally diverse’ (OFMDFM, 2004: 18), the document reinforces the ‘two communities’ of the ‘biopolar’ model of difference that it is trying to undermine elsewhere and effectively racializes diversity. A Shared Future conflates sectarianism and racism, the latter being seen as little more than an adjunct to the former. Thus for minority ethnic groups, ‘it’s as if we don’t exist’ (Bangladeshi Welfare Association, 2003: np). In its contribution to the consultation process, the Ultach Trust, which promotes Irish language learning, argues that a conflictual model of culture runs through the documents. Despite references to diversity, there is limited understanding of ‘the complexities surrounding the issue of multiple, overlapping and shared identities’, and ‘the potential healing power of a cultural diversity approach which transcends zero-sum-game simplicities.’ This is evident in the inclusion of ‘a concern to maintain cultural identity’ among the five cited reasons why ‘Northern Ireland remains a deeply segregated society with little indication of progress towards becoming more tolerant or inclusive’ (Ultach Trust, 2003: 1, 2). In response to criticisms that the terms, ‘community relations’ and ‘good relations’, were ill-defined in A Shared Future, the strategy document introduces a further distinction:

> “Community relations” refers specifically to division between the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland. “Good relations” refers to Section 75 (2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 which includes persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group (OFMDFM, 2004: 5).

The document thus holds the ‘two communities’ model in place at the same time it introduces a wider sense of ‘good relations’.
Relationships between communities: localism and the territorial imperative

Although the referenda in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland that followed the Agreement endorsed the ethos of equality and diversity, subsequent voting patterns, as we have observed, suggest diminished support for such principles. A majority of the electorate has voted to live apart, supporting political ideologies that entwine citizenship, civil rights and cultural identity within micro-nationalist ‘what we have, we hold’ territories. Their monoculturalism is ‘protected’ through attacks on ethnic minorities as well as the binary other. As one submission observes:

> We currently have apartheid and it is far from being benign. It is real. Protestant people in North Belfast cannot have a vision … We are too busy struggling to hold on to what little we have left without losing any more (North Belfast Community Empowerment Group, 2003: np).

This fearful reiteration of the importance of territorial hegemony obviously reflects the importance of safety and security issues in interface areas. But, more widely, territorial hegemony is also fundamental to the republican rejection of the British state and the creation of a parallel or alternative universe from which state agencies are excluded unless, like social security services, they are seen as conferring particular benefits to communities. For loyalists, territoriality can be a process of internalization, both against each other and also against republicanism in a situation in which they feel disenfranchised by politics and politicians and lack of confidence in their own fragmented and unagreed identity (Graham, 2004).

This dual if disconnected sense of republican and loyalist identities being vested in local territories is compounded by the legacy of the Troubles and the clear sense of class exploitation that still exists. One response to the consultation argued that:

> Middle class people in middle class jobs in middle class areas don’t know the reality of working class people and don’t know what it’s like to live in areas of high conflict (North Belfast Community Empowerment Group, 2003: np).

In loyalist areas, such alienation is compounded by a sense of fear of what is seen as the unitary ideology of Sinn Féin and its perceived capacity to impose its will:

> What passes for normal is horrendous. We feel powerless, unwanted, “nobody loves us”. Sinn Féin has a huge agenda — to get Protestants out and create electoral territory (North Belfast Community Empowerment Group, 2003: np).

Such responses by a loyalist community group located in the ultra-ethno-sectarian space of North Belfast could be seen as a reiteration of A Shared Future’s stereotypical depiction of sectarianism. The consultation document is underpinned by class assumptions, linking sectarianism to interfaces between loyalist and republican working-class communities (Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, 2003) rather than to the way in which it penetrates all elements of society (ICTU, 2003). Yet, it does not acknowledge that the actual war was an intra-working-class conflict largely fought in working-class areas, not least because of a deliberate British policy of spatial containment, matched elsewhere by the embourgeoisement of a substantial Catholic middle class (Graham & Shirlow, 1998). While support for ethno-nationalism is strongest among the working classes and the stark communal divide remains ‘despite the existence of two solidly working class parties [Sinn Féin and the DUP]’ (Tonge, 2005: 200), territoriality is a more profound and extensive process. Although unacknowledged in A Shared
Future, it also encompasses and defines middle-class areas. In Derry/Londonderry, for example, a detailed analysis of the 2001 Census of Population and survey evidence suggests that both Protestants and Catholics are living in increasingly segregated residential areas (Shirlow et al., 2005). Again, the stereotypical focus on urban interfaces obscures the issue that rural communities are also markedly segregated. As the response from the Rural Community Network made clear:

> With no peace-walls sectarian interfaces in many rural areas are simply marked out by flags or often hidden, fuelled by family and community history, personal experience, land ownership, shopping patterns and business habits (Rural Community Network (NI), 2003: np).

Further, territorial hegemony is central to a raft of interconnected issues surrounding the reproduction of sectarianism which is crucial to the maintenance of ethnic voting blocs and sustaining resistance to pluralist politics and hybrid identities; Darby and Knox (2004) calculate that 40 per cent of respondents to A Shared Future expressed such attitudes. Sectarianism is reproduced through segregated social networks and representations/perceptions of places and also by the focus on the primacy of group rather than the individual. Moreover, control of territory is important to the ‘ceasefire soldiers’ of the various paramilitary organizations who fund their respective causes by racketeering and drug dealing and ‘maintain order’ through punishment beatings and shootings. Conflict transformation can be about these internal community issues which have little to do with living together but focus, instead on restorative justice and the social problems of deprivation, exclusion and criminality within.

**Contested versions of ‘equality’ and ‘rights’**

In A Shared Future, the costs of division are presented in liberal terms through the curtailment of the freedom of the individual and lack of choice. This follows from the governing ideology of economic individualism, but it can also be read as a way of appealing to a set of shared social values (of economic betterment and freedom of choice) that override political and cultural divisions. In this context, the language of personal choice and the appeal to the individual and ideal of individual freedom is used to avoid divisive ‘group labels’ and the much more problematic issue of group freedoms, rights and choices. It also reflects the framing of political and social justice in Northern Ireland through the discourse of human rights. This has been a significant dimension of the Peace Process and the post-conflict politics of competitive redress as well as progressive legislation.

Yet, as with the issue of cultural recognition, there is concern that claims made in the name of human rights are being used to benefit one group over another. Sinn Féin challenges the view that ‘nationalists have made ‘gains’ through their emphasis on rights and equality and at the expense of the unionist community’ and that measures to achieve equality have undermined community relations. They accuse the authors of A Shared Future of neglecting the finding of the Harbison Report that ‘the achievement of equality should be the sine qua non of any community relations policy’. The party’s approach to equality stresses the distribution of resources on the basis of need rather than absolute equity of treatment of ‘both communities’ (Sinn Féin, 2003: np). Although both policy documents foreground the inseparability of the issues of equality and good relations, the idea of fair treatment is problematic for those concerned
with the inequity of fair treatment in a structurally unequal society. While the Alliance Party’s response posits the individual citizen as the ‘foundation stone of society’, it recognizes difference in arguing that ‘when equality ignores difference, uniformity of treatment leads to injustice and inequality’ (Alliance Party, 2003: 12). This tension between the ideas of equality and human rights and recognition of the special needs of particular groups is complicated further by the political connotations of ‘communities’. Like the support of ‘single identity’ cultural activities in the hope that increased ‘community building capital’ may lead to greater ‘bridging capital’ (fostering better community relations through community development), the policy of directing financial support towards the most deprived areas has been criticized for rewarding violence with funding and thus for perpetuating the problems it is designed to solve. So while many responses to the consultation documents insist on the twinning of equity and ‘good relations’, a shared language of equity and human rights can be differently used and differently interpreted.

The emphasis on the individual within the Shared Future documents is also problematic since it can be construed as locating the sources of division in Northern Ireland through misunderstanding, fear and distrust at the level of the individual, and thus failing to address structural sources of division. Consequently, Sinn Féin argues that locating sectarianism within the attitudes and actions of individuals and groups neglects the structural causes of inequalities in Northern Ireland inherent within the actions of the state since its inception. Thus, advocating ‘sharing’ and ‘understanding’ as solutions to division neglects issues of equality and the state’s own role in creating division. The principle of recognizing division as espoused by policy-makers must, therefore, include an acknowledgement of the British state’s role in ‘the instigation and reproduction of division on the island’ (Sinn Féin, 2003: np). For the PUP (2003), division results from the combined economic, social and cultural marginalization of working-class Protestant loyalist communities and an education system that perpetuates patterns of economic and cultural advantage and disadvantage. The Ulster People’s College (2003), an anti-sectarian and socialist educational organisation, stresses the contradictions between the political rhetoric of mutual understanding and the effective disregard for those who cannot compete in a highly selective and discriminatory education system. So while education is mainly addressed in relation to the question of the denominational organization of schools in Northern Ireland, from their particular positions both the PUP and the Ulster People’s College foreground questions of structural inequality in education and in society more widely. This echoes Little’s (2004) argument that identity politics have to be coupled with an analysis of the socio-economic conditions that prevail in Northern Ireland.

It is clear that the Draft Strategy Document (OFMDFM, 2004) has been written with these criticisms in mind, since it raises the relationship between deprivation and sectarian division and also tries to avoid locating sectarianism in individual or interface areas, rather than the structure of society as whole:

*Ultimately sustained and deeper progress depends on political stability.* Whilst actions to promote good relations will be driven forward by Government it is clear that improving relations in the long-run will require leadership at political, civic and community level (OFMDFM, 2004: 11, italics in original).

If ‘Government’ here means civil service policy-makers and ‘political’ here implies mainstream politics, then this policy statement, which is being offered to political parties for ratification, implicitly criticizes their sectarian nature and role in perpetuating division.
Nevertheless, as these responses also suggest, the entwining of rights, equity and good relations within policy is designed to achieve shared commitment to a working capitalist democracy under the neo-liberal ideals of equality of opportunity and freedom of choice.

A normal society?

We now turn to the Shared Future’s vision of ‘neutral’ public space and its commitment to what might be termed as ‘normalization’. What is meant by ‘neutral’ public space and what version of ‘normal’ society is proffered in the policy documents?

Towards ‘neutral’ space

Addressing culture and diversity in relation to collective or group identity in ways which acknowledge traditional ethno-political ‘blocs’, while simultaneously trying to move beyond them to some sort of shared and more plural society, is a familiar challenge in Northern Ireland and one that clearly frames these policy initiatives. The recourse to ideas of choice, economic costs and benefits, and cultural capital is more novel. The largely superficial and often contradictory treatment of issues of division, diversity and pluralism in the Draft Strategy Document suggests a hesitancy about foregrounding the degree of disagreement at the political level that the policy is trying to address ‘on the ground’. In contrast, there is little sense of caution in the document’s presentation of the fiscal costs of conflict, the economic benefits of peaceful pluralism and the language of individual choice. Both A Shared Future and the Draft Strategy Document espouse and assume widespread support for a neo-liberal discourse of freedom and individualism. They stress the economic costs of the duplication of services and other diseconomies that result from patterns of residential segregation and the potential economic benefits of savings in public expenditure and increased private investment:

Separate but not equal is not an option. Parallel living and the provision of parallel services are unsustainable morally and economically (OFMDFM, 2004: 17).

While it is indisputable that sectarian division has reduced the cost effectiveness of public service provision, ‘normalization’ invokes another but more acceptable socio-economic form of inequality and social inclusion/exclusion. Thus, the Ulster People’s College (2003) highlights the degree to which class division is implicitly normalized or remains unproblematised while other forms of division are addressed as fundamental social problems. A Shared Future embodies a bourgeois vision of a future society in Northern Ireland in which ‘deviant’ sectarian division is replaced by the ‘normality’ of economic individualism, choice, competition and class-based social differentiation. In this respect it replicates the Agreement which, for the leftist PUP is a ‘middle class agreement for middle class people’ (PUP, 2003: np). The economic and social inequalities of the neo-liberal state are elided in favour of aspirations of parity of esteem, celebration of diversity, and the rhetoric of equity. A Shared Future assumes that socio-economic class divisions characterise the ‘normality’ to which Northern Ireland should aspire and thus its moral judgement is that the values of the bourgeois state are more progressive than those of the sectarian state.

The focus on segregation and the public manifestations of division in the Shared Future documents are not theorized through the profound and deeply embedded socio-political processes related to territoriality. Nevertheless, a series of policy objectives are offered for review. First is the reduction of tension at interfaces between loyalist and republican areas which, it is
advocated, must go beyond the ‘band-aid’ approach to individual outbreaks of violence in favour of an integrated local planning framework (CRC, 2004). Jarman (2004) identifies three specific types of interfaces: enclave (a minority area surrounded by a majority area); split (two adjacent communities separated by peacewalls); and a buffer zone separating two communities, which can often be a private-sector development such as a shopping centre. These areas have been — and remain — the focus of conflict but also sometimes provide good examples of conflict transformation expressed, for example, through: dialogue between former combatants; attempts at understanding each other’s perceptions and histories; practical forms of interaction such as mobile telephone networks to reduce conflict; and even political tourism.

Secondly, A Shared Future identifies the issue of symbolic marking of space through murals, flags and painted kerbstones which can be seen, rightly, as visible manifestations of sectarianism and racism if they are intended to threaten or intimidate members of the other community, ‘or which could reasonably be interpreted by members of the other community as intimidating or threatening’ (SDLP, 2003: 13). Oddly, perhaps, given this concern with what are effectively transient markers of territory, A Shared Future does not identify the far more profoundly and often overtly sectarian landscape of commemoration of the Troubles and its permanent memorials which serve to integrate the recent dead into linear narratives of republican resistance or loyalist fealty to Britain. Both sets of iconography are marked by a strong sense of competition for hegemony over victimhood (Graham & Shirlow, 2002). It is also assumed that spatial symbolism is directed at the external world whereas, on the ground, it has a dialectical quality being also aimed inwards at the communities it defines.

Finally, A Shared Future refers to the neutrality of town centres and the need to develop these as safe and welcoming places for all communities. This focus on neutral spaces extends the community relations policy of encouraging those promoting cross-community or inclusive events to consider the ways in which their choice of venue could intimidate potential participants from a different background. While Jarman (cited in CRC, 2004) argues that shared spaces need positive and sustained actions to remain shared and used, neither the Draft Strategy Document nor the responses to the consultation make much of this issue. A Shared Future does not define clearly what is meant by ‘neutral’ space in the divided society of Northern Ireland although it can be assumed that this refers to areas that are not marked as belonging to one ‘community’ or the other. However, this ‘neutrality’ stands for a set of values that are inevitably partial and situated. For Sinn Féin, the spaces of urban civic culture lack neutrality as they represent British civic culture that should be replaced by the culture of ‘National Reconciliation’. They argue that:

old hegemonies should not be confused with legitimate traditions, and the civic spaces and civic buildings shared by people from different communities should be modified to reflect and affirm a new hegemony of National Reconciliation (Sinn Féin, 2003: np).

This, however, is a profoundly alienating reshaping of space that would simply replace one axis of contestation — a hegemonic British and unionist landscape — with another republican alternative. As Nagel (2002) remarks of the post-Civil War reconstruction of the Lebanon, any recasting of urban structure involves selective amnesia while the city remains a site of struggle over the meanings of identity and nationhood.

Moreover, ‘neutral’ space will clearly be marked in other ways. A Shared Future’s conceptualization of a ‘normal’ society equates ‘neutral space’ to ‘capitalist’ space which is equally inscribed by markers of inclusion and exclusion and differently configured social groups but not by symbols of sectarianism. The ‘normal’ neutral living environment evoked in the policy...
documents would be one in which paramilitary threats expressed through flags and graffiti are excised, living space is demilitarized and town or city centres become shared space (presumably policed by the state, even though republicans do not accept the legitimacy of the Police Service of Northern Ireland). Thus space would become configured as ‘normal’ capitalist space with ‘acceptable’ axes of differentiation such as class, income and lifestyle and a neo-liberal accent on personal choice for those possessing the resources to exercise their choice. Unspoken if implicit within the reasoning of A Shared Future lies the assumption that consumerism and a buoyant economy would deconstruct sectarianism, racism and hate.

If the town and city centres of Northern Ireland can be potentially ‘neutral’, the focus on residential segregation in public housing in the Shared Future documents effectively locates sectarianism within the domain of the working classes. Integrated estates form less than 10 per cent of public-sector social housing, while in excess of 70 per cent of Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) estates are more than 90 per cent Catholic or Protestant (OFMDFM, 2003). The NIHE does not advocate enforced integration but does hold that sectarian segregation is unacceptable in democratic society; class segregation, conversely, is tolerable. Given the approach of A Shared Future, it is unsurprising that the responses have little to say on housing segregation or any other spatial issues. One exception, which raises issues of real importance, is the submission by Groundwork Northern Ireland, an environmental regeneration voluntary organization. Their response argues that:

Policy makers cannot separate the inter-community tensions of the last 30 years from the physical and economic environment in which these social problems are most prevalent. Communities must be empowered to take responsibility for shaping their own futures including the local environment (Groundwork, 2003: 9).

Rather than seeing the poor environmental conditions of deprived urban interface areas as simply a symptom of the combination of poverty and violence, Groundwork recognizes the potential of environmental concerns to ‘motivate people to come together’ in practical action that ‘nurture[s] voluntary co-operation, compromise and respect’, thereby ‘creating common ground’ (the title of the policy framework they have developed with the CRC). The influence of their submission is reflected in the Draft Strategy Document’s statement that while legislation may help, the:

removal of inappropriate and aggressive displays of flags, murals, painted kerbstones is best undertaken as a common project with agencies working collaboratively with the police, elected representatives and local communities as part of environmental improvements with a view to enhancing the areas economically and building trust (OFMDFM, 2004: 21).

The incorporation of Groundwork’s approach to collective environmental improvement is indicative of the ways in which policy for improving relations frequently endorses local initiatives, even if widespread territoriality prevails.

The enduring strength of ethno-nationalist geographies

Although the Shared Future documents make a stronger economic than moral case for addressing segregation, they are trenchantly opposed to social and spatial division:

Separate but equal is not an option. Parallel living and the provision of parallel services are unsustainable, morally and economically. Good relations must build on the significant
progress that has been made on the equality agenda. No one is arguing for an artificially homogeneous Northern Ireland and no one will be asked to suppress or give up their chosen identity. However, the costs of a divided society — whilst recognising, of course, the very real fears of people around safety and security considerations — are abundantly clear: segregated housing and education; security costs, less than efficient public service provision, and deep rooted intolerance that has too often been used to justify violent sectarianism and racism. Policy that simply adapts to, but does not alter these challenges, results in inefficient resource allocations. These are not sustainable in the medium to long term (OFMDFM, 2004: 17 [emphasis in original]).

Yet, as implied in many responses to A Shared Future, interfaces, sectarian markers and segregated spaces are manifestations of a more profound and deeply rooted territoriality centred on the hegemonic control of zero-sum space, which remains the key factor defining space and place in Northern Ireland. The electoral mandate is for ‘parallel living’. Even though many of the respondents to A Shared Future make ostensibly progressive noises and question the binary definition of the ‘two traditions’, there is a resistance to pluralism and reconciliation and an insistence on difference, expressed primarily through a territoriality defined by symbolic representations and material practices that are grounded in possession/ hegemony over space and place. This also involves an interplay of public and private space in that the markers and inscriptions of territoriality occur at a variety of scales from the home to the city to the state. Public-sector agencies and the private sector both ‘respect’ sectarian divisions in planning and development and thus capitalist space is integrated within sectarian space. This monocultural space, as in West Belfast or Derry’s Cityside, can be marked by the full array of ‘normal’ indices of residential segregation. These ‘states within states’ include: social housing; middle-class housing; shopping, leisure and sport facilities; and places of employment (although there are mixed work places). They are alternative universes, policed from within, but arguably also a democratically endorsed reflection of the desire to live apart as manifested in the mandates of the two largest ethno-nationalist and inherently sectarian political parties. At root, both Sinn Féin and the DUP espouse anti-pluralist ideologies in the context of a shared future and lack any cross-community support. The post-conflict social geography of Northern Ireland is predominately conceived in terms, not of a radical departure from segregation but of: ‘interconnected separation’; ‘benign apartheid’; ‘separate but equal’; containing conflict by working together to live apart; or even ‘malign apartheid’. For many, therefore, ‘good relations’ means agreement on living apart. Despite the apparent stubborn resistance to pluralism, these terms still reflect attempts to grapple with questions that are fundamental to the social geography of multicultural democracies. This is evident in the response of the Catholic Bishops which suggested that even if:

separate development or mere co-existence are not viable options for promoting a shared future in Northern Ireland, the right to be different and distinct remains at the heart of a more shared and pluralist society … there are legitimate boundaries between belonging to a particular group and sharing space with others (Catholic Bishops, 2003: 8).

Conclusions

The Draft Strategy Document (OFMDFM, 2004) put forward to the political parties for agreement before final revision in 2005 contains a series of policy measures for promoting good relations. It proposes the establishment of a central government cross-departmental
Good Relations Panel that will develop, implement and review triennial action plans for public authorities — not just in the areas of ‘education, housing, culture, sports, arts, neighbourhood and rural renewal and community development’, but in:

spatial or regional planning, sub-regional planning, including local statutory planning, transportation and investment and support for the economy (OFMDFM, 2004: 18).

The promotion of good relations thus becomes central to public policy and, in leading by example, civil society. An enhanced CRC will continue to function independent of Government to promote, support and guide good relations policy and practice and monitor progress, including the proposed new District Council Good Relations Challenge Programme for local good relations policy. Despite our critical engagement with this policy development, we do not claim to be able to offer a resolution to the tensions within community relation policy-making in Northern Ireland. Instead we foreground the complex ways in which ideas of pluralism and equality are deployed both by policy-makers and those who experience and espouse ethno-nationalist political positions in a context of entrenched territoriality and division. We have tried to attend to the limits of legislating for pluralism as well as the possibilities of progressive change.

This policy development can be interpreted in very different ways. Despite some criticisms, it could be read as a constructive attempt to foster participatory democracy through an extended public consultation process and make ideas of pluralism and diversity central to the self-understanding of a post-conflict society. Alternatively, it can be interpreted as symptomatic of a situation in which apparent support for diversity and pluralism masks business as usual for anti-pluralist political parties that depend on an electorate adhering to the security of ethno-national collective allegiances. Policy-making continues in blithe indifference to political realities. Little (2004: 196) believes that Northern Ireland is an example of what he calls ‘conflictual consensus’, a society that embodies a basic level of agreement but in which the ‘political’ remains a sphere of conflict and disagreement. ‘Conflictual consensus’ does involve, however, an acceptance of the legitimacy of opponents and an understanding as to how their perspectives embrace a different way of thinking to one’s own. Even agreement on living apart, the de facto reality of life in Northern Ireland, represents a huge incremental advance on the violence of the period prior to the paramilitary ceasefires in 1994 and also a progressive step towards the aspirations of A Shared Future.

This recognition of the perspectives of opponents is also central to an understanding of reconciliation as a long-term process that is characterized by paradox and contradiction, in which the meaning of reconciliation is itself contested, but involving some kind of common vision as to how pluralism and equality can co-exist with political difference (Kelly & Hamber, 2004). A Shared Future and the broader process of which it is a part, can be seen as contributions to this extended and inevitably contradictory process. In Northern Ireland the paradoxes and contradictions of reconciliation include the coexistence of overt support for and resistance to reconciliation itself. In one intensive study, Porter (2003) identifies a continuum of attitudes to reconciliation, the concept ranging from being ‘beyond reach’ through ‘weak’ to ‘strong’ as envisaged in the Agreement. He concludes, however, that: ‘Resistance to reconciliation, weak or strong, is enormous, despite much talk to the contrary’ (Porter, 2003: 267).

The Shared Future process thus presents a specific example of the contestation and messy contradictions that characterize all democratic processes which, as Barnett and Lowe (2004) suggest, are always about ongoing argument, appraisal, anticipation, aspirations, appeals to
conflicting interests and tensions between ideas of freedom and responsibility, equality and difference. For them:

the value of democracy inheres in the quality of relations between different imperatives, interests and identities — that is, it lies in the degree of openness to contestation of definitions of the proper balance between imperatives of collective action and individual freedom, between conflicting interests and between multiple and fluid identities (Barnett & Lowe, 2004: 16).

In Northern Ireland the ‘democratic deficit’ — the absence of a working forum for formal politics and participatory democracy — means that the processes of contestation are particularly explicit. Yet here the obviousness of contestation is accompanied by the pragmatic ambiguity of the peace process and subsequent policy-making in which clear statements of action follow only weakly elaborated or poorly conceived approaches to pluralism or equality. Policy-making on ‘good relations’ is thus simultaneously a matter of promise and risk (Nash, 2005a).

The risks are two-fold. First, by adopting a model of individual freedom of choice, equality of opportunity and economic benefit as an alternative to deterministic versions of communitarian identity, the most intransigent versions of identitarian politics, and the costs of division, the Shared Future process could naturalize a model of society in Northern Ireland where ‘normal’ class stratification replaces the current intersections of class and ethno-nationalism. ‘Neutral’ space replaces ethno-nationalist territorial space. The Agreement and the Shared Future process can both be seen as part of an incremental process towards the evolution of a class-based politics in Northern Ireland which, eventually, might subsume territoriality and ethno-nationalism. However, as several responses argued, the society envisaged in the Shared Future documents is not one that in which fundamental patterns of disadvantage are addressed. It is worth reiterating, nevertheless, that segregation and geographies of inclusion and exclusion define all western societies, the issue here being one of replacing one set of segregation criteria deemed undesirable (ethno-nationalist and/or sectarian) with other more ‘acceptable’ neo-liberal indices of separation. The messy compromises of the process may, eventually, culminate in some kind of peaceful pluralism but one marked by new patterns of exclusion.

Secondly, the attempt to address patterns of division through ideas of diversity, equality and human rights, without alienating political parties and groups so much that no agreement can be reached is a pragmatic strategy but one that may result in implicit support for separatist ideas of difference. The Shared Future process is clearly influenced by relatively established, if disputed, approaches to concepts of diversity, culture and identity in Northern Ireland. The attempt to address division by emphasising patterns of diversity that cut across the model of the ‘two communities’ is a longstanding tool of cultural and community relations policy. Yet in figuring cultural identities is oppositional terms, A Shared Future both reproduces the approaches to culture within the Agreement and reflects the problematic ways in which culture and identity have come to dominate political discourse in Northern Ireland. Critics have argued that the ideals of parity of esteem and mutual respect in the Agreement have effectively reinforced the hegemony of the ‘two traditions’ model. Thus while the emphasis on the cultural rights and parity of recognition for the two hegemonic ethno-nationalist identities may ultimately lead to their reconstruction, in the short term, ideas of ‘culture’ ‘heritage’ and ‘identity’ have provided a lexicon for legitimating separatist and competitive ideas of difference and rights. In avoiding the idea of culture as constituting the exclusive property of one group, the Shared Future process adopts an economistic logic which substitutes for a more sustained engagement with issues of cultural diversity and cultural identity.
A Shared Future is a state-led and elitist initiative towards a pluralist society that stems from a political process that, inadvertently, has concretized ethno-national allegiances. Critics argue that the privileging of universal group rights in the Agreement has resulted in attributes of individual identity such as culture, nationality and religion, that are understood to be matter of choice in pluralist societies, being reinforced as determining public identifiers in Northern Ireland. The constructive ambiguity of A Shared Future may succeed in achieving a minimalist level of support across the political spectrum for principles that, potentially, can be deployed to serve quite different political strategies. Its call for public debate and development of public policy measures could prompt an engagement that eventually leads to progressive change or it may mask resistance to change with the language of pluralism. While most contributions to the consultation suggested that the short-term outcomes are probably limited, the long-term results are more difficult to predict. Despite the difficulties of producing policies for pluralism that will meet the approval of anti-pluralistic political parties, the implementation of agreed legislation continues as part of a slow, necessarily limited, and uncertain working through of the consociation of the Agreement. Most optimistically, A Shared Future is part of an incremental, flawed, fragile and deeply contested process of transition and conflict transformation.

At the same time and more conclusively, the Shared Future process demonstrates the continued significance of ethno-nationalist versions of society and space and the ways that these are all pervasive at a variety of scales within as well as between societies. Consociational agreements can work only through an elite consensus which is not open to contestation from within the respective communal blocs. In Northern Ireland, however, the leading political parties continue to play a double game. Sinn Féin has acquiesced to consociation but its own ideology depends on the ethnocratic principle of controlling territory. It is this very process that gives the party its political strength in comparison to the SDLP and the more fragmented unionist parties among whom, in any case, the DUP rejects the consociational consensus. Northern Ireland remains an arena of conflict not only between identities but also between the formal procedures of consociational democracy and the persistence of the interconnection of ethnicity, territoriality and political process. While the Belfast Agreement reflects the consociational concern with the scale of the state, it is the failure to formulate ways of addressing the continued potency of these forces at the sub-state scale that, at present, undermines this policy for a ‘shared future’.

References