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Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Deliberative Democracy in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

As trust in politicians and political parties declines, and turnout at election time is on the slide, there is increasing international interest in giving direct voice to citizens in political decision making via various types of *deliberative democracy* exercises (deliberative polling, *Citizens' Assemblies*, constitutional conventions and so on). In such exercises, a representative sample of citizens is informed about an issue, reflects on arguments on both sides of the issue and makes an informed decision via a vote on the issue.¹

Could deliberative democracy potentially play a useful role in Northern Ireland?² Discussion of political reform is almost a constant in Northern Ireland, as there is much debate regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the post-conflict consociational power sharing system. Critics argue that the power-sharing system is undemocratic because there is no clear distinction between government and opposition, there is an emphasis on elite leadership and bargaining rather than citizen led decision making, and the numerous veto points in the system lead to gridlock on key issues and a semi-constant sense of crisis. Proponents of power-sharing argue that such criticisms are overplayed and power sharing contributed significantly to the generation and maintenance of order, stability and peace in Northern Ireland by providing competing ethno-national groups with veto powers and ensuring a highly proportional and inclusive representation in parliament and in the executive.³

However, whether one is a critic or proponent of power sharing, many would agree that there is potential for political reform to help oil the wheels of decision making in Northern Ireland in order to lessen the probability of gridlock (and the consequent vulnerability of the system). Northern Ireland politics has in recent years been beset by issues which have generated a destabilising stalemate: issues such as welfare reform, flag display, parading and remembering the past. Could delegating certain decisions to citizens help make progress on such issues?

Deliberative Democracy and Resolving Contentious Issues

Taking the issue of flag display as an example, what would happen if a representative sample of citizens became informed about the issue of flag display, if they considered the arguments from all perspectives and seriously reflected on the issue? Would their views become more centrist and compromise-oriented or perhaps more hardline? Would there be an increase in the chances of reaching a resolution of the issue?

To find out, we conducted a real world experiment on a representative sample of over 1000 Northern Ireland citizens.⁴ In order to inform citizens about the background to the issue of flag display we created a short film clip which provided an overview of the issue (see Appendix A for full text). In order to ensure that citizens heard a balanced set of arguments on all sides of the issue we created a further film clip providing this balanced set of perspectives (see Appendix B for full text). In order to encourage citizens as much as possible to really think about where different people are coming from on this contentious issue we asked citizens to imagine that they were having a conversation with someone (from the 'other' community) about it in which the various arguments on the issue were being debated (see Appendix C for full instructions to respondents).⁵

In our experiment we had distinct groups of citizens. One group, the 'control' group, did not watch any of the film clips and were not asked to imagine debating the issue. Another group, the 'full deliberation' group watched both video clips and engaged in the task of imagining a discussion on the issue. (A further three groups varied in what they received: one group got the 'information' video only, one group got the information video and was asked to imagine a debate, and one group got the information video and also the 'perspectives' video.)

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All respondents were asked the extent to which they agree or disagree with each one of the three main policy options on flag display:

1. The Union Flag should be flown from all public buildings all the time.
2. The Union Flag should not be flown at all from any public building.
3. The Union Flag should be flown on designated days only from all public buildings, that is 18 days a year.

Our focus here is on citizens' level of agreement with option 3, which may be characterised as the 'compromise' option: respondents could choose anywhere between 1 and 7 on a scale where 1 is 'disagree strongly' and 7 is 'agree strongly'. As reported in Table 1 below the highest level of support for the 'compromise' option (designated days) is from those citizens who had engaged in the full deliberation exercise. Specifically, citizens in Group E who watched both videos and engaged in an imagined debate had a higher level of agreement with the designated days option (4.77) than citizens in the 'control' group (Group A) who did not watch any videos or engage in any imagined discussion (4.28).

Table 1: The Impact of Deliberation on Citizens Views on Flag Display

<i>Experimental conditions</i>	<i>Mean level of agreement with compromise option (1-7 scale, higher=agree more)</i>
A: control	4.28
B: information	4.33
C: information and summary of arguments	4.55
D: information and imagined dialogue	4.74
E: information and summary of arguments and imagined dialogue	4.77

Note 1: The only statistically significant differences between the groups are as follows. Control Group A is different from group D at .05 level and different from group E at .05 level. (N=1000)

Note2: Question wording: To what extent do you agree with the following option "The Union Flag should be flown on designated days only from all public buildings, that is 18 days a year."

If these differences are expressed as percentages rather than mean differences, citizens who did the full deliberation were 59.1% in agreement with designated days compared to the control group (who did no deliberation) who were only 47.9% in agreement with designated days.⁶ What these findings suggest is that when citizens engage in informed reflection on the flag display issue their views do change, and furthermore their views change in the direction of the compromise option (designated days rather than the union flag flying all the time or none of the time).

Support for Deliberative Democracy? Evidence from the General Public and from MLAs

In order for any deliberative democracy exercise to be feasible in Northern Ireland, it must have the support of two key groups. First, the general public must be supportive of the idea, as otherwise any outcome of the

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citizen deliberation would not be taken seriously. Second, MLAs must have a degree of support, as otherwise they are unlikely to see any value in it and would not encourage it. Thus, we asked the general public and MLAs what they thought of the idea of citizens making decisions on contentious issues such as flag display. We did so in the context of presenting a range of possible ways of making decisions on such issues, as reported in Table 2 below.⁷

Table 2: Public and MLA support for a deliberative democracy response to resolving contentious issues, compared to other types of responses

Question Wording: On some important issues – such as flag display and the issue of welfare reform – the political parties in Northern Ireland find it very hard to agree with each other, and this leads to political crises. When such a crisis happens, there may be a number of ways to try and resolve it. Please tell me to what extent you think each of the following approaches is a good idea or a bad idea

% Saying “good idea”

		general public	MLAs
a	Get the British government to come up with a solution	42	7
b	Get the British and Irish governments working together to come up with a solution	54	26
c	Get the British government and the Northern Ireland parties to come up with a solution	66	61
d	Get the British and Irish governments and the Northern Ireland parties to come with a solution	64	67
e	Get someone from outside Britain and Ireland, such as a politician or diplomat from the United States, to chair talks between the Northern Ireland parties and come up with a solution	28	38
g	Hold a referendum on the issue so that the people can directly decide	61	25
h	Have an immediate election to try and resolve the issue	25	7
i	Get a cross section of ordinary citizens on a Citizens Assembly to learn about the issue, listen to a presentation of all the main arguments and then reach a decision on the issue ⁸	65	17

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As reported in Table 2, there is a high degree of support from the general public for the idea of deliberating citizens resolving contentious political issues such as flag display and welfare reform (65 percent saying it is a good idea). In contrast there is a low level of support from MLAs for such a decision making process (only 17 percent saying it is a good idea). Of the full range of options presented, a deliberating *Citizens' Assembly* is the second most preferred option for the general public but the third least preferred option for MLAs. The difference between the general public and MLAs is greatest on the particular option of a deliberating *Citizens' Assembly*.

**Table 3:
Public and MLA support for aspects of deliberative democracy based decision making**

If a *Citizens Assembly* of this kind was introduced do you think it should...

	% Public	% MLAs
make the final decision	23	0
make a recommendation to be considered by politicians	61	61
not be given any role at all in policy making	16	39
total	100	100

In general, how good or bad do you think ordinary people would be at making decisions if they were selected to serve on a *Citizens Assembly*?

	% Public	% MLAs
Good	56	48
Neither good nor bad	27	35
bad	17	17
Total	100	100

In a *Citizens Assembly*, do you think ordinary people would try to come to a decision that is good for everyone in Northern Ireland, or would they just try to look after the interests of their own community, or just try to look after their own personal interests?

	% Public	% MLAs
...good for everyone in Northern Ireland	41	45
...just try to look after the interests of their own community	41	36
...just look after their own personal interests	18	19
Total	100	100

Elections, referendums and *Citizens Assemblies* are all possible ways of making democratic decisions, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. Taking each one in turn, to what extent are you in favour or opposed to each way of making a democratic decision?

% in favour of...	% Public	% MLAs
Elections	51	98
Referendums	54	73
<i>Citizens Assemblies</i>	57	17

If a deliberating *Citizens' Assembly* was established in Northern Ireland, our survey evidence suggests that MLAs would not support it making *final decisions* but would be supportive of it having power to *make recommendations*: 61 percent of both the public and MLAs agree on this (see Table 3). Also, the general public and MLAs share a broadly positive view of how well citizens would be able to engage in deliberation and reach a decision: Only 17 percent of the public and MLAs think that citizens would be bad at making decisions in a *Citizens' Assembly* and less than a fifth of both groups said citizens would just look after their own interests (and between 41 and 45 percent believed they would try to reach a decision that was 'good for everyone in Northern Ireland').

However, there is a very large difference between the public and MLAs when they are asked a general question about the merits of elections, referendums and deliberating *Citizens' Assemblies* as ways of making democratic decisions. From the general public, *Citizens' Assemblies* attracted the greatest level of support but all three methods attracted between 51 and 57 percent in favour. In contrast, there was massive variation in responses from the MLA sample: 98 percent favoured elections and only 17 percent favoured *Citizens' Assemblies*.

Additional qualitative open-ended questions were asked of MLAs in order to tease out their views. One of the themes emerging from the analysis of the responses is that while there is little support for a *Citizens' Assembly* having the final say on a particular issue (an approach many MLAs saw as undemocratic), there is some support for a *Citizens Assembly* to be established that would systematically hear the voice of the people and come up with potentially useful advice, or recommendations, for MLAs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this report is not to argue that deliberative democracy is necessarily a good idea, or that it would quickly resolve issues that have proved contentious for a very long time. Rather the aim is to provide evidence regarding the likely impact of a deliberative democratic approach and to provide evidence regarding the views of the general public and MLAs about such an approach to addressing contentious issues.

This is a timely debate in Northern Ireland given the increasing international interest in using deliberative democracy approaches to formally and systematically give citizens a voice in politics. It is particularly relevant in the context of concerns about growing political apathy (particularly among young people), declining levels of participation at election time and the need to include more women in politics. One of the advantages of having a representative sample of citizens is that there would be an accurate representation of all groups in society; male and female, young and old, rich and poor, nationalist and unionist, those who do not usually vote and those that do. Because the sample of citizens in a deliberative democracy exercise looks exactly like society as a whole, this arguably adds democratic weight to any decision (or recommendation) reached. Also, because the citizens engage in informed reflection on the issue, analogous to a jury in a legal trial, the decision reached is likely to be a considered one. Our evidence suggests that compromise, and the resolution of contentious issues, may be aided by a sample of citizens deliberating on the issue. With respect to feasibility and acceptability, our evidence suggests that the general public are supportive of the idea and MLAs are much less supportive but, on balance, see some potential for deliberative democracy to yield recommendations rather than decisions.

Appendix A: Text of the 'Background Information' Video Clip

There is a long history of disagreement in Northern Ireland on the flying of flags.

The issue dramatically came to prominence in December 2012. Belfast City Council voted to stop flying the Union Flag over City Hall every day and instead only fly it on 18 days of the year – what are called 'designated days'. The decision led to months of protests and demonstrations by people from a Protestant/ unionist background. At its peak there were thousands of people involved in the protests. The police recorded almost 3,000 incidents and the cost of policing the protest was £22 million. Many people, often from a lower-income background, received criminal records or prison sentences. Cross-community relations have deteriorated. The Northern Ireland economy, and tourism, have suffered.

In an attempt to address the flag issue, and other related matters, Dr Richard Haass and Professor Meghan O'Sullivan chaired talks between the political parties. However, no comprehensive agreement was reached by the end of 2013, and the flags issue proved to be the most difficult to resolve.

Further attempts were made to reach agreement in the multi-party talks leading up to the Stormont House Agreement in December 2014. While progress was made on welfare reform, the flag issue remained unresolved. It was decided to establish, in June 2015, a new Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition to try to address the issue over an 18 month period.

Before that Commission produces its report, the flags issue is likely to become controversial again. Each of the 11 new Super Councils, established on 1st April 2015, will need to decide its policy on flag display.

What exactly are the most realistic options for flag flying? They can be boiled down to three:

1. The Union Flag should be flown from all public buildings all the time.
2. The Union Flag should not be flown at all from any public building.
3. The Union Flag should be flown on designated days only from all public buildings, that is 18 days a year.

Appendix B: Text of the 'Perspectives on the Flag Issue' Video Clip

What do people feel about the different options? In a recent in-depth report about the flag dispute and people's attitudes, the following reactions to each of the three options were identified:

1. **The Union Flag should be flown from all public buildings all the time.**

Many people from a Protestant and unionist background are in favour of flying the Union flag all the time. The flag is a symbol of the United Kingdom. It simply represents the reality that Northern Ireland is part of the UK and it is therefore reasonable and acceptable to fly the flag.

As well as being a constitutional symbol, the Union Flag also represents a cultural symbol. It represents a core part of the identity of Unionists. To stop the flag flying all the time would undermine that sense of identity and make them feel they have suffered a loss.

This is particularly so for many lower-income Protestants who feel that no-one listens to their concerns and they are often unfairly ridiculed for their emotional attachment to their identity and the Union Flag. They feel that Catholics and Nationalists have benefitted from the Peace Process and the only people losing out are Unionists.

2. **The Union Flag should not be flown at all from any public building**

This is the belief of many nationalists and Catholics. They believe that the 1998 Good Friday/ Belfast Agreement guaranteed parity of esteem and equality between unionism and nationalism. One way to put that equality into effect is to remove all flags – the Union Flag should not be given priority.

The Union Flag is seen as being alienating for Catholics and a symbol of the cultural dominance of unionism that should be ended.

Also, the idea that unionism is losing out is not accepted: Unionism has gained a lot in the Peace Process, in that Northern Ireland's status as part of the UK is accepted and can only be changed with a majority vote in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland.

The 1998 Agreement gave respect to both traditions. In the interests of fairness and equality the Union Flag should not be flown at all from public buildings.

3. The Union Flag should be flown on designated days only from all public buildings (18 days a year)

This is seen by many people as a compromise option.

On the one hand it recognises that Northern Ireland is part of the UK and so some expression must be given to that constitutional reality. Flying the Union Flag on particular days of the year, many of these associated with the birthdays of members of the Royal family, is in fact the practice of many local authorities in other parts of the UK.

To fly the Union Flag every day is not acceptable as it gives unfair priority to one community. In order to have equality between communities and parity of esteem it is necessary to limit the flying of the Union Flag because the flag is culturally associated with the identity of only one community.

In the interests of being balanced to both sides, the best option is the following compromise: flying the Union Flag on certain designated days.

Appendix C: Instructions relating to imagined dialogue with an outgroup member

Note: These are the instructions received by a Catholic respondent. A Protestant respondent received identical instructions except that the 'other' person is from a Catholic background and is in favour of the union flag not flying at all from public buildings

In relation to the issue of flag display in Northern Ireland, there are three main options on the issue of flag display are as follows

1. The Union Flag should be flown from all public buildings all the time.
2. The Union Flag should not be flown at all at any public building.
3. The Union flag should be flown on designated days only from all public buildings, that is 18 days a year.

Please imagine that you are having a very positive conversation with someone about the issue of flags. Imagine that the person you are talking with is called [Andrew]. He is 35 years old and works in a bank in Belfast city centre. In his spare time he helps out with training a youth football team. He is from the [Protestant/unionist community] and **he thinks that the Union Flag should [be flown all the time] from public buildings**. Please imagine that the conversation that you have with [Andrew] is a very positive and constructive one in which you are sharing your views and thoughts sincerely with each other in an open-minded way that is respectful and friendly.

Please imagine that you are discussing Option 1 with Andrew:

1. The Union Flag should be flown from all public buildings all the time

Andrew agrees with this option. He believes that the Union Flag should be flown all the time. What kind of things do you think Andrew might say in support of his view that the Union Flag should be flown all the time.

How would you respond to Andrew?

What might Andrew reply to you?

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Now imagine that you are discussing Option 2 with Andrew:

2. The Union Flag should not be flown at all from any public building

What do you think Andrew might say about this option?

How would you respond to Andrew?

What might Andrew reply to you?

Now imagine that you are discussing Option 3 with Andrew:

3. The Union Flag should be flown on designated days only from all public buildings (about 18 days a year)

What do you think Andrew might think about this option? (*Remember: Andrew is in favour of the Union Flag flying all the time*)

How would you respond to Andrew?

What might Andrew reply to you?

How do you think, in a friendly and amicable way, you might conclude the discussion?

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Endnotes

¹ On deliberative democracy see Fishkin (1995) and Ackerman and Fishkin (2002). On the subject of using randomly selected representative samples of citizens in political decision making see Dowlen (2008), Stone (2011) and Guerroero (2014).

² For discussion of the possible potential of deliberative democracy in divided places see Luskin *et al.* (2014).

³ On the debate about the merits and demerits of power-sharing see (Taylor).

⁴ All the research described in this report comes from the project entitled “Randomly Selected “Politicians”:
Transforming Democracy in the Post-Conflict Setting” which is led by Professor John Garry and is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). All data was collected by Ipsos-Mori. This report provides the initial and concise analysis of the data. For elaboration of the arguments and analysis presented here please contact John Garry (j.garry@qub.ac.uk). Academics from a range of universities are collaborating on this project: Prof John Garry, Prof John Coakley, Prof Brendan O’Leary, Dr Cillian McBride and Dr Fabian Schuppert from Queen’s University Belfast; Prof George Tridimas from Ulster University; Prof David Farrell from University College Dublin, Dr Peter Stone from Trinity College Dublin and Dr Clifford Stevenson from Anglia Ruskin University.

⁵ Here we differ from many conventional deliberative democracy exercises. We emphasise the value of citizens engaging in reflection and imagining a debate rather than engaging in small group discussions as typically happens in deliberative democracy exercises. We do so for two reasons. First, we wish to extrapolate our findings from the sample to the wider population from which the sample was drawn and, statistically speaking, it is easier to engage in this inference/generalisation if the sampled citizens are kept independent of each other, something that can be achieved in our design but cannot be achieved in group discussions. Second, we argue that it is eminently possible, and often preferable, to achieve considered reflection in contexts other than group discussion. On this point see Goodin (2000, 2003a, 2003b). On the literature on the positive impact of ‘imagined’ rather than ‘actual’ contact see Crisp and Turner (2009).

⁶ This is based recoding the 1-7 scale such that 1-3=disagree, 4=neither, 5-7=agree.

⁷ Representative sample of over 1000 citizens and representative sample of 42 of the total of 108 MLAs. Both surveys were conducted by Ipsos-Mori.

⁸ This question item is prefaced with the following introduction: Another possible way of resolving a difficult issue – such as flag display or the issue of welfare reform – would be to get a group of ordinary people to make a decision on it after they have had a chance to consider the evidence and arguments. Here's how it would work... A representative sample of 500 ordinary citizens in Northern Ireland is selected to consider the issue. These people would be selected in the same way that people are selected to serve on a jury: they are randomly selected. And they would be a cross-section of all of the people in Northern Ireland in terms of age, gender, social class and religious and community background. The people on this ‘Citizens Assembly’ would be provided with background information about the issue and would be given a presentation of all the main arguments on both sides of the issue. They would be asked to think carefully about the evidence and the different views and would then be asked to vote on the issue. What a majority of these people decided in the vote would be seen as the decision on the issue and would be implemented. What do you think of this possible way of making decisions on difficult issues?