



Elected Representatives/Political Parties  
and Minority Ethnic Communities  
in Northern Ireland

**INTERIM REPORT**

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Please note that this report is provisional and interim. It is not for quotation.

## Introduction

Researchers from the University of Ulster are conducting a research project entitled *Elected Representatives/ Political Parties and Minority Ethnic Communities in Northern Ireland* which is being funded by the Community Relations Council and the European Union Peace and Reconciliation Programme. It is the first study of its kind which has focused on the relationship between elected representatives/political parties and minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland. The purpose of this interim report is to contribute to debate amongst elected representatives, minority ethnic communities and other interested parties on how political parties have attempted to engage with minority ethnic communities. It is the intention of the researchers to be constructive as regards the relationship of elected representatives with minority ethnic communities, notably by pointing to best practice models and making recommendations. To this effect a fuller report will be published and disseminated in May 2008 following a final conference bringing together relevant stakeholders.

This research project has several key aims. It will examine the attitudes of elected representatives and political parties in Northern Ireland towards minority ethnic communities and it will assess the extent and nature of politicians' contact with minority ethnic communities. Furthermore, it will ascertain how each major political party in Northern Ireland attempts to address the needs and interests of minority ethnic communities through policies, initiatives and manifesto declarations.

The methodological approach comprises several research components including analysis of election manifestos (Section I), interviews (Section II) and a survey (Section III) which form the basis of the interim report. The analysis in **Section I** focuses on the election manifestos of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Sinn Féin (SF), the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), the Alliance Party (AP), and the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) from 1994-2007. The analysis outlines ways in which the manifestos of each political party talks about minority ethnic communities, and monitors how the use of language has changed over time. **Section II** provides an analysis of the interviews. A total of 43 one-to-one interviews were conducted with elected representatives (24) as well as with minority ethnic community representatives and advocates (19). Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and local councillors were identified according to their geographical location and the proportional electoral weight of their respective political party. The minority ethnic community interviewees are both representatives and advocates, and were broadly reflective of the minority ethnic communities present in Northern Ireland. These individuals were identified according to their prominence and active involvement in community and non-governmental organisations. **Section III** presents the survey research. A questionnaire/survey was sent out to every MLA and local councillor in Northern Ireland and the response rate was 32%, a respectable return rate for postal questionnaires. The survey results serve to illustrate the attitudes of elected representatives towards minority ethnic communities, as well as to indicate the frequency and nature of interaction.

## Section I: Election Manifestos

This section examines how political parties in Northern Ireland have attempted to address and engage with minority ethnic communities through election manifesto content. Election manifestos are important primary political documents and are recognisable as declarations of intent. By stating their commitments to minority ethnic communities, political parties are making de facto promises, meaning that the language carries with it tacit understandings to realise certain goals, outcomes and policies. Every election manifesto between 1994-2007 of the DUP, SF, the UUP, the SDLP, AP, and the PUP was analysed. Any reference to minority ethnic communities explicitly (citing a particular community) or implicitly (discussing immigration, racism, integration, multiculturalism, etc) was incorporated into the research data. It should come as no surprise perhaps that the volume and frequency of references to minority ethnic communities increased from almost zero in 1994 to a point in 2007 when each political party refers to minority ethnic communities. The references to minority ethnic communities are couched in variable language, some of it more and some of it less positive sounding and welcoming. Significant examples from these manifestos are presented below.

The DUP's 1994 European election manifesto refers to Article 8A of the Maastricht Treaty, which relates to freedom of movement of persons throughout the European Union and warns that 'the United Kingdom could be forced to take in people whom it does not want' (DUP, 1994: 5). Immigration is presented, in this instance, as an undesirable burden on the state. Thereafter, there are no references to minority ethnic communities in the DUP's manifestos for the 1996 Forum election, the 1997 Westminster election, the 1997 local government election, the 1998 Assembly election, and the 1999 European election. In the context of European Union enlargement in 2004 the DUP warns of 'benefits tourists' who will come to Northern Ireland to 'abuse the social security and healthcare systems' (DUP, 2004: 22). This is speculative, plays on society's fears, and arguably is somewhat inaccurate according to existing research. However, an appreciable change in language can be detected one year later with a section in the party's 2005 Westminster manifesto which first acknowledges that 'Politicians can also play a role in helping to shape attitudes in society' (DUP, 2005: 24). It then continues, 'as a Province we have benefited in many ways from other cultures and traditions. Whether it is people who have come to Northern Ireland recently, or have been here for many years, our economy and society have benefited from their presence' (DUP, 2005: 24). The change in language is underlined by the 2007 Assembly election manifesto which states that 'racism is a scourge on the reputation of Northern Ireland. We support a zero tolerance approach against racism' (DUP, 2007: 58).

More than any other political party in Northern Ireland Sinn Féin uses the language of equality and human rights. Racism is referred to in the 1994 European election manifesto, although it is in the context of targeted racism against the nationalist community, rather than against smaller minority ethnic communities (SF, 1994: 12). There is no explicit reference made to minority ethnic communities in SF's election manifestos from 1996-1998. In the 2001 Westminster election manifesto though, a section is dedicated to Anti-Racism. The latter includes the affirmation that Ireland is becoming more multicultural and thus 'the challenge is to embrace our growing diversity as a source of strength and opportunity' (SF, 2001: 17). Additionally, it calls on 'all political parties in Ireland to sign an anti-racist pledge and make a commitment that they will not play party politics with the race issue' nor tolerate racism in any form in their party (SF, 2001: 17). Sinn Féin cites certain groups by name, notably targeting discriminatory behaviour towards asylum seekers (SF, 2001: 17), the Traveller community (SF, 2003: 73) and the Muslim community (SF, 2003: 90). The 2004 European manifesto is instructive as it outlines Sinn Féin's position on immigration and the challenges faced by migrants: 'the EU must ensure non-discriminatory work practices' (SF, 2004: 35), and it contends that Ireland shares an affinity with 'the economically marginal former Eastern bloc states' (SF, 2004: 14). The 2007 SF Assembly manifesto promises to 'confront sectarianism, racism, and bigotry where they arise and to promote instead tolerance, inclusivity and a pluralist society in which difference is celebrated and diversity is encouraged' (SF, 2007: 41).

The UUP's 1996 Forum manifesto alludes to the flourishing of 'cultural diversity' (UUP, 1996: 1) and claims an awareness that 'the treatment of minorities requires detailed study and debate' (UUP, 1996: 2). Again it is worth noting that the 1997 local government, the 1999 European, and the 2001 local government election manifestos contain no references to minority ethnic communities. The first specific manifesto reference to minority ethnic communities comes in the 2001 Westminster manifesto: 'we have a wonderful diversity of culture, diversifying further with the contribution to our society of our ethnic minority communities' (UUP, 2001: 13). However, the continuity of the broadly positive language is less apparent in the 2004 European election manifesto. A section entitled 'Governed according to our laws and customs' warns that 'the freedom of movement of peoples across borders is a reality with which we must come to terms' (UUP: 2004: 1). The UUP's 2007 Assembly manifesto contains dedicated sections on women, older people, and the disabled but none on minority ethnic communities. However, significantly, the 2007 election manifesto was condensed and translated into several languages on the party's website.

The SDLP, along with SF, has the most references to minority ethnic communities in its manifestos. The SDLP makes no specific manifesto references to minority ethnic communities until the 1997 Westminster manifesto. The latter contains one of the most comprehensive and elaborate party manifesto references to minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland (SDLP, 1997: 14). It includes a section entitled 'Race Relations' and proclaims that 'we believe that ethnic minorities in our society are entitled to protection from discrimination and measures to guarantee equality of opportunity in terms of jobs, accommodation, education and health care in line with international obligations' (SDLP, 1997: 14). Whilst the 2004 DUP and UUP European manifestos warned of

increasing migration, the SDLP states that ‘evidence shows that migrant workers make a net contribution to the economy’ (SDLP, 2004: 4). The 2007 Assembly manifesto calls for an end to the practice of exporting asylum seekers to Scotland (SDLP, 2007: 5). Finally, this manifesto outlines the party’s commitment to ‘continue training for party representatives against all forms of intolerance, including racism’ (SDLP, 2007: 43).

It is not until the 1997 Westminster election manifesto that the Alliance Party first specifically mentions minority ethnic communities by welcoming the introduction of race relations legislation to Northern Ireland. Alliance maintains that its local councillors would combat discrimination on grounds of race (AP, 1997: 4). Like SF and the SDLP, Alliance condemns the practice of placing asylum seekers in detention centres (AP, 2003: 14). The party’s 2005 general election manifesto states that ‘it is to Northern Ireland’s shame that we have the highest rate of racist attacks in the UK. Alliance welcomes the growing diversity in Northern Ireland, and recognises that our new citizens are valuable members of our community’ (AP, 2005: 2). In the 2007 Assembly manifesto Alliance affirms its support for the full implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy and the integration of immigrants into Northern Ireland society (AP, 2007: 10).

As regards the PUP, in election manifestos the party has repeatedly called for ‘respect for diversity’ (PUP, 1996: 3; PUP, 1997: 1; PUP, 1998: 2). The first explicit reference to minority ethnic community issues is in the 1997 manifesto which welcomed the Race Relations (NI) Order. A section on human rights is included in the party’s 2003 Assembly manifesto which advocates ‘the development of pro-active initiatives that lead to more representative participation of women and ethnic minorities in public and private institutions’ (PUP, 2003: 4). The 2007 Assembly manifesto contains a section on race as well as one on human rights and equality. The PUP makes its position clear in the former section: ‘Racism is unacceptable in all its shapes and forms’ and the party offers backing to community initiatives that foster good relations (PUP, 2007: 5). It also contends here that education is the key to tackling racism (PUP, 2007: 5).

Each political party has gradually come to accept and register that minority ethnic communities are a constituent part of Northern Ireland society and ought to be acknowledged as such. Indeed references to minority ethnic communities have increased in frequency over the years and at present are broadly positive and celebratory in nature. Some political parties address the importance of diversity whilst others detail the specific interests of diverse minority ethnic communities.

## Section II: Interviews

A total of 43 interviews have been conducted for the project. These include 24 semi-structured interviews with MLAs and local councillors which reflect the proportional weight of political parties in the most recent Assembly elections. The interviewees are drawn from six geographical areas across Northern Ireland: Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, Dungannon, Craigavon/Lurgan, Ballymena and Coleraine. An additional 19 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with advocates and representatives from minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland. These include ‘settled’ or longstanding minorities such as the Traveller, Chinese, Pakistani, Indian, Muslim and Jewish communities as well as more recent migrant communities such as the Polish, Lithuanian, and Filipino communities.

### *Interviews with Minority Ethnic Community Representatives and Advocates*

Successive interviewees made it clear that minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland have different interests and concerns which elected representatives need to be attentive to. These include language barriers, employment rights, racism, discrimination, and accessing social provisions such as housing and healthcare, amongst others. Needless to say, the interests of the Chinese community are not necessarily identical to those of the Lithuanian community and so on- even though unsurprisingly some commonalities are in evidence.

In terms of representation of minority ethnic communities, most respondents stated that non-governmental organisations and ethnic community organisations best represent their communities. None of those interviewed stated that a political party could or did best represent their interests. When pressed to specify a particular political party most respondents did not believe that any one political party represents their community. The interviewees cited positively several instances of good work by individual elected representatives, but were somewhat critical of the overall level of interaction with political parties. For instance, a representative from the Polish community states that: *'there is no continual interaction, there is no continuous effort to come back and say "what areas do we need to be looking at here, is there anything specific that we can actively do for you"?''*

Several respondents suggested that political parties are only interested in their communities at election time. As one minority ethnic community advocate remarks: *'to be honest our contact with political parties depends on the political climate. So if there is an election we are tripping over them. You mention their names three times and they appear behind you, you know, and there's nothing more "ethnic" than to have a politician beating a drum along with somebody black or yellow or whatever, and they love the sort of profile that they get out of it'.*

A representative from the Traveller community notes the disparity between what is stated publicly and what is done locally: *'Well I would say the one [political party] that speaks more about Travellers and would be seen to be more sympathetic of Travellers would be Sinn Féin but I wouldn't see that as a reality on the ground. I mean giving that example when local residents do not want Travellers living in their area and Sinn Féin remain at best impartial about that and at worst supporting the residents.'* The respondent further states that: *'Unionist parties can be quite the opposite, where the rhetoric publicly can be quite anti-Traveller, but at a local level Travellers would say Unionist councillors or an MLA would be quite supportive of their issue'.*

The issues facing minority ethnic communities are multifaceted and elected representatives cannot know these issues unless they interact with these communities. The nature of the contact is important too and several respondents were critical of an over emphasis on cultural celebration events if they tend to divert attention from the more pressing socio-economic and political issues which different minority ethnic communities face. Most respondents claim that political parties are still not proactive enough in reaching out to minority ethnic communities, but many are able to cite instances of individual elected representatives who engage regularly with minority ethnic communities. Finally, some respondents note a disparity between political party official discourse and localised realities or practice i.e. a disparity between saying and doing.

### **Interviews with Elected Representatives**

When elected representatives were asked which minority ethnic communities they came into contact with, a broad range of communities was mentioned. This interaction was not routinised but ebbed and flowed according to circumstances and demand. Mostly, the interaction takes place at the constituency surgery and is problem-solving in nature, particularly in the area of visas, employment rights and advice (signposting) in terms of accessing social services such as health and housing. Also, many elected representatives are invited to the cultural events of various minority ethnic communities which, in turn, they are keen to attend. When asked what were the main issues facing minority ethnic communities, they cited racist attacks, linguistic barriers, accessing public services, exploitation (notably of migrant workers) and employment rights, amongst others.

Most elected representatives that were interviewed believe that racism is a problem in Northern Ireland society. One Alliance MLA points out: *'The numbers of racist attacks speak for themselves. A few years ago the number of racist attacks per head of population was higher than anywhere else in Europe'.* However, those interviewed do not believe that racism is a specific problem within political parties, even though instances of individual elected representatives making racist comments were acknowledged and duly condemned. For example, an SDLP MLA declares that: *'I believe that each political party, whilst they subscribe to being non-racist, actually they should take much more action against those representatives who have made comments in the press'.* The elected representatives interviewed were very keen to condemn racist attacks which they believe stem from ignorance and/or a perceived threat (e.g. to jobs or benefits).

Most elected representatives did not believe that minority ethnic communities represent a substantial voting block at present but several acknowledged that this could change in the future. As one DUP MLA notes: *'I think the numbers are there but they are so disparate [...] and sometimes the tenuous nature of their stay means that they don't even register'*. Some elected representatives added that the potential votes to be gained from minority ethnic communities and migrant workers should not be a reason in and of itself to reach out to these communities. As one UUP MLA explains: *'It's better to have a more open and honest approach of assistance and help, and if that leads to individuals supporting you or your party at election then that is a bonus but it should not be the raison d'être'*. Several elected representatives interviewed noted also that the election of Anna Lo to the Assembly could have an impact on voting behaviour of minority ethnic communities (notably by encouraging individuals from these communities to register and vote). Interestingly, none of those interviewed mentioned whether their political party would be fielding a candidate from a minority ethnic community background on their party's electoral lists in future elections, although some expressed a hope that they might.

When asked whether their respective political party represents minority ethnic communities, most interviewees argued that it does, in so far as it can potentially represent any section of society. However, when pressed to cite or elaborate on specific policies or initiatives at a political party level, several of those interviewed were uninformed. Policies and initiatives relating to minority ethnic communities do exist but several of those interviewed are not aware of these which would suggest some problem of information communication in political parties. This includes knowledge of whether or not each political party publishes election literature in different languages, and which languages these are.

When asked whether all elected representatives should receive training on issues such as anti-racism and use of appropriate language, most interviewees replied that they would welcome such provision. Also, when the interviewees were asked about the potential value of appointing a designated Race Equality Officer in their respective political party, almost all agreed that this was or would be a valuable resource.

When asked how political parties could improve their representation of minority ethnic communities, most interviewees stated that interaction/communication was crucial. Some noted that it was the job of elected representatives to send a positive message to minority ethnic communities that they are there to serve their interests too, as part of the general public. Therefore, they would be welcome at constituency surgeries. As a Sinn Féin MLA stated: *'You have to make yourself available... you have to make it known within the constituency or within the sector that you actually have their interests at heart, [...] and that hasn't been the case with all parties all the time'*.

### Section III. Survey

A survey was sent out to every MLA and local councillor in Northern Ireland and it secured a respectable response rate of 32%. The purpose of the survey is to illustrate the attitudes of elected representatives towards minority ethnic communities. Specifically, the questions focused on the frequency and nature of politicians' interaction with minority ethnic communities as well as their attitudes towards issues such as immigration. This section presents a snapshot of the survey data, focusing on key questions and the responses from elected representatives.

Minority ethnic community representatives and advocates consistently argue that interaction is crucial in order for elected representatives to appreciate the needs and interests of diverse communities in Northern Ireland. The first question in the survey assesses the frequency of contact of elected representatives with people from different minority ethnic communities. It was inquired whether contact was daily, once or twice a week, once or twice a month, very rarely, or never. The findings presented below have collapsed the categories in order to present an overview of the data.

Minority ethnic community	Frequency of contact: daily/once or twice a week	Frequency of contact: very rarely/never
Black (African Caribbean) background	4%	77.7%
Chinese background	13.9%	52.4%
South Asian (Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi) background	7.4%	65.4%
Irish Traveller background	4%	79.2%
Filipino background	4.5%	73.7%
Portuguese background	5%	79.2%
Polish background	13.9%	49.5%
Central and Eastern European background	7.4%	69.8%
Another European background	5.5%	64.8%
Any other background	3%	50%

The minority ethnic communities with which elected representatives have the most frequent contact are the Chinese and Polish communities (both 13.9%). This is not surprising as these two communities have sizeable populations and presence in Northern Ireland. The Polish community has the highest daily interaction with elected representatives (5%). Conversely, the minority ethnic communities with the most infrequent interaction with elected representatives are the Irish Travellers (79.2%) and the Portuguese community (79.2%), followed closely by the African Caribbean community (77.7%).

One question asked whether elected representatives considered themselves to be prejudiced. The majority of respondents from all political parties report that they are not at all prejudiced (83.1% of respondents). The majority of DUP respondents report therefore that they are not at all prejudiced (82.1% of the DUP respondents). The majority of Sinn Féin respondents also report that they are not at all prejudiced (82.2% of the SF respondents). Again the majority of UUP respondents report that they are not at all prejudiced (72.7% of the UUP respondents). The majority of SDLP respondents too report that they are not at all prejudiced (94.6% of the SDLP respondents). Finally, here, the majority of Alliance respondents report that they are not at all prejudiced (90% of the AP respondents). It should be noted that whilst the UUP respondents exhibited the highest level of reported prejudice, this could perhaps mean that they were more forthright and open in their anonymous responses.

Another question asked whether elected representatives were committed to enhancing their respective political party's policy and practice relating to minority ethnic communities. Respondents were asked to select from a choice of 'greater' input, 'less' input, the 'same' input, or 'don't know'. The majority of respondents from all political parties would like to see *greater* input from their political party (48% of respondents). The majority of DUP respondents would like to see the *same* level of input (61.5% of the DUP respondents). The majority of Sinn Féin respondents would like to see *greater* input (77.8% of the SF respondents). The majority of UUP respondents would like to see the *same* level of input (48.8% of the UUP respondents). The majority of SDLP respondents would like to see *greater* input (52.6% of the SDLP respondents). The majority of Alliance respondents would like to see *greater* input (50% of the AP respondents). The data show that political parties are generally in favour of

more proactive policies and practice regarding minority ethnic communities or at least a continuation of the current level. The DUP and UUP respondents appear to be the most satisfied with their current respective approaches towards minority ethnic communities.

In May 2004 eight countries from Central and Eastern Europe joined the European Union. Most of the existing EU member states put restrictions on immigration from these eight countries. However, formally, the U.K government did not. Elected representatives were asked whether they agreed with the formal U.K decision, whether the U.K should have placed restrictions, or if neither position was appropriate. The majority of respondents from all political parties disagree with the U.K decision on immigration believing that there should have been restrictions placed on immigration (49.7% of respondents). The majority of DUP respondents disagree with the U.K decision on immigration believing that there should have been restrictions placed on immigration (87.2% of the DUP respondents). The majority of Sinn Féin respondents agree with the U.K decision on immigration (54.5% of the SF respondents). The majority of UUP respondents disagree with the U.K decision on immigration believing that there should have been restrictions placed on immigration (77.3% of the UUP respondents). The majority of SDLP respondents agree with the U.K decision on immigration (55.6% of the SDLP respondents). The majority of Alliance respondents agree with the U.K. decision on immigration (55% of the AP respondents). Both the DUP and UUP therefore are parties which believe the U.K should have placed restrictions on immigration.

## Conclusion

This interim report should serve as a springboard for future discussions on minority ethnic communities and the role of political parties/elected representatives in engaging with these communities. As already indicated, further research, feedback and analysis will result in a more substantive final report being published in late May 2008, following a conference in Belfast bringing together relevant stakeholders. Lessons from the conference will inform and be incorporated into the final report. The purpose of the interim report is to contribute to debate amongst political parties and elected representatives as regards to how they interact with minority ethnic communities and to identify ways and means to enhance their representation. Furthermore, it is hoped that this short interim report provides a useful overview of how elected representatives are addressing the needs and interests of minority ethnic communities

The election manifesto analysis demonstrates how political parties are paying increasing attention to the needs and interests of minority ethnic communities. Nowadays every political party mentions minority ethnic communities in their election manifestos either directly, by name, or indirectly, when condemning racist attacks. The interviews with minority ethnic community representatives and advocates suggest that, notwithstanding evident developments and progress, elected representatives and political parties could be somewhat more engaged with these communities. Minority ethnic communities do not see political parties in Northern Ireland as particularly representing them, but nonetheless can cite instances of good work by individual elected representatives on their behalf. The interviews and the results of the survey conducted with elected representatives suggest infrequent and intermittent interaction with minority ethnic communities. Again, some interviewees are not always aware of their respective party's policies or initiatives which support the interests and cause of minority ethnic communities.

### Community Relations Council



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