Mayoralty in Northern Ireland: Symbolism or Substance?

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Introduction

The role of Mayors and other council chairs in Northern Ireland local government has attracted little attention from historians or political scientists. The literature has been dominated by research on the 'high' politics of the 'troubles', including detailed speculation over the conflict's party political aspects[1]. Indeed, Northern Ireland local government, with some notable exceptions[2], is a largely under-researched area because of the emasculated nature of councils. Local authorities were stripped of key functional responsibilities under the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 in response to a litany of sectarian practices aimed at consolidating the hegemonic Unionist state from the 1920s. In 1973 core public services (education, housing and social services), typically delivered by local government in the rest of the United Kingdom, were vested in the hands of appointed boards accountable to British ministers under 'direct rule' from Westminster. Hence, the role of the Mayor/Chair in local government is largely symbolic but hugely significant in a province where symbolism is pervasive in the form of flags, emblems, parades, anthems and paramilitary paraphernalia marking out republican and loyalist territories[3]. Yet as one political initiative after another failed to 'solve' the constitutional crisis in Northern Ireland, local government became the only forum for expressing the political views of elected representatives. The role of the Mayor/Chair became pivotal to the emergence of power-sharing (or 'responsibility sharing' as unionists prefer to call it). This, in turn, offered a model for proportionality (d'Hondt allocation of committee chairs[1]**)** and arrangements for cross-community consent in the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly from December 1999[4].

This chapter attempts three tasks. First, it explores the context of the debate about the constitutional position and role of the chair/mayor in Northern Ireland local government since 1898, while emphasising the most recent period from 1972 onwards. Second, it considers how, despite local government's functional unimportance, the election of one high-profile republican Mayor (Alex Maskey) to Belfast City Council, a bastion of unionist power and supremacy, offered wider

[1] The d'Hondt system, also known as the highest average method, is named after Victor d'Hondt, a Belgian lawyer. The principle of the system is that seats are won singly and successively on the basis of the highest average. The method requires that the number of seats each party gained in the Assembly is divided initially by one and thereafter by one more that the number of seats won, until all the seats are won.

potential for power-sharing arrangements. Finally, in the light of an ongoing major review of local government, it discusses what the future offers for mayors/chairs in Northern Ireland.

Background

Local government in Northern Ireland is the product of the Local Government (Ireland) Act 1898 which in turn derived from the 1888 and 1894 legislation for England and Wales. First, the 1898 Act[5] established a two-tier system of local government in which county boroughs (the six largest towns: Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Waterford, Belfast, Londonderry) and county councils formed the upper tier, and urban and rural districts the lower tier. Second, the public health functions of the Poor Law guardians in rural areas were transferred to the rural district councils. Third, the Act rationalised local government boundaries, eliminating overlapping jurisdictions. Fourth, a simplified rating system, based on a single assessment for all local government purposes, was introduced. Finally, the Act extended the local government franchise to include all adult male ratepayers, thereby rendering the new county councils as foci of growing nationalist agitation for the separation of Ireland from the United Kingdom. Overall, this legislation established the local government structure obtaining in Ireland at the time of the establishment of the Irish Free State and devolved government of Northern Ireland.

When the 'free state' was created in 1920, Northern Ireland's devolved government consisted of six counties, which formed the administrative state. Within the six counties the local government framework comprised 2 county boroughs, 6 county councils, 10 boroughs, 24 urban districts and 31 rural districts; a total of 73 local authorities, serving a population (by 1966) of about 1.4 million people. This ranged from Tandragee Urban District Council, with 1,300 inhabitants, to the city of Belfast with 407,000[6]. Elections were held triennially and all councils except rural districts had rating functions. They fulfilled the same role**s** as their British counterparts with the exception of protective services like police and civil defence. The post-1920 period witnessed several controversial changes wherein 'the invincibility of the Unionist local government system was carefully constructed and maintained'[7].

The first step in this process began with the 1922 Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act which: replaced proportional representation (PR) with simple majority elections; enabled the redrawing **of** electoral divisions and ward boundaries once PR had been removed; and, altered the franchise by incorporating property ownership as a qualification for the vote. In short, the mechanisms for Unionist hegemony were established, or as O'Dowd *et al* put it:

> While Britain and the Irish Republic had been democratising local government, the Unionist Government was consolidating its grip on local politics by fixing ward boundaries, by distributing votes to the propertied, and by disenfranchising the propertyless... The abolition of PR and the reconstruction of wards and the franchise meant that, for rural and county councils, elections were hardly necessary. The only question for Unionists to resolve was who was chosen to serve on the local council[8].

Growing recognition of the inadequacy of local government machinery to provide services efficiently became apparent from 1940 onwards. Loughran noted that it 'has not made any considerable contribution to the development of Northern Ireland since the war'[9]. This is evidenced by the growth of *ad hoc* statutory bodies and the removal and centralisation of local government functions (hospitals, fire, electricity and housing). Pressure for reform eventually surfaced in the 1960s from two complementary sources. First, the Northern Ireland government at Stormont started campaigning to modernise the system from March 1966, and remedy its defects – mainly the multiplicity of small local authorities existing with small rateable bases and hence limited financial resources. Of the 73 councils, 27 had population of fewer than 1,000 people, and 46 had rateable values where one penny produced less than £500[10]. Many councils were therefore neither administratively or financially viable. Second, there was ongoing dissatisfaction with gerrymandered electoral wards and the restricted franchise, which contributed to the disturbances of 1968. Local politics were dominated by sectarian considerations. Unionists controlled a disproportionate share of local authorities with disproportionately large majorities – few councils changed hands at local elections. Buckland noted, 'local government remained an outstanding grievance, with Unionist majorities bolstered by discriminatory housing practices, carefully drawn electoral areas and the persistent refusal to adopt the British practice of one man (*sic*), one vote'[11]. Minority community grievances about housing

and employment helped motivate the 1968 civil rights protest and the subsequent outbreak of civil disturbances.

Local government history up to and during the 1960s is best characterised by the Town Clerk of Downpatrick Council who subsequently became a permanent secretary and Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. Recounting his time in local government, he wrote:

> Majorities were winners: they took the spoils and held the field. Councils were 'won' or 'lost', positions so well entrenched, heads so well counted that change rarely took place. Offices were not shared, committees, where they existed, were dominated by majorities; minorities knew their place and took the crumbs with as much grace as possible[12].

Hayes relates the story of a veteran nationalist councillor who, finding himself in hospital with a minor ailment, joked to the nurse when she removed the bedpan, 'I've been on the council for twenty years and that's the first motion I've ever had carried!'[13]. The invincibility of the Unionist-dominated local government system carefully constructed from 1922 onwards was, however, about to be threatened. Up until then, the role of elected council chairs was simply to hold the party line, reaffirm majoritarianism, and share the spoils of a political system buttressed by gerrymandering and a restricted franchise. Yet, even within Northern Ireland's highly insular and sectarian milieu, the qualities or competencies of a chair were important:

> While officials are there to serve all members and no single party, the chairman is the key figure, both in the procedures and in ensuring the efficient disposal of the public part of the business. His (*sic*) personality too will have a great bearing on the way in which members behave – amicably or with animosity, and since he is often the public face of the council, it helps if it is a restrained and dignified one[14].

A series of reforms initiated by the Stormont government in November 1968 modernised local government structures, reformed the franchise, including abolishing the company vote, introduced a points system for housing, and established/appointed Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration. Michael Farrell described these as 'too little, to later; …enough to outrage loyalists without satisfying the civil rights movement at all'[15]. By October 1969 local government had been stripped of its

responsibility for housing and a decision made to create a centralised housing agency (the Northern Ireland Housing Executive). In December 1969 the Minister of Development with overall responsibility for local government initiated a review chaired by Patrick Macrory.

The Macrory Report (1970) divided services into regional (requiring large administrative units) and district (suitable for small areas) services. The Stormont parliament was to take responsibility for regional services and district councils would administer district services. Macrory recommended establishing 26 borough or district councils and setting up appointed boards to decentralise the administration of centrally provided health and education services. The recommendations were subsequently passed into law under the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972. Macrory's proposals were however overtaken by Stormont's abolition in 1972 and the imposition of 'direct rule' from Westminster.

Figure 1: Map by Conal Kelly - CAIN website

Local government since 1973: emerging consensus?

The most significant changes introduced **by** the 1972 Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) were new local government boundaries (see figure 1), universal adult suffrage, and the replacement of simple plurality voting by proportional representation (the single-transferable-vote). The new district councils came into operation on 1st October 1973 and have remained largely unchanged since then, although a major review of public administration is currently underway which will reform local government once more[16].

The allocation of powers to local authorities was confined to the provision of a limited, and outwardly uncontroversial, range of services: refuse collection and disposal, leisure and community services, street cleaning, parks and tourism. Some 582 councillors now represent 1.68 million people in Northern Ireland. Councils have 4 main functions – ceremonial functions associated with civic leadership; the direct provision of the public services; a representative role where councillors are appointed to a number of public bodies; and a consultative role whereby government departments responsible for functions like planning, roads, water and conservation engage with councils about service provision within their areas.

Under the provisions of the 1972 Act councils were initially designated as 'district councils' but they could be granted city or borough status in certain circumstances. Or as section 2 puts it: 'a council may, in pursuance of a special resolution of the council, submit a petition to the Governor praying for the grant of a charter designating the district of the council a borough'. The two largest councils – Belfast and Derry – retained their city status, whilst Armagh was granted it by royal order in March 1995, and Lisburn and Newry attained theirs in 2002. Fourteen other councils have obtained borough status either because of charters applying in their area before 1973 or through petitions for new charters since 1973. The title for the head of the council is determined by the council's status. Hence district councils have a chairperson; city and borough councils a mayor; and Belfast City Council a Lord Mayor. City and borough councils may designate up to one quarter of their councillors with the ceremonial title of 'alderman'. The typical role of the Mayor is described by Lisburn City Council thus:

> As first citizen of the city, the Mayor will actively lead on all matters of civic life, take responsibility for chairing council meetings, undertake the management of the full council, and positively represent the City of Lisburn and its residents to the wider community both domestically and internationally[17].

In spite of the councils' radically reduced powers since 1973, local government has been the focus of revitalised electoral competition. In 1973 there were 1,222 candidates for 526 seats compared to the previous local government election (1967) where a majority of seats were uncontested. The political composition of councils also reflects the PR electoral system, there being relatively few where one party has an overall majority. There is also greater representation of minority parties.

Despite its innocuous powers, local government became immersed in wider constitutional controversy when in the 1985 elections 59 Sinn Féin councillors, representing the political wing of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, secured seats. Unionists perceived Sinn Féin's electoral strategy (the infamous mantra of the 'ballot box and armalite') as a threatening new dimension in local government and marked their displeasure by disrupting its operation. Some councils adjourned business and all 18 Unionist controlled local authorities refused to carry out normal duties. Varying degrees of conflict ensued**,** with occasional fist-fights in council chambers over the presence of Sinn Féin. The disruption campaign was superseded by a hard-line campaign against the Anglo-Irish Agreement of November 1985. All **U**nionist councils adjourned in protest, refusing to levy district rates. The courts ordered several indicted councils to resume normal business and set a rate. The local government forum had, by this stage, become embroiled in a constitutional protest of defiance against the Agreement, well beyond its remit, and clashed variously with central government and the courts. Fines were imposed by the high courts against recalcitrant councils (Belfast and Castlereagh, for example) and legal censure against others (Lisburn, Antrim and Coleraine). Confronted by such set-backs, support for the protest dwindled and from early 1988 it petered out[18].

The local 1989 government elections marked a turning-point in council chambers, with a degree of moderation appearing not unrelated to the decline in representation from the political extremes. Dungannon District Council is credited

with leading the way through an experiment in responsibility- or power-sharing. It established a special committee, which passed a resolution recognising 'responsibility as an important step which might help us to develop trust in the community'[19]. It was agreed that the position of the chair would be rotated, every six months, between council members 'who deplore violence and seek to pursue political progress by political means'. This effectively excluded Sinn Féin from responsibility-sharing, while the Democratic Unionist Party refused to partake. The rotation of the chair, in effect, alternated power between the main unionist (UUP) and nationalist (SDLP) blocs at that time. Given unionist fury about wider political developments in the province, Dungannon's decision to rotate the chair must be viewed as a major step forward in relations between unionists and nationalists.

Other councils followed suit in the wake of the 1989 local elections. Eleven local authorities appointed chairs/mayors and deputies from both political traditions. The power-sharing trend continued following the 1993 local elections, with 12 councils participating and, according to one observer, an upbeat mood emerging about its longer-term prospects:

> There may be some hope in Ulster's new councils. The Ulster Unionist Party, Alliance and the SDLP have expressed varying degrees of enthusiasm for 'partnership', code word for sharing the main positions of authority… There are several local councils where a combination of these three parties can form the critical mass necessary to take control and to blur the orange/green divide. A growth in power sharing would to a great deal to change the mood music of Ulster politics and to build trust between parties, which is the necessary precursor to a larger accommodation[20].

Power-sharing councils (see appendix 1) were not however a haven of tranquillity and co-operation. Controversy flared over many issues, causing fundamental divisions between the parties. During 1992-93, for example and in proper power-sharing spirit, the SDLP elected DUP Councillor William Hay as mayor of Derry City Council. During his tenure, Hay refused to meet with both the (then) Irish President, Mary Robinson, and (then) Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds. The SDLP claimed that Hay as mayor had failed in his mayoral duty to represent the wishes of Derry's majority. Divisions also emerged in Newry & Mourne Council when the nationalist council chair proposed a motion condemning road traffic delays caused by army checkpoints

in South Armagh (locally referred to as 'bandit country'). Despite a policy of co-operation, unionists could not support such a motion. In the same council area, however, all political parties, except Sinn Féin, condemned the bombing of a local hotel by the IRA and the killing of a British soldier.

Minor partners in power-sharing arrangements were sometimes more cynical about the use of council chairs to maintain a façade of harmony. As one Ulster Unionist councillor put it:

> Derry City Council has always been portrayed nationally and internationally as a shining example of how nationalists will treat unionists and, in reality, it is quite different. It is **not** a power-sharing council. In all committees and meetings there is an SDLP majority. So no matter who chairs a meeting or who is the mayor, the SDLP still control the council and on every issue they operate a strong party whip. If unionists were in power we would probably be doing the exact same thing[21].

Whilst rotating the chair or mayoral position up to this point appealed to middle-ground parties, power sharing of whatever hue was anathema to the DUP who argued it was contrary to the principle of majority rule in a democracy. Sinn Féin's position was dictated by what advantages the party gained from specific power-sharing arrangements.

Symbolism matters

The role that the chair, mayor or lord mayor played in local government, as explored thus far, characterises the wider political milieu within which this governmental tier has existed. From 1922 onwards, local political heads reinforced unionist hegemony to such an extent that local government became a core grievance in the civil rights movement of the late-1960s. Tomlinson highlights the symbolic importance of Belfast Corporation in strengthening unionist supremacy: 'Protestant bourgeois patronage, operating through the local government system on the basis of carefully concocted electoral districts and restricted franchise, was well fortified against political and economic forces for change'[22]. With reorganisation in 1972/3, not least through boundary reorganisation and changes to the voting system, unionist dominance decreased. Although local government's diminished functional importance made the role of chair, mayor or lord mayor less significant, what happened in

councils became a barometer of the wider political process. With the imposition of Westminster direct rule in 1972, British governments presided over a series of failed initiatives attempting to restore devolution to Northern Ireland. This involved giving constitutional guarantees to unionists on their position within the United Kingdom and delivering some sort of power-sharing arrangements between Catholics and Protestants within an all-Ireland framework[23]. The 1972-73 power-sharing executive, the 1975 constitutional convention, the 1980 talks-about-talks, 1982 rolling devolution and the Northern Ireland Assembly, 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, Brooke/Mayhew party talks, Hume/Adams peace plan, the 1993 Joint Declaration and the 1995 Framework Documents all testify to initiatives which raised hopes and foundered. In the meantime local government was the only democratic forum around. Even since the historic Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in 1998, political and administrative stability have proved elusive. With the Northern Ireland Assembly now suspended (since October 2002) for the fourth time, local government remains in place, albeit emasculated in form[24].

The key contribution**,** which heads of state at local-government level have made**,** is to embed the principle of power-sharing that has been pivotal to the Belfast Agreement. Hence, what had been happening in local government for some time, presided over by chairs, mayors or lord mayors, became the blueprint for a devolved Northern Ireland Assembly. Legislative Assembly members (MLAs) are elected by PR (STV). The election of the chair and deputy-chair of the Assembly, main committees, and the power-sharing executive are made on the basis of proportionality using d'Hondt. Key decisions are taken on a cross-community basis (either through parallel consent or weighted majority). As one leader-writer put it at the beginning of the 2001 local government elections:

> Some council chambers, most notably Belfast City Hall, once earned a reputation for being sectarian bearpits. But tensions have eased and local government has played its part in changing the face of Northern Ireland politics. Although mayoral rotation has not worked everywhere, many councils blazed a trail for the peace process by demonstrating that power-sharing can be a reality[25].

The contribution by councils to 'working' power-sharing at local level has been hard fought, and not without major controversy in some authorities which cling

to the vestiges of majoritarianism and unionist domination. This is particularly true where Sinn Féin is vying for the post of chair, mayor or lord mayor, the political symbolism of which is simply too much for die-hard unionists to accept. The case is best illustrated by Sinn Féin's success in securing the post of Lord Mayor of Belfast for the first time in its history.

Belfast City Council – mayoral symbolism writ large

The 1997 local government elections were a turning point in the politics of Belfast City Council, by far the largest local authority in Northern Ireland. The mainstream unionist parties lost control of Belfast local government, thereby producing its first elected nationalist Lord Mayor. Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionist Party secured most seats (13 each) and the Alliance Party held the balance of power[2]. One century of unionist control of Belfast City Council ended when Alban Maginness, an SLDP barrister, secured the post with support from Sinn Féin and the Alliance. Although Sinn Féin held the largest number of nationalist/republican seats, neither the SDLP nor Alliance would support a republican candidate without an IRA ceasefire. Sinn Féin reasoned that the symbolism of the first nationalist lord mayor was so momentous that they supported Maginness. Ulster Unionist councillor Jim Rodgers was elected unopposed as deputy Lord Mayor. In what was seen as one of Unionism's most potent institutions, Belfast City Council, had shuffled in. Lord Mayor Maginness, on accepting the mayoral chain, which ironically given its unionist 'ownership' bore the Irish inscription 'Eireann Go Brea' (Ireland forever), avoided the temptation of triumphalism:

> Tonight, the political mould has been broken. Its fracture does not mark a defeat of one tradition by another, nor is it a victory. Rather, it signifies a bold step towards the creation of a partnership amongst the political traditions in this divided city. A partnership in which there is neither victory nor defeat but the triumph of tolerance[26].

This magnanimous approach contrasted sharply with a more resolute response from Gerry Adams, Sinn Féin president, who welcomed the election of a nationalist Lord Mayor by commenting 'the days of unionist domination are over forever and

[2] In the 1997 local government elections to Belfast City Council: unionists/loyalists won 25 seats (UUP = 13; DUP = 7; PUP = 3; UDP = 1; Unionist = 1); nationalists/loyalists won 20 seats (Sinn Féin = 13; SDLP = 7); and, Alliance Party won 6 seats.

Sinn Féin is absolutely determined to ensure that they will never return'[27]. The first powerful test of mayoral symbolism for Mr Maginness came when he participated in a wreath-laying ceremony at the Cenotaph outside Belfast City Hall to commemorate the fallen at the Battle of the Somme in which soldiers of the 36th Ulster Division were killed. Maginness had not attended the ceremony previously, claiming the political climate was not amenable to his being there. He was joined by his Dublin counterpart, Mr. Brendan Lynch. The symbolism was potent. This was the first time that a nationalist Lord Mayor had led the procession at the ceremony and it was also the first time that a Dublin Lord Mayor had attended. The DUP accused the Lord Maginness of 'blatant hypocrisy', arguing 'we can conclude that nationalists were dragged into this event out of embarrassment rather than out of civic duty and true respect for those who laid down their lives'[28]. Maginness, although overtly inclusive, started to chip away at the British traditions associated with the post of Lord Mayor. He opted not to toast the Royal Family in keeping with tradition at his inaugural dinner and removed the Union Flag from the Lord Mayor's parlour in a bid, according to Maginness, to depoliticise the office of Belfast's First Citizen.

The 2001 local government witnessed a further increase in nationalist/republican representation on Belfast City Council with Sinn Féin becoming the largest political party[3]. The Alliance, still holding the balance of power, joined with the SDLP and republicans in June 2002 to elect Alex Maskey, Belfast's first Sinn Féin Lord Mayor. Maskey, a senior provisional republican and anti-monarchist, first elected to City Hall in 1983 where he attended his first meeting wearing a bullet proof vest, was an abhorrent figure to unionists. The support of the three Alliance councillors was the crucial, but by no means certain, ingredient securing his mayoral election. One observer captured the tension thus:

> Unionists stared sullenly across the floor of the chamber on the Alliance benches. From Sinn Féin benches the questioning glances towards Alliance reflected republican anxiety that the trio would recant at the eleventh hour and plead 'not guilty' to the charge that they were handing the keys of unionism's citadel to the 'Provo Pariah'[29].

[3] In the 2001 local government elections to Belfast City Council: unionists/loyalists won 25 seats (UUP = 11; DUP = 10; PUP = 3; UDP = 1); nationalists/loyalists won 20 seats (Sinn Féin = 14; SDLP = 9); and, Alliance Party won 3 seats.

Unionists reacted to Maskey's election by walking out after this hugely historic and symbolic decision was taken and refusing to propose anyone for the position of Deputy Lord Mayor. They declined to nominate anyone for election arguing that it gave credibility to the city's first republican mayor. Maskey appealed to unionists, beneath portraits in Belfast City Hall of Queen Victoria and King Edward VII, symbols of the British establishment and repugnant to republicans, 'judge me on what you see me doing and saying'. The DUP said the election was 'a night of shame for the city, a night of sadness for those who have suffered at the hands of the IRA over the last 20 years'[30].

The civic leadership expected of Belfast's republican Lord Mayor was soon to be tested. Maskey attended the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland with some 1,200 delegates where the Moderator welcomed 'the chief citizen of Belfast… to a Christian assembly... where we are in the business of trying to understand each other, to dialogue with each other'. The DUP accused Irish Presbyterians of 'giving cover to Maskey who is stained by the blood of innocents[31]. Maskey then faced the same dilemma as the first SDLP Lord Mayor in commemorating the Somme. Republicans have traditionally refused to attend wreath-laying ceremonies, arguing they are closely associated with the British military establishment. Following internal party discussions (and dissension) the republican Lord Mayor laid a wreath at the Cenotaph at the Somme anniversary after which he said 'this is a major step for republicans and nationalists on this island. I hope the initiative will be seen at face value and as a positive gesture'[32]. The Lord Mayor followed this event by laying a wreath at a ceremony in Belgium in memory of those from the island of Ireland (north and south) who died in the battle of the Somme.

Maskey's mayoral tenure was helped on the wider front by the IRA's unprecedented public apology to the families of 'non-combatants' killed by the paramilitary group during the 'troubles' and a restatement of its commitment to the peace process. Maskey also held a high-profile meeting with John White, a member of the Ulster Political Research Group, the main conduit for the views of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), a paramilitary group which had tried to (and almost succeeded) assassinate him. The meeting had been arranged to defuse escalating

sectarian tensions in Belfast and was described as a triumph of political necessity or expediency over mutual loathing[33].

In an office where symbols matter, Maskey had promised the Alliance Party, in return for their support to get elected, that he would not strip the Lord Mayor's parlour of unionist paraphernalia and replace these with trappings of republican history. Instead, he placed a tricolour (the flag of the Irish Republic), presented to him by a former IRA prisoner at a civic ceremony, alongside the Union flag, photographs of Queen Elizabeth, Prince Phillip and the late Queen Mother. He justified this as a move towards equality and respect for the two traditions in Northern Ireland where both flags had a place in the mayoral parlour. Maskey also held a City Hall reception for members of the old soldiers' charity, the Royal British Legion, the first Mayor to do so and ironically boycotted by unionists. In a further attempt to represent both traditions, the Lord Mayor explored the possibility of meeting the Duke of York who was to participate in a Royal Irish Regiment ceremony where he was Colonel-in-Chief. For a high-profile republican like Maskey, meeting a British Royal invited anger from his grassroots. In an attempt to balance civic leadership with his political and ideological beliefs, he tried to negotiate the conditions of the meeting, particularly to ensure what he described as 'no British military symbolism'[34]. He could not meet with someone in British military uniform given his implacable opposition to everything the British monarchy stood for. The British at the last minute, according to Maskey, changed the Prince's schedule from a private civic reception to a public event with military overtones, making the Lord Mayor's attendance impossible.

Strategically, Sinn Féin had carefully considered plans for Maskey's mayoral role. The party explained:

> We wanted to use Alex Maskey as a kind of ambassador, following on from the success of Martin McGuinness and Bairbre de Brún (former Sinn Féin Assembly Ministers). We wanted to prove to unionists that they would be under no threat whenever Sinn Féin was in power, whether that was in Belfast or in a united Ireland[35].

Handing over the chain of office in June 2003, Maskey called on all future mayors to sign a pledge of office compelling them to represent all the people of Belfast, and give

a written commitment to reach out to both communities and restore international confidence in a city whose image was synonymous with sectarianism. The outgoing Lord Mayor remarked: 'the City Hall didn't burn down as some unionists had predicted and, hopefully, the efforts I made to reach out to unionists can be built and strengthened by myself and others in the years ahead'[36]. Sinn Féin had now 'worked' two symbolically important political institutions – Stormont and Belfast City Hall. Detractors found it difficult to criticise their commitment, those within Sinn Féin and the IRA saw it as an integral part of implementing the internal arrangements (strand 1) of the Belfast Agreement.

Conclusions: beyond symbolism

The potency of mayoral symbolism and how this has been used in the wider political process in Northern Ireland goes well beyond the functional importance of local government as a democratic entity. Creating power-sharing arrangements is the most obvious manifestation of how the role of chairs and mayors has been hugely influential. This is not confined to Belfast. Several Northern Ireland councils now engage in power-sharing, a practice, they argue, which originated through rotating the chair/mayor's position between local political parties well before it became integral to the principles of devolved government in the shape of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Former SDLP Deputy First Minister, Mark Durkan, claimed that Derry City Council was where power-sharing between unionists and nationalists first operated. He described the city as a 'trailblazer' and claimed Derry 'has a great track record and great potential. So much of the thinking that inspired the Belfast Agreement was tried and perfected in this city over many years. We are pace setters and we must continue to be'[37].

Not only has learning been transferred upwards to the Assembly, but increasingly councils have adopted more formalised power-sharing arrangements than previously existed. The d'Hondt system of proportional representation was adopted by the Northern Ireland Assembly to allocate seats in the executive, and appoint committee chairs and deputy-chairs. Several councils have now adopted this process as their *modus operandi*, although a small number remain recalcitrant. Lisburn City

Council, for example, the second largest council area in Northern Ireland (which gained city status in 2002) is accused of excluding nationalists from all key positions and refusing to adopt any form of power-sharing arrangement. This has prompted the Department of Foreign Affairs (in Dublin) to monitor the allocation of offices in response to a complaint from Sinn Féin[4]. Recently, invitations to Lisburn City Council's mayoral banquet excluded Sinn Féin councillors at the behest of the DUP mayor. Under pressure from council officials, his decision was overturned but he remained unapologetic: 'If it was down to me there would be no Sinn Féin members there. It is certainly not a U-turn by me. I had been given to understand that the invitations to the mayoral banquet were at the Mayor's discretion. I was later informed this is not the case'[38]. The Mayor pledged to hold a toast to the Queen during the banquet to rebuff Sinn Féin's inclusion.

These remaining vestiges of political exclusivity, exercised through the election of the chair/mayor of local authorities, raise two general issues. First, debates about the possibility of directly elected mayors/chairs in the Northern Irish context have been mostly rejected as divisive and likely to compound sectarianism. For example, in a debate in Derry City Council on the merits of having a mayor directly elected by the public every 4 years, the (then) DUP mayor (Mildred Garfield) argued she would be the city's last unionist mayor if the proposal became a reality. Given Derry's large nationalist majority, it is highly likely that a public vote would displace existing power-sharing arrangements to rotate the mayoralty between parties with a nationalist/republican first citizen. This would do little to foster harmony and good relations in the city.

Second, local authorities are now part of a wider review of public administration currently underway. Initiated by the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2002, this has continued despite the on/off nature of devolution. It has recently launched final proposals for consultation which stress that whatever form of local government emerged, it would need 'to be underpinned by a range of statutory safeguards on the operation of councils if confidence and trust in the new arrangements were to be achieved'. The statutory arrangements, the review argued,

[4] Lisburn City Council comprises: 13 UUP members; 5 DUP members; two independent unionists; 3 SDLP members; 4 Sinn Féin members; and 3 Alliance Party members.

'should provide a framework of checks and balances under which councils would conduct their business and ensure equality and fairness in decision-making'[39]. These proposals, it appears, are an oblique acknowledgement of the merits of power-sharing where it has happened voluntarily between political parties keen to built trust at local government level, but also a recognition that such principles have not been universally applied. As the review envisages returning greater powers to local government, then 'equality and fairness in decision-making' become yet more important, not least because of the history of local government malpractice before 1973. The proposed new safeguards would undoubtedly include reference to the election of the chair, mayor or lord mayor of local authorities and a more detailed explication of his/her civic leadership role.

What the Northern Ireland case illustrates is that the seemingly innocuous role of local heads of state, presiding over a relatively small-scale tier of governance, is imbued with powerful political symbolism, with wider constitutional ramifications. In the absence of any other democratic forum for long periods since 1973, local government became a laboratory for power-sharing arrangements, which were later to form the whole edifice of the Belfast Agreement. How chairs, mayors and lord mayors played out their respective roles at the local level influenced the prospects of securing a workable power-sharing Assembly with major functional responsibilities. In short, the part played by local heads of state in the Northern Ireland context has been disproportionately significant in the wider political and constitutional arena and well beyond a civic leadership role in relatively powerless local councils.

Appendix 1: Council Mayors/Chairs - 2004 / 2005

Council	Mayor / Chairperson	Deputy Mayor / Vice - Chairperson
Antrim	Cllr Bobby Loughran (SDLP)	Cllr Drew Ritchie (UUP)
Ards	Cllr Hamilton Gregory (DUP)	Cllr Angus Carson (UUP)
Armagh	Cllr Eric Speers (UUP)	Cllr John Campbell (SDLP)
Ballymena	Cllr Hubert Nicholl (DUP)	Cllr T. G. A. Scott (UUP)
Ballymoney	Cllr Cecil Cousley (DUP)	Cllr Ian Stevenson (DUP)
Banbridge	Cllr Ian Burns (UUP)	Cllr John Hanna (UUP)
Belfast	Cllr Tom Ekin (Alliance)	Cllr Joseph O'Donnell (Sinn Féin)
Carrickfergus	Ald David Hilditch MLA (DUP)	Cllr Eric Ferguson (UUP)
Castlereagh	Cllr Ms Joanne Bunting (DUP)	Cllr David Drysdale (UUP)
Coleraine	Cllr Robert McPherson (UUP)	Ald James McClure (DUP)
Cookstown	Cllr Patrick Pearse McAleer (Sinn Féin)	Cllr Trevor Wilson (UUP)
Craigavon	Ald David Simpson (DUP)	Cllr Ignatius Fox (SDLP)
Derry	Cllr Garoid O'hEara (Sinn Féin)	Ald Joe Miller (DUP)
Down	Cllr Robert Burgess (UUP)	Cllr Carmel O'Boyle (SDLP)
Dungannon	Cllr Robert Mulligan (UUP)	Cllr W. J. McIlwrath (DUP)
Fermanagh	Cllr Gerry McHugh (Sinn Féin)	Cllr John O'Kane (SDLP)
Larne	Cllr Roy Craig (Independent)	Cllr Ms Gerardine Mulvenna (Alliance)
Limavady	Cllr Jack Rankin (UUP)	Cllr Michael Coyle (SDLP)
Lisburn	Cllr Cecil Calvert (DUP)	Cllr Bill Gardiner-Watson (UUP)
Magherafelt	Cllr Patsy Groogan (Sinn Féin)	Cllr R. A. Montgomery (Independent)
Moyle	Cllr Mr Michael Molloy (SDLP)	Cllr George Hartin (DUP)
Newry & Mourne	Cllr Henry Riley (UUP)	Cllr John Feehan (SDLP)
Newtownabbey	Ald E. A. Turkington (UUP)	Ald W. H. DeCourcey (DUP)
North Down	Cllr Ms Valerie Kinghan (UKUP)	Cllr John Montgomery (DUP)
Omagh	Cllr Sean Clarke (Sinn Féin)	Cllr Thomas Buchanan MLA (DUP)
Strabane	Cllr Jarlath McNulty (Sinn Féin)	Cllr Ms Ann Bell (SDLP)

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