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## **Democratic Autonomy, Women's Interests and Institutional Context**

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Many democratic systems explicitly recognise and accommodate the interests of particular ethnic groups within their decision procedures. This is true, for example, of the democratic system established under the terms of the Belfast Agreement. But the question remains as to whether those systems leave sufficient space for the recognition and accommodation of other kinds of political interests. In this article, I seek to explore this question with respect to the political interests of women, understood in relational terms. To this end, I defend a particular reading of the value of personal autonomy. Having shown how that principle relates to the value of political equality, I then show how it might be realised and applied by women along three different dimensions. Finally, I use this elaboration of the principle of personal autonomy as a means of evaluating the democratic quality of Northern Ireland's electoral system and Assembly decision rules.

Under the terms of the Belfast Agreement (Agreement, 1998), Northern Ireland has sought to address its political problems by building democratic institutions that enable British unionists and Irish nationalists to share power. Although power sharing marks a significant shift away from the more usual majoritarian model of democracy, the thinking behind this shift is easy to appreciate. The fairness of the majoritarian model depends in large measure on the assumption that majority rule will not result in permanent majorities and permanent minorities—since majorities and minorities can be expected to alternate over the course of time, no group need fear being permanently excluded from the government (Jones, 1983: 168). Yet no such assumption can be expected to hold in the context of a deeply divided society such as Northern Ireland—since ethnic groups tend to line up squarely behind their own political parties, voting patterns tend to be relatively stable or unchanging. Consequently, deeply divided societies must opt for power sharing over

majoritarianism so that minority ethnic groups will have at least some opportunity to participate in the government (but see Barry, 1975: 405).

The democratic institutions established under the terms of the Agreement not only enable unionists and nationalists to share power, but, in so doing, place unionist and nationalist interests firmly at the heart of Northern Irish politics (O'Leary, 1999: 76). Yet although many people in Northern Ireland care a great deal about the future of the union with Great Britain or about the prospects for a united Ireland, many people also care a great deal about political issues that do not, or at least need not, have anything to do with unionism or nationalism. The question remains, however, as to whether a political system that is built principally around the need to recognise and accommodate the interests of two conflicting ethnic groups can also leave sufficient space for the recognition and accommodation of other kinds of political interests within its decision procedures. In this article, I take up this question with respect to women's interests, such as they might be. More specifically, I ask whether the power-sharing institutions established under the terms of the Agreement treat those interests fairly or whether they discount those interests in ways that should give democrats cause for concern.

Now, at first sight, one might think that the answer to this question is obvious: since the Agreement recognises and accommodates the interests of two ethnic groups, and since all ethnic groups are patriarchal, the Agreement must inevitably fail to provide sufficient space for the recognition and accommodation of women's interests (Okin, 1997; Yuval-Davis 1998). Of course, it would be hard to deny that ethnic groups tend to be patriarchal to one extent or another. Yet it still need not follow that the Agreement treats women's interests unfairly, since much will depend on how ethnic interests are actually framed and institutionalised within its decision procedures (see Kymlicka, 1997: 30). At a more philosophical level, we cannot simply say that the Agreement treats women's interests unfairly until we have first decided which democratic standards ought properly to apply in making evaluative judgements of this sort.

In this article, then, I will proceed as follows. First, I will argue that women's interests are best understood in relational rather than essentialist terms. However, a

relational understanding brings problems of its own, since there are always limits to the number of interests that can be recognised and accommodated within any given set of decision procedures. Secondly, I will argue that although the circumstances of politics are such that interests must inevitably be prioritised, that prioritisation should not be arbitrary from the moral point of view. Instead, it should be directed in the light of clearly defined and soundly justified democratic standards. To this end, I defend a particular reading of the principle of personal autonomy and suggest different ways in which women might put that principle into practice. Finally, in the light of this treatment of the principle of personal autonomy, I evaluate a number of the core institutions established under the terms of the Belfast Agreement (the electoral system and parliamentary decision rules). I conclude that, as far as the recognition and accommodation of women's interests in Northern Ireland is concerned, the evidence is mixed.

Before proceeding, two points are worth noting. First, although this article is concerned with questions of institutional design, it is not explicitly concerned with offering positive proposals for remedying the problems that it identifies. Feminists have already offered a range of proposals of this of this latter sort, highlighting the important role that might be played by instruments and mechanisms such as candidate quotas, reserved seats, equality legislation and bills of rights (e.g., Young, 1990; Phillips, 1995; Williams, 1998, Mansbridge, 1999). Yet the fact remains that the appropriateness and utility of those instruments and mechanisms depends on prior normative and empirical assessments of the space for women's interests within particular institutional designs. Secondly, although this article is concerned with the recognition and accommodation of different and sometimes competing interests, not all interests on a par. In particular, a democratic government can have little truck with interests that are inimical to democracy or injurious to its members, no matter whose interests they are or why it is they hold them. For the purposes of this article, I will simply assume that interests of this injurious sort are not at issue.

### **Conceptualising women's interests**

Naturally, it is important to begin by explaining how women's interests should be understood, since different explanations can have different implications for our

assessment of the fairness or otherwise of any given set of democratic decision procedures. Here, in this section, I consider two possible explanations: essentialist and relational. I argue that the essentialist understanding is both ontologically flawed and democratically suspect. By contrast, I argue that a relational understanding offers a much more ontologically defensible conceptualisation of women's interests, although, as we will also see, it poses a number of difficult democratic questions of its own.

On an essentialist reading, women's interests are traced to an underlying nature in which all women, simply because they are women, share. For example, Carol Gilligan suggests that women's interests can be grounded in their natural capacity for nurturing (Gilligan, 1982). Yet, as most contemporary feminists openly accept, the trouble with essentialist approaches of this sort is that many women simply do not fit the proposed accounts of what it is to be a woman (e.g., Phillips, 1995: 68). Some women may see themselves as nurturers, and hence have strong feelings of connectedness to and sense of responsibility for others. In turn, those feelings may colour the interests that they hold more generally. But other women may feel nothing of the sort: their fundamental sense of what it means to be a woman may be very different, bound up with very different life experiences and reflected in very different interests and concerns.

Insofar as different women's interests cannot be traced to a single underlying nature, an essentialist understanding of those interests must be considered ontologically flawed: it does not provide a coherent account of the lived social reality of women in general. Of course, it might be responded that although essentialism might be ontologically flawed, it nevertheless captures the way in which many women actually *perceive* their interests: although there may be no such thing as an underlying nature to which each and every interest can be traced, some women believe that such a nature exists. Such claims are democratically suspect, however. Among other things, democracy entails the view that no one has the right to have their demands met or their interests satisfied without first justifying those interests in ways that others can understand and in principle accept. But if the essential nature to which you point has no meaning for me, it hard to see why I should be persuaded by the claims that you make on both of us (Barry, 2006: 22-3). To insist on those interests nonetheless,

simply because you think that they have arisen from some natural, pre-political source, is to fail to treat me as your equal.

Thus, the decisive factor that counts against essentialist approaches is that many women simply cannot think about their interests in such reductive terms (Young, 1997: 387). Nor, from a democratic point of view, should they be required to do so. By contrast, I want to suggest that a relational understanding provides a far more plausible way of conceptualising women's interests. But as I will also suggest, although essentialist claims are democratically suspect, a relational understanding poses democratic problems of its own.

On a relational understanding, we cannot make sense of the idea that the members of group *A* have a distinct interest in a given issue except in relation to how the members of an opposing group, *B*, see that issue. (In the absence of group *B*, the members of group *A* might not even be aware that they have a distinct interest in the issue.) Accordingly, when women qua women say that they have a distinct interest in issues such as childbearing, domestic violence or occupational mobility, this should not be understood as a claim about the centrality of those interests to their nature as women, but simply as a claim about how their experiences of childbearing, domestic violence and employment differ from those of men. Admittedly, some women do not have children or suffer domestic abuse, and we know that some women make it to the top of their profession. But since those women have their own particular experiences and perspectives, their interests should be understood not just in relation to those of men but also in relation to those of other women (Young, 1997: 389; Young, 2000: 99; cf. Phillips, 1995: 67-8).

Ontologically, the beauty of a relational approach is that it allows us to account for the different interests that different groups of women may or may not have, if and when they have them. Unlike an essentialist understanding, which is ontologically rigid, a relational understanding is inherently flexible. It treats membership in a social group not as a matter of satisfying some purportedly objective criteria, but, in Iris Young's words, as a matter 'of a subjective affirmation of affinity with that group, the affirmation of that affinity by other members of the group, and the attribution of membership in that group by persons identifying with other groups' (Young, 1990:

172). In other words, on a relational conceptualisation, groups are composed of people who see the world in a similar way and who feel a certain affinity for one another because (among other things) they hold certain interests in common. Of course, our sense of affinity with those others can, and often will, wax and wane over time—as we change as people, our sense of what is of concern to us in life will change also, along with the relations in which we stand to others. There is nothing unusual about this shifting social process. But, as far as democratic decision making is concerned, it can make the recognition and accommodation of women's interests a highly complex affair.

If our interests are those things that we take to be of particular concern to us, then women have many different, and sometimes competing, interests. In the kinds of deeply divided societies with which this article is concerned, women will often oppose one another along ethnic or national lines—for instance, women qua unionists and women qua nationalists disagree fundamentally on the issue of the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. But those same women may simultaneously view themselves as sharing certain affinities that cut across the ethnic divide. They may share a distinct gendered interest in the kinds of issues that I mentioned above (childbearing, domestic violence, occupational mobility, and so forth). But they may also share a distinct gendered interest in being able to challenge dominant interpretations of ethnicity from within, especially in those cases where dominant interpretations are highly patriarchal or where they create unwanted expectations about how women ought to behave or what their proper role ought to be (Appiah, 1994: 160-63).

Now, if an essentialist understanding tends to reduce the number of women's interests, a relational approach tends to multiply them (and perhaps multiply them exponentially). In this sense, a relational understanding magnifies the basic challenge that all democracies must confront, namely to design a fair procedure for deciding which interests will find their way into public policy and which will not. This challenge has both normative and empirical dimensions (Habermas, 1994: 124-25). In order to know whether a democratic decision procedure is fair or unfair, we must first have some appreciation of the values and standards against which that decision procedure should be measured. But we must also know something about the political

context in which that procedure has to operate, since conditions on the ground must also inform our evaluation of it (Goodin and Pettit, 1993: 1). After all, it makes no sense to say we ought to do something unless we can actually do it: ought implies can, as every philosopher knows.

No doubt the need to balance normative and empirical consideration can be extremely difficult in practice. This is especially so in deeply divided societies, where larger democratic goals and purposes will often have to give way in the face of harsh realities—ethnic interests may simply have to come first, not because they have the best arguments on their side, but because the alternatives might be unthinkable (O’Leary, 2005: 9). And yet normative standards continue to have a vitally important role to play.

No democracy is perfect. Far from it. But since democracies are not static, the hope is always that they can be socially, politically and even morally improved. In this vein, it is often said that democracy is best understood as an ongoing learning process according to which we come to see that democratic standards are better satisfied if, for example, women have the vote or hitherto marginalised ethnic groups are brought in from the cold (Young, 1990: 190; Habermas, 2001: 774-75). But in order to know that democratic standards are better satisfied, we must, in the first instance, have some appreciation of what those standards are, how they are grounded and why they are worth pursuing. In the next section of this article, I focus on one such standard, namely the principle of personal autonomy. As we will see, this principle has much to tell us about the political recognition and accommodation of women’s interests. I begin the section, though, by briefly considering how this principle relates to democracy more generally.

### **Democratic autonomy and women’s interests**

From the outset of this article, I have traded on the assumption that a democratic system should allow sufficient space for the recognition of women’s interests, or, perhaps more accurately, that a democratic system should not simply discount those interest as being of lesser *a priori* value or importance than ethnic interests. But how is this assumption grounded?

On the face of it, we might be tempted to think that this assumption flows naturally from a relational understanding of group interests: the idea that group interests need to be understood in relation to one another seems to preclude the idea that some interests are antecedently privileged. Yet the difficulty here is that ontological claims only tell us about the way the world is, not about the way the world ought to be—although our ontological commitments may colour the normative claims that we make, they need not determine them (Taylor, 1995: 182-85).<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, in order to move from a relational understanding of women's interests to the normative assumption that a democratic decision procedure should not discount those interests in advance, we must appeal to some intervening moral standard (see Jones, 1983: 165-66).

As I define it, democracy is a procedure for making decisions in which all of those who are bound by the decisions have the right to participate equally in their making. As this definition makes clear, political equality is the central value of democracy: since men and women are bound by the decisions that democratic governments make, men and women should have an equal say in those decisions. And so it follows that if men are entitled and empowered to shape their own relation to the polity (which, as an empirical matter, they generally are), then women must have the same general entitlement. Anything less is undemocratic.

Of course, the value of political equality has been interpreted to mean different things in different contexts. But for many contemporary democrats, the interpretation that is most relevant to the democratic process is expressed in the principle of equal consideration of interests. That principle 'supposes that the weaker members of a democratic association are entitled to the same concern and respect of their government as the more powerful members have secured for themselves' (Dworkin, 1977: 297). Even so, democrats worry that this principle may not be enough, taken on its own, to secure our standing as political equals. After all, it has often been pointed out that a benevolent and informed despotism could claim not only to know what was in your best interests, but also that it could be trusted to advance your interests as if they were its own (Dahl, 1989: 87-8).



In response, some democrat theorists argue that any convincing account of democracy must also involve a principle of personal autonomy which, in its most familiar formulation, supposes that each person should be treated as the best judges of his or her own interests (e.g., Mill, 1991 [1861]: 245-48; Dahl, 1989: 99). There are good prudential reasons for adopting a principle of this sort. Although democratic governments always claim to treat the interests of minority groups with equal consideration, and in many instances are actuated by a sincere desire to do so, the historical record nevertheless suggests that, as John Stuart Mill put it, ‘the rights and interests of every or any person are only secure from being disregarded when the person interested is himself able, and habitually disposed, to stand up for them’ (Mill, 1991 [1861]: 245). Indeed, those who advocate power sharing in deeply divided societies take this reasoning one step further, arguing that unless representatives from the weaker ethnic groups are actually included, as of right, in the government, there is a very real danger that their interests will be depreciated or ignored (e.g., Lijphart, 1977, 2004; Horowitz, 1985, 1991).

Thus, there are good prudential grounds for thinking that the value of political equality should be spelt out not just in terms of a principle of equal consideration, but also in terms of a principle of personal autonomy. Of course, it might be objected that the principle of personal autonomy is far more suited to private decisions than to democratic decisions, since our views about our own interests can never be decisive in the public realm in the way that they can be in the private realm. But, as Robert Goodin enables us to see, this objection overlooks an important point, namely that statements of interest entail claims, not just demands:

To say ‘I want  $x$ ’ is a demand: we do not need to know why, only that you want  $x$ , to fully comprehend the nature of the proposition and (if we are in the business of want-satisfaction) to act upon it. To say ‘it is in my interests that I should have  $x$ ’ is to say something about the *reasonableness* of a want. It explains, rationalises, justifies a want in the way that a statement of brute longing does not (Goodin, 1990: 184).

On this understanding, when a woman says that her experiences as a woman have led her to have a distinct interest in  $x$ , she is not simply saying that those experiences are proof enough that her interest in  $x$  should be satisfied (but see Hartsock, 1983).

Rather, what she is saying is that there is something about those experiences, and hence about the interest-claims to which they give rise, that we should find rationally compelling (for example, that they are the product of unjust social hierarchies created and maintained by men to the unfair advantage of their gender). Of course, we might decide on due reflection that other claims are more compelling. But the general point remains that, insofar as we are willing to treat people as the best judges of their own interests, we will not discount their interests in advance.

Clearly, this characterisation of the principle of personal autonomy implies a very particular vision of democracy, one in which decision making proceeds in the first instance by rational discussion and deliberation rather than by bargaining or voting. Since I have written elsewhere on the subject of deliberative democracy in deeply divided societies, I will say no more about that subject here (O'Flynn, 2006; O'Flynn, 2007). Instead, I wish to spell out in more detail what I take this characterisation of the principle of personal autonomy to mean for the recognition of women's interests.

The principle of personal autonomy calls for a democratic decision procedure which affords women an equal say in the decisions that result. More specifically, it calls for a decision process that is flexible enough to allow women to freely shape their own relation to the polity, consistent with a similar freedom for all. In practical terms, there are two general dimensions along which this freedom (or autonomy) might be realised. First, some women might view themselves as having an exclusively gendered interest in some given policy issue, for example, equal pay. They might therefore decide to join a women's political party in order to pursue that interest. Of course, party members might disagree internally with one another about how exactly they should proceed. But when it comes to engaging externally with other political parties, they will, along this first dimension, see that engagement primarily as a challenge to patriarchal norms.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, some women might think of themselves as having interests in common with men. For example, they might see themselves as sharing a concern for the environment. Those women might therefore decide to join a green political party in order to bring a gendered perspective to bear on that concern. When it comes to internal policy debates, those women may understand their interests in relation to those of male members. But, regardless of whether or not their interests as women shape a particular policy outcome, they will, along this second dimension,

act first and foremost as environmentalist when it comes to engaging externally with other political parties.<sup>4</sup>

Now, on one level, these two general dimensions along which the principle of personal autonomy can be put into practice pertain just as much to deeply divided societies as they do to more normal democratic societies. For example, some women born into the unionist (or nationalist) community in Northern Ireland might think about their interests in wholly gendered terms and hence as independent of the concerns of unionism. By contrast, some unionist women might think of themselves as unionists in the first instance and women in the second. In relation to the male members of the unionist community, those women might challenge the development of party policy on, say, grounds of gender equality. But when it comes to engaging externally with nationalist parties, they will typically prioritise their ethnic allegiances to unionism.

On another level, however, it must be remembered that the members of a divided society tend not to think about social issues such as the environment in the same way as ethnic issues. This reason why is obvious: given the legacy of protracted violent conflict, ethnic interests will resonate uniquely for them. But then it seems that, as far as women's interests are concerned, there are good grounds for thinking about the principle of personal autonomy in terms of three general dimensions of autonomous democratic engagement rather than two—as women in their own right (dimension 1), as women with a gendered interest in social (or non-ethnic) issues (dimension 2) or as women with a gendered perspective on ethnicity (dimension 3). In the following section, I consider whether or to what extent women in Northern Ireland can meaningfully choose to exercise their personal autonomy along each of these three dimensions.

### **Women's autonomy in context: power-sharing in Northern Ireland**

In what follows, I focus on the electoral system and Assembly decision rules established under the terms of the Agreement. Admittedly, a more complete analysis would need to consider a much broader range of issues, including human rights, justice and security provisions, along with their implications for cross-border relations

(Fearon and Rebouché, 2006: 283-87). Yet insofar as democracy is normally thought of in the first instance as a decision procedure, it seems natural to begin by focusing on the two institutional features to which I now turn.

### *The electoral system*

Northern Ireland uses the single transferable vote (STV) form of proportional representation (PR) to elect representatives to its 108-member parliamentary Assembly. Like all PR systems, STV tends to reduce disproportionate vote-to-seat ratios. It also tends to increase electoral choice, not just because its ballot structure allows voters to vote for any mix of candidates they prefer, for whatever reason they prefer them, but also because its low threshold for election encourages new political parties or independent candidates to run for election (Taagepera and Shugart, 1989: 24-8).

In theory there is reason to think that STV might serve women well along all three dimensions that I identified above. Since STV operates with a low threshold for election, it can encourage women to stand as independent candidates, to create their own parties or to join social parties that might have little chance of success under some alternative electoral system (dimensions 1 and 2). And since STV tends to increase electoral choice and hence electoral competition, it can also encourage ethnic parties to pay greater attention to women's interests—for example, by including gender issues in their party platforms or by fielding a greater number of female candidates at election time (dimension 3). Nevertheless, it might well be objected that matters are no way near as straightforward in practice as they appear to be in theory. Although STV might encourage new political parties and independent candidates, some of whom might seek to promote women's interests, it might just as easily encourage ethnic parties that aim to represent the more extreme ends of the political spectrum. Insofar as those parties polarise society, electoral choice will be reduced rather than increased.

Critics of the Agreement claim that this is precisely what has happened in Northern Ireland (e.g., Horowitz, 2001; Wilson and Wilford, 2003, Taylor, 2006). In particular, they blame STV for the spectacular rise of the two main hard-line parties, Sinn Féin

(SF) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and the equally spectacular decline of the two main moderate parties, the Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). More generally, they blame STV for what they see as an unhealthy darkening of ethnicity in Northern Irish political life and, alongside that, an unhealthy narrowing of the space for cross-cutting social interests. Thus, as Robin Wilson and Rick Wilford conclude, ‘elections have become entirely communalised affairs, rewarding intra-ethnic outbidding as the only competition’ (Wilson and Wilford, 2003: 7).

Those same critics argue that Northern Ireland would fare much better under the alternative vote (AV) electoral system. Like STV, AV also enables voters to rank candidates in order of their preference. But unlike STV, which operates with a relatively low threshold for election, AV operates with a majority threshold. In highly mixed constituencies, a threshold of this latter sort may mean that electoral results will turn heavily on vote transfers, which may in turn encourage candidates to take the broader view. This would be good for women, were it not for the fact that there is a fatal flaw. It is very hard to see why hard-liners, whose inclusion in the negotiations is generally crucial to the success of any peace agreement, should agree to sign up to an electoral system that is explicitly designed to reduce their future chances at the polls (McGarry and O’Leary, 2004: 30-1).

If the critics are misguided on this score, then it may well be that they are also misguided in their criticisms of STV. So let us consider the evidence.<sup>5</sup> The critics suggest that the rise of SF and the DUP has constricted the space for non-ethnic social parties. If this were the case, then we would be right to worry about the space for women to exercise their democratic autonomy along dimension 2. But the facts tell a different story. Social parties such as the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI) or the Green Party are not doing badly under STV. On the contrary, the Green party won its first seat in the 2007 Assembly elections. In those same elections, the APNI increased its number of seats from six to seven, and its number of female Assembly members from one to two. Of particular note in the present context is the fact that the APNI’s new female Assembly member, Anna Lo, is the first member of the Chinese community to win an Assembly seat, which nicely illustrates the ability of STV to

capture a wide diversity of social interests, gendered and non-gendered, beyond unionism and nationalism.

Turning to dimension 1, there might be some initial cause for concern. In particular, it is tempting to blame the demise of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition on the electoral system. But as I have just suggested, STV seems to serve small parties reasonably well. Indeed, the demise of the NIWC may simply indicate that its former supporters have decided that their interests as women are better represented by other parties in other ways. In other words, it may not be a question of the electoral system failing women along dimension 1, but possibly of an electoral system which has successfully provided women with a range of more attractive political options along dimensions 2. This is not a wholly speculative thought, since the constituency seat that Anna Lo now holds (South Belfast) is the same seat that Monica McWilliams, the former leader of the NIWC, held until 2003.

The evidence therefore suggests that STV is not making things worse for women along dimensions 1 and 2. Nor, it should be said, is it making things worse for them along dimension 3. For example, the DUP put forward 6 female candidates in 2007 in comparison to 4 female candidates in 2003. In both years, it put forward more female candidates than the UUP. SF continues to put forward fewer women candidates than the SDLP. But of the 9 female candidates put forward by SF in 2007, 8 were elected, which suggests that SF is willing to run female candidates in safe constituencies. Of course, no matter how the statistics are read, women are still grossly under-represented in the Assembly relative to their share of the voting population as a whole. But, as far as dimension 3 is concerned, the argument that STV has made things worse for women does not appear to hold up. At the very least, it would appear that hard-liners are just as sensitive to the interests and concerns of their female supporters as are their more moderate rivals.

#### *Assembly decision rules*

Assuming, then, that STV allows an acceptable degree of space for the recognition and accommodation of women's interests, judged in terms of our three dimensions of democratic autonomy, does the same hold true of the rules and procedures by which

decisions are taken in the Assembly? As we will now see, the picture that emerges is much more mixed.

Take, to begin with, the issue of designation. The Agreement contains strong veto points designed to ensure that key decisions such as budget allocations or changes to standing orders are taken on an inter-ethnic basis. More specifically, all important decisions may be passed under the ‘parallel consent’ rule, which requires, among those present and voting, an overall majority of Assembly members and a majority of both unionists and nationalist members; or, alternatively, they may be taken under the ‘weighted majority’ rule, which requires, among those present and voting, at least 60 per cent of all members voting, plus at least 40 per cent of both nationalists and unionist members (Agreement, Strand One, para. 5(d); O’Leary, 1999: 70).

Crucially, in order to ascertain whether these requirements have been met, all Assembly members must register upon election as ‘unionist’, ‘nationalist’ or ‘other’ (Agreement, Strand One, para. 6). Yet while these measures are intended to ensure that one group cannot dominate or tyrannise the other, the net effect of enforcing vetoes in this way is that it is more rewarding to be a member of one of the two named ethnic groups than of an unaffiliated group such as the APNI or, formerly, the NIWC. In practice, the parallel consent rule implies that once a majority is secured within the Assembly, the ‘others’ no longer count; at such a point, all that matters is whether or not there is a majority within both ethnic groups. However, by disadvantaging unaffiliated Assembly members in this way, ‘the Agreement violates their interest in pursuing politics in their own way on terms of equality with other political actors’ (Horowitz, 2002: 195).

Insofar as this analysis is correct, designation favours women who choose to exercise their personal autonomy along ethnic lines (i.e., along dimension 3). But even here matters are not straightforward, since those same women might decide to exercise their autonomy differently on some other occasion (i.e., along dimensions 1 or 2). As I argued earlier in this article, much of the complexity that attaches to our thinking about interests stems from the fact that the same woman can stand in a different relation to others, depending on the issue in question. On one particular issue, a woman might be perfectly happy to prioritise her ethnicity. The Agreement will serve

her well. But on some other issue, she may see herself as having a stronger sense of affinity with women in general (dimension 1) or with women and men with whom she shares a particular social interest (dimension 2). Yet the trouble is that these choices may not be equally valued, or equally recognised, within the Assembly's decision procedures.

Of course, it is important not to overstate the issue. So long as the policy proposal under discussion is a wholly ethnic issue, it is hard to see why anyone should complain. The issue may simply be of no concern to women who think about their interests as gendered interests plain and simple (dimension 1) or as social issues that cut across the ethnic divide (dimension 2). An example might be a change to the rules governing the flying of flags on public buildings. Or again, it is possible to imagine an issue in which all women thought about their interests solely from an ethnic perspective, under which circumstance they would all be equally protected (dimension 3). For example, a change to Northern Ireland's constitutional status might group women in just such a way. Yet, by the same token, it is also possible to imagine an issue in which no woman thought about her interests in ethnic terms, instead thinking about them in gendered terms plain and simple. Put in relational terms, it may well be the case that, on certain issues, men and women differ, no matter what their ethnic background (see Song, 2005).

For instance, in June 2000, the Assembly debated a motion to prohibit any future proposals to extend the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland. During the course of the debate, the NIWC tabled an amendment calling for the issue to be referred to the Assembly's Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee for further discussion. The proposed amendment was defeated by 43 votes, and the motion was subsequently passed without further amendment (Fearon and Rebouché, 2006: 292; ref. to Hansard, 2001). In the present context, there are two related points about this example that stand out. First, although defeated, the proposed amendment was supported unanimously by all 14 female Assembly members. The fact that they were able to vote as women, independently of their respective official designations, suggests that they were able to act autonomously in their own right (dimension 1). But even so, the fact also remains that their distinct interest in the issue of abortion was trumped by the distinct interest of their male colleagues in that issue. Secondly,



most of those who voted against the amendment and in support of the motion ‘chose to focus on the so-called rights of the unborn rather than on women’s health’ (Fearon and Rebouché, 2006: 292-93). But in so doing, they seemingly discounted the fact that a woman’s concern for her own well-being gives her not just a distinct interest in abortion, but strong grounds for claiming that her interest in abortion should be appropriately protected.

This last sentence requires comment. In suggesting that her interest in the issue of abortion should be appropriately protected, I am not implying that that interest is grounded in some underlying pre-political essence.<sup>6</sup> As I noted earlier, there is no necessary correlation between the ontological view that one holds and the policies that one advocates. It is, after all, possible to think about interests in relational terms while at the same time advocating policies that rigidly protect those interests. We might, for example, think that unionism and nationalism are most sensibly understood in relational terms, but that unionism and nationalism should nevertheless be expressly protected at the level of the state. Our understanding of the context is everything here, which brings me to a second important point.

As I also noted earlier, women’s interests are vast and varied. But since they are so varied, we may want to consider paying special attention to those strikingly unusual cases in which the female members of a deeply divided society speak with one voice. Sometimes, when the members of an ethnic group speak with one voice, we treat this as a sign that their fundamental interests are at stake or that old injustices have resurfaced, and often go to great lengths to protect them, for example, by providing them with vetoes. Naturally, much will depend on the context and in particular on what we know about the treatment meted out to members in the past—whether they have been discriminated against historically, whether they continue to bear the consequences of past injustices, whether equality of opportunity is still a problem, and so forth. But since women also claim that historically they have suffered injustices at the hands of men, there is, as Young has argued, a clear case for claiming that women, too, should have a right of veto on issues that they deem to be of particular concern to them as women (Young, 1990: 184). After all, the principle of equal consideration of interests entails that similar cases should be treated similarly, dissimilar cases dissimilarly.

Of course, the trouble with this particular line of reasoning is that it seems to place us on an extremely slippery slope—insisting that, under some circumstances, women qua women should have the right to veto decisions that are of particular concern to them seems to commit us to the view that, let us say, left-handers should have a similar right to veto decisions that are of particular concern to them. After all, left-handers continue to be discriminated against when it comes, for example, to the design of surgical instruments. Yet it must be obvious that no functioning democratic system could grant a right of veto to each and every group that claimed that its fundamental interests were at stake or that it is the victim of unfair discrimination (but see Mansbridge, 1999: 635). Insofar as vetoes make groups realise that they must behave fairly towards one another, they can be a friend of democracy; but the greater the number of vetoes, the greater the chances are that decision making will stall.

Indeed, matters are even more complicated than this, since they ultimately pose what Young terms ‘a paradox of political origins’: who shall decide which groups are to have vetoes and under what conditions shall that decision be made? I agree with Young that there is no determinate answer to questions of this sort (Young, 1990: 190). Or at least there is no determinate answer from within a procedural view of democracy. We are where we are, and so the real challenge is to decide where we should go next. As I have argued in this article, democracy needs to be seen not just as an ongoing learning process, but as an ongoing learning process that is consciously directed in light of sound political principles. Those principles are not a panacea: at best, each case can only be treated on its merits in a rough and ready way, and every decision may well be subject to future challenge or revision. Yet, as I have also argued, although principles such as the principle of personal autonomy can be difficult to interpret and apply, they can nevertheless serve as moral beacons that direct us, albeit imperfectly, in our efforts to build a better, more egalitarian democracy for all.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have offered a number of inter-linking arguments. To begin with, I argued that women’s interests should not be traced to some underlying nature or

essence, but should instead be conceived in relational terms. Yet, as we saw, the problem with a relational understanding is that it multiplies women's interests to such an extent that no democratic system could recognise and accommodate them all. The question, then, is how to choose between them democratically. I have suggested that since choosing inevitably involves making value judgements, we should be clear about which values we are invoking and why, which principles best express those values, and which application is most appropriate in the given context.

As far as the case of Northern Ireland is concerned, I have suggested that the Belfast Agreement is not so bad after all. Its electoral system seems to leave sufficient space both for the recognition of women's interests and for the exercise of their personal autonomy. Its parliamentary structures do not fare quite so well, however. In particular, they raise difficult, if not insoluble, questions not just about the recognition and accommodation of women's interests, but also about the recognition of human interests more generally. That said, I have also stressed the point that no democratic system is perfect. Or, otherwise put, I have stressed the idea that every democratic society needs to learn and grow. Northern Ireland is no different in this respect.

Of course, women face a great many other barriers, besides those that I have considered here, in their efforts to have their interests duly recognised. Those barriers come in many different social, economic and political forms (Reynolds, 1999: 550-57). But in whatever form, the fact remains that no democratic society can ever rise to its full political and even moral maturity until they are torn down once and for all. This insight is hardly novel—although John Stuart Mill based certain of his arguments on a questionable assumption about the essential unity of male and female natures, he clearly thought that the full and equal inclusion of women in political life was essential to human improvement generally (Mill, 1991 [1869]: 471, 493-95). And yet, despite the power of this insight, much work remains to be done.

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<sup>2</sup> Think, for instance, of liberal individualists who nonetheless support the types of holist policies that one might normally associate with the welfare state.

<sup>3</sup> In practice, parties of this sort have sometimes used essentialist rhetoric in order to strengthen their political hand; they present themselves as representing all women, not just some particular portion of them (whether or not they actually believe their own rhetoric is, of course, an altogether different question). But strategies of this sort will often backfire, since essentialist rhetoric can have a alienating effect on many women. Haslanger, 2000: 46; see Little, 2002, for an example from Northern Ireland.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, gender might not even have been the prime motivating factor driving those women to engage in politics; gender may ultimately be of lesser importance to them than the state of the planet.

<sup>5</sup> The data presented here is drawn from Queen's University Belfast's Centre for Advancement of Women in Politics website, available at <http://www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/UKhtmls/electionNIMarch07.htm>, and from the Northern Ireland Assembly's own website, available at <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/>.

<sup>6</sup> Nor am I implying that all women think about abortion in the same way. In the example used above, there is no suggestion that the 14 female Assembly members were all pro-choice or all anti-abortion. They all viewed the issue as a healthcare issue, they all wished to talk about the issue further, and they all viewed their interest in the issue in relation to the interest of men. But beyond that, we do not know what they thought or how internally diverse their views actually were. Cf. Phillips, 1995: 68, for a nice insight into these types of distinctions.