

From Deference to Defiance: Popular Unionism and the Decline of Elite Accommodation in Northern Ireland

Introduction

On 29 November, 2003, The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the party that had governed Northern Ireland from Partition in 1921 to the imposition of Direct Rule by Ted Heath in 1972, lost its primary position as the leading Unionist party in the N.I. Assembly to the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Reverend Ian Paisley. On 5 May, 2005, the electoral revolution was completed when the DUP trounced the UUP in the Westminster elections, netting twice the UUP's popular vote, ousting David Trimble and reducing the UUP to just one Westminster seat. In March, 2005, the Orange Order, which had helped to found the UUP exactly a century before, cut its links to this ailing party.

What explains this political earthquake? The press and most Northern Ireland watchers place a large amount of stress on short-term policy shifts and events. The failure of the IRA to show 'final acts' of decommissioning of weapons is fingered as the main stumbling block which prevented a re-establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly and, with it, the credibility of David Trimble and his pro-Agreement wing of the UUP. This was accompanied by a series of incidents which demonstrated that the IRA, while it may have given up on the 'armed struggle' against the security forces, was still involved in intelligence gathering, the violent suppression of its opponents and a range of sophisticated criminal activities culminating in the robbery of £26 million from the Northern Bank in Belfast in December 2004.

However, our analysis suggests that longer-term factors are at work within Unionism which severely limit the scope for moderates to achieve a lasting power-sharing deal. In order to understand these processes, we must look at the history of two key Unionist institutions, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Orange Order. First, it is important to note that both the UUP and Orange Order are highly democratic, decentralised institutions. Within the UUP, constituency associations have a high degree of local autonomy from the party centre.¹ In the Orange Order, a system of elections elevates leaders from local lodges through district, county and then Grand lodge levels. All of this theoretically allows the grassroots to keep their leaders close to the centre of

popular opinion.

Yet, despite their democratic structure, both institutions were dominated for a long time by small cliques drawn from the Ulster-Protestant social elite. This socio-political system held until the mid-twentieth century. The Ulster Unionist Party was formed a century ago, well before Partition, and was dominated by an elite of merchants, industrialists and large landowners.ⁱⁱ It organized the pan-class mobilization of Ulster Protestants against the Asquith government's Home Rule Bill of 1912 and formed the government which took power in the new state of Northern Ireland in 1921. The Orange Order, formed in 1795, is a fraternity whose network of some 800 lodges reaches into almost every Unionist community in Northern Ireland. The Order provided the Unionist Party with support and acted as a mobilising agent for the UUP machine. From the formation of the UUP in 1905, the Order was entitled to a significant representation of the delegates to its ruling Ulster Unionist Council. The upper echelon of the Order, focused on the 40-odd members of the Central Committee of the Grand Lodge, was dominated by the same social class as the UUP elite. Meanwhile, private lodges were mostly working class. Within the UUP, a similar discrepancy ensured that the party leadership was far more socially elite than its footsoldiers at branch level.

Social Revolution

However, during the twentieth century, the Orange Order underwent major social changes. In 1954, for example, the Order's Grand Master was former Northern Ireland Prime Minister John Millar Andrews. Its 35-member Central Committee was dominated by grandees: just nine lacked a title and there were 16 JPs and 5 OBEs. In 1995, the Order's Grand Master was Martin Smyth, a Presbyterian preacher of middling Belfast origins. In that year, the 41-members of Central Committee contained just ten titled delegates, with only 5 JPs. **(GOLI Reports of Proceedings 1954, 1995)**

The UUP mirrors this shift: in the 42 years from the formation of Northern Ireland it had only three leaders: James Craig, John Andrews and Basil Brooke, Lord Brookeborough. . All came from either the bourgeoisie or landlord class. Brookeborough's successor, Captain Terence O'Neill, although he became associated

with the modernization of Ulster economy and society, was part of the traditional landed eliteⁱⁱⁱ, as was his successor and cousin, James Chichester-Clark. The last Unionist Prime Minister, Brian Faulkner, although despised by some of the Ulster landed gentry, still came from a modest bourgeois background. Things changed in the 1970s, when replaced by the bluff Fermanagh farmer, Harry West who in turn gave way in 1979 to James Molyneaux, a farmer's son, who served as UUP leader until 1995. Molyneaux and Smyth both took office in the 1970s and exemplify the decline of deference within Unionism and the rise of a more self-confident, populist grassroots.^{iv}

This social revolution went well beyond the pinnacle of these organizations to encompass a wider elite down to the level of the hundred-odd Orange districts. In 1901, a majority of district lodge officers worked in white-collar occupations and were more socially elite than local lodge officers and the Unionist population. By 2001, MOSAIC postal code analysis shows that there was no status difference between the top and bottom of the Orange Order, while its class composition slipped *vis á vis* the wider Unionist population. **(1901 GOLI Reports of Proceedings; 2001 GOLI Returns)**

Political Revolution

The social revolution within Orangeism, and, to a lesser extent, the UUP, was linked with a major political revolution in which the rank-and-file gained the confidence to challenge their 'betters'. Things began to change in the period after the Second World War when the Unionist government was forced by the fear of defection of working class Protestants to the Northern Ireland Labour Party to accept the welfare state, despite the instinctive reaction within the party that it was an alien and 'socialistic' importation. In the post-war period the Prime Minister, Lord Brookeborough, chose to pursue a path of increasing financial dependence on the Treasury to stave off loss of support because of the province's economic difficulties and high level of unemployment.^v Many grassroots loyalists were concerned that the welfare state and new factories in areas like Londonderry would upset the demographic balance and undermine Unionist control of border counties like Fermanagh and Tyrone where Catholics were a majority of the population.^{vi} The Prime Minister was also aware that the new international situation with the creation of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights left the regime open to new forms of criticism from its nationalist and labour opponents.^{vii} This encouraged him to try and ensure that the government did not do anything which would

allow it to be presented as 'sectarian' and discriminatory. The result was a chorus of criticism that his government was 'appeasing' the Catholic Church and other 'enemies of Ulster'. Thus even before the pressures of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, the traditional Unionist and Orange elites were under pressure from both dissident loyalists and also from increasing numbers of working class Protestants in Belfast who seemed to be prioritizing material interests over ethno-national loyalties

Prior to the 1960s, despite these instances of challenges from the grassroots, dissidence was held in check by the norms of deference expressed so well by a Tyrone district Orange lodge as late as November 1967:

'In view of the vacancy for Grand Master, this lodge recommends the Marquis of Hamilton, MP...it would be an honour for County Tyrone to have such a worthy brother in this high office. He would bring grace and dignity to this office [and this would] mean much goodwill for the Orange Institution in Ireland' - Fintona District Lodge #8, Co. Tyrone. **(County Tyrone Grand Lodge Minute Book, November 1967)**

However, the political reforms of the 1960s begun under Terence O' Neill's leadership and maintained during the tenure of reformist leaders Chichester-Clark and Faulkner, alienated many Unionists from their political class. O'Neill's decision to have an historic meeting with the Irish Taoiseach, Sean Lemass, in January 1965 and his rhetoric of communal bridge-building aroused the ire of evangelical Protestants led by the Reverend Ian Paisley. The opposition of Paisley's Free Presbyterian Church to the emerging ecumenical movement was also reflected in the Orange Order, where the relatively moderate Grand Master, Sir George Clark, became the butt of rank-and-file criticism for being too close to the government and resigned in 1967.^{viii} The formation of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in 1967 and the onset of protest marches aimed at forcing British government pressure on O'Neill for reform of the local government franchise, of the mechanisms for the allocation of public employment and housing and of policing.^{ix} Many rank and file unionists saw the civil rights movement as simply a new tactic adopted by nationalists and republicans to destroy the state.

What emerges from meetings and resolutions of both the Unionist Party and the Orange Order is the increasing hostility between the Orange Order as well as many ordinary Unionist Party supporters and reformist prime ministers. Populist leaders like

the Reverend Martin Smyth, James Molyneaux, who was from 1970 Unionist MP for South Antrim, the Reverend John Brown from county Antrim and William Douglas from county Londonderry, had emerged within the Order's Central Committee from the mid-1960s. These figures challenged the patrician leadership of the Order and opposed any concessions to the Nationalist minority - even if this put the Stormont administration's life in danger. The British were equally adamant that the Unionist-led government pursue reform, and forced these administrations to change or face fiscal and political sanctions. As the Unionist regimes of 1969-72 haltingly embraced reform, they incurred the wrath of the Orange Order and many within the Unionist party branches. Whereas even in the 1960s it would have been considered shocking to chastise the Prime Minister, this was no longer the case. In the words of Antrim Orange leader Rev. John Brown:

'The P.M. [James Chichester Clark] is at heart an Englishman...keen to obey the generals'. (August 1970) **(GOLI Central Committee Minutes, August 1970)**

"The man [Prime Minister James Chichester Clark] is stupid, unreliable, and depends on his blind acceptance of the "advice" of his "professional advisers" '. **(GOLI Central Committee Minutes, November 1970)**

As the Unionist governments came under ever more obvious supervision and pressure for change from London, they were also faced with an intensifying campaign of shootings and bombings by the Provisional IRA which had emerged in 1970. Issues of security and law-and-order came to dominate intra-Unionist debate with the Unionist elite being charged with failure to respond effectively to the IRA. British imposed reforms of the security forces- the abolition of the 'B' Special constabulary and the reform and disarming of the Royal Ulster Constabulary- further enraged the Orange and unionist rank and file. The UUP began to splinter into reformist and right wing tendencies with the former largely located in the middle-class suburbs of Belfast and predominantly protestant constituencies like North Down. By the time Edward Heath imposed direct rule in March 1972, the UUP faced serious challenges from Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party and the right wing Vanguard movement of former cabinet minister, William Craig . The right wing finally took over the party in 1974 when Brian Faulkner attempted to form a power-sharing administration with the nationalist SDLP. Though there was a solid bloc of pro-power sharing Unionists ranging from 30-50 percent of the

total Unionist population, these tended to be disproportionately better educated and resident in greater Belfast. Thus they were largely absent (or passive) within the rank-and-file of Orangeism, though some did play a role in the Unionist Party and its liberal offshoots like the UPNI or Alliance Party and Faulkner's short-lived Unionist Party of Northern Ireland .

From the mid-1970s the UUP managed to reassert its leading position in Protestant politics by projecting itself as the moderate and 'sensible' center of gravity of pro-Union politics in contrast to the 'extremism' of Paisley's DUP. Although the DUP was able to establish a substantial base of support in traditional working class areas of Belfast on top of its core original rural and evangelical base, it failed to overtake the UUP. This was , in large part, because of the fear of many Protestants that DUP dominance would provoke a major crisis in relations with the UK government . James Molyneaux's leadership of the UUP moved it towards a policy of low-key integrationism. This was opposed by a strong devolutionist wing of the party in which border Unionists like Harry West played a central role. However, the problem for the devolutionists was their unwillingness to accept the only terms on which self-government for the province was likely to be made available: power-sharing with the SDLP and some sort of North-South institutions to accommodate Northern Catholics' Irish identity. ^x

Molyneaux's crypto-integrationist strategy suffered a major blow when Margaret Thatcher signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement with the Irish Taoiseach, Garret FitzGerald in 1985. The Agreement gave the Irish state an unprecedented degree of institutionalized influence on the governance of Northern Ireland and was met by a massive wave of unionist opposition. ^{xi} However, the DUP, was unable to capitalize on Molyneaux's discomfiture, in part because the Agreement could be seen as a response to DUP extremism and also because unionist grassroots pressure for a united response was bound to favour the dominant party in the unionist bloc.

The IRA's declaration of a 'complete cessation of military activities' in August 1994, heralded a radical shift in the balance of forces which finally undermined Molyneaux's leadership. His emphasis on winning influence at Westminster appeared increasingly ineffectual when John Major's government agreed the Joint Framework Documents with the Irish government in 1995. These contained provisions for North-South institutions

which caused acute unionist alarm and internal pressure forced Molyneaux to resign as leader. His replacement, the MP for Upper Bann, who had won the support of many Orangemen in the party because of his role in the confrontation between Portadown Orangemen and the police over a banned Orange procession at Drumcree.^{xii} However, Trimble, a long-time critic of Molyneaux, was soon to become associated with a more pro-active style of leadership centred on the belief that the IRA cessation had created a situation where unionists would be further marginalized if they did not engage in negotiations with nationalists and republicans. This was particularly the case, he believed, when Tony Blair won a land-slide victory in the 1997 general election .

It was Trimble's decision to enter all-party talks which included Sinn Fein in the autumn of 1997 that created the conditions for the Belfast Agreement . The DUP remained outside the talks process accusing the UUP leader of compromising with the political representatives of terrorism. It was clear from the referendum on the Agreement that little more than a half of Protestants supported it while in the subsequent elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly, the UUP received its lowest ever share of the vote and anti-Agreement unionist parties, led by the DUP, outpolled Trimble's party.^{xiii} Although Trimble had won the support of 70 per cent of the party's ruling Ulster Unionist Council for the Agreement, his margin of support soon fell as unionist discontent on a range of issues including the Pattern Report on Policing, the early release of paramilitary offenders and the delay in decommissioning IRA weapons increased rapidly.^{xiv}

Northeast vs. Border

Another important facet of popular Ulster Unionism is region. Northeast Ulster (Antrim, Belfast, North Down) has a very different Unionist tradition than border counties. In the northeast, there are few Catholics, and most Protestants are Presbyterians or Methodists. There is a long tradition of tenants-rights or working-class populism which has bred a more 'rebel' mindset that is suspicious of authority (including that of the Crown). In border areas, Catholics are often a majority, and more Protestants are members of traditional institutions like the Church of Ireland, UUP and Orange Order. Their mindset is more 'traditional' and less willing to challenge the continuities of loyalty to the Crown, Party and Government. In this curious way, 'tradition' is more moderate

than rebellion.

Border Protestants - exemplified by figures like Harry West the critic of O'Neill and subsequent leader of the UUP (1974-79) - initially opposed reforms in local government and housing. As late as 1980, surveys showed Protestants in border areas to be more hostile to power-sharing than in Belfast. However, this was grounded more in a 'rational' fear of losing local government control than in militant Protestantism. 'Loyal' border Unionists were more likely to stick with the UUP (as 'our party') than their northeast Ulster counterparts. Today, in interviews, border respondents stress their need to work with the Catholic majority in their areas. Thus James Cooper a prominent Fermanagh unionist who was also a Party Officer and supporter of the Agreement :

My perception of Fermanagh Unionism is that it has always been very realistic...the workings of Unionism on the ground were very pragmatic and that derives from the fact that the population in Fermanagh was split 50: 50. ^{xv}

Border constituency associations were thus more likely to support the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) after 1998.

Thus, by the 1990s, Border Unionists' staunch opposition to power sharing had turned to moderation - especially in southern Armagh, Tyrone and Fermanagh. This is illustrated by the maps in tables 1,2 and 3. Table 1 shows that the UUP vote amongst Protestants at local level in 1993 was weakest in North Antrim and greater Belfast, and strongest along the southern border and County Londonderry. Table 2 examines the inclinations of UUP constituency associations in 2003. Notice that unlike Londonderry, southern border associations are solidly behind Trimble and the GFA. Thus border areas are generally the only places where voters solidly backed the UUP and the UUP solidly backed the Agreement.

explaining their stance toward the Good Friday Agreement. Moreover, Orange delegates and Young Unionists tended to oppose the Agreement while the 17 MLAs (who stood to lose status and salary if the Assembly was suspended) were almost unanimously pro-Agreement. In effect, local networks mattered more than individual characteristics when it came to a vote on the UUC floor.

What of the wider swath of the Unionist population and the rise of the DUP? In 2001, when the UUP still held an electoral advantage over the DUP, long-term signs pointed toward an in-built DUP demographic advantage. This is because, as table 4 shows, age was by far the most important predictor of a DUP vote. Education and support for private enterprise were also very important, though class and gender were not significant. (N.B. Insignificant factors are excluded from the graph) Recent research on the Orange Order undertaken by Jocelyn Evans and Jon Tonge (**Tonge & Evans 2002 - ref. below**) confirms this finding: younger Orangemen are significantly more likely to vote DUP than their older counterparts. It seems that 'rebel' Unionism has transcended its roots in North Antrim and Belfast and is being carried by less deferential new generations throughout Northern Ireland.

Conclusions

The period since 1998 has been one of electoral realignment within Unionism. Unquestionably, this is linked to short-term shifts in public opinion revolving around issues like decommissioning. But beneath the surface, a longer-term cultural shift has been taking place from 'loyalty' to 'rebellion' which made a UUP-DUP 'tipping point' increasingly likely. The Unionist population has become less willing to defer to its social elite, and newer generations are expressing this new 'defiance' by voting increasingly for the DUP. This shift in attitude is partly due to a modernisation process that has swept through the western world and challenged status hierarchies of all kinds since the 1950s. In Northern Ireland, it is also related to the decline of the Stormont majoritarian system. Unionist elites were pressured by the British to reform to reach an accommodation with the Catholic minority. As Unionist leaders acceded to reform in the 1965-74 period, they lost legitimacy in the eyes of Unionist working and rural people.

Within the Orange Order, a new generation of 'self-made' populists replaced the old 'squirearchy' in leadership roles by the early 70s. In the UUP, populists made important inroads after 1975. The grassroots were rising, and in the 1975-95 period, their sentiments were expressed by Martin Smyth, the Orange Grand Master, and James Molyneaux, the UUP leader. More recently, modernisers under David Trimble regained control of the UUP and engineered a compromise with Nationalists which took the form of the historic Belfast Agreement. This accommodation ultimately ensured that Trimble met the same fate as Faulkner did in 1973-74. In short, a more anti-elitist Unionism is in the ascendant, rendering elite accommodation (which is key to all power-sharing systems) difficult.

Martin Smyth, James Molyneaux and Ian Paisley emerged from the grassroots, have histories of populist activism and thus identify with their anti-Establishment origins. Their biographies are hence quite different from previous Unionist leaders and from David Trimble. Given this pattern, it is unlikely that Paisley's DUP will reach an accommodation with Sinn Fein that will relaunch devolved government in Northern Ireland. It is even arguable that the Unionist population must, like the Iranian people, experience and tire of militancy in order to bring forth more liberal generations committed to compromise.

Tonge, Jonathan and Jocelyn A.J. Evans. 2002. 'For God and Ulster?: Religion, Orangeism and Politics within the Ulster Unionist Council,' paper presented to the Political Studies Association of Ireland Conference, University of Ulster, Belfast.

ⁱ On the structure of the party see J.F. Harbinson, *The Ulster Unionist Party, 1882-1973 Its Development and Organisation* (Belfast, 1973) pp.35-60.

ⁱⁱ Peter Gibbon, *The Origins of Ulster Unionism* (Manchester, 1975)

ⁱⁱⁱ Marc Mulholland, *Northern Ireland at the Crossroads: Ulster Unionism in the O'Neill Years, 1960-9* (London, 2000) p.12.

^{iv} For a detailed account of the West-Molyneaux years see Graham Walker, *A history of the Ulster Unionist Party: Protest, pragmatism and pessimism* (Manchester, 2004) pp.221-248.

^v P. Bew, P. Gibbon & H.Patterson, *Northern Ireland 1921-2001 Political Forces and Social Classes* (London, 2002) pp.86-99.

^{vi} Henry Patterson, *Ireland since 1939* (Oxford, 2002) pp. 130-131.

^{vii} Henry Patterson, 'Party versus Order: Ulster Unionism and the Flags and Emblems Act', *Contemporary British History*, Volume 13 Winter 1999, Number 4, pp. 110-114.

^{viii} Mulholland, p. 127.

^{ix} Bob Purdie, *Politics in the Streets: The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1990)

^x Walker, pp.222-223.

^{xi} Arthur Aughey, *Under Siege: Ulster Unionism and the Anglo-Irish Agreement* (Belfast, 1989) pp.62-98.

^{xii} Dean Godson, *Himself Alone: David Trimble and the Ordeal of Ulster Unionism* (London, 2004) pp. 123-145.

^{xiii} Paul Mitchell, 'Transcending an ethnic party system? The impact of consociational governance on electoral dynamics and the party system', in R. Wilford (ed) *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement* (Oxford, 2001) p. 33.

^{xiv} Henry Patterson, 'The Limits of "New Unionism" David Trimble and the Ulster Unionist Party', *Eire/Ireland*, Volume 39 1& 2, Spring/Summer 2004, pp.164-168.

^{xv} Interview with James Cooper, 17 January 2003