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"The new unionism"

Northern Ireland's recent violence reflects the "modernisation" of unionism

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Eric Kaufmann is writing a book on the Orange Order in Northern Ireland

The loyalist riots which convulsed Belfast this September brought a level of violence to the streets not seen since the height of the Drumcree conflict in the mid-1990s. Do they signify a new phase in the evolution of unionism?

The conventional wisdom, both in the media and among loyalists themselves, is that aside from the short-term factors relating to the re-routing of marches, the real reason for the violence is "Protestant alienation," especially within the loyalist working class. This has been caused by de-industrialisation, unemployment and a sense of having been defeated by an increasingly self-confident nationalist community.

No one can deny the strength of feeling among the loyalist working class, but these sentiments are not new. The entire history of Northern Ireland since the late 1960s has been one of Protestant "loss"; de-industrialisation, British-driven political reforms aimed at including an Irish/Catholic dimension and a decline of Protestant privilege. "Protestant alienation" has been a cliché since the 1980s. Yet until recently, the unionist reaction to this loss has been intransigence but rarely violent protest. In short, organisation as well as angst was necessary for the recent rioting to occur.

Who are the brains behind the new violence? Certainly not the paramilitaries, who are always looking for trouble unless it gets in the way of their profitable criminal activity. This leaves the mysterious bowler-hatted Orangemen. The British media tends to lump the Orange Order and the paramilitaries like the UDA or UVF into one "loyalist" bloc, but this is a mistake. The Orange Order actually took a firm stand against violence and paramilitarism throughout the Troubles. This opposition was rooted in the large contingent of Protestant clergymen who are built into the power structure of the Order. Young Orangemen were urged to join the RUC (police) or UDR (local security forces) and to stay away from paramilitaries. Until recently, many Orangemen identified with the RUC and the leaders of the Order condemned confrontation with the police.

The Orange Order was also linked to the traditional, moderate institutions of unionism: the Ulster Unionist party (UUP) and mainstream churches. Thus the Order had bloc representation within the UUP and virtually all UUP MPs were Orange. All Orange lodges require "chaplains," and these were restricted to clergymen from "recognised" denominations.

On the other side of unionism were the outcasts: Ian Paisley, a non-Orangeman, and his Democratic Unionist party (few of whom were Orangemen) represented the political wing. Paisley's Free Presbyterians were the religious rebels, and the Independent Orange Order (closely linked to Paisley) were the fraternal militants. Paisley's street politics and equivocation on the violence issue endeared him to the urban working class and their non-traditional, non-Orange institutions: the paramilitaries and "kick the Pope" marching bands.

Today, however, the gap is rapidly closing between the Order and non-traditional unionism. Recent research by Jon Tonge and Jocelyn Evans at the University of Salford shows that Orangemen are at least as pro-DUP as the general population, while 20 per cent feel that violence is sometimes justifiable. DUP men now permeate the leadership of the Order and Free Presbyterians are no longer barred.

Paradoxically, this is due to the "modernisation" of Protestant Ulster. When most people think of modernisation, they think of liberalism and a decline of sectarianism, as in postwar Liverpool for instance. But local circumstances can refract modernisation in several different directions. In Egypt and much of the Muslim world, younger generations are often more pious than their parents partly because their faith is more "modern" and has been stripped of its Sufi bells and whistles. Likewise, in Northern Ireland, the young are more ethno-nationalist than their parents. They are less willing to defer to established traditions and hierarchies and seek to go "back to the basics" of sectarianism. A statistical analysis of the 2001 elections confirm that by far the strongest predictor of a vote for Paisley as against Trimble is age: younger voters, irrespective of class or education, supported the radical sectarianism of Paisley over the traditional unionism of the UUP. They also favour an urban loyalist culture of marching bands, paramilitarism, drink and Glasgow Rangers' jerseys over the hierarchy, history, moralism and pseudo-masonry of Orangeism.

In Belfast, where the recent incidents occurred, it is hard to find a bona fide young Orangeman. The Belfast County lodge's membership is well below a quarter of its 1960s peak. Many current members are middle-aged and now live in the suburbs. Even in western parts of Northern Ireland, where Orangeism is much stronger, in major towns like Cookstown, Lurgan or Portadown, the Order is failing to induct the new generation into their 200-year old tradition.

In order to adapt, there is tremendous pressure on the Order to modernise and accept the violent brand of sectarianism espoused by the new generation. As a result, the urban Orange Order now accepts members, and even whole lodges, that are composed of well-known paramilitary men.

From all directions, violence is permeating an organisation which "like the Catholic church among nationalists" long served as a restraining force. The unprecedented equivocation of Orange leaders in the face of recent violence reflects its desire not to alienate the new generation of urban loyalists, which it needs to attract if it is to survive in modern Northern Ireland.

The Orange Order has also learned from its adversaries. Like Sinn Fein/IRA, it is becoming proficient at claiming the mantle of victimhood and applying for government funding. It has learned that a show of force on the streets often pays greater dividends than a moral stance against violence. This is exacerbated by a parades commission that considers every parade application on public order grounds without being bound by precedent. All of this results in a moral hazard whereby each side "parades and parade blockers" tries to appear most threatening to public order if it doesn't get its way. Far better to crush the aggressors' hopes and declare certain routes permanently

closed and others permanently openâ€”regardless of demographic change or new political developments.

The British government had to sacrifice principle for pragmatism in order to end the conflict. But British success in neutralising Republican violence may have come at the cost of undermining traditional loyalist restraint. This may open a bloody new chapter in the province's history in which unionists rather than nationalists are the aggressors.

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