



Paisley's brand of sectarian politics is making the running in the Protestant community. But what factors lie behind its rise?

Henry Patterson

Paisley and Protestant Politics

The eruption of Protestant anger in November over the Provisional IRA's killing of the Unionist MP for South Belfast was given its most strident and disturbing expression by Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party. Together with the emergence of the 'Third Force' to supposedly give Protestants the protection that the British Army and the local security forces have failed to provide, and the attempt to link the security issue to the British government's alleged plan to gradually ease Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom, this has contributed to the prevalent media image of Protestant politics in which its essential spirit is materialised in the blustering bulk of Paisley.

However, despite Paisley's present domination of this media, it is important to remember that Paisleyism as a mass force with substantial working class support is a very recent phenomenon. It was not until the Westminster general election in May 1979 that the DUP

increased its share of the twelve Northern Ireland seats from one, Paisley's own in North Antrim, to three. Most significant, in two of these victories, North and East Belfast, there were signs of an increase in support for the DUP amongst a previously reluctant Protestant working class. As one Official Unionist commented (the Official Unionists were the dominant force amongst the various loyalist groups that had opposed power-sharing),

'In the late sixties it was a commonplace for left wing writers on the growing crisis in Ulster to represent the embryonic Protestant Unionist party of the Rev Ian Paisley as a populist movement destined to capture and articulate the latent resentments of the Protestant working class in Belfast. Yet a political breakthrough in Belfast eluded Paisley's party. In fact such a breakthrough was to come first in rural Ulster. May 3 1979, has radically altered Paisley's catchment area.'

The subsequent Euro-election in which Paisley got just under

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30% of votes cast, capturing half of the Unionist vote and the 1981 local government elections in which the DUP almost overtook the Official Unionists in the number of seats held, has allowed Paisleyism to increasingly set the tone of Unionist politics.² How is this development to be explained?

SECTARIANISM AND UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT

The fundamentalist type of religion at the core of Paisley's world view is not the basis of his electoral success. It is clear that decisions made by some councils under DUP control to close leisure centres on Sundays are unpopular with many Protestants including working class Protestants who voted DUP. In fact narrow sectarianism of this kind has been only one component of the major Protestant political mobilisations from the time of the first Home Rule Bill (1886). Despite the view of both recent television histories of Ireland, the Unionist mobilisation against Home Rule was not predominantly an Orange Order affair.³ Despite its importance the Order was never a force that could have provided the integrating ideology for Unionism as a mass movement. There were simply too many Protestants who were not only not members of it but also bitterly hostile to it. The original unity of the Unionist movement was based on much more than the sectarianism of the Orange Order.

Ideologically it was based on the representation of the uneven development which was a stark reality in Ireland at the beginning of this century. Unionism was built round the contrast between 'bustling', 'progressive' industrial Ulster and 'backward', 'stagnant' peasant southern Ireland.⁴ The political argument was that rule from Dublin would be economically and socially retrogressive and this was of particular importance in integrating the Protestant working class into the Unionist movement. A related factor often ignored in analyses which dwell so much on Protestant sectarianism is the role played in unifying the Protestant community by the sectarian aspects of Irish nationalism then and since. Thus although James Connolly's analyses of Orangeism are often quoted, no mention is made of his references to the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the main mass sectarian exclusivist organisation on the Catholic side in the Home Rule period. But it was Connolly who wrote,

Every shade of political opinion in Ireland . . . agrees that this organisation of Mr Devlin's creation, and of whose work Mr Redmond (the nationalist leader) accepts the fruits, is the greatest curse yet introduced into the political and social life of Ireland."

Divergence between north and south

Since the formation of the two states in 1921 the decline of the main staple industries in the north (shipbuilding, heavy engineering and textiles) and the economic development strategies adopted by governments in the south have transformed the comparative situations of both economies. However, it is important to remember that as recently as the mid-fifties there was widespread discussion in the press and Dail (legislature in the Republic of Ireland) about just how long it would be before the 'Irish race' became extinct so great was the rate of emigration from the Republic's crisis stricken economy.⁶ For over two decades after 1932 successive Fianna Fail governments in the south had followed a strategy of industrialisation based on protective tariffs and import substitution.⁷ In theory at least the industrialisation was to be based on the mobilisation of 'Irish' resources; as far as possible foreign capital was to be kept out. The same period saw a drive to exclude British based unions from the



south. A nationalist offensive within the southern labour movement was to split the trade union movement into two organisations from 1945 to 1959. One of these organisations, the Congress of Irish Unions, was to propagate an intense Catholic and anti-socialist ideology.⁸ These were years of an intense Catholic-nationalist offensive against all 'alien' ideas and institutions in every area from the unions to literature and the theatre.

It would not have taken much effort on the part of the Unionist party in this period to persuade Protestant workers that the south was an alien society and one which was engaged in an economic development programme of little relevance to the north and one which was, from the end of the Second World War, no longer capable of even developing the productive forces of the south any longer. The end of the war also saw the north integrated into the British welfare state. This was a process bitterly resisted by some sections of the Protestant bourgeoisie, but supported by a Unionist government who were well aware of the effect the welfare state would have in increasing the differential between working class living standards in the north and south.

¹ *Irish Times* 8 May 1979.

² In fact the DUP got more first preference votes, with just over 50% in the local government elections. For the first time it is the largest Unionist group on the Belfast corporation. *Belfast Newsletter* 23 May 1981.

³ For a critique, see Paul Bew 'Britain's modern Irish question', *Economy and Society* vol 10 No 4 November 1981.

⁴ The political implications of uneven development were first systematically dealt with in Peter Gibbon's *The Origins of Ulster Unionism* Manchester 1975.

⁵ Quoted in Bew, p485.

⁶ This is dealt with in Paul Bew and Henry Patterson *The Reshaping of Modern Ireland 1945-66*, to be published by Gill and MacMillan, Dublin summer 1982.

⁷ Founded in 1926, first in power in 1932, Fianna Fail originally combined republicanism with a populist economic and social programme.

⁸ E Rumpf and AC Hepburn *Nationalism and Socialism in twentieth century Ireland*, Liverpool 1977, p151.

The crucial reality

These points cannot be over-stressed for they signal one crucial reality: the clear divergence of economic and social structures north and south is quite sufficient to account for the existence of two states and the fact that the Protestants and in particular the working class have always been militantly anti-nationalist. The role of sectarian-

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ism is not that of, in any sense, *founding* the state, but in influencing the *form* that it took. Similarly in analysing the politics of the Protestant masses in any particular period, sectarianism will undoubtedly be an element. But it will not have a pre-given significance, its importance will be determined by specific circumstances. This means that while the material basis for Protestant sectarianism has existed and still exists in Northern Ireland, it does not in itself have enough weight to determine political developments. Before elaborating this point it is necessary to outline what the material bases for the continued reproduction of sectarianism are.

The usual arguments on the relationship between economic differentials and sectarianism have not got much beyond the impressionistic comments on Belfast by Beatrice Webb made after spending part of her honeymoon there collecting data:

'... hardfisted employers and groups of closely organised skilled craftsmen ... veracious and cautious in their statements about their own conditions of employment and contemptuous and indifferent to the Catholic labourers and women who were earning miserable wages in the shipyards and factories of Belfast.'

This was relatively superficial even at the time for it left out of account the fact that the majority of labourers in the shipyards and factories would have been Protestants. But more fundamentally any attempt to develop a theory of Protestant politics based on arguments like this results in a complete reversal of the relation between sectarianism and the workplace¹⁰. Sectarianism in the workplace did not and does not reflect the needs of particular groups of Protestant workers to defend their privileges. It did and does reflect an intense distrust and antagonism of *some* Protestant workers to Catholics which has its origin not in the sphere of production but in the state of inter-communal relations. The material basis of sectarianism is in this sense much more a question of *territory* than occupation. Orangeism as a popular movement provided an identity for its supporters through the process of regular and often ritualistic confrontation with Catholics seen as the bearers of alien religious and political principles. Orangeism can feed off any situation which can be represented as a Catholic threat to the existing balance of forces. In this sense the importance of economic differentials is clear, although derivative. The entry of Catholics into a particular workplace or occupational category will be represented in the same way as any change in the balance of forces between the two communities. The wider *political* conditions for the operation of this process are crucial. Thus although throughout the nineteenth century relations between Protestant and Catholic workers would regularly be strained at the time of the annual Orange celebrations every July, the major outbreaks of violence in workplaces came only when there was a general political uncertainty about the future government of Ireland as a whole — 1886, 1912 and 1920.

POPULISM AND THE NORTHERN IRELAND STATE

It was the ambiguous attitude of the Protestant bourgeoisie to these outbursts of popular Protestant violence that contributed to the important tradition of Protestant populism which Paisley embodies

so well. For not only were the bourgeoisie in Ulster split in their political attitude to Orangeism, with the important Presbyterian section of the bourgeoisie seeing the Order as a catspaw of the established church and the landlord class. All the bourgeoisie opposed any interference with the prerogatives of capital to hire what labour power it wanted and to organise production in an orderly and continuous way. As long as the Unionists also believed that a substantial section of the British ruling class and public opinion would support them against Home Rule there was also a desire to make the Unionist case seem as reasonable and non-sectarian as possible. For all these reasons the Protestant bourgeoisie had good reasons to want to keep Orangeism in check.

This lukewarmness has at various times given rise to popular movements of protest attacking the 'compromises' and general timidity of the Protestant upper class and demanding a more militant style of leadership whatever the effects on production and British public opinion. This militancy was often associated with attacks on the class nature of the Unionist leadership, accusing it of neglecting the material interests of the Protestant masses. The Independent Orange Order, of which Paisley is a member, was founded at the beginning of this century in part as a protest at the manipulation of the original Orange Order by the bourgeoisie. Its leader was the only Unionist Westminster MP to vote consistently with the Labour Party and in Belfast some of its members played an active role in the local labour movement. By linking class grievances with Orangeism, populism has been at times a severe political embarrassment to the Unionist political leadership. However, just because it was a sectarian tradition, it could be relatively easily assimilated through the adoption of a more strident anti-catholic position by Unionist politicians. It was this assimilation which gave the Northern Ireland state its specifically sectarian cast — the famous 'Protestant Parliament for a Protestant People'.

The state was born in circumstances of intense political instability. By 1920 it was clear that the IRA had broken British rule throughout the south of Ireland. In the north the Unionist political leadership was in a state of acute apprehension over the threat from republicanism at a time when it was becoming clear that the predominant position in the British ruling class was to treat the Unionists as expendable in an attempt to consolidate the more 'moderate' wing of the nationalist movement in power in Dublin. This made the maximum possible degree of Unionist unity necessary and given the lack of trust in Britain's long term commitment to partition, it means an increasing reliance on a repressive apparatus — the RUC and a special constabulary — under local control and 'responsive' to local, Protestant pressures. Right from the beginning therefore security policy and local, Protestant control over it were central to the functioning of the Unionist state.

Unifying Unionism

Although this reflected a situation of military and political uncertainty it had also the effect of integrating the Unionist bloc. For the threat to the state was not only defined in terms of republicanism. Little more than a year before the outbreak of the 'Troubles' in 1920, the city of Belfast had been brought to a halt by a mass strike of shipbuilding and engineering workers and there is plenty of evidence that the Unionist leadership was almost as worried about the defection of sections of the Protestant working class to socialism as it was about Sinn Fein. The 'constitutional issue' — the supposed threat to the very existence of the state — was therefore crucial not simply in mobilising the population against the IRA but as a means by which the Unionist bourgeoisie waged the class struggle against its own proletariat.¹¹ Throughout the history of the state the Unionist party would use the threat to the constitution as an ever-present

reason why Protestant workers should put loyalism before class interests.

The continued existence of the IRA, although for most of the history of the state it was too feeble to be a real threat, and the almost universal acceptance in the political culture of the south that partition should be ended, gave some external and internal basis for the Unionist 'siege mentality'.¹² But it was the functioning of the Unionist state itself which was largely responsible for it. By openly demonstrating its distrust of Catholics by excluding them from all but the most menial types of government employment and by maintaining a form of exceptional legislation — the Special Powers Act — and an often openly partisan judicial and police system, it demonstrated to the Protestant masses just how seriously it took the threat of subversion.

Even Terence O'Neill, the Unionist prime minister popularly associated with reforms and the attempt to 'build bridges' (his phrase) between Protestants and Catholics, was quite prepared in the Stormont elections of 1965 to claim that the Northern Ireland Labour Party was a threat to the state, despite its own quite strident support for the Union. But the most interesting thing about this election was the degree to which O'Neill himself realised that the NILP had to be dealt with in its own terms — by demonstrating that the Unionist party also had a set of progressive economic policies to deal with the crisis of the local staple industries. It is clear that the degree to which traditional appeals on the constitutional issue could be effective depended greatly on the overall political context.

The crisis of Unionism

This context was to change dramatically in the mid-sixties. The Unionist state was to reel under the impact of a series of crises. Its incapacity to deal with the major crises of the linen, shipbuilding and aircraft industries at the end of the fifties, had caused substantial working class defections to the NILP. To recuperate Unionism's position O'Neill tried to identify it with an ideology of 'planning' and 'modernisation'. One of the effects of this was an attempt to rationalise local government structure. However, it was in just these apparatuses that much that was central to the functioning of Unionism went on: particularly the exclusivism in the area of the allocation of housing and jobs. The result was the emergence of serious divisions in the party. These predated the Civil Rights movement but its emergence forced them to a new level of intensity.

Those Unionist leaders starting with O'Neill who, under British pressure, attempted to reform the state soon came up against the basic problem that it was this very state and its method of operation that had provided the basis for Unionist unity. That this was being done under British pressure made the process even more potentially explosive. For the original form which the state took had been greatly influenced by Unionist distrust of the British government. It was clear, even by 1921, that Ulster would remain in the Union more because of the immense difficulties involved in engineering a united Ireland than from any substantial British interest in maintaining Partition. In 1966 at the start of the present troubles it is estimated that British subsidies to Northern Ireland were £245 per head (at 1975 prices) and this had risen to £480 in 1978". Although Unionists will argue, with justice, that no one makes an issue of the 'subsidisation' of similarly economically disadvantaged areas of Scotland and Wales, there is an increasingly clear recognition that Northern Ireland is not just like any other region in the United Kingdom, at least as far as the British ruling class is concerned. British politicians' reminders of the extent to which the province is dependent on British support, most notoriously in Harold Wilson's use of the term 'spongers' in his television broadcast during the Ulster Workers' Council strike, serve to accentuate the belief that

any British government will be eager to extricate itself from such a costly commitment.

Those Unionist leaders who have cooperated in British initiatives since 1968 have therefore laid themselves open to the charge of dividing the Protestant population at a time when it most needed to be united. That the reforms concerned amongst other things just

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those apparatuses — the police and the special constabulary — that had been traditionally defined as essential to the very existence of the state intensified the opposition. The street violence which erupted in August 1969 and in which members of the special constabulary were involved, precipitated the sending in of British troops and created the conditions for the final crisis of the Unionist state.

DIRECT RULE

Heath's abolition of Stormont in March 1972 was a direct response to the massive Catholic withdrawal of support from the existing state after internment and Bloody Sunday. There was a belief that the Provisional IRA could only be defeated by isolating them politically from the Catholic masses and it was calculated that for this to occur a major restructuring of the state was necessary. However, it was the effect of Direct Rule on Protestant politics that was to have the most decisive long term effects, and one far removed from the intentions of its planners. Direct Rule had one of its desired effects, which was the break-up of the Unionist monolith. It was hoped that out of a period of intra-Unionist division would emerge the basis for a new

⁹ Quoted in Henry Patterson *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, Blackstaff Press 1980, p29.

¹⁰ The most recent attempt is L O'Dowd, B Rolston and M Tomlinson, *Northern Ireland: From Civil Rights to Civil War* CSE Books, 1980. For a contrasting approach see Bew, Gibbon and Patterson *The State in Northern Ireland*, Manchester 1979.

¹¹ In the mass expulsions from the shipyards in 1920 many Protestant members of the ILP lost their jobs.

¹² The role of the strident irredentism of Fianna Fail in unifying Protestant politics from De Valera to Haughey should not be underestimated.

¹³ Rob Rowthorn, 'Northern Ireland: an economy in crisis', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 1981,5, p23.



kind of unity to underly the state — that of the moderate centre, including the Alliance party, the NILP, the SDLP and moderate Unionists freed from the suffocating embrace of the old party.

However, not all the elements which were set free by the strategy were of a moderate disposition. Unionist hegemony had had as one of its most enduring ideological effects amongst the Protestant masses the identification of stability and security with a particular type of political control of repression. At the centre of the problems facing William Whitelaw, the first and most activist Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, was the need to transform the ideological relationship of the Protestant masses to the key questions of security and stability. The Union which had for fifty years been indissociably linked with a real material reality — the form of organisation of the state apparatuses — was now to be guaranteed by the much less substantial reality of bargaining and compromise between 'reasonable men' on both sides.

But some of the compromises which Whitelaw attempted to organise only served to consolidate those forces in Protestant politics opposed to any reforms. Thus it is doubtful if his reputation survived the leaking by the Provisionals that he had had six of their leaders flown to London to meet him secretly in July 1972. This was at a time when the Provisionals were at the height of their campaign of car-bombing the main urban centres of Northern Ireland causing substantial numbers of civilian deaths and mutilations. Similar in effect was the decision, under pressure from the southern government and the SDLP, to make an 'Irish Dimension' a central part of any settlement in the north. This was crucial in undermining support for the Faulkner Unionists (supporting power-sharing with the SDLP) in the period between the Assembly elections in June 1973 and the Westminster election in February 1974 where they were decimated.

The rise of Paisley

The effect of British policy in conjunction with the Provisional campaign has been to generate the conditions for a resurgence of Protestant populism. This has been articulated in various forms. The UDA, although clearly having its origins as a unification of vigilante groups in working class districts of Belfast, was very early articulating the traditional populist message that the Protestant masses had been betrayed by the 'fur-coat brigade'. Its politicisation was hastened by the UWC strike where it provided much of the muscle which made it effective. Its leadership was soon to complain that all it had achieved was the replacement of one group of useless politicians by another. Out of these experiences came the adoption of 'Independence' as its solution to the conflict. Whatever its undoubted progressive value in shifting the focus of the leadership's attention from military questions to politics, it has so far clearly failed to attract the support of any substantial section of the Protestant working class. For although the seventies was to see a shrinkage in the size of the core sections of the Protestant working class due to a combination of the general crisis of the UK economy, a weaker regional policy and the deterrent effects of the violence on inward investment¹⁴, the tendency so pronounced in that class to see in the 'link' with Britain the basic guarantee of its economic well-being is still there.

It has been the Paisleyite variety of populism which has made most political progress. The essence of his appeal was epitomised in his telegram to Thatcher after the 1979 Westminster election demanding a meeting to let her know that 'the Protestant people of Ulster have had enough of violence and the Provisional IRA'. The continuation of Provisional violence would not, in itself, have guaranteed Paisley his success. This came as a result of the effects of the abolition of Stormont on the Official Unionists. As possession of the

state apparatuses had served the function for traditional Unionism of producing Protestant unity, its loss of control of the state was to produce a profound disorientation. No unitary strategy replaced it. Instead the predominant characteristic of the Official Unionist party has been its equivocal position. While formally committed to pushing the British government for the return of an elected legislature with substantial powers, an important reaction of its leadership has been prepared to accept much less than this. It has been openly split between 'integrationists' and 'devolutionists' and it is this equivocation that has provided the basis for Paisley's contention that traditional Unionism must be recreated with the DUP as its core. DUP strength is therefore the product of its apparent possession of a strategy in comparison to the fumbblings of the official Unionists. This extends to the area of economic policy where some at least of the leaders of Official Unionism are declared supporters of monetarism whilst the DUP is publicly adopting a rhetoric of anti-Thatcherism and opposition to the cuts.

Undermining the DUP

Are there any limits to the expansion of the DUP's electoral support among Protestants? Will it soon become the obviously predominant

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party on the loyalist side? These questions must remain open, although the signs that there is some grass roots Official Unionist support for a merger with the DUP does not bode well for future of the party. Internal to Northern Ireland, Paisley's belligerent demagoguery still alienates those Protestants who fear that it can only lead to a confrontation with Britain and bring withdrawal that much nearer. But the continuation of the Provisionals' terrorism will at least ensure a substantial place in Protestant politics for the DUP. One change in the external situation which may limit the growth of Paisleyism has been the return of the Coalition government in the Republic. Paisley's surge forwards in the local government elections reflected not only the extreme polarisation brought about by the Hunger Strike, but also the grandiose claims which the then Fianna Fail prime minister, Charles Haughey, was making for the Anglo-Irish talks. These were presented essentially as a means of out-flanking Unionist opposition to moves towards unity. As in the past the propagation of a strident nationalism by a southern government only served to consolidate the most irreconcilable elements in Protestant politics.

Similarly the continuation of Direct Rule reflects a fear on the part of successive British governments that a mass basis for the politics of compromise and accommodation does not exist. But this reluctance to devolve power to local politicians simply makes it easier for Paisley to claim that the basic commitment is to settle the question over the heads of the Protestants. If the Unionist monolith is not to be reconstructed around the DUP a clear commitment to devolve government with rigorous safeguards for minorities is essential. This is not in itself a 'solution'. All it does is make a progressive solution more likely by removing the constitutional uncertainty on which the DUP thrives.

¹⁴ According to Rowthorn's calculations, in 1970 manufacturing employed 32% of the total workforce, in 1980 it was 23%. In contrast was public and private services where the figures are 41% and 54%. The high degree of dependence on the public sector obviously makes the independence option even more unattractive, p 11.