

# Discussion

## Paisley and Protestant Politics

Geoff Bell



For the last ten years the 'Irish problem' for the British Left has been the Protestant working class. That these workers have been perceived as being sectarian, divisive and politically and socially reactionary has contributed, at least in part, to the marginalisation of the Irish conflict in the day-to-day activity and theoretical work of much of the Left in this country. It is not difficult to see why: if the majority of the working class in Northern Ireland are as politically backward as Protestant Loyalists appear to be, then what chance for progress is there? Lately, such a question has become all the more relevant with the rise of Paisleyism which, as Henry Patterson noted in January's *Marxism Today*, now has 'substantial working class support'.

An attempt to come to grips with the phenomenon of the Protestant working class is therefore long overdue. In that respect Henry Patterson's article is welcome, as indeed is the work he and others of his 'school' have undertaken<sup>1</sup>.

### A major revision

It is all the more stimulating that Henry Patterson argues for a major revision in the manner in which Marxists have analysed what he terms, 'Protestant politics', the traditional view being best summed up in the description Lenin applied to the Ulster Loy-

alists in 1914 as being counter-revolutionary, 'Black-Hundred gangs'<sup>2</sup>. Or, as James Connolly, with his first-hand experience of a union organiser in Belfast put it, 'the Orange working class are slaves in spirit because they have been reared up among a people whose conditions of servitude were more slavish than their own'<sup>3</sup>.

Henry Patterson challenges such perceptions. In itself, there is nothing wrong with that; reality did not end in Lenin's or Connolly's time. But what is breathtaking about Henry Patterson's re-interpretation is that it ends up, with fists raised in the opposite corner to the traditional Marxist view. To over-simplify, Henry Patterson sides with the Loyalists.

This is apparent in his conclusion to his article in *Marxism Today*. He calls for an ending of the 'constitutional uncertainty' in Northern Ireland by, from Britain, 'a clear commitment to devolve government'. This, he argues, would cut the ground from under Paisley, and in one sense it could. For, as this is what Paisley is asking for, it would deny him, at least momentarily, a cause. But although Henry Patterson also argues for 'rigorous safeguards for minorities', there is no disguising that he is calling for a stopping of Paisley by appeasement. Incidentally, the plea for minority safeguards is in idealistic contrast to the concreteness of the rest of Henry Patterson's analysis. Just how would such safeguards be enforced? The experience in Northern Ireland and other capitalist states of legislating for civil rights has not proved encouraging.

Saying that Henry Patterson argues for appeasement of Paisley is not to suggest that he has even a trace of sympathy for Protestant sectarianism. His suggestions are made with the best of motives: that by assuring the Protestant working class of their constitutional position and by giving them the right to rule Northern Ireland they would then move on to more distinctively class politics. This hypothesis is sustained by an historical and contemporary analysis of Protestant politics which sees the Protestant masses as reacting to challenges to them, and that the best way to stop the reaction is to cease to challenge. And it is in this view, that the main difficulties with Henry Patterson's argument lie.

### The differences between North and South

The first major suggestion that Henry makes is that there was an economic and social justification for the Protestants' reaction to the movement in Ireland during the 19th and early 20th centuries for self-determination: a reaction which ended with parti-

tion. For Henry, 'the clear divergence of economic and social structures North and South is quite sufficient to account for the existence of two states'. There is reference to, at the end of the 19th century, the "progressive" industrial Ulster and "backward", "stagnant" peasant southern Ireland.' And, for Henry, there were contrasting political/sociological, structures, illustrated by Orangeism on the one hand and, on the other, 'sectarian aspects of Irish nationalism', in particular the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

Both these arguments have a questionable validity. The first, which seeks to explain partition by the separate economic development of the two areas, is one that has been used by both those who attack or justify partition. The facts are not so persuasive. It is true that by the end of the 19th century Belfast was an Irish outpost of industrial Britain, but within the nine county province of Ulster as a whole there was not such an economic or social divergence with the rest of Ireland. For example as late as 1906 emigration from Ulster — a sure sign of economic deprivation — was in line with the Irish national average, and indeed in one of the most industrialised counties, Antrim, it was higher than the national average.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in some aspects of social life, even in Belfast, 'progressiveness' was difficult to detect. A 1906 report from the commissioners for national education in Ireland noted that Belfast was 'the most backward in the British Isles in the matter of schools. I venture to say that the poorest counties in Ireland are better off in this respect.'

Even after partition, the new remodelled six county 'Ulster' was not a thriving centre of commerce. In 1926 agriculture still employed the largest number of male workers<sup>5</sup>.

### Nationalist sectarianism

If the economic differences between North and South were not so comprehensive as to explain partition, what of Henry Patterson's second argument, that the establishment of the Northern Ireland state was a defence

<sup>1</sup> For instance, Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, *The State in Northern Ireland*, Manchester 1979; Henry Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, Belfast 1980. In contrast to, Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland, The Orange State*, London 1976; Geoffrey Bell, *The Protestants of Ulster*, London 1976.

<sup>2</sup> *Lenin on Ireland*, Dublin, 1970, p14.

<sup>3</sup> James Connolly, *Selected Writings*, London 1973, p215.

<sup>4</sup> For breakdown of figures see *Thorns Directory* 1908, Dublin, p127.

<sup>5</sup> *Ulster Year Book*, 1926.

against Catholic nationalist sectarianism? The one example, prior to partition, which is given is the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH). But the AOH could hardly be interpreted as representing the threat of southern nationalism, for it was largely confined to Belfast. More generally, while it is the case that the Irish national movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries did have traces of the promotion of the interests of Catholicism in its make-up, this is hardly surprising given the historic discrimination Catholics suffered in Ireland.

Moreover, Catholic sectarianism was a minute factor in Irish nationalism in comparison with the influence its Orange counterpart has had on Unionism. For all Henry Patterson's depreciation of the power of the Orange Order, it was under its auspices that the Unionist Party was formed in the late 19th century, and even today the Order has a guaranteed number of seats on the Official Unionists' ruling council. Until the late 1970s it was, in practice, obligatory for any Unionist Party election candidate to be a member of the Orange Order. Neither the AOH, the Legion of Mary or any other Catholic institution had or has such power. Henry Patterson is correct to point out that since partition the southern state has, on occasions, in its social policy over-reflected the Catholicism of the large majority of its inhabitants, but it is unlikely that such a development would have occurred had the million Protestant joined the new state in 1921. They would have been too large a constituency to offend.

Even if, for the sake of argument, Henry Patterson is correct when he says that socially and culturally, northern Protestants see the South as an 'alien society' in terms of social values Unionists are as far removed from Great Britain as from the South. As the then powerful Ulster Vanguard Party put it in 1972, 'Recent experience suggests that a Westminster administration of Ulster affairs would be representative of the social mores of the larger island and insensitive towards the rather old fashioned Ulster which progressives despise'<sup>6</sup>.

### The British interest

It is this issue of Britain's relationship with the Northern Ireland state where Henry Patterson's explanation for Loyalist nastiness as a reaction to external pressure becomes the most dangerous. He argues that both before and after partition the British ruling class had no 'substantial interest' in staying in the north of Ireland. The contention is that before partition 'the predominant position in the British ruling class was to treat the Unionists as expendable'. This is just not

the case. The 'predominant position' in the British ruling class was one that was successful. The view, backed to the hilt by the Tory party and the establishment in the British Army, was that even if it meant defying Westminster, 'Ulster will fight and Ulster will be right', to quote Randolph Churchill.

It is true that British presence in Ireland is not motivated today, or even recently, by simple imperialist plunder. Indeed, the main reason even predates imperialism. It is summed up in the following secret report approved by the British cabinet in 1949: 'It has become a matter of first class strategic importance to this country that the North should continue to form part of His Majesty's dominions. So far as can be seen, it will never be to Great Britain's advantage that Northern Ireland should form part of a territory outside His Majesty's jurisdiction. Indeed it seems unlikely that Great Britain would ever be able to agree to this even if the people of Northern Ireland desired it'.

It is fair to assume that in a general sense such a view prevails today. The British ruling class may, in principle, want to be shot of Ireland, but they will only do so if their 'strategic interests', that is their defence interests, are guaranteed. That is why the current talks between the Irish and British governments on new 'institutional' arrangements in Ireland go hand in hand with Britain's desire to see the south of Ireland in NATO. In the meantime, Britain will stick with partition.

It is not that Henry Patterson tends to absolve Britain of any blame for the current Irish conflict. He misplaces the blame. 'The effect of British policy in conjunction with the Provisional campaign has been to generate the conditions for a resurgence of Protestant populism', that is Paisleyism, he complains. Such an explanation is to feed the paranoia of Paisleyism and its protest at the failure to adopt 'firm security measures'. How many more Bloody Sundays, Castlereagh torture chambers or H Blocks must there be before Britain has shown enough 'firmness' to satisfy the Loyalists? How many more Loyalists will have to be trained and armed in the British Army controlled Ulster Defence Regiment before a 'third force' becomes unnecessary?

Essentially, what Henry Patterson is asking for is that Republicans cease their agitation, and Britain allows the Loyalists to run their Ulster as they see fit.

In practical terms it is unreal. The IRA and its predecessors have been fighting too many years for Irish self-determination to cease now. Even the most obdurate of British politicians recognises that it was Loyalist mis-rule in Northern Ireland since 1921

which created the current round of the Irish 'troubles' with sectarianism and repression of political opponents.

### Real material differences

More importantly, for socialists, Henry Patterson's diagnosis is a political misjudgement. James Connolly was right. What the Protestant working class is defending is its better 'conditions of servitude'. The real material base for Protestant workers' sectarianism is the privileged position they have enjoyed over their Catholic counterparts. These privileges have been documented by a wealth of statistics which Henry Patterson neglects to mention. They have meant that before and after partition the Protestant working class in Northern Ireland has had relatively more jobs, better jobs and better houses than have Catholic workers<sup>8</sup>. This situation persists. In 1978 the government sponsored Fair Employment Agency reported that there were two and a half times as many Catholics unemployed as there were Protestants<sup>9</sup>. A later report, issued by the same body in 1980, concluded that in the last generation 'Catholics have tended to move down the social scale more commonly than Protestants' and that 'the proportion of Catholics in lower status jobs could increase in the next decade'<sup>10</sup>.

That is what the Protestant working class was defending when it attacked the civil rights movement in the late 1960s, just as it is what the Northern Ireland state was set up to defend and reproduce. The Irish national revolution of the late 19th and early 20th century threatened such privilege, and the more progressive wing of that revolution threatened landlordism and capitalism. The revolution was incomplete for a variety of reasons, but one of them was the insistence by the Protestant working class that the 'Loyalists' had the right to veto Irish majority rule, and, ultimately, the unity of the Irish working class.

Given the marginal material benefits the Protestant worker enjoyed and continue to enjoy their behaviour has been understandable. Given as well the classic settler culture of 'progressive' Protestants and 'backward' Irish natives, which has ideologically reinforced such privilege, then on that level too the behaviour of the Protestant working class is understandable. But to understand is not to justify. •

<sup>6</sup> Ulster Vanguard, *Ulster a Nation*, Belfast 1972, p10.

<sup>7</sup> Public Record Office, CP(49)4.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Bell, *op cit*, p15-33.

<sup>9</sup> *Irish Times*, 12/1/78.

<sup>10</sup> *Irish Times*, 17/1/80.