

The Permanent Crisis of 21st Century Ulster Unionism

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Last month, a frail and diminished Ian Paisley was interviewed by journalist Eamonn Mallie in what is likely to be his last major public appearance. For much of his public life the roaring voice of unionist intolerance and bigotry, Paisley seems anxious in his twilight years to cultivate a legacy as a voice of reason and good-neighbourliness. The contrast between some of his comments in the interview and Paisley's long record of sectarian agitation was clear, and in places bizarre. The 'whole system' of gerrymandering 'was wrong,' he now concedes. 'It was not one man one vote - that's no way to run any country. It should be absolute freedom and absolute liberty' - an astounding about-face for a man who came to international prominence as the arch-opponent of the civil rights movement. Bloody Sunday, he now tells us, 'was a very dangerous thing, and then the attempt to cover it [up] They were just making a protest within the law.' This from a politician whose party, the DUP, struggled to contain its outrage at the verdict of a Tory government that British troops had killed innocent civilians on the day.

Still, even by his own words, Paisley's conversion is an incomplete one. The victims of the Dublin-Monaghan bombings brought the attacks on themselves, he insists. He glossed over or claimed he could not remember the litany of bigoted statements made throughout the years (including calling Catholics 'vermin'). He was unapologetic about his involvement in organising the paramilitary Vanguard organisation, or his close cooperation with loyalist paramilitaries during the UWC strike in 1974.

People will disagree about the motivations and the sincerity of the 'Big Man's' transformation, but in some ways this misses the point: the real revelations were to be found in his scathing attacks on his DUP successors-First Minister and party leader Peter Robin-

son and North Belfast MLA Nigel Dodds, whom he accused of staging a coup to oust him. According to Paisley, there are powerful elements in the DUP who are anxious to draw back from the power-sharing agreement and re-galvanize the DUP around sectarian posturing. This directly contradicts the image Robinson has tried to concoct for his leadership one that presents itself in Washington and Dublin as the reasonable voice of 21st-century unionism, out to win the hearts and minds even of Catholic voters.

Predictably, Robinson reacted angrily to Paisley's charges, deriding his account as 'a failure of recollection'. But Paisley's attack signifies the weakness of his embattled and crisis-prone successor, who appears to be a sitting duck for any would-be leadership contenders. Long-time underling of Paisley and for decades the day-to-day organiser of the DUP, Robinson's ousting of Paisley was designed to appease the harder loyalist section of the party who were displeased with their leader's close relations with Martin McGuinness. Certainly, the replacement of Paisley's 'chuckle brothers' routine with the deadpan demeanour of Peter Robinson eased the nerves of some. But the change was cosmetic and the inherent problems of the DUP remained, and have even intensified under Robinson's leadership.

Much has been made of Paisley's apparent volte-face: had he mellowed in his old age or was he simply angling for a historical legacy that did not have the word 'bigot' as its main epitaph? In truth, Paisley's confused retrospective reflects the contradictions of modern-day Unionism as it tries to square sectarian politics with the reality of power-sharing in the North today: this conundrum is not specific to the ageing firebrand but is one that the entire historical project of Unionism now faces. After decades of branding anyone who worked with nationalists a 'Lundy' and

spouting the slogan ‘Never’ from innumerable platforms, Paisley - the embodiment of Unionist oppositional politics - stunned many of his followers by cutting a deal with his long-time enemy Gerry Adams in 2007, leading to the reopening of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the implementation of power sharing between Sinn Féin and the DUP. This wasn’t the result of a maverick leader out to secure his legacy: it was the logical outcome of the historical conjuncture that Unionism now finds itself in.

On the surface Unionism appears to be stronger than ever. The Belfast Agreement solidified partition and entrenched the notion that constitutional change would only come about with support of the majority of people in the North: thus seemingly ruling out a united Ireland for the foreseeable future. The main threat to the state for decades, the Provisional IRA, has ceased to exist and its political wing now fully supports the security forces and accepts the hand of the British Queen. Certainly, stubborn resistance to the Northern state remains in some republican quarters - and small-scale armed ‘dissident’ actions remain a reality - but it hardly compares with the wide-scale resistance seen at the height of the Troubles.

Despite these successes, Unionism has staggered from crisis to crisis in the last number of years. Peter Robinson has been hit with scandal after scandal, resulting in the stunning loss of his East Belfast seat to the Alliance Party in the last Westminster elections. The spat between Paisley and Robinson, however, is a reminder that Unionist leaders have been fractiously divided for decades. Neither Paisley nor Robinson nor Trimble before them could claim to be the leader of a singularly united Unionist Movement in the way that past figures like Craig or Carson could. In short Ulster Unionism is not what it once was. Pulled by the realities of power-sharing with Sinn Féin and pushed by its own class contradictions Unionism has continuously spi-

ralled into crisis. Below, we examine the origins of this crisis, and how its interaction with other variables, namely the inherited sectarian structures of the state and the economic crisis, continues to fuel the resurgence of sectarianism in the North.

The Belfast Agreement and the Sectarian State

The 1998 Belfast Agreement was welcomed by a large majority across the island of Ireland. Although a demand among ordinary people for an end to armed conflict drove the peace process forward, at its core the Agreement was an attempt by local and Anglo-American elites to secure stability by plotting a way out of the impasse that the North found itself in by the early 1990s. Within official unionism, there was a grudging recognition that the old methods of open sectarianism backed up by crude repression that had sustained the Orange state since the 1920s were no longer viable, and that some form of political accommodation was necessary. To republicans it was increasingly clear that their ‘long war’ stood no chance of forcing a British withdrawal, and that a low-level military campaign was futile and unsustainable. The solution in political terms - aggressively managed by successive British, US and Irish governments - was an accommodation between unionism and nationalism in a devolved assembly at Stormont.

From the outset this political arrangement has been fraught with tension and prone to intermittent crises. The Agreement has been described as ‘a cure for which there is no known illness,’ because nowhere in its 11,000 words does it identify the problem which it purports to solve.¹ Instead, it relied on ‘constructive ambiguity’ - the notion that, for unionists, the Union is guaranteed, while at the same time, for nationalists, the path to Irish unity is secured. Furthermore, the very nature the Assembly perpetuates and rein-

¹ Eamonn McCann, ‘Tragedy is opportunity for conflict resolution envoys’, *Belfast telegraph*, <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/eamonn-mccann/tragedy-is-opportunity-for-conflict-resolution-envoys-28747476.html>

forces existing communal divisions - all Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) have to declare themselves Unionist, Nationalist or 'Other'. The First Minister is always from the largest Unionist or Nationalist party, the Deputy First Minister from the largest party on the 'other side'. Every election consists of two parallel contests to elect the party seen as the best champion of 'their own' community. Any elected representatives who want to opt out of the sectarian headcount by designating 'Other' are consigned to the margins when it comes to voting in the Assembly on issues requiring 'cross-community support', for example. Thus the 'new' Stormont institutionalises sectarianism in a fundamental way.

The political system in the North is therefore based on an inherent contradiction. On the one hand we have a political set up based on 'power sharing', wherein old communal animosities were to be sidelined in favour of cross-community cooperation. In a new, prosperous Northern Ireland closely integrated into an Anglo-American free market powerhouse, sectarianism was to become the fading shadow of a retreating epoch. On the other hand power-sharing seems in some ways to have further entrenched communal divisions, giving rise to a system in which the unionist and nationalist blocs today dominated by the DUP and SF - united in their commitment to neo-liberalism - are continually at loggerheads over peripheral, so-called 'cultural' issues. The result is that Northern Ireland plc is in an almost permanent state of crisis, as sectarian animosities are continually inflamed over flags, parades and sharp differences over how to deal with the past. Consequently, rather than watching the slow decay of sectarianism over the past year we have witnessed its resurgence. The political structures in place in the North have not only proven consistently incapable of challenging it: they are part of the problem, and there is widespread exasperation among ordinary people at the lack of progress in moving forward.

This way of running things has had a poisonous effect as the Assembly perpetually descends into communalism and sectarianism

trickles down towards to the street. For this reason, and contrary to establishment claims, the structures of the Northern state have led to an intensification of sectarianism rather than its decline. In Belfast, for example, the number of 'peace walls' has more than doubled since the Agreement. The level of fear has not fallen, and in interface areas, it has increased. There is now genuine and quite rational fear of physical attack in some 'interface areas'. Persistent low-level sectarian attacks have been a regular feature of life in sections of the North, particularly in Belfast and north Antrim, and have at times become more orchestrated in character as loyalist paramilitaries seek to flex their muscles. Today, as sectarianism is again ratcheted up, fear grows that we are headed back to 'the bad old days': in late September a young nationalist in Brompton Park - just across the Crumlin Road from the so-called loyalist 'civil rights camp' was set upon by a gang roving the area in a car while walking with his girlfriend, suffering permanent disfigurement of his face and head: his 19-year old brother committed suicide two years ago, after suffering permanent brain damage in a vicious sectarian attack in the same area four years earlier. Protestants too have been the victims of sectarianism. In the summer of 2013 a number of Catholic youths attacked a small Protestant enclave in the Blacks Road in Belfast, and a number of Protestant churches and homes have been attacked over the last period. The fear is that such horrible incidents will now become routine.

Economic Crisis and the Resurgence of Sectarianism

While an unstable accommodation between unionism and nationalism lay at the heart of the political institutions thrown up by the Belfast Agreement, its economic underpinnings of are crucial to understanding the current revival of sectarianism. The Agreement was patched together during the boom years of the mid-1990s, when the Celtic Tiger was in full stride in the South and the property

bubble seemed to confirm the promise that an end to armed conflict would bring new prosperity to the North, including those working-class communities hardest hit by the Troubles.

Under the influence of London and Washington, local elites aimed to reposition themselves in the global economy through restructuring the Northern Ireland economy along neo-liberal lines.² The substantial public sector that had grown up during the ‘Troubles’ would be chopped down to size, with redundancies in the thousands; New Labour’s mania for privatisation and the Blairite assault on the welfare state would be extended aggressively to the North; in the longer term more ‘flexible’ labour arrangements and a drastic cut in corporate tax rates would provide the foundations for a new, private-sector led economy. A revived tourism sector and a ‘globally competitive (i.e. low wage) knowledge economy’ would serve as the economic foundations of a ‘new’ Northern Ireland.

The onset of global economic crisis in late 2008, however, and the dramatic downturn since has laid bare many of the flawed assumptions behind these ambitious plans, though none of the political parties at Stormont seems inclined to change course. Belfast has the highest retail vacancy in the UK, and the bulk of foreign investment has involved massive public handouts to multinational corporations offering low-wage employment in call centres and the like. As elsewhere, the bursting of the real estate bubble has meant that many working-class homeowners are struggling to hold on to houses that are not worth what they owe on them. A recent report noted that standards of living have fallen further in the North than anywhere else in the UK.³ Poverty remains deeply entrenched, its effects felt most severely in areas that suffered the most during the Trou-

bles.

Even in a period of boom, the combination of communally-organised political institutions and an aggressive neo-liberal assault on the welfare state would mean that the potential for peoples’ frustrations manifesting themselves in renewed sectarian violence is never far from the surface. But in a period of protracted economic crisis, the danger of sectarian polarization and renewed and wide-scale violence is a real one. Sectarian tensions have been escalating in the North, driven by both the ‘respectable’ wing of unionism represented at Stormont and by the combined agitation of loyalist paramilitaries and the Orange Order, who have orchestrated a series of confrontations over flags, parades, and what they describe as a ‘cultural war’ against their ‘Britishness’. The clearest sign yet of this resurgence in sectarianism has been the return of loyalist violence to the streets of Belfast, starting during last year’s marching season, peaking in the run-up to and after Christmas in the ‘flag protests’, and then returning ferociously around this year’s Twelfth.⁴

In July 2013, loyalists set up a ‘civil rights’ camp at an interface at the end of Twadell Avenue in North Belfast, and in the east of the city the UVF has painted over a council-funded George Best mural and replaced it with a sinister profile of a masked paramilitary gunman - side by side with a quote from US civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. on the need for the ‘oppressed’ to forcibly take what the ‘oppressors’ won’t give them. In August, a republican-organised anti-interment march through the city centre was met by thousands of loyalists, who attempted to lay siege to the parade, attacking bystanders and police and ransacking one of the better-known mixed pubs in the city centre. At the start of the school year, three Catholic schools in loy-

²For details of this see Brian Kelly, ‘Neoliberal Belfast’, *Irish Marxist Review* 2

³‘Northern Ireland living standards had steepest fall in the UK,’ *BBC News* 10 Feb 2014 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-26120255>>.

⁴The most recent period of violence originated with a banned Orange parade past the Ardoyne shops in North Belfast. Night after night, the streets of North Belfast and some sections of East Belfast were consumed by rioting. Undeterred, Unionist politicians and the Order went further. Additional marches in the same area were called in subsequent weeks in an effort to turn Ardoyne into a ‘New Drumcree’.

alist areas were threatened and warned not to re-open, although nothing came of the threats and the schools are functioning as normal.

The renascent sectarianism that these incidents demonstrate has taken the establishment by surprise, though none of it should come as a shock: low-level sectarianism has been a persistent feature throughout the post-Agreement period - particularly in Belfast - at times erupting into serious violence. There can be no doubt, however, that in the last few years, particularly over the last 18 months, incidences of sectarian confrontation have become more and more frequent and orchestrated.

Deeply invested in the Agreement, Sinn Féin shares a responsibility for the resurgence of sectarianism in recent years. Increasingly it reflects the outlook of a substantial Catholic middle class that has made its peace with the Northern state, and which rather than seeking a radical overhaul asks only for some room within the existing arrangements for its expression of 'Irish identity'. Sinn Féin fully accepts the communal premise of the Agreement, that there exist in the North two main 'traditions' - unionism and nationalism - equally deserving of tolerance and respect, and which must be accommodated perpetually into the future.

Much like the Nationalist Party, which dominated Catholic politics in the North before 1969, SF sees itself increasingly as the mainstream representative of 'nationalist interests' in a communally divided society. They aim not to overcome sectarian divisions, but (like the DUP) to be seen as effective at securing the best carve-up for their side of the divide. This means that the growing disparity between rich and poor within the 'nationalist community' is ignored, and that on the rare occasions when discussions of issues like poverty and unemployment etc. are taken up, they are used mainly to illustrate the (minimal) lingering differences in conditions between Protestant and Catholic workers rather than their common interests in resisting the growing disparities between rich and poor in

the 'new' Northern Ireland. This is a recipe for benign apartheid - 'equal but separate' development without any need for unity.

The Historic Crisis of Unionism

Undoubtedly, however, the main thrust of discontent over the last period has emanated from within the ranks of Unionism. Working-class Protestant communities, like those in Catholic areas, have gained little from the peace process. There is a deep well of anger that progress is not being made and that working class people are being left behind. For this reason the DUP have consistently tried to raise sectarian tensions to deflect anger from their own inability to deliver substantive change in the lives of ordinary people. Fearful of losing their voting base to hard-line loyalists around Jim Allister's TUV (traditional Unionist Voice) and the PUP (Progressive Unionist Party), the DUP has been completely silent in the face of escalating sectarianism, with their local MLAs standing should-to-shoulder with Orangemen and paramilitaries.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the loyalist flag protests were preceded by a systematic attempt by the DUP to raise sectarianism in East Belfast. The flag protesters had come onto the streets in response to 40,000 leaflets delivered across Belfast slamming the Alliance party for 'backing the Sinn Féin/SDLP position that the flag should be ripped down on all but a few days' and urged people to tell the Alliance party 'We don't want our national flag torn down from City Hall. We can't let them make Belfast a cold house for Unionists.'⁵ The focus on the Alliance party resulted from that party's victory over DUP leader Peter Robinson in his East Belfast stronghold at the Westminster election. It is doubtful that the DUP leadership, so wedded to portraying Northern Ireland as 'open for business', intended to unleash a wave of disruptive protests across Belfast. But this was

⁵Goretti Horgan, 'Loyal to the Flag', *Socialist Review*, February 2013

the consequence nonetheless.



The Flag protests were not the first time in the post-ceasefire era that Unionism has descended into outbursts of sectarian street protests. On a number of occasions, such as the Garvaghy siege of the late 90s, the Holy Cross protests in 2001, the loyalists street protests of 2006 or the various outbursts around Ardoyne and the Short Strand, sections of Unionism have taken to the streets to stoke sectarianism. To an extent, these incidents can be explained by the sectarian grandstanding of Unionist politicians and paramilitaries. However, they also represent a deeper malaise within Unionism.

The historical project of Unionism is in a protracted crisis. In truth, this process predates the current period, and can be traced right back to the Civil Rights movement and the decline of the Orange state that set in from the early sixties. It is a crisis, however, that has continued apace in the post-agreement period, and further intensified in the last few years. Why has this been the case? Unionism has always been defined, both organisationally and ideologically, as an all-class alliance of Protestants, designed to capture and maintain state power. This project has been undercut throughout the last few decades for two main reasons. Firstly, the decline of the Orange State - coupled with the acceptance of the British Government that the Northern state could only survive with the support of a section of the Nationalist population - meant that Unionism was pushed into the power sharing with Nationalists. Gone are the days of absolute Unionist authority over the state and with it the ability of Unionism

to dictate the political agenda of the North.

Secondly, the material mechanisms for maintaining Unionism as an all class alliance have been severely undercut. The well-documented decline of traditional industry decimated the social base of Unionism and weakened it as a project that could corral the protestant working classes. There are no shipyards, no mills, and no factories to parcel out jobs to Protestants. The security industry remains overwhelmingly Protestant, but the days of an exclusively Protestant police force are gone. This collapse of industry also had the consequence of corroding the social fabric of many protestant communities. The prescription of the Unionist and Nationalist elites to this crisis, a mixture of austerity and neo-liberalism, has only made the situation worse.

One symptom of this crisis has been declining support within Protestant communities for the Belfast Agreement. Whilst a clear majority of people both North and South of the border supported the Agreement, support amongst Protestants from the outset was less secure. According to Jonathan Tonge, 'With both Nationalist parties endorsing the Agreement a 99 percent yes vote was recorded among Catholics, but only 57 percent of Protestants voted likewise'. Within six months of the referendum this had dropped further; only 41 percent of Protestants, as against 72 percent of Catholics, felt that the Agreement benefited unionists and nationalists equally.

As the years went on, the notion that 'Protestants were losing out' while 'Catholics were getting everything' - energetically promoted by Unionist politicians - continued to gain traction. By 2005 only 2 percent of Protestants believed that unionists had benefited more than nationalists from the agreement. When asked in a 2008 survey which community they thought had benefited most from the Belfast Agreement, 78 percent of Protestants responded that it was the Catholic community. Whilst the notion that Catholics were doing better out of the Agreement was quite widespread, the facts

don't quite add up. As the report itself comments; 'Protestants perceive the Belfast Agreement to have benefited Catholics unequally to Protestants, [but] respondents generally didn't understand why or how this had happened, and may have been basing their answers on a perception that Catholics had benefited rather than from actual evidence'.⁶

The notion that Catholics were gaining to the detriment of Protestants has gathered pace in some quarters since the economic crisis of 2008. In the absence of a struggle that could articulate the real and genuine anger into a class direction; the notion that the 'other side' is to blame has gained traction. Secondly, the crisis of Unionism has caused it to fracture, meaning that forces outside of the DUP have begun to grow which in turn has caused the DUP to continuously tack right in the hope of courting favour with disaffected loyalists. In essence, therefore, the current resurgence of sectarianism must be understood as the intersection of **the political crisis of Unionism with the deepening economic crisis driven by the recession**. Journalists' accounts from within the ranks of the riots suggest that beneath the communal defence of the 'right to march', it is the increasing economic desperation in working-class Protestant areas that is fuelling the riots. 'It came to a head because the taigs were getting away with everything, getting everything they want, and we just can't hack it any more,' one local resident told David McKittrick, adding that it was easier for Catholics to get jobs. 'Aye, definitely. They get the work on building sites and all.'⁷

Socialists must therefore begin from a different starting point than the middle classes who express their disdain at the rioting. Where mainstream condemnation combines revulsion at the violence with deep class contempt for the communities involved, we have

to insist that the deep anger persisting among sections of the Protestant working class at their losing ground in post-Agreement Northern Ireland is not the problem. The problem is that under the influence of sectarian bigots in the DUP and loyalist paramilitaries the rioters misdirect their anger toward Catholics, who live in conditions as bad as or worse than those prevailing on the Shankill, rather than directing it upwards, at those who benefit from the poverty at the bottom - including the leadership of the DUP itself.

Flags, Parades and 'Protestant Culture'

Increasingly, Unionism has sought to make up for its shortcomings by portraying itself as forthright defenders of an embattled 'Protestant Culture'. Conflicts at Assembly and local government level over so-called 'cultural' issues - chiefly the right of Orange marchers to parade through majority nationalist districts where they are unwanted, but also over the flying of flags on public buildings, the attempts to foist 'homecoming parades' for British military regiments on mixed communities, decisions over whether to fund or acknowledge the rights of Irish-language communities, etc. - continually aggravate sectarian enmity and resentment, and shape the context in which, in the absence of progressive alternatives, loyalist paramilitaries continue to exert a substantial influence in working-class Protestant districts

This notion of 'Protestant culture' - widely promoted by both sides in the 'New' Northern state - rests on the claim that Orange Parades and flag flying are somehow innately Protestant. Consequently, a consistent attempt has been made by various forces in the establishment to promote 'protestant culture' as an integral part of the 'New North-

⁶*Ten Years On: Who are the Winners and Losers from the Belfast Agreement?*, http://www.academia.edu/3238672/Ten_Years_On_Who_are_the_Winners_and_Losers_from_the_Belfast_Agreement

⁷David McKittrick, 'Rioting by night, peace by day: Belfast seeks a swift solution', *The Independent* <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/rioting-by-night-peace-by-day-belfast-seeks-a-swift-solution-8104884.html>

ern Ireland'. Part of the 'two traditions' approach, this argument absolves the state from finding any permanent solution to the conflict here other than 'peaceful coexistence' between cultures. It seeks to placate sectarianism and to manage it.

In reality this strategy is falling apart, and if anything, is leading to increasing disorder. Part of the problem with promoting the notion of 'Protestant Culture' and the two traditions idea more broadly, is that it tends to lead to more division, not less. It ingrains a sense of 'other', portrays sectarianism as something natural, and lends justification to all sorts of divisive notions. Beyond the vacuous rhetoric spouted by Unionist politicians, the truth is that talk of 'Protestant Culture' has increasingly become an excuse to justify all manner of sectarian activities. For instance, we are now expected to accept the flying of Union Jacks in communities as 'cultural': the reality couldn't be any different. Flying union jacks has always been a means of intimidation, a way of marking territory. Thus, when Union Jacks go up the message that follows is 'Catholics stay out'.

The Orange Order is another case in point. In a vain effort to ingratiate the Order, and include it into the wider neoliberal agenda of the State, millions of pounds were poured into a campaign to rebrand it as a cultural organisation and to repackage the Twelfth as a colourful and harmless day out with the kids - 'Orangefest'. As well as this some £4 million was poured into the organization's coffers - including large sums from the austerity-obsessed southern state. Despite this, there are now more contentious parades rather than less in Northern Ireland. Still, the Northern state encourages us to see organisations like the Orange Order as an integral part of building a 'shared future'. But this is a contradiction in terms. How can an organisation whose *raison d'être* is to maintain division be part of a shared future? The idea that the Orange Order is simply a commemorative outfit, a sort of Battle of the Boyne re-enactment society, is nonsense. The Orange Order is an institution that actively seeks to reinforce sec-

tarian order and division in society. Time and time again they prove themselves incapable of change. In short, the Orange Order aren't a part of the solution to sectarianism, they are a fundamental part of the problem.

When Unionist politicians or Orange leaders talk of 'Protestant Culture' they wish to convey an image of something benign and harmless. But it is not surprising that the term tends to arise when Orangeism comes under criticism for actions that are anything but. Even the idea of 'Protestant' culture is misleading. Protestantism is a global religion, yet Orange marches etc are something particular to the North of Ireland. It is not comparable to say 'Jewish culture', the various practices which are common amongst Jewish communities the world over. Yet even if we accept that Orange marches are somehow cultural, this does not give them *carte blanche* legitimacy. All cultures or cultural practices must be judged on what they entail and what consequences they have for wider society. It was once part of the 'cultural' practices of the South of Ireland to lock women up in laundries because they had children out of wedlock or did not conform in one way or another to the supposed moral code of the church. Certainly this horrid oppression of women was part of the 'catholic culture' of the day, which viewed sex as something bad and women as innately inferior to men. But this did not stop right minded people in coming out and condemning it and eventually succeeding in abolishing it. The same goes for the practices of Orangeism, be they cultural or not.

The Real Face of Orangeism

Orangeism has never been a benign cultural movement; rather it has always been a deeply political project, and a reactionary one at that. A cursory glance at its history will illustrate this. The Order was formed to defend 'the King and his heirs' and to support the political, economic, and social domination of Ireland by a minority grouping of great landowners, business men and Protestant clergy known as the 'Protestant Ascen-

dancy'. These elites consciously saw the Order as a counter-revolutionary force, 'a barrier to revolution and an obstacle to compromise', and actively opposed the Protestant led 1798 Rebellion. In the 19th century it was reinvented by Unionist industrialists, and became a powerful tool in tempering the rise of trade unionism in Ulster and in opposing the anti-colonial movement throughout Ireland. Throughout the 20th century it was a key component of the 'Orange State', instituting discrimination and solidifying sectarian division. Crucially, when the spectre of working class unity was raised, the Orange Card was deployed. Indeed, as Liam Clarke recently noted in the *Belfast Telegraph*, the Order has historically been a barrier to progress of any kind:

The Order has been dragged kicking and screaming into every century since 1800. It opposed Catholic emancipation, the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland and even the introduction of the secret ballot. It has also been opposed to nearly every successful political reform since partition.⁸

Still, some sections of the Order reject this description, and prefer to portray the organisation as a 'respectable' religious outfit. Historical experience, however, tells us otherwise. From the first sectarian riots of the 1840's, to the pogroms of 1912, 1920, 1935, 1949 and the Orange riots of 1969, right through the tunnels of Dunloy in the 1980s and the streets of Drumcree in the 1990s, Orangeism has always been synonymous with sectarian violence. This is not accidental. Rather, it is the logical outcome of the confrontational strategy of the Order. Despite talk about 'tradition', Orange parades have always been about immediate objectives, namely political

and territorial domination. As a former leading Orangeman, John Brown, once explained:

On 12 July and other occasions the Orangeman marched with his lodge behind its flags and drums to show his strength in the places where he thought it would do most good. Where you could walk you could dominate and other things followed.⁹

In the main, it is the Catholic community that has been on the receiving end of this exercise in domination. Still today, the polarization that the Order encourages provides a context for sectarian attacks on Catholic homes and even murder across the North. For this reason, Socialists support the right of residents to oppose the sectarian coat trailing of the Order. As the protestant historian William Brown pointed out, it is absurd to expect Catholics to react any differently giving the history of the Order:

Even if we exclude the hatred, mayhem and murder this marching can in certain circumstances generate, it is patently ridiculous nowadays to expect the Catholic-nationalist community always to show tolerance and forbearance to something that was designed 'to keep the papists in their places' and 'to show them who's master'. The politics of the ascendancy is both foolish and dangerous.¹⁰

But we also have to understand that it is not just Catholic residents that lose out. The tension that Orangeism creates has the effect of dragging us all backward, and it is invariably the people at the bottom, both working class Protestants and Catholics, that lose out the most. Working class Protestants have as

⁸'Why cuddling up to Orange Order would be a mistake for the DUP' ,*Belfast Telegraph*, <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/debateni/blogs/liam-clarke/why-cuddling-up-to-orange-order-would-be-a-mistake-for-the-dup-29421787.html>

⁹'Marching against time', *Socialist Review*, Issue 200, September 1996

¹⁰ William Brown, *An Army with Banners: The Real Face of Orangeism*, 2003

much a stake as anyone in creating a society free from sectarianism. Sectarian politics has laid waste to working class protestant areas, and offers no hope for a future for the people of the Shankill or the Sandy Row. Orangeism is a barrier to building an alternative to this mess. Despite the fact that most people in the North wish to see a more integrated society, the Order is resolutely opposed to it. It's modus operandi is to maintain divisions between Catholics and Protestants, it discourages mixed marriages, and evokes notions of 'protestant unity'. Crucially, as the living standards of working class people are being cut across the board, the Order encourages notions of 'the other side are doing better', weakening the urgent necessity for Catholics and protestants to come together to fight the cuts.

Furthermore, the divisive politics of the Order is working to produce further divisions. At the 2010 Twelfth of July march in County Down, the Grand Master of the local Orange Lodge, told the gathered crowd that 'multi-culturalism and diversity politics are a mask for intolerance and hatred towards the established majority'.¹¹The LGBT community too has become a target for the Order. The Unionist newspaper, the Belfast Newsletter, described the 'resolutions' that 'each Twelfth gathering is expected to support:

Orangemen and women will pledge their support for the flying of the Union Flag on public buildings and oppose gay marriage at 18 demonstrations across Northern Ireland on July 12.¹²

What any of this has to do with 'protestant culture' is anyone's guess? The fact that the Order chose opposition to Gay marriage as one of their main pledges is just another

example of how Orangeism is about the promotion of exclusion, rather than about celebrating culture. It is also testament to the fact that Nationalist resident groups are not the only people who have a stake in opposing Orangeism.

However, it would be a mistake to view everyone who partakes in Orange marches as unreconstructed bigots and to write them off entirely. The Order contains many working class people who can be won through struggle to socialist politics. Famously, during the 1907 Dockers strike the Order split, with many of its more progressive and labour minded brethren going on to form the 'Independent Orange Order'.¹³

Still today many working class people will have some association with the Order. As the social fabric of many working class areas has been eroded organisations like the Orange Order have come to fill the vacuum. The routine of Lodge meetings or the pride and discipline associated with band practices can give many working class people a sense of 'belonging': particularly amongst the young and disadvantaged who have little other recourse for recreation. Whilst acknowledging this, however, socialists have to be clear in pointing out that Orangeism ultimately holds the whole working class back. James Connolly long ago pointed out this contradiction:

Viewing the procession as a mere 'Teague' (to use the name the brethren bestow on all of Catholic origin), I must confess that some parts of it are beautiful, some of it ludicrous, and some of it exceedingly disheartening.

The regalia is often beautiful; I have seen representations of the Gates of Derry that were really

¹¹Seán Mitchell, *Why All Workers Should Oppose the Orange Order*, <http://www.swp.ie/node/4716>

¹²'Orange Order set to pledge support for the Union flag and oppose gay marriage at this year's Twelfth celebrations', <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/regional/orange-order-set-to-pledge-support-for-the-union-flag-and-oppose-gay-marriage-at-this-year-s-twelfth-celebrations-1-5205602>

¹³For more on this see John Gray's seminal account of the strike, *City in Revolt*, 1985

a pleasure to view as pieces of workmanship; and similar representations erected as Orange arches across dingy side streets that, if we could forget their symbolism, we would admire as real works of art.¹⁴

Connolly, however, understood that behind the majesty of the Orange procession lay a politics that all workers had a stake in opposing.

The Orange Order was not founded to safeguard religious freedom, but to deny religious freedom, and that it raised this religious question, not for the sake of any religion, but in order to use religious zeal in the interests of the oppressive property rights of rackrenting landlords and sweating capitalists.¹⁵

We should be forthright in our opposition to Orangeism, but we should also not overestimate its strength or weight in society. Orange parades certainly still bring out thousands of people and the organisation remains a formidable force with thousands of members and influential backing within the Assembly. However, its size and weight within society has considerably declined. Its membership, once as high as 100,000, is now down to about 30,000 and the behaviour of the Order of late has turned many people from its doors. Indeed, one poll showed that only 8 percent of Protestants agreed with the Order defying Parade Commission rulings.¹⁶

¹⁴James Connolly, *July the 12th*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1913/07/july12.htm>

¹⁵James Connolly, *Labour and the Proposed Partition of Ireland*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1914/03/laborpar.htm>

¹⁶Northern Irish People to Orange Order: 'You Can't Walk Where You Want,' <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/northern-ireland/northern-irish-people-to-orange-order-you-cant-walk-where-you-want-29581681.html>

The Impossibility of 'Progressive Loyalism'

Void of a stable base in Protestant areas, the DUP has increasingly come to rely on sectarian grandstanding and the support of loyalist paramilitaries. It is a strategy long used by Unionist parties, but it is fraught with difficulties. The shift to the right by the DUP has created a space where other loyalist forces, namely the PUP and the UVF, have grown. The PUP claims that its membership has increased from around 100 to 500 in the last year. Undoubtedly the party has benefited from both its involvement in the flag protests and the growing disillusionment with the 'Big House Unionism' of the DUP. It is likely, therefore, to make small gains in this year's local elections.

The PUP has long purported to be a working class party and the progressive voice of Unionism. It holds a number of what might be called 'old labour' positions around economic questions. However the growth of the party has plainly not come from these positions: instead it has derived from its sectarian stance around flags and parades. Those who bemoan the absence of a 'progressive loyalism' that will speak for the protestant working class miss the point entirely: any set of politics based on communalism will always be driven into the cul de sac of sectarianism. What the PUP is doing is exploiting genuine working class anger and misdirecting it in a sectarian direction. Their argument is that the deterioration of working-class life in Protestant areas is down to Catholics getting preferential treatment: their 'solution' is to attain these resources at the expense of the 'other side' through whipping up sectarian violence and intimidation. Moreover, rather than developing an independent working class politics, the

PUP will be pushed in line behind the ‘big house Unionists’ of the DUP. This was made clear by PUP leader Billy Hutchinson’s support for ‘Unionist Unity’ at the party’s most recent conference:

Today the Progressive Unionist Party reiterated its commitment to Unionist unity, recognising that this is the best way to maintain the Union while also addressing in partnership the complex issues that affect our most disadvantaged communities.¹⁷



PUP banner at the loyalist ‘civil rights’ camp on Twadell Avenue.

Loyalism has always represented a certain class division in Unionism. When Big House Unionism has fractured loyalist forces emerge which combine a discontent with Unionist elites with a renewed and intensified focus on anti-Catholic sectarianism. The way that the PUP exploits genuine concerns over poverty and unemployment to increase sectarian tensions is reminiscent of loyalist movements throughout the history of the Northern state. In the 1920s, the Ulster Protestant Association articulated a reactionary response to mass unemployment by calling for expulsions of Catholics from workplaces. In the 1930s, the Great Depression and the corresponding decline in industry in the North, also caused Unionism to fracture. One consequence of this

was fissures to the left - most famously around the Outdoor Relief Riots. But less well-known is the development in the period of right-wing loyalist movements, principally the Ulster Protestant League, which combined class discontent over unemployment and poverty with a reactionary sectarianism. The same can be said of the emergence of Paisleyism, which exploited growing unease with the post-war economic downturn to promote an intensification of sectarianism. And today loyalist paramilitaries claim that Protestants are losing out, and that Catholics are doing better. Common to all of these loyalist movements is that they combine working class discontent over economic issues with a reactionary narrative that points the finger at Catholics. Many of these movements emerged at the behest of a Unionist leadership desperate to maintain their own support base. But they then develop a life of their own, as the Flag protests have shown.

Whilst loyalism today shares many characteristics with reactionary movements of the past, there is one crucial difference; loyalism today is far weaker. Think of the Ulster Workers Council strike, when loyalists brought Northern Ireland to an effective standstill. Or the mass protests and ‘general strike’ around the time of the Anglo-Irish Agreement which had more limited consequences, but still conveyed considerable strength. Whilst its true that these ‘strikes’ had more in common with a lock-out than a traditional industrial action-whereby people were intimidated by paramilitaries not to go to work- they did signal a degree of social weight within loyalism. The decline of old industry has undercut this social weight. Around the time of the Garvaghy dispute, loyalists talked of shutting the North down as they had in the past. Certainly there was widespread violence. But there were no strikes, life went on. The loyalist flag protests are on an even smaller scale. Whilst they have had a considerable impact on society here, creating no go areas, heightening tensions and causing wide scale disruption they are on a far

¹⁷‘Unionists must co-operate: PUP boss’, *Belfast Newsletter*, <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/regional/unionists-must-co-operate-pup-boss-1-5580760>

smaller scale than past loyalist movements. In short, loyalism no longer has the power to take us backwards to the days of the Orange State, but it can play a role in holding us all from moving forward.

Are Catholics Gaining over Protestants?

In addition to claiming that they are the victims of a cultural war, loyalists have been arguing for some time that Catholics have been gaining from the Peace Process whilst Protestants have lost out. This perception has been driven in part by the rise of a new and confident Catholic middle class which has made its peace with the Northern state and is content to carve out a space for itself in the current order. The richest part of Belfast, the Malone Road, for example, now has a Catholic majority. The idea that Protestants are losing out is also fuelled by the deterioration in Protestant areas themselves. One of the most striking features of poverty in Northern Ireland over the last 20 years has been the way Protestant working class areas have steadily climbed up the deprivation figures. So, while Catholic areas were highly over-represented in the 10 percent most deprived areas 20 years ago, today about 40 percent of the most deprived areas are Protestant.

Loyalists are correct in saying that Protestant working class areas are deteriorating, but they are wrong to point the finger at Catholics. In fact, despite perceptions to the contrary, the fact remains that by most socio-economic determinants, Catholics continue to do slightly worse than Protestants. In 2007 the religious composition of the population of working age in the North was found to be 53 percent Protestant and 47 percent Roman Catholic. Yet, 54 percent of those unemployed were Roman Catholic, compared to 46 percent Protestant, making Catholics 1.4 times more likely than Protestants to be unemployed. Indeed, this trend is observable across all age groups, with Catholics being more likely to be unemployed than Protestants, young and old alike. The same can be

said of housing, where Catholics continue to be disproportionately affected by the housing crisis. In North Belfast for example, Catholics make up 45 percent of the population yet some 74 percent of those on the housing waiting list are Catholic.

Much of these differences can be put down to regional trends rather than some new form of discrimination: for historical reasons, things remain worse in Catholic areas, which are concentrated in the West of the region where wages are lowest and services poorest - mirroring the North-South divide in England. In Belfast unemployment between Catholics and Protestants is almost identical. The fact remains, however, that Loyalists are wrong that Catholics have been doing better than Protestants economically. Whilst these figures clearly disprove the fallacy of a Catholic advantage over Protestants, they mask the extent to which Protestant communities have faced a serious decline over the last number of years. There are many reasons for this decline: the engineering and other manufacturing jobs that used to provide relatively well-paid, secure employment in Protestant areas have gone. Educational disadvantage hits the Protestant section of the working class, especially boys, hard - though all children in the North are poorly served by a selective education system.

Agency work is often the only option - jobs that earned £12 an hour 10 years ago but now attract only the minimum wage and offer no security. The reality of poverty, however, is that both Protestants and Catholics lose out. Even before the recession, median wage levels in the North generally were just 85 percent of those in Britain - over £15 a week less than the next lowest-paid region of the UK, the North East of England, now it's down to about 82 percent of wages in Britain. However, in the absence of any class based alternative the notion of one community doing better has been the predominant way that anger has been directed.

The protesters are right, then, that the Protestant working class has not benefited from the peace process. But neither has the

Catholic working class. It may have made some sense 40 years ago to see the interests of Catholic and Protestant working-class communities as separate and distinct - even contradictory. Undoing the effects of generations of discrimination and exclusion meant striking a new balance between the communities. Conventional thinking saw the game as zero-sum: giving to the Catholics meant taking from the Protestants. This was never an accurate assessment, but there was enough truth in it to make it seem plausible. Now it makes no sense at all. Today, there is no solution to the problems of deprived Protestant areas which would not also be the solution in deprived Catholic areas. There is no separate Protestant or Catholic working-class interest. The working class will advance in the future together, or, to the detriment of all, it won't advance at all.

The Socialist response

Unlike media pundits and other others on the left, we should not see the current resurgence of sectarianism as being about culture, identity, or some vacuous notion of a 'clash of competing rights'. What we are witnessing is the crisis of capitalism mediated through the political specificity of the North: unemployment and austerity are causing a well of anger which reactionary forces are anxious to exploit. But as Marxists we understand that these same underlying factors can give fuel to class struggle and new opportunities for the Left. Socialists have to be confident about the possibilities that class politics offers for building a serious resistance and winning working-class Catholics and Protestants to a new and effective round of mass struggles.

The type of visceral sectarianism we have seen over the last few months is a very dangerous development, and one that cannot be ignored. But we should resist the temptation to see it as an inevitable and permanent facet of life. New obstacles have emerged for the left certainly, but significant opportunities remain. The economic crisis, and a raft of soon to be implemented cuts, has the potential to

further worsen the situation. Working tax credits have been massively cut; Housing Benefit has been cut for people on benefits and few people in work now get it. If the Assembly passes the Welfare Reform Bill and brings in the Bedroom Tax and further cuts in disability benefits, then Northern Ireland is set to lose more income than any other part of the UK. But these issues can also be a source of resistance. If we are to make any serious headway in the coming period then we must find ways to build both a movement against these cuts which undercuts the notion of one community doing better than the other, whilst simultaneously linking this with a fight against the sectarian ideas and organisations which hamper any real unity emerging.

However, the history of the labour movement in the north going back before the founding of the Northern Ireland state suggests that sectarianism has played a crucial role in paralysing every attempt at advancing independent working class politics in times of capitalist crisis. In trying to demonstrate the potential for class politics, socialists tend to emphasize the high points of workers' unity in the north: the 1907 dock strike, the 1919 engineers' strikes, the Outdoor Relief riots of the thirties. But each of these episodes also demonstrates the resilience of sectarianism: the post WWI recession saw a massive general strike in 1919, but also the rise of the Ulster Protestant Association and the pogroms of the 1920's. The post WWII decline in industry saw a rise in Labourism and the Northern Ireland Labour Party but also generated an early form of Paisleyism.

The political lessons of the last great economic recession in the 1930's are of paramount importance. In 1932, a sustained campaign of agitation around unemployment brought thousands of Catholics and Protestants into the streets. An attempt by the state to crush the movement by force was met by sustained rioting on both the Shankill and the Falls, creating Belfast's first non-sectarian working class riot. But again, despite the mass movement, sectarianism didn't just disappear. Sectarian attacks continued

and the Revolutionary Workers Group, which had developed a base in both Protestant and Catholic areas during the strike, were forced to contend with the rise of organizations like the Ulster Protestant League and the sectarianism of Unionist politicians who viciously resisted any notion of class unity.¹⁸

In other words the history of the labour movement in Belfast suggests that economic crisis presents both the potential for a united working-class response and for a retreat into the familiar groove of sectarian scapegoating. There is little appetite in the North for a return to the violence of the Troubles. But we have to be clear that in the current situation, with a deepening economic crisis as its backdrop, the potential exists for the emergence of class struggle against austerity and at the same time the possibility for a renewal of sectarian tensions. The cuts, austerity and discontent with the establishment has created a situation where the continuation of the status quo is not a viable option for ordinary people on either sides of the divide. The question for the working class in the North remains this: in the face of this impasse, will we move forward towards class unity, or backward into the cleavages of communal politics?

In attempting to build a left in the North two strategic approaches towards the Protestant working class have historically prevailed. The first position, prevalent amongst republicans, writes them off as a singular, reactionary bloc. Here, Protestant workers are viewed merely as the dupes of Unionism, incapable of breaking from the shackles of Orangeism. In the past this position was justified on the left by a crude materialism, which categorised Protestant workers as a privileged cast, above and separate from their Catholic counterparts. Certainly, real and significant differences did exist between Protestant and Catholic workers, and no serious socialist movement could afford to ignore this. But ultimately sectarianism had the effect of dragging all workers backwards - living standards

across the board have been lower in the North than corresponding regions in Britain- and as such, all workers had a stake in opposing it. Today, the differences between Protestants and Catholics are even more marginal, rendering any notion of privilege null and void: ultimately both Catholics and Protestants have an interest in fighting together. Furthermore, any movement of the left that confines itself to one community will face serious pressures to revert to communal politics. Historically this has meant a retreat from class politics into a version of left Nationalism or Labour Unionism.

The second approach is the reformist one. This position, dominant amongst the trade union leadership, seeks to win Protestant workers to class politics by ignoring or at worst justifying the sectarianism of loyalists. This approach is evident in the failure of the Unions to present any sort of clear opposition to the upsurge in loyalist violence in the last period. It can be seen also in the attempts by some union leaders to build a relationship with the 'protestant community' by effectively entering into alliances with loyalist paramilitaries. Taking its cue from the Northern state, the Unions accept the notion of the 'two traditions', and refuse to take a stand against loyalist sectarianism. In the short term Unions fear that any opposition to loyalists will jettison their protestant support. True, some loyalists would no doubt criticise the unions if they were to come out against sectarianism. But the reality is that in the long term this position paralyses the labour movement and forces it to retreat every time sectarian enmity rises. Despite this, the Unions and Trade Union struggle can play a crucial role in challenging sectarianism. At 36 percent, the North has a higher trade union density than any corresponding region in Britain or the Republic of Ireland¹⁹, bringing hundreds of thousands of Catholic and Protestant workers together. If the unions can be pushed into action, then the environment for challenging

¹⁸For more on this see the author's forthcoming book on the ODR riots.

¹⁹*Trade union statistics* 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/trade-union-statistics-2012>

sectarianism will be much more favourable. But if we ignore the menace of sectarianism, then that unity will be short-lived and the divisions will emerge once more.

Socialists, therefore, can neither write off the protestant working class because loyalist ideas currently predominate within a section of it, nor can we shirk from the difficult questions when attempting to build a movement of working class opposition to austerity. Common to both these positions is the equation of loyalist and the Protestant working class as one and the same. It ignores the long tradition of labourism and trade unions amongst protestant workers, and neglects the many Protestants who have no truck with loyalism or Unionist politicians. Common too is a separation of the political and the economic, a sort of '*Render unto Loyalism the things which are loyalist; and the Trade Unions the things that are the Trade Union's*'. Socialists do not separate political and economic questions. On the contrary, we see them as inextricably linked. Socialists understand that through struggle workers can change their ideas. Class struggle is, as Marx put it, a 'self-changing' process. Therefore when Protestant and Catholic workers fight together, the terrain is changed, and an opportunity arises for sectarianism to be challenged. However we should not confuse an opportunity with inevitability. As Marx put it, revolutionary action must be 'practical-critical'.²⁰ That is to say it must combine a practical engagement with the building of real struggle with an ideological offensive against bourgeois ideas. The history of the left in the North, unfortunately, is the history of the separation of these two things.

For this reason, the only principled and sustainable position for the left is to build

a movement which brings Protestant and Catholic workers together, whilst simultaneously fighting to break workers from reactionary ideas like Orangeism. This is why socialists are not neutral on the National question. As Lenin argued, socialism 'assesses any national demand, any national separation, from the angle of the workers' class struggle'.²¹ Socialists do not call for an end to the border out of some desire to unite the historic Irish nation. We do so because we understand that if a real workers movement is to be built in this country, then it must overcome all sources of division, including the ideas of Orangeism in the working class. But we also understand that this cannot be done on the basis of Irish Nationalism. Gerry Adam's plan to have a referendum on Irish unity is a case in point. What he is effectively asking protestant workers, and catholic workers for that matter, is to vote to separate from one rotten state in the North, in order to unite with another rotten state in the South. Socialists of course want to see an end to the border. But we stand in the tradition of James Connolly and fight for a 32 County Workers' Republic that can offer a future for all workers on this island, Protestant or Catholic.

Socialists must be able to link the day to day issues around pay, jobs or funding with a wider political fight in society. This relationship between the practical activity of bringing workers together through struggle and the political fight against reactionary ideas within that is the key to left wing strategy in the North. Ultimately this process can only be synthesized by a revolutionary party, rooted in struggle and capable of challenging backward ideas within the working class. The task remains to build it.

²⁰Karl Marx, *Theses On Feuerbach*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>

²¹Lenin, *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/self-det/ch04.htm>