

PARTITION

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It is sometimes assumed that the differences in Ireland which gave rise to partition had mainly or solely to do with religion and communal identity. These were important factors, but economics played a more profound role. This becomes clear from examination of the emergence and development of the major manifestations of unionism and nationalism.

Unionist leaders had reacted with fury and alarm in 1886 when Liberal prime minister Gladstone introduced the first Home Rule Bill at Westminster. They called on the Protestants of the North to rise up and repel the hordes of Romanists massing, so they warned, in the West and the South, intent on destroying the freedom, religion, and laws of the Protestant people.

Some well-upholstered bosses of unionism at the time may have been genuinely concerned about a perceived threat to their religion. There were Calvinists among them who ever craved the semblance of threat to get them through the gloom of the day. But more importantly they cherished at least as much the class privilege they had come to enjoy and to see as their literal God-given right.

North/South economic divergences had become more pronounced through the nineteenth century. By the 1830s, Belfast was at the centre of an expanding linen industry. The sons and daughters of tenant farmers were swarming into the city to become wage earners

in the mills. Profits from linen fuelled the foundation of the shipbuilding and engineering industries which were to mightily prosper in the Belfast area.

The first iron ship built in Ireland was made in Belfast in the 1840s. The first large Irish shipbuilding company opened at Queens Island in 1850. The population of the city increased from fewer than 30,000 in 1813 to more than 100,000 in 1851. Power was generated from Scottish coal. Credit was supplied by British banks. The Empire provided raw materials and secure markets. By the time the first Home Rule Bill came onto the agenda, Belfast, for practical purposes, was part of industrial Britain. The owners of land and increasingly of industry desperately needed to retain the link with Britain.

The position on the rest of the island was different. Industry was sparse. The vast majority of people lived on the land, dirt poor. Oppressive law blocked their every avenue of advance. The Famine in the 1840s more than decimated their numbers. Two million fled to other continents and countries. Landlords were left to rule the roost in a bedraggled land. But their dominance was under continuous threat from the mass of the oppressed and, at first in a glimmer, then in full glow, from an emerging urban caste of professionals, intellectuals, and commercial operators who, drawing for strength on the rage of the downtrodden, elbowed their way into the mainstream of London politics, able to exert pressure at Westminster to tilt developments towards their preferred alignment.

A series of land acts, culminating in Wyndham's Law in 1903, giving tenants the right to buy out their holdings, created a new class of peasant proprietors in relatively short order. Between 1903 and 1909, 270,000 tenants bought out their holdings, drastically changing the pattern of life and livelihood across swathes of the land.

It was in the context of these developments that Sinn Féin was founded in 1900. Its key contribution was to campaign for an end to British rule while fomenting conditions for the emergence of an independent manufacturing class. The party's founding document set out an economic perspective on giving native manufacturers protected space in which they might meet foreign competition on level

terms. 'If a manufacturer cannot produce as cheaply as an English or other foreigner only because his competitor has better resources at his disposal, then it is the first duty of the Irish nation to afford protection for that manufacturer.' Not an optional aspiration, then, but 'the first duty'.

The party's first president, Arthur Griffith, was not lacking in ambition for his class, noting that the English, the French, the Germans, and others were plundering Africa, Asia, and Latin America for colonial booty and declaring that, as a patriot, he could not accept that Irish people were inherently incapable of playing their full part in this process. Looking beyond immediate horizons, he envisioned an independent nation at the heart of an Irish commercial empire, taking advantage of the links forged by Irish Catholic missionaries in faraway places. Which is not to say that the purity of his vision was ever corrupted by association with foreign causes.

The SF leadership was, logically enough, opposed to anything potentially disruptive of national solidarity as Ireland strove to claim its place among the nations of the world. Griffith wanted nothing to do with trade unionism and stayed aloof from the tumult surrounding the 1913 Dublin Lock-out. He feared that class struggle—not that the phrase ever fell from his lips—would split the national movement. He summed up his position in forthright language:

'The right of the Irish people to political independence never was, is not and never can be, dependent on the admission of equal right in all other peoples. It is based on no theory of and dependant in no way for its existence or justification on the "Rights of Man". He who holds Ireland a nation and all means lawful to restore her a full and free exercise of national liberties, thereby no more commits himself to the theory that black equals white, or that kingship is immoral or that society has a duty to reform its enemies, than he commits himself to the belief that sunshine is extractable from cucumbers'.

From the point of view of Unionist leaders as they watched these developments from the North, Sinn Féin, although still tiny, would have appeared a

different proposition from constitutional semi-separatists like Parnell or Redmond. They had been out, not for a clean break from Britain, but for a degree of independence within the kingdom. The difference wasn't merely a matter of identity. Sinn Féin's economic nationalism posed a direct threat to the owners of industry in Belfast, Lisburn, etc. Had the linen, shipbuilding, and engineering industries been cut off from Britain by protective tariffs, they would have gone to the wall.

However, the direst threat to Unionism came not from the nascent Sinn Féin party but from the potential of its separatism to rally support from the teeming mass of the discontented. The message of the need to break with Britain also attracted advocates of a radical transformation, interested in the overthrow of economic structures as much as in the achievement of a Dublin the stated policies of Nationalist groups which most unnerved Northern business leaders and their British allies. In 1907, the Unionist Party defined the situation thus: 'In Ireland, the classes that are inevitably opposed to Home Rule include the following—the capitalists, the manufacturers, the merchants, the professional men, and indeed all who have anything to lose'.

The Home Rulers, observed the Marquis of Londonderry, were 'remarkably lacking in the support of businessmen, merchants, manufacturers, leaders of industries, bankers and men who compose a successful and prosperous community.'

It wasn't just the flag which the leaders of the Unionists wanted to preserve but the class structures that it floated over. In this situation, communal rivalries were heaven sent. *The Times* editorialised in 1913: 'By disciplining the Ulster democracy and by leading it to look up to them at its natural leaders the clergy and the gentry are providing against the spread of revolutionary doctrine and free thought.'

'Big House' Unionism sent out a sectarian message not so much for protection against the sprinkling of holy water but against the vulnerability of the 'Ulster democracy' to dangerous ideas.

Revolutionary doctrine and free thought were soon to get short shrift not only from the clergy and gentry of the North but from the clergy and the leaders of the Home Rule movement in the South. Social revolution

was not to be included in the ideological baggage of the fight for Irish freedom.

The national movement reached its highest point in the 1916 Easter Rising. One of its leaders, James Connolly, a Marxist, directed the hostility of the working class towards native as well as foreign capitalism. He had been an organiser for the Irish Transport and General Workers Union during the lockout three years earlier, and with James Larkin can be said to have created the Irish Citizen Army, armed picket lines, or more grandiosely, 'the first Red Army in Europe'. It was partly due to Connolly's and the Citizen Army's impatience for action in Ireland while Britain was distracted by war in Europe that the Easter Rising had been launched: from the socialist perspective, the sense of freedom generated by the rising might have passed over into a class struggle for economic freedom. Hence the socialist impatience for nationalism to rise.

Connolly's approach had wide support among trades unionists and those defined at the time as 'advanced' nationalists. But, on the face of it, his views were to leave little imprint on the vastly expanded movement inspired into existence in the wake of the Easter Rising. Extreme nationalists, poetical dissenters, and radical socialists were in the vanguard.

Despite all this, time and circumstance were to dictate that priest-ridden conservatism would become the defining ideology of the national movement. By the general election of December 1918, the battle for the hearts and minds of nationalist Ireland was being waged between constitutional nationalism and its militant variant, Griffith's version of republicanism.

Meanwhile, the respectable leadership of a Labour Party built on the back of rank-and-file workers' action and claiming apostolic lineage from Connolly stood aside so as not to 'split the Nationalist vote'. The workers' role was to vote.

Throughout this period, a new class of Catholic aspirant capitalists was increasing in numbers and self-confidence. In Dublin, Cork, and other towns, Catholics ran small leather, textile, paper and printing, milling and glass industries, and two banks, the National and the Hibernian. Between 1910 and 1920, as turmoil raged towards partition, joint stock bank deposits in Dublin increased from £62.5 million

to £200 million.

At the same time, Labour was astir.

In September 1918, Dublin 'papers were likening the industrial situation to 1913 and the Lock-out. At the beginning of 1919, when the first shots in the War of Independence were fired, industrial struggle loomed much larger than the guerrilla campaign getting underway. Between 1916 and 1920, workers deluged into unions. From a base of 5,000 in 1912, membership of the ITGWU soared to 100,000 by 1920.

In the North at the same time, Unionist leaders, too, were feeling the heat from working-class anger. In the December 1918 general election, the Labour Representation Committee put up four candidates in Belfast. Each came a respectable second, amassing around a quarter of voters in all, likely a majority of them Protestant despite passionate appeals from Carson and others not to 'split the vote'. (This was the first election in which women (over 30) were able to vote, and the first under full manhood suffrage.)

In January 1919, the Belfast District Committee of the Federation of Engineering and Shipbuilding Trades balloted for strike for a forty-hour week. The result was 20,225 to 558 in favour. Trams stopped, streetlights stayed dark, factories and mills fell silent. After three weeks, troops moved in. Belfast was under martial law. The workers eventually accepted the compromise of a forty-seven-hour week. The strike had not been a triumph. But it showed that Protestant workers were by no means imprisoned within Orangeism, but, on a trade union level at least, were as ready as workers in any other part of Britain and Ireland—including, for example, Dublin—to take on the bosses.

Thirteen LRC candidates were elected to Belfast Corporation in January 1920. James Baird of the Boilermakers' Union outraged Unionist burghers by turning up at council meetings in overalls. There were strikes for the forty-four-hour week in the shipyard and among building workers. When, in February 1920, Lloyd George's government offered Home Rule within a partitioned Ireland, the Protestant community was far from united behind the flag. From a class point of view, the significance of the 'Holy War' which was to erupt in Belfast four months later

was that it tended to weld the classes within the Protestant community together again.

In July 1920, Edward Carson discovered a ‘Bolshevik-Sinn Fein alliance’:

What I say is this—the men who come forward posing as friends of Labour care no more about Labour than does the man in the moon. Their real object, the real insidious object of their propaganda, is that they may mislead and bring about disunity among our own people and in the end, before we know where we are, we may find ourselves in the same bondage and slavery as in the rest of Ireland.

Wrap the Union flag around me, boys, even as, as if in choreographed coordination, the green flag is draped around other boys in other parts of Ireland.

Just nine days after Carson’s speech, Protestant engineers at Workman Clark held a rally at which it was decided to expel all ‘Sinn Feiners’—Catholics—from the yard. A hail of rivets sent them scurrying. A pattern was set. Once a workplace was cleared of Catholics, the Union flag was raised as a sign of victory. At a gathering by the slipway in Harland and Wolff, the future prime minister of Northern Ireland James Craig congratulated the workers who had just driven their workmates out. *The Northern Whig* reported: Would they hang on forever to the old Union Jack, the emblem of their loyalty to King and Empire? (“Yes”, and Cheers.) Did they still refuse to go under a Sinn Fein parliament than Dublin? (“Yes”, and Cheers.) Well, as they had answered those questions it was only fair that he should answer one that had not been put to him. Do I approve of the action you boys have taken? He said, Yes.’

In all, 10,000 workers were driven out. They were not all Catholics. Protestant radicals too were, logically enough, hunted from the premises. Among those victimised were Charles McKay, James Baird, and Jay Hanna—a member of the Orange Order who nevertheless, it hadn’t been forgotten, had backed the dockers’ strike led by Larkin Back in 1907.

The effect of these events on trade union activity in Belfast was pulverising, and immediate. On October 18th, four days after Craig’s rhodomontade at

Harland and Wolff, workers there agreed ‘in the interests of good order’ to waive their claim for a forty-four-hour week. In December 1920, engineering pay in Belfast was actually cut without any reported response, much less resistance, from trades unionists who, just a few years earlier, had put the fear of godlessness into the British ruling class.

It wasn’t that Belfast workers from the Protestant community had sloughed off class feeling and collapsed into Orangeism, more that sectarian sentiment inflated by the rhetoric of Unionist leaders and their mouthpieces in the local press was billowing through the workplace. Stiffer ideas would have been needed to stand up for class politics, and, after the expulsions, these were not forthcoming.

At no point in the critical years preceding partition did Labour agitation in the North link up with a fight for independence across the island. In terms of the political ideas which were then dominant, there was no sustainable basis on which this connection could have been made. The tendencies competing for dominance in and around Sinn Féin were at one in holding that class was irrelevant for the foreseeable future, and that ‘Labour must wait’. There was no political formation with the heft and ideological clarity to campaign in the North for an independent Ireland in which Protestant workers could be confident they would get a better deal and find a more congenial home than was likely in a partitioned Ireland, no anti-Unionist organisation differentiated in the public mind from the conservative Catholic nationalism which now infused Sinn Féin and its adjuncts. In all these circumstances, appeals to northern Protestants to join with their Catholic compatriots in a fight for independence from Britain were, in the literal sense of the word, impertinent. As socialists in Ireland today, it is our task to ensure this bleak scenario is not repeated and that a vision of a better Ireland for all its working-class people is strongly argued for as an integral component of the case for and the process of reunification. Moreover, People Before Profit, for the first time on the Irish left since the days of Connolly, is actually in a position, both North and South, to make a modest but serious start in this direction.