



UNIONISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS PART 1

Seán Mitchell

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Part One: Ghosts of Terence O'Neill

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The formation of the Northern Irish state a century ago may well be the high water mark of the Ulster Unionist project: a movement of hundreds of thousands, led by powerful and wealthy industrialists alongside the remnants of the landed aristocracy, bolstered by the allegiance of a sizeable section of workers who could be relied on to expel 'disloyalists' from their ranks, and backed up by an imposing repressive apparatus bankrolled by the might and financial resources of the British Empire in London. When King George V came to open the maiden sitting of the Northern parliament in June 1921, he told its first prime minister, James Craig: 'I can't tell you how glad I am I came, but you know my entourage were very much against it', to which Craig confidently replied, 'Sir, you are surrounded by pessimists; we are all optimists over here'.¹ There was good reason for unionist buoyancy at the dawn of the Orange state.

Surveying the condition of Unionism today, little is left of Craig's puffed up triumphalism: as identification with Unionism reaches new lows in opinion polls, the prospect of a border poll looms ever larger on the horizon, and a fractured political Unionism lurches from calamity to crisis. Unionism would appear as if it has locked itself into an intractable cycle of decline, from which it has not yet escaped nor shown detectable signs that it may in the

future. As the Northern Irish state marks one hundred years of existence—a remarkable feat given its marked propensity towards political instability—few are wagering that it will see out another centennial celebration. The long crisis of Unionism is headed towards a reckoning one way or another.

The centrepiece of the latest round of Unionist ignominy is the high farce that gave rise to no less than three DUP party leaders in the space of a month. The background to this sorry episode has been widely reported: Edwin Poots, the misbegotten heir to Paisleyite intransigence, had engineered a leadership challenge to Arlene Foster in a context of Loyalist disenchantment with the so-called NI protocol with the EU.² Encouraged by Loyalist paramilitaries who wanted a tougher stance against Republicanism and traditionalist members of the DUP who were concerned with the future of 'Ulster conservatism' (i.e., a softening towards women's rights or the LGBTQ+ community), Poots calculated that a new leader could stem the drift of party supporters to Jim Allister's Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) and stave off any effort by Sinn Féin to become the largest party in the Stormont Assembly.

The devil always fools with the best laid plans, however. No sooner had the palace coup succeeded—with Foster replaced as first minister by Poots' protégé Paul Givan—than a swift and summary coup de grâce was delivered to Poots himself: with the new DUP leader unceremoniously dumped within hours by an assembly team reportedly displeased with the renewal of power-sharing with Sinn Féin in return for the enactment of Irish language legislation at Westminster. The fact that Poots was deposed on account of his perceived weakness on the Irish language—and by logical extension, for having propped up Stormont too easily—puts obvious question marks over the common assumption that the transition from Poots to his successor Jeffrey Donaldson represents a move from an obstructionist Orangeism to a more pragmatic, even liberal, Unionism. Nevertheless, this has been the narrative in the media, and one the new DUP leader has been keen to convey himself.

In his inaugural address as party leader, Jeffrey Donaldson pledged 'to renew and revitalise unionism' around 'a simple, positive and modern' vision,

committing to a presentation more outward looking than the bullish brand of Loyalism promised by his fleeting predecessor. He further declared that his vision of Unionism would ‘have no barriers to entry beyond a belief that Northern Ireland is best served as a part of the UK’, and that his new, enterprising DUP would ‘not hanker on returning back to a bygone age but forward to a new era’. Henceforth, he wanted ‘to be known as a bridge-builder’, who would ‘anchor [the DUP] securely in the mainstream of unionism and on the common ground of Northern Ireland politics’. Days later he offered an apology, of sorts, for hurtful remarks made by DUP members about the LGBTQ+ community, though with little of substance as to how he might redress this in the future.³

In a nod to the once mighty all-class alliance that was the bedrock of Unionism a century before, Donaldson proposed ‘to reconnect with grassroots unionists and loyalists’ as well as ‘with representatives from across civic society from church leaders to business representatives’, in order to construct ‘a pan-unionist convention [that] can be the vehicle to build practical and strategic unity’. This coalition, he determined, would make common cause with those whose ‘support for the Union is based on a cultural, social and historic affinity with Great Britain and those whose support is grounded more in reason and realism of what is in the best interests for them and their families’. In perhaps his most telling admission, he conceded that ‘Northern Ireland in 2021 is not the same as Northern Ireland a hundred years ago’—‘The pace of social change this past decade cannot be ignored by those who wish to represent a majority of the people who live here’.⁴

Donaldson’s credentials for the role of liberal reformer may seem suspect at best: an Orangeman and former UDR soldier who cut his teeth as an election agent for the unabashed racist mouthpiece Enoch Powell, later rising to prominence as a negotiator for the Ulster Unionist Party during the Belfast Agreement talks before staging a walkout in protest and becoming the chief anti-agreement critic of David Trimble throughout the peace process. A much touted leadership bid against Trimble would fail to materialise, with Donaldson decamping instead to the ranks of the DUP alongside fellow UUP exiles Arlene Foster and Peter Weir, boosting Paisley’s

efforts to topple his rival from the perch of Unionist dominance at a critical juncture. If Donaldson is a DUP ‘liberal’, you could be forgiven for thinking it is with an ‘l’ so small it is not visible to the naked eye; his career defined, undoubtedly, by a pattern of political intransigence and revanchist Loyalism.

That said, a number of factors are at work that would compel any Unionist leader to engage in a strategic re-evaluation. Donaldson has inherited a Unionist movement in a deep state of malaise. At the time of writing, the DUP are trailing in the polls as more liberal-minded Unionists scuttle towards the Alliance Party and hardliners to the TUV. Worse still, as Tonge explains: ‘At the time of the Good Friday Agreement around 40 per cent of people in Northern Ireland described themselves as unionist, whereas the corresponding figure today is closer to 28 per cent.’⁵ And prospects look bleak for the future, with just 17 per cent of those aged 18–24 in the North identifying as British, something that has long been claimed as a cornerstone of Unionist identity.⁶ Admittedly, none of this means partition will vanish tomorrow: polls on the prospect for a united Ireland vary, but they generally lean towards a slim majority for the union. And any number of determinants could swing that one way or another in the years ahead. Still, Donaldson is savvy enough to realise that the caprice of the electorate is hardly solid ground on which to build another century of Northern Ireland. The crisis of Unionism will not be solved so easily.

Donaldson’s primary aim, therefore, was to strike a chord of modernity and originality against what Steve Bruce identified in the nineties as the ‘dismal vision’ of modern Unionism⁷ and the now universally held opinion that the DUP is stuck in some kind of biblical time warp. His intention was to appeal to the much vaunted middle ground of Northern Irish politics and those who have been turned off by the DUP’s naked sectarianism and flagrant abuse of oppressed minorities. On reflection, what was striking about Donaldson’s speech was not its originality but the utter sense of *déjà vu* it evoked: with his solemn promise to build a heuristic, non-sectarian Unionism redolent of a string of Unionist leaders before him. There were echoes of Terence O’Neill, shades of David Trimble, and more than a few hints that Donaldson had failed to develop any new strategic

insights that might allow his project to avoid the kind of crashing defeats suffered by those who had sought to modernise Unionism before him.

The basic conundrum that has befuddled unionist leaders for decades is as follows: in order to build a non-sectarian coalition for the preservation of the union which can command a stable majority in the North for the foreseeable future, it is necessary to move beyond a broadly Protestant identitarianism and the decidedly sectarian politics of Orangeism more specifically. Not impossible, by any stretch. But then how might Donaldson expect to ‘reconnect with grassroots unionists and loyalists’ just as he moves away from the ‘orange drum-beating’ that had connected them in the first place?⁸ Just weeks after his coronation, the new DUP leader was already stumping for Loyalism in a dispute over a Twelfth of July bonfire in North Belfast. Donaldson would appear to be following the pattern of reforming Unionist leaders before him, whose initial cross-communal intentions seemed to melt away in the heat of July, as if you could hear them say: ‘Lord make me good, but not just yet’.

One of the principal claims of Donaldson, and O’Neill and Trimble before him, is that Unionism could be detached from Orangeism and become something of a secular union-appreciation club, involving people of all religious backgrounds and none. This is not entirely fanciful. Many Catholics, liberal Protestants, and people who identify as neither are pro-union, often for reasons of economic pragmatism or fear of the unknown. To be a supporter of the union you need not be sectarian, a member of the Orange Order, or have any truck with Loyalism or indeed the DUP for that matter. Plenty have been, and many more will be. Alex Kane, one of Unionism’s most astute thinkers, has additionally spotlighted the many shades of Unionism: ‘Party political unionism, civic unionism, loyalism, liberal unionism, Orange/non-Orange unionism, small-u/big-U unionism, traditional unionism, for-God-and-Ulster unionism, secular unionism, truculent unionism, accommodating unionism, paramilitary unionism, Brexit unionism/non-Brexit unionism’.⁹ Quite.

There is a certain sleight of hand in all of this, however. It is demonstrably true that there are many Unionists who do not follow the politics of

Orangeism, and many shades of pro-union politics besides. But then this does not negate the elementary fact that it was on the power and infrastructure of Orangeism that Unionism was built in the first place. Nor does it exculpate Unionism from its long history of ‘beating the big orange drum’, as it were—both historically and in the more recent post-Good Friday Agreement (GFA) era—when its dominance or support appeared to be under challenge. In reality, Unionist power has long been a duality of pro-union politics and Orangeism—it has been the growing variance between these two pillars, and the labyrinth of class contradictions that underpins them, that has fuelled the crisis of Unionism for several decades. Removing sectarianism as the operative principle in Unionism is a noble endeavour, but it has thus far failed because it has required a confrontation with the foundations of Unionism itself. That is, to challenge sectarianism is to challenge the very structures that fostered and sustained the Northern Ireland state in the first place. Therein lies the materiality of the historic crisis of Unionism.

What follows is not a totalising history of Unionism but the first in a series of reflections on the problematic at the heart of the historic crisis of the Unionist project, honing in on past efforts by Unionist leaders to resolve this by ‘liberalising’ or modernising, and the intractable class contradictions that undid their efforts.

Terence O’Neill: Orange machine or Northern Ireland Ltd?

More than half a century before Jeffrey Donaldson proffered his ‘positive’ proposal to ‘anchor securely in the mainstream of unionism and on the common ground of Northern Ireland politics’, the then Northern Ireland prime minister Captain Terence O’Neill was offering a very similar vision:

Above all, Ulster needs today people whose view of politics is a positive one. The recent National Opinion Poll showed many signs of radical movement in local opinion, much of it towards a central position in which reasonable men can stand together. It is that middle ground which is there to be won at the next and subsequent Elections.¹⁰

'Liberal Unionism' was predicated on the argument, as O'Neill put it, 'that Northern Ireland must remain an integral part of the United Kingdom', but that this position would 'never be secure as long as a large section of our population sets its face against it'. To this end, O'Neill declared it would be the 'unmistakable policy of the Unionist Party that everyone shall have a fair deal in Ulster' regardless of religious background. He embarked on a series of largely symbolic actions designed to give his liberal Unionism a visual pretence; sending a public letter of condolence over the death of Pope John XXIII; becoming the first Northern Ireland prime minister to visit a Catholic school in 1964, and later the first Northern premier to meet the Irish Taoiseach in 1965. Some academics have attempted to explain O'Neill's apparent non-sectarianism as a product of the 'cosmopolitan' culture he was exposed to at Eton, apparently undisturbed by the tribal preoccupations of Ulster.¹¹ But this is nonsense. In 1959, at a time when he was finance minister, O'Neill placed an advertisement in the *Belfast Telegraph* that read: 'Protestant girl required for housework. Apply to Hon. Mrs Terence O'Neill, Glebe House, Ahoghill, Co. Antrim.'¹² Forces other than O'Neill's Etonian worldliness were clearly at play in the genesis of liberal Unionism, therefore.

What, then, motivated this apparent about-turn? And what accounted for its cataclysmic implosion? Its origins lie in the tremendous material changes taking place in Ulster capitalism in this period. The Northern Irish economy was facing a protracted decline by the late fifties. As the sun began to set on the British Empire, and London began its long move towards a more finance-centric economy, the centrality of Ulster industry to British capitalism dramatically declined. The three staples of the Northern Irish economy— heavy industry, textiles, and agriculture—had all receded in terms of output and jobs; shipbuilding alone recorded a 40 per cent loss in employment between 1961 and 1964. Additionally, these staples were being challenged, if not rapidly outstripped, by international competitors, leading to a general economic slowdown, a rise in unemployment, and gloomy prospects for Ulster capitalism. In turn, this led to discontent with Unionist elites, with the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) scoring some impressive electoral results. A recalibration in the ruling ideology was required.

It was this context that gave rise to Terence O'Neill's liberal Unionism. An old Etonian of aristocratic stock, who was wounded in World War Two and had served as a captain in the British Army, O'Neill's primary loyalty was not to an ancestral Protestant Ulster (he could, in fact, trace his lineage back to Gaelic nobility), nor even to the Orange Order of which he was a member, but instead to what he extemporaneously referred to in one speech as 'Northern Ireland Ltd': the capitalistic interests that lay at the heart of the Unionist project, whose material and political needs drove the creation of the Northern state. O'Neill belonged, as a 1965 *London Times* editorial suggested, 'to a generation of Ulstermen concerned with the challenge of economic necessities', who were pledged to the 'building up of home industries and the extension of overseas markets [as] the targets of the island as a whole.'¹³ A finance minister for several years before his premiership, O'Neill was attuned to the rapidly changing needs of the capitalist class in this period:

We were talking textiles in Ulster centuries before Hong Kong became a British colony. Our ships were sailing the oceans of the world before Japan had begun to emerge as a significant industrial power. Yet, with all this wealth of experience, it takes more men to produce a ton of steel or build a house than it does in the countries of some of our competitors.¹⁴

O'Neill was, to paraphrase James Craig, a representative of the capitalist class first and an Orangeman second: 'The profit motive may seem wicked to some people', as O'Neill once remarked, 'but the loss of motive is the royal road to bankruptcy.'¹⁵ Northern Irish capitalism was in need of reform, and O'Neill proposed two changes: 'First, we must achieve a substantially more efficient use of labour ... The second really important change we need is to secure somehow or other a more rapid and effective commercial exploitation of scientific and technical innovations.'¹⁶ Northern Irish capitalism needed to be modernised and rationalised, in other words. This was combined with a system of government grants designed to 'make the North a

Mecca for foreign capitalists' by encouraging foreign direct investment (FDI).¹⁷ This economic strategy scored some initial successes, with firms such as Michelin, Goodyear, and DuPont setting up shop. Indeed, by March 1965, 324 new foreign enterprises had been established in the North.¹⁸ O'Neill enjoyed a period of goodwill as a result of this. The NILP suffered significant losses in the 1965 Stormont elections, for example, with the Unionists winning their largest vote share since 1949. It would be a brief honeymoon.

Another critical feature of O'Neillism was a thawing in relations with the southern Irish government. This was a highly controversial move within Unionism. In 1960, O'Neill's main party rival, deputy leader Brian Faulkner, had stated: 'Those in Ulster who advocated closer economic co-operation with the South ought to pause and consider the implications of what they are saying ... A Unionist government can be relied upon to see that there is no tampering with our Trade relations which must be on a United Kingdom basis.'¹⁹ Nevertheless, significant material changes and pressure from the British government were encouraging Unionist tops to think the unthinkable. By the late fifties, the Irish ruling class was beginning to abandon its decades-long strategy of economic protectionism, removing trade barriers to better foster foreign investment. Despite the continuing Republican rhetoric of the Fianna Fáil Party, the southern ruling class had definitively reached a point where 'the resolution of the national question was subordinated to economic development.'²⁰ In particular, it was more open to free trade with Britain, and by the late sixties the south of Ireland had become the sixth largest importer of British goods. Under pressure from the British government, O'Neill met the Irish Taoiseach Seán Lemass in 1965. That same year the Republic excluded Northern Ireland from the operation of its import levy, confirming that in spite of the loud-mouthed opposition from hard-line Loyalists like Ian Paisley, 'it had become good business to talk to the dreaded southerners'.

Nonetheless, O'Neill's outreach to Catholics and the Irish government, alongside the arrival of international firms—who had little need to institute the kind of systems of sectarian preference that had been the hallmark of Orange capital—would

begin to clash with the Orange ideology that had underpinned Unionist power since the inception of the state. The hegemony of Northern Ireland Ltd—of the capitalist class, in other words—was closely entwined with what Eamonn McCann described as 'the Orange machine': the civic networks and sectarian structures grouped around the Orange Order that could marshal the support of large sections of society, built around a system of patronage, sectarian preference, and when necessary, organised violence. The Orange machine was 'as remarkable a piece of political equipment as had existed anywhere', McCann conceded, '[involving] tens of thousands of people, each of who had an interest in the machine retaining its central position in the power structure'.²¹ Critically, the interest of the Orange machine 'did not forever coincide with the overall needs of the Northern Ireland economy', and by the sixties a sharp divergence was developing between its needs and the material interests of Northern Ireland Ltd:

The [Orange] machine needed constantly to be tended, needed to be fuelled and refuelled with the spoils of discrimination—jobs, houses and social prestige—which could be paid out to the faithful to endow them with a sense of privilege. The threat from without had constantly to be inflated and 'dealt with' in order to discourage and buy off the threat from within.

The new economic pattern in Ireland in the sixties made the Orange machine redundant. Northern-Protestant and Southern-Catholic capitalism could not come together as economic common sense demanded while the main political expression of Northern Protestantism continued to brow-beat the Catholics within its territory. Hence 'liberal-Unionism'.²²

The Orange Order was a tremendously powerful institution in this period, and had been the ballast of Unionist opposition to both Republicanism and socialism for a century and a half. It was first created to smash the largely Protestant-led United Irishmen in the 1790s, was again resurrected in the late nineteenth

century to oppose Home Rule, and was deployed with great effect to stymie the development of socialism and trade unionism within the Protestant working class. The Orange lodges were the first to develop the idea of military drilling during the Home Rule crisis of 1912, an occasion Unionist leaders would exploit to create the Ulster Volunteer Force. After partition, the order became the civic conduit for Unionist hegemony in the Orange state—developing into what Antonio Gramsci called a ‘hegemonic apparatus’—providing the infrastructure for the application of discrimination and segregation, upon which bourgeois hegemony could rest. It was also hugely influential in the Unionist Party. The overwhelming majority of Unionist MPs in the Stormont Parliament were members of the Orange Order. Only three people who served in the cabinet had never been a member of the order. Every prime minister of Northern Ireland during the period 1921-72 was in the order. It was, as one historian of the order put it, ‘an army with banners.’²³

To both its defenders and many of its detractors, Northern Ireland was a monolithic ‘Protestant state for a Protestant people’, a moniker coined by its first prime minister, James Craig. However, this concealed the class dynamics beneath the surface, and what O’Leary correctly describes as the ‘structural brittleness of the Unionist regime.’²⁴ Rather than a singular monolith, the Orange state is more accurately comprehended as an uneasy alliance between the Northern Ireland Ltd of the capitalist class and the Orange machine that provided it with cross-class support, with an impressive coercive apparatus developed as insurance (armed RUC, B Specials, etc.). It was in some respects an example of Gramsci’s ‘integral state’ par excellence, combining both an ability to attain mass support through the Orange machine and a vicious state apparatus that could crush dissent when this mass support fractured (as happened in the thirties and the sixties).²⁵ Unionist rule was very much a ‘hegemony armoured with coercion’, in Gramsci’s words.²⁶

Orange ideology was not simply a crude reflection of the interests of the capitalist class, therefore, but ‘an ideological refraction of the economic needs of property’, with the former offering a stable basis for capitalist power and the latter providing the

material sustenance that kept the Orange machine churning.²⁷ Far from Unionism being a natural expression of Protestantism, or the ‘Protestant nation’ as others would have it, it was a uniquely Northern Irish product of capitalist power, reflecting the uneven manner of its development in a colonised and segregated island. In order to maintain Unionist dominance, therefore, it was necessary to maintain the all-class nature of the project—its ability to weld together support from both the working class and the business community. In 1919, Richard Dawson Bates, who later became the minister for home affairs, underlined the thrust of this critical component to Unionist strategy:

I should like to draw the earnest attention of the whole Province [of Ulster] to the necessity of placing our organisation on a thoroughly democratic basis ... Complete unity can only be secured by taking care that all classes and all views are thoroughly represented in our local organisation and that opportunities are taken to keep in touch with the feelings and requirements of the people ... It is by unity alone that we can expect to maintain our position in the council of the state and enforce our policy of obtaining for Ulster all that is thought essential for the democracies of Great Britain.²⁸

For O’Neill’s part, he was well aware of the necessity of maintaining the all-class nature of Unionism, stating that ‘the great strength of Unionism was the fact that it was a constitutional coalition of so many different elements in Ulster life.’²⁹ He took some measures to work towards this goal, becoming the first prime minister to recognise the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, stating: ‘Employers, unions and the Government really must become an effective Triple Alliance in the national interest.’³⁰ But how was this all-class alliance to be maintained? O’Neill’s gamble was that his soft, rhetorically cross-community Unionism, combined with the promise of FDI, would be enough to keep both employers and workers contented. Unlike many of his predecessors within the leadership of

Unionism who were industrialists—and thus had some practical experience of class struggle that allowed them to acquire a certain populist touch that could appeal beyond their own class ranks—O'Neill was hopelessly out of his depth when it came to appealing to workers. He was 'aloof' and 'preferred the advice of technocrats and civil servants.'³¹ Here he is explaining his conception of class:

I would like to see the word 'worker' applied to every man and woman who works, whether for a wage or a salary, whether he wears a white collar or a blue collar or overalls. I refuse to be told that someone like Sir Donald Stokes, chief of Britain's vast new motor empire, and a man who will travel at a moment's notice to Tokyo or Tehran to win export orders, is not as much a 'worker' as the man on his company's assembly lines. Somehow or other we must break down the old rigid divisions between bosses and employees, and begin to regard them as workers with different skills to contribute to the success of the same enterprise.³²

Another fault line emerged within liberal Unionism that would prove to be its undoing. For all its cross-community pretences, O'Neillism was far from committed to any kind of frontal challenge to the Orange machine. At best it promised a process of gentle persuasion that would leave the bulk of the machine untouched, or at worst a passive acquiescence in the face of ongoing sectarian discrimination. At times, O'Neill seemed to display a bewildering naivety about the reality of sectarianism: 'It is frightfully hard to explain to Protestants, that if they give Roman Catholics a good house they will live like Protestants.'³³ But O'Neill cannot be excused on the basis of his misplaced naivety, as his own record shows. One writer during the period explains the nature of the Orange machine's workings:

All the good government posts go to the Orangemen; not only in the Belfast bureaucracy but also in the local county offices. No job of any sensitivity or importance would go

to someone not in the Order. Many liberal Protestants with passive disdain, regard the Orange Order as militant, dogmatic and out-dated, but they realise that it is impossible to advance up the political ... ladder in Northern Ireland without joining it. They also find that it is sometimes necessary to join more reactionary group as well ... particularly the Black Preceptory and the Apprentice Boys of Derry.³⁴

When O'Neill became prime minister, he also joined the Apprentice Boys and the Royal Black Preceptory in addition to the Orange Order of which he was already a member, suggesting that he was very familiar with the dynamics of upward mobility in Northern Ireland.³⁵ Moreover, the actual record of liberal Unionism would seriously undermine its claim to an anti-sectarian ethos. In line with British government policy, O'Neill had enacted a policy of 'regional Keynesianism'—based around investment into new towns and infrastructure that could boost capitalist growth—but in the North this was implemented in a decidedly sectarian manner. As Farrell notes, O'Neill's 'new economic policies worsened the minority's position' by exacerbating the regional divide between east and west, symbolised by the decision to build a university in Coleraine rather than Derry.³⁶ New motorways built by O'Neill's administration connected Belfast with the largely protestant Ballymena and Craigavon, but left predominately catholic Derry and Newry off the grid.³⁷ Gerrymandering was largely left untouched too. During O'Neill's premiership there were 3000 company votes in the North, but half of these were concentrated in Derry, suggesting a highly organised, state-sponsored strategy of rigging the local government elections there.³⁸

Worse still, even 'where no new legislation, no drastic shifts in policy, were required', O'Neill's good-neighbourliness came to very little. The RUC actually became more Protestant, not less, during O'Neill's reign.³⁹ In September 1967, four years after his ascension to power, O'Neill's government reappointed members of three public boards. The demographics were as follows: 'Youth Employment

Board, 33 members, three Catholics; Hospitals Authority, 22 members, two Catholics; General Health Services Board, 24 members, two Catholics.' Despite there being 'no shortage of middle-class Catholics eager to serve' on these boards, O'Neill's liberal Unionism failed to deliver. So much so that even the staunchly pro-O'Neill *Belfast Telegraph* decried the appointments as 'a mockery of O'Neill's professions of goodwill.'⁴⁰

Thus O'Leary is correct in his appraisal that O'Neill's intention 'to improve cross-community relations [was] a by-product of his determination to ramp up economic development', but this must be qualified with an understanding that he had no intention of dismantling the Orange machine or definitely breaking Unionism from the politics of Orangeism.⁴¹ As O'Neill himself would later concede, his liberal Unionist agenda was largely superficial: 'As the [Unionist] party would never stand for change I was really reduced to trying to improve relations between North and South; and in the North itself between the two sections of the community.'⁴² This might explain why, despite his reforming rhetoric, O'Neill did little to blunt his regime's repressive apparatus: the B-Specials, Special Powers Act (1922), and the Flags and Emblems Act (1954) were all left untouched. Indeed, O'Neill unwittingly revealed the paucity of his anti-sectarianism in a speech to the Ulster Unionist Council in 1967: 'Because I talk to my neighbour in a friendly way across the garden fence, and perhaps even agree that we should share some gardening tools with him, it does not mean that I intend to let him live in my house.'⁴³

Liberal Unionism would of course come apart in the storm of 1968-69: caught between a civil rights movement demanding tangible action beyond O'Neill's nebulous appeals to a cross-community spirit and a 'Protestant backlash' led by Paisley, who condemned the prime minister as a 'coward and a puppet of the pope.'⁴⁴ The class basis of the Protestant backlash lay within a middle cadre of the Orange machine who objected to being ousted in favour of Catholics, and sections of the working class and unemployed convinced by a sectarian narrative that an end to discrimination could only be a zero sum game from which they would lose out. Billy Mitchell's recollection of the civil rights

movement, that the 'whole thing was sectarian' because 'I got a slum quicker than a Catholic, but it's still a slum',⁴⁵ would appear to confirm James Connolly's assessment decades before that '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.'⁴⁶ But it is also deftly illustrative of the distorted class dynamics that fuelled sectarian violence. Mitchell would add that the 'philosophy' in Mackies where he worked was 'If you don't like it there's a hundred Taigs'll take your job tomorrow.'⁴⁷ Evidently, then, there was very little by way of a 'privilege' for Protestant workers to defend, but there was just enough to bolster the façade that they had a stake in defending the old order rather than take their chances in liberal Unionism's Northern Ireland Ltd.

It has become commonplace in academia to pin the blame for the Troubles on the provocative activism of groups of left-wing radicals—most notably those grouped around People's Democracy—who inadvertently set off a chain of events they could not control.⁴⁸ As Simon Prince put it: 'The leftists had acted like sorcerers' apprentices: they had unleashed powerful forces that they little understood and that ultimately mastered them.'⁴⁹ Yet if anyone is to be blamed for conjuring forces they could neither restrain nor control, then surely it was the Unionist government itself, who raised expectations in the Catholic community without delivering meaningful reform until it was too late, and eroded the conditions of many working-class Protestant people whilst maintaining an ideology that claimed they would always be first in the queue. As McCann sardonically put it, it never occurred to 'the economic planners who were guiding Northern and Southern Ireland closer to one another that the gutters of Belfast and Derry might run red as a result.'⁵⁰ 'The psychopaths have not taken over', he concluded as the cycle of violence took hold: 'There is a war in Ireland because capitalism, to establish and preserve itself, created the conditions which made war inevitable.'⁵¹

Liberal Unionism crashed against the rocks of its own innate contradictions. It was perfectly plausible to advance a case for the union that was not predicated on Protestant exclusivity, but this required a definitive reckoning with the sectarian organisations that had

defined Unionism until that point. And it also required a clean break with politics of Orangeism: it is not possible to claim the mantle of non-sectarianism, only to ‘beat the Orange drum’ the second that support begins to drift from you. These contradictions were the undoing of O’Neill, and would form the contours of the long crisis of Unionism to come.

The class contradictions of Trimble’s ‘new Unionism’

In the 1990s, David Trimble heralded the arrival of what some dubbed ‘new Unionism’: a carefully calculated rebrand that was remarkably similar in scope and rhetoric to O’Neill’s failed project a generation before.⁵² Trimble conceded that the old Stormont regime had been a ‘cold house for Catholics’, and in a reversal of James Craig’s sectarian dictum, vowed to build ‘a pluralist parliament for a pluralist people.’⁵³ The signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998—that produced a fraught power-sharing arrangement with nationalism—would be the apex of new Unionism, briefly appearing to confirm the promise that its sectarian baggage could be discarded henceforward. In 1998, Trimble and John Hume would be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. High praise indeed.

New Unionism benefitted from the surge of goodwill and optimism that marked the infancy of the Good Friday era. As this mood began to recede, however, the incongruities of Trimble’s ‘modernising’ project would be laid bare, posing the question of why new Unionism would succeed where O’Neill’s efforts had floundered. The contradiction was in some ways reflected in Trimble’s path to prominence within Unionism itself. He had entered politics as a member of the Loyalist Vanguard movement—founded by former cabinet minister Bill Craig, who had been a vociferous opponent of Terence O’Neill’s liberal Unionism—and was consequently a backroom player in the Ulster Workers’ Council strike that brought down Northern Ireland’s first power-sharing administration in 1974.

He later joined the UUP and spent much of the 1980s on the right of the party before succeeding James Molyneaux as leader of the party in 1995. His rise to party leader was largely a result of his prominence in the Drumcree dispute that summer, when the Orange

Order had been initially refused entry into the largely Catholic Garvaghy road, only to be later escorted through the district by the RUC after a wave of Loyalist protest. The dispute took place in Trimble’s constituency and famously concluded with the future UUP leader capering down the road with a joyous Ian Paisley, in what most people viewed as a gross display of sectarian triumphalism. It was undoubtedly these actions that garnered Trimble the votes to become leader, especially among the 120-strong bloc vote afforded to the Orange Order inside the UUP.

Notwithstanding the fact that he owed his position to Loyalist discontent, there was good reason for Trimble to consider nudging Unionism into a more conciliatory posture: not least the war weariness inside the hard-pressed working-class communities yearning for peace, alongside a rapidly developing middle class who were eager to avail of the new opportunities they had tasted during the ceasefires. Unionism also had to contend with the election of a Labour government who were committed to enacting devolution in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and the challenge of a Republican movement committed, on paper at least, to the creation of a ‘pan-nationalist front’ of Sinn Féin, the SDLP, Fianna Fáil, and Irish America. New thinking was in order to stave off the prospect of isolation. After Trimble’s election as party leader, the UUP’s in-house journal the *Ulster Review* celebrated the arrival of a ‘new Unionism’: ‘pro-active, inclusive, open, pluralist, dynamic, progressive, outward, articulate, intelligent, coherent, professional, confident.’⁵⁴

Trimble’s new Unionism was heavy on the cross-community rhetoric, especially when speaking to international audiences, but its underlying agenda was to ensure Unionist hegemony in the North. This strategy had three components. Firstly, Trimble sought to ensnare Sinn Féin within the political structures of the assembly, in a subordinate position to Unionism—something that would be ensured by the agreement’s consociationalist structures, marginally weighted towards the largest ‘community’ and subject to a communal veto—thus robbing Republicanism of its ability to destabilise the Northern state. This was a hugely controversial tactic, especially for a movement that had once boasted it would ‘not have a Catholic about the house.’⁵⁵

Trimble was convinced, however, that the structures of the agreement would force Sinn Féin to be ‘house trained in democracy and brought to heel.’⁵⁶ As he put it elsewhere: ‘Consider the Sinn Féin slogans years ago—no return to Stormont, no Unionist Prime Minister, no Unionist veto and no decommissioning. On all these issues we drove them far beyond their bottom line ... only by continuing to work this process will Unionists finally corner the republican movement inside the structures set up by the Belfast Agreement.’⁵⁷ The Belfast Agreement represented a ‘reconstruction of bourgeois order in Northern Ireland’, therefore, with the old Orange state partially reconfigured to make space for sections of the nationalist and Republican middle class, but with sectarianism remaining as the state’s operating principle.⁵⁸ As Eamonn McCann explains at the time of the signing of the agreement:

The allocation of the entire population into separate sectarian camps, and the institution of mechanisms for ensuring that all decisions are weighed to ensure sectarian balance, will make competition between the Catholic and Protestant communities the main dynamic for politics in the future.

It will be in the direct and compelling interest of the leaderships of nationalist and unionist parties to reinforce communal loyalty as the basis of political allegiance, and to present themselves as the most forthright and uncompromising advocates of their own community’s interests vis-a-vis the interests of ‘the other side’.⁵⁹

The second component of new Unionism was to recast Orangeism in terms of ‘identity’ and ‘culture’, alongside the energetic promotion of a superficially secular Britishness that could theoretically appeal to people beyond the hardened ranks of Loyalism. This would allow Trimble to continue to defend the order during controversies like Drumcree, and to carve out a space for Orangeism within the reconfigured Northern state through networks of funding and grants, whilst keeping up the pretence that he was

moving towards the middle. After all, sectarian triumphalism was one thing, but who could deny the right of someone to celebrate something as benign as their culture and identity? It was also a way of further cornering Republicanism, by drawing Sinn Féin into a ‘culture war’ over flags, the trappings of monarchy, and triumphalist parades.

Lastly, and perhaps most provocatively, was the proposal to separate the ‘cultural’ from the ‘political’, by removing the direct link between the Orange Order and the UUP. New Unionism would seek to make inroads into the ‘middle ground’ of politics—identified as a layer of ‘small u’ unionists primarily within the middle class and even including some Catholics who were enjoying the fruits of peace and were buoyant about prospects for capitalist development—by removing the order’s historic ‘bloc vote’ inside the UUP. Alex Kane, an important backroom figure in the UUP during Trimble’s leadership, explains the kind of thinking behind new Unionism, consciously echoing O’Neill in the process:

If the Union was to survive then unionists had to ensure that support for it continued to grow even during periods when birth rates for Catholics moved ahead of birth rates for Protestants. That meant supporting a strategy of cross-community cooperation underpinned by equality of citizenship. Putting it crudely—and paraphrasing Terence O’Neill’s clumsy ‘treat Catholics like Protestants’ approach in 1968—if people from a perceived nationalist background didn’t believe they were viewed as second-class citizens then they might take a more sanguine approach to Irish unity.⁶⁰

In some respects, Trimble’s new Unionism was particular to the North: a reflection of the stalemate of twenty-five years of war and the realisation among a section of political Unionism that Britain would never resurrect Stormont without nationalist participation. That said, it is impossible to fully comprehend new Unionism without locating it within a more general, global mood of Western capitalistic

optimism in the post-Berlin Wall era, where, it was imagined, governments could instigate unparalleled economic growth if only the entrepreneurial spirit could be unshackled by removing public ownership and lowering corporate taxes. Trimble, alongside his advisor Paul Bew, was a signatory to the principles of the trans-Atlantic, neoconservative think tank the Henry Jackson Society.⁶¹ This document included a commitment to the ‘maintenance of a strong military’ and an interventionist imperialism led by the ‘United States, the countries of the European Union and other democratic powers’, and gave ‘two cheers for capitalism’ as ‘only modern liberal democratic states are truly legitimate.’⁶²

‘As part of this liberal imperialism’, Allen argues, ‘Trimble and Bew tried to show that “Britishness” involved accommodation and inclusion.’⁶³ It was this global, intellectual context of exultant, liberal capitalism that gave credence to Trimble’s argument that power-sharing would instigate a new era of capitalist growth and prosperity. In his speech where he committed to ‘a pluralist parliament for a pluralist people’, he explained this would be founded on ‘a [power-sharing] government committed to enterprise’ that would create the conditions whereby the North would ‘become the gateway to Europe’ and the global economy, with Unionism and nationalism ‘work[ing] together to build a new stable and prosperous Northern Ireland.’⁶⁴ New Unionism, therefore, was a very Northern Irish refraction of the post-Cold War, neoliberal era.

Trimble’s agenda also had a distinct class basis at home. Though the Northern Irish economy had been hit hard during the Troubles, its burden was not equally shared. In fact, owing to a generous system of government grants to businesses, direct rule had by the nineties ‘heralded an era of unprecedented affluence for the Northern Irish middle classes’—‘The relatively generous practical and financial assistance tendered by the Northern Ireland Office has allowed indigenous enterprise to enjoy profit rates which would not appear to be justified on grounds of performance.’⁶⁵ Despite the rapid growth of a new Catholic middle class in this period, ‘Protestants remain[ed] heavily overrepresented among the remnants of the local bourgeoisie’, meaning that there was a small but influential layer of Unionist society

that had a significant amount to gain from peace and a new power-sharing arrangement.⁶⁶

As Susan McKay observed in her now classic account of the Protestant community at the turn of the new millennium: ‘Whereas the excesses of Thatcherism were, belatedly, visited upon the poor, the [Northern Ireland] middle classes had enjoyed uninterrupted prosperity ... They were well paid, and benefited from house prices which were relatively low.’⁶⁷ McKay further noted that in the 1998 referendum, Trimble’s pro-agreement Unionism had ‘pitched itself towards middle [class] unionism by stressing things like the benefits of peace for investment, and of cross-border co-operation in the era of the Celtic Tiger. Self-interest was the key.’⁶⁸ The hotelier Billy Hastings, one of the North’s wealthiest people and owner of the Europa—then Europe’s most bombed hotel—was asked why he supported the Belfast Agreement and said it ‘would be good for business regeneration’. When pressed on what he thought of the early release of the people who had bombed his hotel, he replied that ‘he’d rather they came into the hotel as customers.’⁶⁹

Hasting’s circumstances, if not his sanguine attitude, might not be easily generalised—but his remarks are emblematic of the way that it was possible for a layer of people to identify a material benefit from the Belfast Agreement. These material benefits, however, were ‘neither universal nor evenly distributed’, with post-ceasefire Northern Ireland becoming ‘more polarised along class lines than a generation before.’⁷⁰ For many poor and working-class people on both sides of the divide—who had, after all, endured the brunt of the Troubles—the prospect of an end to violence was sufficient motive to support the peace process. In the context of the rapid deindustrialisation of cities like Belfast, and a wider neoliberalisation of Northern Irish society towards a low-wage service economy with pockets of multi-national industry built around cheap labour and precarious employment, it is hardly surprising that large parts of Unionism’s working-class base would over time come to develop a gloomier outlook on their prospects in the ‘new Northern Ireland’.

When O’Neill had sought to reform Unionism,

the old material basis of the all-class alliance was beginning to face difficulties. The prognosis was terminal by the time of the nineties. Between 1950 and 1994, for example, employment in manufacturing fell by 58.4 per cent.⁷¹ In the nineties, the Northern Ireland middle class had the highest disposable income in the UK; this relative 'bourgeois affluence', Coulter notes, had 'rendered the six counties an increasingly lucrative site for commercial enterprise.'⁷² Thus, deindustrialisation in the nineties was accompanied by a largely 'retail-based economic growth' that saw the 'emergence of a low-income economy', with employment in the service economy growing by 22.8 per cent in this period. Whilst the middle classes enjoyed the highest disposable income in the UK, contrarily the North's new layer of retail workers had rates of pay 42 per cent below the UK average.⁷³ The situation would only deteriorate in subsequent years, creating a wall of festering alienation across the working-class communities where the stable employment of the old industries had once formed part of its social fabric. As McGovern and Shirlow observed in the late nineties:

The standard features of the post-industrial economy—flexible labour markets, deindustrialisation and the creation of a low-income service employment—have had a myriad of effects upon the class structure and, as a consequence, on the political fabric of Northern Ireland The result of both these processes is a tendency to consolidate non-sectarian middle class solidarity while at the same time alienating sections of both Catholic and Protestant working class ... for many working-class protestants their denial of entry into new labour markets which require educational qualifications or skills they do not possess is not acknowledged as a consequence of economic restructuring, but of a Protestant middle class that has deserted them and a Catholic population who are, in socio-economic terms, in the ascendant.⁷⁴

As McGovern and Shirlow acknowledged, the idea promoted by Loyalists that 'Protestants have lost out because great gains have been made by the Catholic working class is, quite simply, not true.'⁷⁵ But they added that by the nineties a process of 'equity of immiseration' had begun to set in. Despite the end of open conflict, this equity of immiseration created a context where Loyalist paramilitaries continued to thrive and Paisley's DUP began to grow. It was not class politics that drove these forces but a misdirection of an underlying class concern into a flagrantly sectarian direction. As a leader of the UDA said in 1994: 'Fair employment is against the Protestant people. Such policies are an attack against Protestant livelihoods. It's simple.'⁷⁶

What had new Unionism to offer working-class people? Before becoming leader, Trimble was attentive to the cross-class nature of Unionism: 'I suppose one does put the Union pretty high up, but one doesn't say that the Union is an absolute end in itself. I regard unionism as being an all-class political alliance ... for the development in social, economic and political terms, of the Ulster British people.'⁷⁷ Curiously, at the time of his leadership, Trimble had come under the influence of a group of intellectuals—some former members or associates of the Workers Party or the British and Irish Communist Organisation (BICO)—who had become convinced that class was no longer the driving force of politics, and were instead enamoured by the reforming capacity of the market.⁷⁸

Whereas the bourgeois leaders of Unionism a century before had taken great care to construct their all-class alliance, Trimble was under the spell of intellectuals convinced that the working class was disappearing and could only be a conservative force: 'The shrinkage in the size of the Protestant working class and its increasing disposition to support the DUP have encouraged some UUP strategists to consider it a lost cause.'⁷⁹ Progress, instead, was to be found in the enterprising classes. Eoghan Harris encouraged Unionists to become 'proactive and dialectical thinkers'⁸⁰ by transforming their messaging and abandoning the 'siege mentality plus the evangelical and preaching tradition [that produces] a public, polemical sound that is not suitable for television or

radio.⁸¹ Paul Bew identified a stable support base within the middle class, a demographic he memorably christened ‘the garden centre prod, as the key to the success of this reinvention: ‘The failure of the middle class to rally decisively behind a leader who has given the leadership the middle class claimed to want, is the clue to the uncertainty which marked Mr Trimble’s prospects for the last two years.’⁸²

Bew’s long-time collaborator Henry Patterson was much closer to the mark when he wrote of Trimble’s UUP: ‘What is most striking about the “new unionism” is its lack of concern for the party’s working-class support’, adding that it’s ‘focus was almost exclusively on the business and professional classes.’⁸³ Bereft of a solid material base for winning support from all classes, it had become increasingly necessary for Unionism to ‘mask the differentiation within itself by using or imposing a common set of symbols’, to borrow from Anthony Cohen.⁸⁴ The context of deteriorating prospects in deindustrialised working-class communities, combined with a string of set-piece conflagrations over the denial of ‘cultural rights’ (much of which was encouraged by Trimble’s party itself), meant that large sections of Unionism’s base failed to comprehend the peace process in any way other than as one of decline. New Unionism’s heave to the centre and occasional rhetoric about a rosy future was no substitute for real, tangible, material benefit. The ground was left wide open for Paisley’s rhetoric about doomsday scenarios and ‘last stands’ to take hold.

Like O’Neill before him, Trimble struggled to disentangle the Orange-Unionist synthesis. Though the power of the order had declined considerably by the nineties, it still had a disproportionate influence on the UUP. A large majority of Trimble’s MLAs were members of one of the loyal orders, and the Orange had the right to send 120 delegates to the UUP’s governing council. It also maintained a significant influence on the party at large, as Alex Kane explained in the early 2000s:

We’re a party that puts far too much emphasis on local, really local politics. Outsiders tend not to get even elected as MPs in our constituencies. They tend to come up through the ranks: Orange man,

local councillor, MP and that doesn’t encourage talent. Let’s face it if a lot of people are interested in politics, in unionist politics, if they’re not in the Orange like I’m not, they wouldn’t even get to join the party.⁸⁵

Graham Walker’s appraisal that ‘the Orange Order was to the Ulster Unionist Party what the trade union movement was for so long to the Labour party’ gives too benign an impression of the ubiquitous influence of the order in Northern Irish politics, but he was undoubtedly correct to write that ‘the political influence it tried to exert in the period of the peace process was unremittingly subversive of Trimble’s brand of unionism.’⁸⁶ For many, Trimble removing the order’s bloc vote would be his triumphant ‘Clause 4 moment’: an allusion to the removal of Labour’s Clause 4 commitment to public ownership, which Blairites were convinced had ushered New Labour into power. The analogy, however, was far from precise. Blair’s break with the unions was one example of a more fundamental embrace of ‘third way’ social liberalism and a rejection of social democracy.

Trimble’s Clause 4 moment was not quite so dramatic. As with O’Neill, Trimble sought to reform Unionism without definitively breaking with the politics of Orangeism. And the order resisted him every step of the way. When the Patten report was published, committing to a series of largely symbolic reforms of the RUC—but with the commitment to 50/50 recruitment of Catholics and Protestants—the writing was on the wall for the UUP leader. Again just like O’Neill, Trimble owed both his rise to power and his fall from grace to the pressure of the Orange machine, albeit in a rapid state of deterioration.

Trimble’s new Unionism would be finally routed in the 2003 elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly, against a background of declining support for the agreement and the ongoing saga of IRA decommissioning. The class contradictions of new Unionism were exemplified by its choice of propaganda during the election campaign: a chic poster depicting a Mini car alongside the slogan ‘Simply British’.⁸⁷ Cute, perhaps, but painfully nonsensical: the classic icon of sixties Britannia having been outsourced to factories in Germany and

sold to BMW. Nevertheless, it was an unconsciously revealing moment, suggestive of new Unionism's inability to tie its modernising appearance with any kind of material reality that could have mass purchase with working people—a reminder that all ideologies, sooner or later, require material sustenance. Moreover, the failure of the campaign strongly suggested new Unionism's heavy promotion of what O'Dowd called a 'revitalised British nationalism' had not only failed but likely stunted its effort to pull broader layers of Northern Irish society behind the UUP banner.⁸⁸

The results of the election were a bitter blow to Trimble, resulting in the UUP being superseded by the DUP for the first time. Superficially, this decline can be explained by the failure of the NI Assembly and Trimble's inability to secure decommissioning. It was also exacerbated by the abandonment of a large section of the UUP's urban, working-class support base. The 2003 elections spelled the end of the UUP's centuries old dominance of the Unionist project, ushering in a protracted period of decline from which it has not yet recovered. By 2011, the party that had long dominated Belfast City Council (and the Northern state for the best part of the twentieth century), was reduced to a measly three seats. In less than a decade new Unionism had already become old hat, and the possibility of resurrecting the kind of sturdy all-class alliance commanded by the 'big house' leaders of old seemed an unlikely prospect. The era of dissonant Unionism had begun.

NOTES

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- 22 McCann, 1974, p 126.
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- 27 McCann, 1974, p 123.
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- 29 O'Neill, 1969, p 58.
- 30 Ibid, p 107.
- 31 O'Leary, 2019, p 169.
- 32 O'Neill, 1969, p 60.
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- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Farrell, 1976, p 242.
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