

The State of Loyalism

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Anyone visiting the North of Ireland these days cannot drive through any city, town or hamlet there without finding part or all of it bedecked with massive union flags. From December 2012 into the early months of 2013, to the time of writing, Belfast and all of the North has seen almost daily protests about the union flag, some ending in riots; all featuring vicious sectarianism on the streets.



Loyalist flag protest

The protests started on December 3rd after a vote in Belfast City Council to fly the union flag over City Hall only on 18 designated days a year; the Queen's birthday etc. Sinn Féin had wanted the flag taken down altogether, but in the end supported the 'designated days' compromise put forward by the 'moderate' Alliance Party. A loyalist protest outside City Hall erupted into violence minutes after the motion was passed. Rioting also broke out in east Belfast. The protesters had come onto the streets in response to 40,000 leaflets slamming Alliance, distributed across Belfast in a joint operation by Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) activists.

The leaflets accused Alliance of: 'backing the Sinn Féin/SDLP position that the flag should be ripped down on all but a

few days'. It urged people to tell Alliance: 'We don't want our national flag torn down from City Hall. We can't let them make Belfast a cold house for Unionists.'

Background

The focus on the Alliance Party arose not just from the City Hall vote but because Alliance's Naomi Long had defeated DUP leader and First Minister Peter Robinson in the 2010 election. The shock result had little to do with flags but reflected disgust at newspaper revelations about the 'Swish Family Robinson's' luxury lifestyle at the taxpayers' expense. Peter Robinson and his now-disgraced wife, Iris, who was also an MP, had claimed over half-a-million pounds a year in salaries and expenses from Westminster, and had tried to claim twice for the same expenses on a regular basis. Peter Robinson had claimed £755 for a briefcase and Iris Robinson had tried to claim for a £300 fountain pen. Working-class DUP voters suffering the brunt of austerity measures were fuming.

There had also been a raft of revelations about broader corruption in DUP-controlled councils, particularly Castlereagh in east Belfast where the Robinson family had close, lucrative ties to property developers. These revelations came after Ian Paisley, senior and junior, had been shown to have profited from links with property developers.

The loss of east Belfast was traumatic for the DUP. They set out to use the flags issue to stir up Protestant hostility to Alliance. While Alliance Party offices and even councillors' homes - were attacked by mobs at the start of the protests, loyalist paramilitaries weighed in behind

the DUP/UUP - inspired protests and changed tack towards more generally disruptive tactics, like the rash of road-blocks.

Loyalist Paramilitaries Death Squads of the British State

While today's loyalist paramilitary gangs emerged in the mid-1960s as a reactionary response to the civil rights movement, the roots of sectarianism go right back to the plantations of the 17th century, when racist depictions of the native Irish as 'savages' were employed to justify seizing their land. At the end of the 18th century, there were frequent clashes between Irish (Catholic) peasants and the English (Protestant) landlords. The landlords then promoted an alliance between themselves and Protestant yeomen (independent farmers) against the Catholics - with the Orange Order as the main mechanism for cross-class integration. As industry developed, the Orange Order (or 'Orange Lodge') moved into the towns and into Belfast where it operated to tie Protestant workers to Protestant bosses and encourage them to look down on their Catholic fellow workers. The Orange Lodge became the place to secure a skilled job - so such jobs were only open to Protestants. From time to time, the British government armed the Orangemen to put down rebellions.

The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was (re)formed in 1966, in response to commemorations of the 1916 Rising; before the year was out, it had killed two civilians - a Protestant and a Catholic. The other large loyalist paramilitary group, the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), was formed in Sept 1971. In its first year, it killed more than 30 Catholic civilians. Loyalist paramilitaries are not, as they claim, a Protestant equivalent of the IRA. They

are pro-imperialist and pro-state; gung-ho supporters of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example. From their inception, there have been allegations of collusion with the forces of the state. Since the peace process, clear evidence has emerged that the relationship went further than collusion: loyalist paramilitaries were actively promoted by the State as they went about their grisly sectarian business.

In July 1972, the British Army's GOC (General Officer Commanding), General Harry Tuzo, dispatched a paper to Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, suggesting that the growth of loyalist paramilitaries should be quietly promoted. The wording of the paper implied the creation of a 'second front' against the Provisional IRA. 'Vigilantes, whether UDA or not,' Tuzo wrote, 'should be discreetly encouraged in Protestant areas to reduce the load on the Security Forces.'

This suggestion wasn't entirely new. A month earlier, up to 8,000 masked UDA men armed with iron bars and cudgels confronted British troops in the Shankill Road area. The British commander of land forces, Major-General Robert Ford, arrived to negotiate with the UDA in the back of a Saracen armoured car; they struck a deal whereby the UDA and the British soldiers conducted joint patrols of the area.

The same paramilitaries, with the help of British army intelligence and the arms and expertise of the part-time Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), carried out a proxy war, assassinating targets like solicitors Pat Finucane and Rosemary Nelson and over 1,000 other innocent civilians. Unsurprisingly, they have always had links with fascists; first with the National Front and Combat 18, then with the BNP and lately the English Democrats. One link between the BNP and the English Democrats is Jim Dowson, who fell out with the BNP over

money, became a leader of the ED, and has addressed a number of the flag rallies. Dowson moves between Scotland, Northern Ireland and England setting up anti-abortion and fascist groups.

Despite the peace process and the 'Patten reforms' - which saw the effectively all-Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) change name and badges to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) for weeks the loyalist protesters were given an easy ride by police. This showed the extent to which Northern Ireland remains a sectarian state. In contrast to protests by students or anti-war protesters, police stood by and allowed main roads to be blocked by small groups of teenagers.

Secret and Political Policing: 'The Policing You Dont See'

The devolution of policing and justice powers was to be the end of the argument about the need to end the Northern state - when the essential power of the state, its 'bodies of armed men', came under the control of the people of Northern Ireland. But, a state built on sectarianism cannot just leave it behind. Apart from the fact that the devolution of policing and justice is merely a return to the *status quo ante* of the years when Stormont ruled 'a Protestant state for a Protestant people', the devolution of policing and justice leaves the political aspects of policing in the hands of British intelligence agency (or 'Security Service') MI5.

The 'Committee on the Administration of Justice' (CAJ) recently published: *The Policing You Dont See: Covert Policing And The Accountability Gap*. Researched and written by CAJ's deputy director, Daniel Holder, it contains a shocking indictment of the extent to which the secret Security Service - implicated in past abuses - remains unaccountable to any politician

or court, despite being involved in the North in a highly important area of mainstream policing.

The report reminds us of the overwhelming evidence from official inquiries of many abuses in covert policing in the past. As a result, the Patten report on policing reform recommended that the Special Branch be downsized and integrated into the PSNI, where it would be overseen by an independent board rather than a government minister. However, the St Andrews Agreement included a 'Memorandum of Understanding' whereby Special Branch was to be run by a parallel police force - 'a force outside a force' - answerable only to 'direct rule' Ministers. Since the Chief Constable has said that MI5 would focus only on dissident republicans, this means that two different covert policing regimes, in terms of operational techniques, standards and oversight, are now in place for republicans and loyalists.

The CAJ research shows that in the UK oversight of MI5 is ineffective. Policy documents, which have been released to CAJ under Freedom of Information, rather than encouraging safeguards actually appear designed to limit accountability. The documents discovered for the report show an obsession with keeping anything with the label 'national security' secret from politicians, lawyers, media and the public.

After St Andrews, Tony Blair gave assurances that PSNI officers working with MI5 would be 'solely accountable' to the Chief Constable and the Policing Board; in contrast, the CAJ report shows that PSNI officers, up to and including the Chief Constable, working on national security matters are not accountable to anyone but Westminster. Political policing remains.

The director of CAJ said: 'MI5 - secret, unreformed and unaccountable - is now running one of the most sensitive areas of policing. This is a disaster waiting

to happen to confidence in the rule of law and our peace settlement. CAJ wants a full, independent review with the aim of bringing covert policing here in line with human rights standards.'

In any case, the PSNI are doing their best to ensure that they continue to be seen as a sectarian force. Their use of Section 44 stop-and-search powers has been entirely in working-class areas but mainly Catholic working-class areas. These searches have risen year on year from over 2,000 in 2006 to over 22,000 in 2010/11.

Re-invigorated Loyalism The Ugly Face of Inequality

Loyalist paramilitaries have delighted in telling their Facebook audience that they 'haven't gone away, you know' (echoing Gerry Adams' 1995 quip about the IRA). They are using the anger incited by the DUP/UUP leaflets for their own purposes. These include recruiting young people to paramilitarism and gaining funding for their 'community projects' - aka jobs for the boys.

Most community groups in Catholic working-class areas have for years been firmly controlled by Sinn Féin - in part, a pay-back for the Provo ceasefire. Loyalist paramilitaries aim at a similar situation in 'their' areas. While Sinn Féin has used manoeuvring and political influence to gain control over community groups, loyalists have tended to use intimidation. For historical reasons, linked to their loyalty to the state, community organisation in Protestant areas is less developed than in Catholic areas. So, fewer jobs for the boys - unless rioting can bring millions into the area to 'restore peace' and deal with 'Protestant alienation'.

There are good reasons for working-class Protestants to feel alienated - but

none likely to be helped by the flag protests. 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. There are many reasons for this: the engineering and other manufacturing jobs that used to provide relatively well-paid, secure employment in Protestant areas have gone.

And educational disadvantage hits the Protestant section of the working class, especially boys, hard. All children in the North are poorly served by a selective education system; but all the nationalist parties are against selection. Sinn Féin's Education Ministers abolished the Eleven Plus but failed then to get rid of the grammar schools or to push through the NI Assembly a new non-academic form of transfer from primary to second level, because both the Unionist Parties support academic transfer. A taskforce on Protestant educational disadvantage was set up by Dawn Purvis while she was still an MLA. It identified a range of shocking statistics: Just 8.5 percent of those on Free School Meals (FSMs are a proxy for poverty as they are only available to the poorest children) in Protestant non-grammar schools achieved two A levels, compared with 21.2 percent in Catholic non-grammars. A Catholic pupil from a poor background on FSMs will have a one in five chance of going to university while a similar child in a Protestant school has a one in ten chance. Shirlow points out that there was only one unionist MLA (besides Dawn Purvis) at the launch of this report, while there were three Sinn Féin MLAs including the

Deputy First Minister¹. Despite their own working class constituents being so badly impacted by selection, the unionist parties continue to defend it.

So, Protestant young people are less likely to get a minimum-wage job in the many call-centres that have come to Northern Ireland than their better-educated Catholic counterparts. 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. 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.

Thus, Protestant working-class areas have been moving up the deprivation 'league', but not because Catholic areas have seen poverty levels reduced. The convergence is the result of the wages for all workers being pushed down. Northern Ireland is marketed across the world by the DUP and Sinn Féin as a low-wage area. More than half of Northern households are dependent either on benefits or working tax credits, while about a quarter are doing very well and can still afford foreign holidays and second homes.

This lack of concern by unionist politicians for working-class Protestants stretches back in history. The Ulster Unionist Party was known as the 'fur coat brigade' and, despite the Orange Lodge being supposed to bring all Protestants together, the fur coat brigade looked down their noses at the working class. The DUP was supposed to replace the fur coat brigade and cater for working class Protestants. That fiction did not last very long; as seen in its relationship with property developers across the Six Counties and its determination to cut the living standards of all working-class people through

privatisation and welfare reform. Historically, there has been much sharper class stratification on the Protestant side - big landowners, industrialists, the professional classes, skilled workers, labourers, the jobless - all bound together in their British identity, but each knowing well enough his or her own place within it. Now DUP Ministers echo the anti-working-class rhetoric of Cameron and Osborne, looking down their noses at the 'strivers' and 'shirkers' on whose votes they depend for power.

In his study of the psychosocial impact of class, *The Impact of Inequality*, Richard Wilkinson points out that, statistically, people who live in highly unequal societies and feel looked down on are much more likely to be violent and have racist attitudes. The 'fur-coat brigade' of the unionist elite has long looked down on working-class Protestants. Working-class Protestants are more likely than Catholics to live in deprived areas that are surrounded by wealth pockets of poverty among plenty. While the new Catholic middle classes tend to get out of the working-class areas as quick as they can, they are less likely to be able to openly look down on working-class Catholics. They might live on the Malone Road or the Culmore Road, but they are only one generation away from Ballymurphy or the Bogside.

This abandonment by the unionist parties means that many people looking in from outside Protestant working-class communities see loyalist paramilitaries as 'community representatives', as the voice of the Protestant working class. But this has never been the case. In election after election, political parties associated with loyalist paramilitaries have failed to get more than derisory votes. The only time the UDA's political wing got elected was when there was a list system with a very low threshold for representation. The

¹Shirlow, P. (2012), *The End of Ulster Loyalism?*, Manchester University Press

Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) did get elected for a short while but lost its electoral position when it was seen to be returning to feuding. This is precisely because loyalist paramilitaries are not the voice of the Protestant working class; they are a parasite on that class and rule their areas through fear and intimidation, often with the collusion of the police.

Institutionalised sectarianism

What's happening on the streets was predictable. The 1998 Belfast (or Good Friday) Agreement was a recipe for institutionalised sectarianism. This is seen best at Stormont, where 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. If you decide you're 'Other', your role in politics is automatically diminished - when it comes to voting in the Assembly on issues requiring 'cross-community support', for example. Either unionists or nationalists can trigger this mechanism, which means that a measure has to be passed either by weighted majority, when at least 60% of all MLAs who vote support the motion, including at least 40% designated unionist and 40% designated nationalist. Or it may pass in accordance with the parallel consent formula, when at least 50% of members who vote support the motion, including at least 50% unionist and 50% nationalist.

This way of running things has had a poisonous effect, as sectarianism trickles down towards the street.

In Belfast you can see in the built environment the visible growth in sectarian-

ism. The number of 'Peace Walls' has more than doubled since the Agreement. The level of fear, and not just in interface areas, has not fallen. In interface areas, it has increased. The fear is of physical attack, not just a generalised fear of the 'other side'. Now, as sectarianism is again ratcheted up, fear grows that we are headed back to 'the bad old days'. In spite of all the talk of 'moving forward', politics is gridlocked, with the DUP effectively in charge. The DUP is openly neo-liberal, a party in which Sarah Palin would feel rightly at home. It opposes gay rights, is virulently anti-abortion and doesn't think there's any poverty in Northern Ireland. A good proportion of its MLAs and government Ministers are members of the Caleb Foundation - an Evangelical umbrella group that promotes creationist views, urges its politician members to 'implement god's law' and 'jokingly' calls itself 'the Caleban'

In early January, while the flag protests raged, the DUP's Minister for Social Development, Nelson McCausland, announced the abolition of the Housing Executive, one of the Civil Rights Movements most important legacies and, with it, the privatisation of all public housing and the certain loss of hundreds of public sector jobs. McCausland is also pushing the Welfare Reform Bill - already passed at Westminster - through the Assembly, introducing Universal Credit, the Personal Independence Payment and the 'bedroom tax' on top of cuts to benefits and tax credits. This represents a massive assault on working-class living standards. Sinn Féin is going along with it. Like the Lib Dems, they 'oppose' the cuts but then vote for their implementation.

The cuts affect Protestant workers as well as Catholic. These are the issues we need to see people on the streets about. The presence of a united working-class voice has been sadly missed. Two rallies

for peace at Belfast City Hall attracted around 2,000 people each. The numbers could have been much bigger if the political basis had been different. The trade union movement organises more people - Protestant and Catholic - than all the Loyal Orders and comparable Catholic groups put together. It has the capacity to organise the overwhelming majority in Northern Ireland who are in despair over the latest eruption of sectarianism, but so far has failed to do so. So, while there is an alternative to the vicious cycle of sectarianism - the tradition of Protestant and

Catholic workers uniting to fight as a class against the bosses - it can be hard to see the evidence that it still exists. It is the task of socialists to defend the principle of working-class unity against sectarian bigotry and to seek out ways of making that unity more visible. The fight to defend jobs and tenants' rights, by stopping the abolition of the Housing Executive, provides the sort of issue and opportunity needed to bring workers together, to show that an alternative does still exist to the growth of sectarianism.