From stereotypes to solidarity: the British left and the Protestant working class

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The British left needs to start taking Ulster Unionism seriously, listening and engaging with its concerns, history, and political character.

Too many on the British left, Northern Irish Unionism is self-evidently on the losing – and wrong – side of history. This attitude has hardened since 2017, following the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) agreement to prop up Theresa May's Conservative government in a 'confidence and supply' arrangement. The chief irony here is that Ulster Loyalist communities are akin to the white working-class constituencies of the North of England and West Midlands that the British Labour Party is so concerned about losing in present times. They too feel disillusioned and abandoned by political elites. Cast on the scrap heap by deindustrialisation and angered by parliamentary expenses scandals, many have not used their vote in recent years except to support Brexit.[1] They are also akin to supporters of Donald Trump in the United States. They appreciate leaders who 'don't give a damn', and are attracted by tough talk and easy scapegoats.[2] The comparison between Trump voters and Ulster Loyalists was alluded to by civil rights veteran Bernadette McAliskey in a 2016 interview:

> As the American system disgracefully refers to some of its poorest people as 'white trash,' loyalists are perceived within British nationalism as an underclass. Many from loyalist communities have internalized that themselves. When I work with people from that background I'm often surprised that they will set on the table first, 'Okay, so, we know we are no good.' I have talked to young loyalists who say, 'We know we are scum.' I don't

> understand any human being starting a conversation saying that they are not human. There is a clear lack of self-esteem and also a loss of confidence.[3]

As in the US, Europe and Britain, the danger is this group falling prey to the far right; especially if working-class Protestants are repeatedly told they are already worthless and/or 'fascist'. In the end, the only people sure to engage deprived Loyalist communities will be fascists.

For many years now, there has been a debate within the British Labour Party as to whether it should stand candidates in Northern Ireland. Forming a judgement on that complex question, however, will only be possible if the British left starts to take Ulster Unionism seriously, listening and engaging with its concerns, history, and political character. Against basic principles of solidarity in the labour movement, there are numerous examples of entire Ulster Protestant communities being tarred with the same reactionary brush by voluble journalists and academics.[4] Familiar clichés and caricatures, of 'Protestant Unionist privilege' and 'communal domination and entitlement' litter recent works discussing the 'inevitability' of a united Ireland, often emanating from those with British Labour Party associations.[5] These accounts not only propagate the factual inaccuracy that Protestant communities lack a left-wing or labour history, but often imply that Ulster Protestants lack any real 'culture', as in a literary or creative lineage that exemplifies the community's past achievements and future potential. This is one of the reasons a united Ireland is apparently 'inevitable': any British-identifying culture or population is so retrograde and negligible that it requires washing away into a 'new Ireland'.

These two narratives – of Protestants having a regressive political history and a non-existent cultural heritage – reinforce each other. This was demonstrated particularly clearly by paramilitary-turned-writer Ronan Bennett (a former parliamentary researcher to the current Labour Party leader), in an infamous article published just before the 1994 Ceasefires, entitled 'An Irish Answer'. Bennett proclaimed that Protestant culture was fundamentally 'inward-looking' and 'restricted to little more than flute bands, Orange marches and the chanting of sectarian slogans at football matches'.[6] Bennett's attack was a well-placed condemnation of Unionism for a welcoming liberal English readership, though it is a portrayal that continues to filter through to international coverage of Northern Ireland. Contemporary American visitors report that an institution such as the Londonderry Bands Forum represents 'an integral part of Protestant culture', affirming overall presentations of Ulster Protestants and Unionists as conservative, purely Orange, and philistine.[7]

Unionism and social democracy

This is, however, an unhelpful caricature of a diverse and contested political constituency, with a rich cultural life, from the novels of Maurice Leitch and Jan Carson, to the poetry of Michael Longley and Jean Bleakney, to the painting of William Conor and the music of Van Morrison. Most urgently for British Labour, however, it reflects its ignorance of the social-democratic (and left) tradition of the Protestant working class of Northern Ireland.[8] Especially in the period between the end of the Second World War and the beginnings of the Troubles in the late 1960s, the Protestant working class was drawn to various left-wing groupings, from the cross-community Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) to the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI). In 1962 the NILP gained four seats in the old Stormont parliament and over 25 per cent of the entire Northern Ireland vote (roughly what Sinn Féin gets now as the second largest party), with particular strongholds in Protestant working-class parts of north and east Belfast.[9] The highest vote for any NILP Westminster election candidate came in 1966 for Martin McBirney in overwhelmingly-Protestant East Belfast.[10]

Moreover, Unionist MPs have often allied with Labour in Westminster. A voting arrangement between Labour and Ulster Unionist MPs kept James Callaghan's government afloat in the late 1970s, and it is often forgotten that two Unionist MPs, Harold McCusker and John Carson, voted with Labour in the critical 1979 vote of confidence in the Callaghan government (it was the abstaining vote of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) MP for West Belfast, Gerry Fitt, that sealed its fall).

Nor was the Labour-Unionist crossover confined to the 1960s and 1970s. The 2011 intake of members for the Northern Ireland Assembly featured Unionist representatives such as the DUP's Sammy Douglas and the Ulster Unionist Party's (UUP) Michael Copeland, who do not hesitate to highlight their Labour-supporting backgrounds. Even the DUP deserves further examination in this respect, with its MPs tending to vote with the British Labour Party on economic issues in Westminster, including tax credits, NHS pay rises and tuition fees.[11] Rooted in the working-class base of its founder, the DUP was one of several parties created in the early 1970s that hoovered up swathes of former NILP supporters. Though it has been described by left-leaning English journalists as consisting of 'bigoted throwbacks (*sic*) to several centuries ago', it has broadly 'statist' and welfarist tendencies – on behalf of its working-class constituents – as well as an intriguing discrepancy between councillors and membership, with evidence that the former prize 'bread and butter' issues over 'constitutional grandstanding'.[12]

As more than one commentator has noted, Ulster Unionists often do themselves few political favours when it comes to presenting their case to the outside world.[13] Essentially, because mainstream Irish nationalist parties employ the language of progressive causes, many Unionists have responded by embracing an opposing conservative mantle, meaning that they have now come to actively negate their own left-wing history. On 5 May 2018, Councillor Dale Pankhurst of the DUP tweeted his disgust at the sight of Sinn Féin member and former Provisional IRA prisoner James McVeigh appearing on a trade union demonstration in Belfast. Pankhurst commented how it was 'Hard enough for Protestants to engage with trade unions given their history of anti-Unionist socialism' (*sic*), but that the presence of the Sinn Féin man made it 'unsurprising why Protestants stay away'.[14]

Pankhurst's distortion of history illustrates how Unionists and Loyalists often function as their own worst enemy, happily confirming their opponents' political lines. Indeed, rather than locating the broadest and most progressive concepts of Britishness, Unionists by their own admission tend to focus on 'flag-waving and worn-out mantra-chanting'.[15] Rather than celebrate actual bastions of Britishness like the National Health Service, mainstream Unionists focus on the armed forces, the Royal Family, and the Union Jack: a Britishness that faded in the eyes of many English, Welsh and Scottish people some decades ago. Similarly, Unionism has not distinguished itself when in office. It is galling for its adherents to be reminded that one of the Provisional IRA's main outlined aims was to make Northern Ireland 'ungovernable except by colonial military rule'.[16] Arguably, the last three years have shown that Ulster Unionists have themselves made Northern Ireland 'ungovernable', through their incompetent mismanagement of devolved political departments, refusal to compromise with opponents, and – in the case of the Renewable Heat Incentive scandal that came to light in late 2016 – high-scale corruption and rank cronyism.[17] The main party of Ulster Unionism has achieved ungovernability without armed Irish Republicans firing a shot.

The dangers of condescension

While official 'Unionism' wastes its energies on symbolic battles and obstructionism, working-class Protestants associated with the 'loyalist' tradition appear stranded, disillusioned, and restless once more as the Brexit wheels turn. The term 'Loyalism' began to be used in the early 1970s to distinguish Loyalists pejoratively from Unionists: as working-class men who committed acts of violence, contrasting with 'respectable' middle-class Unionists.[18] And while the class location of Loyalism shaped its capacity for violence, it also inflected its politics in a left-wing direction. A brief survey of the leadership and members of Loyalist

paramilitary groups during the Troubles reveals working-class Labour supporters or trade union members. Ulster Defence Association (UDA) leaders Glen Barr and John McMichael regularly discussed their left-leaning politics, as did Gusty Spence, William 'Plum' Smith and David Ervine on the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) side.[19] All described themselves as socialists, either in public pronouncements or interviews. All had connections to Belfast (or in Barr's case, Derry) working-class cultures of trade unionism and left politics.

Loyalist policy documents – of the kind some academics denied Loyalists were ever capable of making[20] – such as the *Principles of Loyalism* (2002) lauded the 'multi-cultural and multi-ethnic pluralist society' of the modern United Kingdom. This treatise also highlighted socialist influences on Loyalism such as the late Belfast councillor Hugh Smyth and the NILP's Reverend John Stewart.[21] On the UDA side, Supreme Commander Andy Tyrie confirmed in a 1980 interview 'I lean towards socialism, yes', and complained how the conflict meant that 'normal politics' never developed in Northern Ireland: 'I believe that the bulk of both communities here are Labour-minded people. Or even socialist-minded people. They don't want things to be done by people who've been born with a silver spoon in their mouth giving them special privileges.'[22] This strain of left-Loyalist class politics, while reduced, continues on through the Progressive Unionist Party, which was founded in 1979 and adopted (and retained) British Labour's original Clause IV in its own constitution. It remains one of the few local parties that supports the extension of the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland.

This is hardly to say that Loyalism is straightforwardly or uniformly progressive. Notwithstanding its decidedly regressive propensity for paramilitary violence, former UVF combatant and current PUP leader Billy Hutchinson noted how in Long Kesh prison he talked socialist politics while the UDA's John White extolled free market Thatcherite views.[23] Loyalism leans – like many ideologies – to both the left and right, yet the latter has been disproportionately covered in journalism and academic writing. Researchers studying the Protestant working class should start moving beyond conventional Unionist and Loyalist staples to take in areas of history that are less reactionary and less well-known. The community's social-democratic history is one such area, which with few exceptions has not been properly reflected in scholarly literature.

A constituency that nobody wants

British Labour's difficulties in understanding and listening to the Protestant working class are shared by local parties. Sinn Féin is by its nature hostile to this constituency,

despite the founding father of modern Irish Republicanism Wolfe Tone's famous wish to unite 'Catholic, Protestant and dissenter'.[24] The SDLP once harboured hopes of being a non-sectarian force that would transcend the north's tribal politics, but once individual leaders committed to this philosophy left the party in the late 1970s, it became a mainly Catholic and middle-class nationalist party, with conservative attitudes on social issues. It lost its Westminster seats in June 2017, and earlier this year agreed a partnership with the centre-right Fianna Fáil party in Irish politics (a massive sign to British Labour that it should not regard the SDLP as its natural 'sister' party anymore). The non-sectarian Alliance Party is a pro-business party that has gone in search of votes from the expanding Catholic electorate, and so has antagonised working-class Loyalists through its voting patterns on city councils across Northern Ireland; most notably during the 'Flag Protests' of 2012-13, which blew up following Belfast City Council's decision to restrict the flying of the Union Jack outside City Hall. Alliance's compromise motion sealed the deal back then, and its strong performance in the local elections of May 2019 is sure to alarm Loyalists even further (it is a measure of Loyalism's weakness that it is concerned by the mild gains of a centrist party, which offers compromise motions at municipal level).

Only the radical left-wing grouping People Before Profit, particularly through its activists in Derry, has shown any willingness to engage Protestant working-class communities, setting up public meetings addressing this section of the population and participating in cultural and political events in Protestant working-class districts such as the Fountain estate (which was the subject of petrol bomb attacks from nationalist youths in the summer of 2018).[25] Though this engagement may appear at times to be largely rhetorical, and there are still a few too many references to left Republican icons such as James Connolly, the simple aspiration to address a group so often avoided is commendable.

As during the Troubles, trade unions in Northern Ireland play a valuable role in promoting working-class solidarity across communities. A recent publication edited by two trade unionists highlights the Protestant Unionist strain of left-wing politics via the underrated figure of William Walker (1870–1918), who argued that socialists in Ireland should realise their political aspirations through the British labour movement.[26] This was less a call for the British Labour Party to organise in Northern Ireland than it was a reminder of a radical, constitutionally British perspective that Ulster Unionists could potentially connect with. Similarly, back in February 2014, the International Brigade Commemoration Committee unveiled a plaque in the Shankill Road Library to seven volunteers from this working-class Protestant area who fought alongside Catholics on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War.

However, in present times even the anti-sectarian ethos of the trade union move-

ment, hard-won and taking years to build, is facing new challenges. At the end of February 2019, over 150 Irish activists signed a declaration calling for Irish unity under the banner of 'Trade Unionists for a New and United Ireland' (TUNUI) and held two events launching the initiative in Dublin and then Belfast.[27] Many northern trade unionists fear this will split and possibly break the movement, which had maintained a neutral stand on the constitutional issue during the Troubles and so maintained cross-community cohesion. Organisations such as the Belfast Trades Council and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions set up distress funds, initiated anti-sectarian training programmes in the workplace (through units like Counteract), released statements condemning violence, and promoted (and directly facilitated) dialogue between opposing factions.[28] The TUNUI declaration, on the other hand, is likely to prompt a 'Best with Britain' counter-group emerging – unsurprisingly, given that Sinn Féin activists are driving the agitation, which was received with predictable encouragement on social media from the same British authors who talk of the 'inevitability' of a united Ireland – the vanguard of those who have little or no knowledge of the labour movement in Ireland and its Protestant working-class contingent.[29]

Brexit and Labour's neutrality

In May 2018, the current Labour leadership encouragingly reaffirmed the party's commitment to remaining neutral in any border poll, appearing (in marked contrast to the Conservative Party) to uphold the bipartisan background of the Good Friday Agreement.[30] But the crisis unleased by Brexit has produced a welter of new literature on the prospects for Irish unification, usually advancing classic demographic arguments about Catholics overtaking Protestants on account of the birth-rate, often authored by individuals previously or presently attached to the British Labour Party.[31] In a roundabout way this indicates that the main opposition to Irish unity is unlikely to emanate in the long run from the UK. The principal opposition will probably emerge from Irish citizens facing a huge taxation hike across an all-Ireland economy in order to be able to afford taking on the six counties, along with a potential serious security problem in the form of some kind of Loyalist rebellion.[32]

Instead of speculating on how this might all pan out, however, those British left-wingers who do turn their attention to Ireland should consult the actual history of Ulster Unionism and working-class Protestantism, re-adjusting their settings to a more nuanced analysis of Northern Ireland. Labour needs to recognise that Northern Ireland's urgent problems of poverty, austerity, Brexit, and the breakdown of the devolved institutions can't be addressed without respectful engagement with this vital political constituency. The party's role is not to sit and

wait for Northern Irish Unionism to be washed away by the tide of history, but to encourage it to recover and advance its best political traditions. There needs to be a little less listening to voices from an Irish nationalist comfort zone, and more respect and solidarity shown to those who share many of Labour's values in what remains, wanted or not, a part of the UK.

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Further reading

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Connal Parr, *Inventing the Myth: Political Passions and the Ulster Protestant Imagination*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

Notes

1. Anthony Barnett, *The Lure of Greatness: England's Brexit & America's Trump*, Unbound, London 2017.
2. Trump supporter quoted in Dave Eggers, 'Why Donald Trump could win again', *Guardian*, 2 March 2019.
3. 'Left behind by Good Friday', *Jacobin*, No 21, 2016, p87.
4. Richard Seymour, 'The last gasp of Northern Ireland', *New York Times*, 2 November 2018.
5. Kevin Meagher, *A United Ireland: Why Unification is Inevitable and How it Will Come About*, Biteback Publishing, London 2016, pp73, 159.
6. Ronan Bennett, 'An Irish answer', *Guardian Weekend*, 16 July 1994.
7. Benjamin Mueller, 'How a "No-Deal" Brexit could open a path to Irish Unity', *New York Times*, 15 February 2019.
8. Connal Parr, *Inventing the Myth: Political Passions and the Ulster Protestant Imagination*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.
9. Aaron Edwards, *A History of the Northern Ireland Labour Party: Democratic Socialism and Sectarianism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2009.
10. *Irish Times*, 1 April 1966. McBirney was assassinated by the Provisional IRA in 1974.
11. 'DUP could force government into further public sector pay rises after siding with Labour on NHS pay', *Daily Telegraph*, 13 September 2017; 'Government faces humiliation as DUP poised to side with Labour over women's pensions', I*ndependent*, 14 October 2017.
12. Owen Jones, 'Never mind the SNP. The real danger is if the DUP is in government', *Guardian*, 24 April 2015; Jonathan Tonge, Máire Braniff, Thomas Hennessey, James

W. McAuley and Sophie A. Whiting, *The Democratic Unionist Party: From Protest to Power*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, pp75-76.

13. For a discussion of this see Alan F. Parkinson, *Ulster Loyalism and the British Media*, Four Courts Press, Dublin 1998, pp161-167.
14. See https://twitter.com/Dale Pankhurst/status/992760123524374529.
15. Alex Kane, 'Unionists don't need to panic about the border ... however, they do need to be prepared', *Belfast Telegraph*, 15 February 2019.
16. Text of Irish Republican Army's Green Book (Books I and II, 1977): https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/othelem/organ/ira/ira_green_book.htm.
17. 'RHI Scandal: DUP MLAs Carla Lockhart and William Irwin reveal family members have boilers under the botched green energy scheme', *Belfast Telegraph*, 23 January 2017.
18. Parr, *Inventing the Myth*, p9.
19. Interview with Glen Barr, Derry, 28 November 2012. See McMichael's comments in 'Ireland's intractable crisis: exclusive interviews with UDA and Provisionals', *Marxism Today*, December 1981, p28; Anne Uprichard, 'Gusty Spence: The Man and the Myth', *Fortnight*, No 127, 21 May 1976, pp6-7.
20. Jennifer Todd, 'Two traditions in Unionist political culture', *Irish Political Studies*, Vol 2, No 1, 1987, pp1-26.
21. Billy Mitchell, *Principles of Loyalism (An Internal Discussion Paper)*, Progressive Unionist Party, 2002, pp25, 65-69.
22. Barre Fitzpatrick, 'Interview with Andy Tyrie', *The Crane Bag*, Vol 4 No 2, 1980-81, pp17-18.
23. Interview with Billy Hutchinson, Belfast, 12 November 2012.
24. Tony Novosel, *Northern Ireland's Lost Opportunity: The Frustrated Promise of Political Loyalism*, Pluto Press, London 2013, pp210-211. This is one of the few books that adequately surveys progressive politics within Loyalism.
25. *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 June 2018. See also Eamonn McCann, 'Protestant workers are key', *Socialist Worker*, 1 February 2017: http://www.socialistworkeronline.net/eamonn-mccann-says-protestant-workers-are-key/
26. Seán Byers and Francis Devine (eds), *William Walker, 1870-1918, Belfast Labour Unionist Centenary Essays*, Umiskin Press, Dublin 2018.
27. *Irish News*, 28 February 2019.
28. Ann McKee, *Belfast Trades Council: The First Hundred Years (1881-1981)*, Regency Press, Belfast 1982, p18.
29. See https://twitter.com/KevinPMeagher/status/1100518553512566784.
30. See https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-politics-44229774 .
31. Paul Gosling, *A New Ireland: A New Union – A Ten Year Plan?*, Paul Gosling, 2018; Meagher, *A United Ireland*. Gosling was a former Labour councillor in Leicester during the 1980s and remains active in the Co-operative Party in Northern Ireland, while Meagher is a former Labour Party adviser.
32. See John Bruton, 'Beating drum for united Ireland only deepens sectarian division', *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 March 2017.