Unionism's Last Stand? Contemporary Unionist Politics and Identity in Northern Ireland
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> Since its inception, on the back of London's declaration of virtual neutrality, the peace process has had a chequered career. It brought comparative peace on the streets, broken only occasionally by the crack of bones under baseball bats or iron bars wielded by republican or loyalist paramilitary law-enforcers, but failed to produce the political stability that was to follow. It was an uneasy peace, between Protestant and Catholic communities that still did not mix at the level where it counted, in the working class, and who still had little trust in each other (Barry White, 2000:163-4).

> The present system increases nationalist and republican confidence because it offers them progress. … The same cannot be said for the unionist community. This present Agreement is built upon the same faulty foundation that has been tried before. … Unionists need convincing that an Agreement is capable of addressing unionist concerns and grievances (Gregory Campbell, *Belfast Telegraph*, 8th January 2002).

Introduction

Ulster unionism[1] is in no small state of confusion and schism. Since the current phase of the 'peace process' has begun, political unionism has increasingly fragmented. Moreover, many unionists now regard the social consequences of the contemporary period with some alarm. They perceive recent events as a direct challenge to their culture and identity and at an extreme to the very existence of Northern Ireland. Such viewpoints are reflected directly in the declining political and electoral support from within unionism for the political and organizational settlements brought about by the peace process, some of which is outlined below.

These changes in unionist attitudes are noteworthy. It may now be difficult to recall with clarity the expressions of euphoria and political optimism from within sections of unionists, which marked support for the organizational and political settlements outlined in the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement (GFA). In the referenda that followed, support for the political settlement was endorsed in overwhelming terms throughout Ireland. In Northern Ireland, the 'Yes' campaign drew support from 71 per cent of the voters, while in the Republic 95 percent of voters endorsed the deal. Subsequently, on 25th June 1988, elections were called, in order to choose the 108 members of the Northern Ireland Assembly (see Hennessey 2000; Tonge 2000).

Within the broad mood that political progress was taking place, however, some of the detail went almost without comment. On further assessment while it was clear that the bulk of Irish Nationalists had supported the deal, only a small majority of Unionists gave backing to the process. Even although the arrangements formally replaced the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, so much despised by unionists, there was discernible opposition to the settlement from within key sections of the unionist community. In fact a significant minority of the Protestant Unionist community had voted against the Agreement (see material in Coakley ed., 2002; Ruane and Todd eds. 1999).

This meant from the outset unionism was divided over the desirability of the Agreement and future directions of politics of Northern Ireland (McAuley 1997a, 1997b, 1997c). It is of little surprise therefore, that since the signature of the GFA in 1998, the Northern

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[1] Throughout this article I have used the terms unionism and unionists to refer to a broad category of political identification. When referring to specific responses of political or paramilitary groupings within unionism these have been clearly identified.

Ireland peace process has encountered a whole series of crises, with both the elected Assembly and the wider peace process, teetering at several points on the verge of outright collapse.

Many of the anxieties surrounding the peace process are understandable, because at the heart of the settlement was always a series of interlocking political ambiguities. As a result on the one hand, Irish republicans believe they are in government and in the Assembly as a matter of right, simply exercising representative political power and the mandate of the growing number of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland which vote for Sinn Féin.

On the other hand, many unionists believe republicans are only in the position they are because they agreed a deal, based upon a transition from a past where political violence was central to the movement, towards a future where they would use only democratic means. For most unionists, of course, this includes at its core the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. The growing belief across unionism that the republican movement has not moved as far, or as fast, down the road they have charted, has led directly to a turning away of support from the GFA by unionists.

Hence, within three years of the signing of the Agreement, the situation within unionism had changed dramatically. In the period immediately following the referendum, the main voice of unionist opposition, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) appeared politically isolated. Its leader, Ian Paisley was increasingly portrayed in the media as atavistic and the party as a grouping merely representing the politics of the past. More recently, however, the DUP has again come to the foreground, harnessing one of the strongest contemporary political dynamics within the unionism, expressed in growing expressions of disgruntlement with the political situation and call for a renegotiations of the GFA.

The strength of this dissatisfaction within unionism can be clearly illustrated if we consider the results for the Westminster general election of 2001. The pattern of unionist voting revealed increased support for those expressing strongest opposition to the GFA. In the election, the pro-Agreement, Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) lost four of its ten seats, while the DUP increased its representation from the two seats they won at the 1997 general election, to five.

Further, the DUP's overall share of the vote also rose from 13.6 per cent in 1997 to 22.5 per cent, (although in 1997 they did not stand against sitting Ulster Unionists). In comparison, the UUP share of the vote declined from 32.7 per cent to 26.8 per cent. There is clearly then within unionism not just a growing discourse of opposition within unionism, but a growing political expression of resistance to the shape of the power-sharing settlement brought about by the peace process. This has led to strong speculation that the DUP may become the leading voice within unionism in any forthcoming election in Northern Ireland (Cowan 2003).

This article will critically analyze Unionist responses to contemporary political events. Fundamental to this, is a focus on the increasing levels of disillusionment within unionism with the political process, and important differences in unionism's political responses to the peace process. In particular it will consider the growing prominence of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), both politically and ideologically in the period since the GFA.

Unionism's Alternative Voices

So what has happened to the alternative political voices within unionism? Central to the attempted political realignment of unionism has been the politicization of the loyalist paramilitaries. Two parties have emerged in the contemporary period, with origins in loyalist paramilitary groups: the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) linked to the Ulster

Volunteer Force (UVF); and, the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) associated to the Ulster Defence Association (UDA).

Both the PUP and UDP took seats in the Forum following the elections of 1996. When elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly eventually took place, however, while the PUP secured two seats, the UDP failed to win any representative places. This marked a turning point in UDP fortunes, with those involved directly in the UDP unable to convince the broader UDA of the merits of political involvement. The party has since been disbanded, fracturing over unbridgeable disagreements within the broader leadership as the UDA itself shattered, following a series of bloody feuds and prolonged infighting (see *Irish News* 29 November 2001).

That said, the politicization of key sections of the paramilitaries, especially in the period immediately following the paramilitary ceasefires marked an important change in the politics of unionism. Expressed most positively as it was through the leadership of the PUP, it resulted in a degree of self-criticism and political reflection for which Unionism was hardly noted. The PUP argued, for example, that it sought to move Unionism away from 'sectarian politics', towards a new secular form of unionism (see Progressive Unionist Party 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1998, 1999, 2000).

Certainly the PUP, at least in the early stages of the peace process, was able to yoke a growing engagement with politics from the Protestant working class. This marked the opening up of discussion and debate within many loyalist communities, particularly from those traditionally excluded from the domain of politics (see Ballymacarret Arts & Cultural Society 1999; Ballymacarret Think Tank 1999a, 1999b; Hall 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 2002).

Further, the PUP was able to convince its immediate constituency of working class Protestants, many with paramilitary backgrounds, that the peace process had secured the Union for the foreseeable future and would bring widespread benefits to Northern Ireland (see Progressive Unionist Party 1996c, 1998, 1999, 2000). This period also saw the partial renegotiations of the ideological boundaries within which many unionists sought to express their identity. These processes loosened some of the political and ideological bonds within unionism, and shifted some of the interpretative frames within loyalism (see Shankill Think Tank 1995, 1998).

Support for the PUP has, however, remained largely confined to identifiable working class areas in Belfast and its immediate environs. Any hope they had for expansion throughout the electorate floundering with the paramilitary feuds between the UDA and UVF during the summer of 2000. Within wider unionism (and beyond) these events firmly repositioned the PUP with their paramilitary past.

Beyond this, the PUP has had difficulty in continuing to convince its core support that the peace process has delivered. As Billy Mitchell (2002:50) one of the key thinkers within the PUP notes, the supposed gains being made by Sinn Féin as a result of both the Belfast Agreement and concessions granted outside the Agreement has led to despondency within large sections of the unionist community. Indeed, Mitchell (2002) supports the view of Hadden (2002) that the PUP have found themselves defending an Agreement that was not delivering anything in the working class unionist areas. Pragmatically by offering continuing support for the peace process, the have PUP consistently appeared to be defending David Trimble and the UUP, particularly against the DUP challenge.

The broad result of the period since the signing of the GFA has been a weakening of support for the PUP. This reflects more widespread feelings within loyalism and

particularly sections of the Protestant working class that they are in retreat, increasingly subject to forces of rapid economic, political, cultural and psychological change and decline (Dunn and Morgan 1994; Morrow 2000).

Challenging Mainstream Unionism

More centrally, contemporary unionist politics has been driven by the emphatic engagement of the Ulster Unionist Party with the peace process. Hence, much of the struggle for the mantle of political unionism has crystallized around clashes for control of the political direction of the UUP. This has often manifested in challenges to the leadership of David Trimble. Despite intense challenges from the DUP, the UUP still remains the primary electoral force within unionism. Arguments within the UUP surrounding continued support for the Agreement remain animated. In particular, the willingness of the Unionist Party leadership to work with Sinn Féin in the Assembly has been used by opponents within unionism and the UUP, to undermine the position of David Trimble as leader of the party.

Most specifically, political differences within the UUP have manifested in a series of overt confrontations at meetings of the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC). This is a formal grouping within the party, which since 1905 has sought to act as a key intermediary between the parliamentary group and the wider Unionist electorate, local Unionist associations and the Orange Order.

Since 1998, (when the UUC were asked to endorse UUP support for the GFA), there have been a whole series of meetings of the UUC surrounding Trimble's leadership and policy direction. In April 1998 some 72 per cent endorsed UUP support for the GFA. Since then, however, the support base for the GFA has declined. In a range of votes, including those seeking support for continued power-sharing with Sinn Féin before decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, and a leadership challenge by Martin Smyth, MP for South Belfast, the percentage of the UUC supporting Trimble's leadership has fallen to somewhere between 53 and 58 per cent. Overall, UUP support for the leadership of Trimble, the sanction of the GFA, and the role of Sinn Féin in the Assembly has been marked by a downward trend.

Those most strongly opposing the UUP's pro-Agreement stance within the party have coalesced around the MP Jeffrey Donaldson. Indeed, David Trimble has now survived eleven challenges in his tussles over strategy and tactics with Jeffrey Donaldson. Further, along with two other MPs, Donaldson has refused to take the Unionist whip in Westminster. Put most simply, this section of the UUP has simply run out of patience with David Trimble's leadership and have little confidence that the tactics of the Unionist leadership will bring about the policies outlined in the GFA.

At the core of Trimble's claims have been the promotion of the Agreement as a way of bringing unionism back to 'the heart of government' (Trimble, 2001:1444). Underpinning this has been arguments that the UUP could secure devolution and bring about complete decommissioning perhaps even the eventual disbanding of the IRA. The difficulty, however, is that this is now clearly not how contemporary events are perceived by many unionists at an everyday level.

Within unionism a more grounded understanding is that the IRA is being seen to be 'getting away' with too many violations of the agreed processes. These include 'punishment' beatings, ceasefire breaches, allegations of a republican led break-in at Castlereagh police centre, of gun-running in Colombia, continuing street violence at sectarian interface areas of Belfast, and most recently the allegations of a Sinn Féin organised spy-ring operating in the Assembly.

Further, many of the concrete provisions of the GFA are now seemingly offensive to unionists. The *d'Hondt* system of ministerial selection within the Assembly resulted in two

Sinn Féin ministers being elected (Martin McGuinness as Education Minister and Bairbre de Brun as Minister of Health). Together they were in charge of almost half the entire budget for the Assembly. For many, even liberal unionists, the reality of Sinn Féin ministers in office in Stormont is difficult.

This sense of frustration is widely felt within unionism has been compounded by the spectacle of the release of IRA prisoners, the transformation of the Royal Ulster Constabulary into the new Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and most importantly, the prolonged absence of decommissioning of the paramilitaries. All of these changes are now perceived within broad sections of unionism as deeply unacceptable consequences of the GFA. As a result, White (2000) indicates, there was a widespread feeling throughout the Protestant community, that unionist politicians were constantly being out-thought by the guile and tactics of their republican counterparts as part of a 'pan-nationalist front'.

Unionist attitudes to the peace process have also been determined by, or expressed the reaction of unionists at the everyday community level, where many social relationships have remained as divided as before (see Darby and MacGinty 2000).

Unionist Politics 'on the streets'

Shirlow (2002a, 2002b; see also Brown 2002), for example, indicates that Belfast has become more segregated since the peace process began. In the contemporary period working class communities in particular have remained polarized over a range of contentious issues, including the chosen routes of parades by the Orange Order, the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, the nature of policing and many others.

The result is that the sectarian divide is at least as deep, if not deeper than it was when the peace process began (see *The Guardian* 4th January 2002; 7th January 2003). Shirlow's research (based on 4,800 households in 12 neighbouring estates, separated by so-called peace lines), indicates that the level of social and physical integration is less now than it was a decade ago. Perhaps of most concern is the finding that social segregation and sectarianism is particularly prevalent amongst younger people. Prejudice on both sides was so marked among 18 to 25 year olds, that a large majority (68 per cent) had never had a meaningful conversation with anyone from the other community. Hence, Shirlow concludes that despite five years of relative peace and the continual decline in the level of violence, social relations between Catholic and Protestant communities have not significantly improved (see also the article by Shirlow in this volume).

Further as (Wilson and Wilford, no date: 4) note entrenched social divisions continue to be exhibited at many different levels of Northern Irish society Power sharing devolution seemingly done little to reduce inter-communal divisions. Throughout recent times, sectarian violence has remained overt in working class areas of Belfast. On 3rd June 2002, for example, three people were injured in shootings as sectarian violence raged for the fourth successive night along in east Belfast (see *News Letter* 4th June 2002, *Irish News* 4th June 2002). Those clashes mirrored other recent tensions, particularly those involving interfaces in north Belfast, and conflicts over the route taken by Catholic children to the Holy Cross primary school in Belfast.

As a result there are growing indications of unionist political disengagement and a growing lack of confidence with the ability of the broader political process to fulfil its assurances.

The Politics of Disillusionment

Clearly this disillusionment it is not located in any one factor. We can find another example if we consider unionist reaction to the Patten Report. This involved the change of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) to the newly established Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). The Patten Report on the future of policing in Northern Ireland made some 175 recommendations, including proposals to reduce the force's size from 11,400 to 7,500 while increasing Catholic representation from 8 to 30 per cent within ten years.

The disgruntlement amongst a large section of unionism with the abolition of the RUC, rested largely on it being seen as yet another concession too far to Sinn Féin. Some unionists even suggested that something that the IRA could not achieve through 30 years of a terrorist campaign have been obtained through political concession. Thus, from within the unionist mindset the creation of the PSNI was seen as the dismantling of 'their' police force, the RUC. For many Unionists the scrapping of the name of the RUC and badge was deeply pernicious. There is little or no recognition that the RUC played a repressive role within the Catholic community, or any awareness of the need for changes in contemporary policing. Rather, as Lucy puts it:

> … many Unionists and Protestants view the lost of the name RUC, its badge and its traditions and the stripping away of British symbolism from the courts as part of the process of 'hollowing out Ulster's Britishness' (Lucy 2002:8).

This is but one example of a broader process of social and political uncertainty within unionism. As early as 1997 there was clear evidence that unionists were about evenly divided on how the unionist political leadership should proceed, if at all, with the peace process (Breen 1997). Hall (1997) suggests that by this stage 'the death of the peace process' was in place, brought about largely because of the loss of community ownership and engagement with the process. Further, there was an emerging gulf between Protestants and Catholics in their opinions as to how a lasting peace might best be secured in Northern Ireland.

These differences were made overt in a survey, published in the *Belfast Telegraph* on 10th January 1998. The research (conducted by Dr Colin Irwin of the Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University Belfast) revealed that a large majority (some 70 per cent) of Protestants questioned said the most important step towards a lasting peace was to disband the paramilitary groups. The priority for around 78 per cent of Catholics interviewed, however, was the creation of a Bill of Rights that guaranteed equality for all.

While complete reform of the RUC was the second most popular choice for Catholics, (with 70 per cent declaring it essential). This was in stark contrast to Protestant respondents, only seven per cent of which thought that this was fundamental and placed it as their sixteenth highest priority. British withdrawal was predictably the least popular choice for Protestants with only one percent believing it essential. Catholics ranked this as their ninth choice, with 46 per cent deeming it essential.

Importantly, unionist opinion on any future political arrangements, and their 'preferred model' for the government of Northern Ireland is also highly divided. Dowds (2002) indicates that only 41 per cent of unionists supported power sharing, even with the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). Moreover, a majority of unionists (58 per cent) did not support power sharing with either Sinn Féin or the SDLP.

Dowds (2002) research further shows that the most popular option for unionists, was direct rule from Westminster (42 per cent). This was followed by 23 per cent who support the return of the power-sharing assembly, with an independent Ulster (17 per cent) and a return to majority rule at Stormont (15 per cent) also finding some support from

unionists (Dowds 2002). It is clear that many unionists are at best disillusioned with the outcomes of the GFA.

This pattern of growing unionist disillusionment with the GFA was further revealed in February 2003 (see Irwin, 2003). This survey showed support for the Agreement at an all-time low amongst the broad population of Northern Ireland (62 per cent). Crucially this broad figure disguises severe discrepancies between the two communities. Only 36 per cent of Protestants interviewed claimed that they would still vote for the GFA. This marks a relentless drop in Protestant support for the GFA since its high point in May 2000 (at 55 per cent), just after the IRA said they would 'completely and verifiably put their arms beyond use'.

Further, the poll also revealed that only one-third of Protestants would vote 'Yes' if a new referendum were held. While a majority of Protestants (some 60 per cent) claimed that they would still be happy to see the Agreement work, that figure had also fallen to the lowest level since the 1998 referendum. Further, within unionism, a large majority of Protestants, at 73 per cent directly blame the problems surrounding the peace process directly on republicans.

Central to the strength of reactions by unionists are wider expressions that they are 'losing out' from the contemporary political process. This also finds articulation through the view that 'unionist culture' is being relegated and downgraded by the peace process. This draws on expressions from within sections of unionism that the British government, having set about removing unionist political rights, is now seeking to remove their cultural rights as well. As Murray suggests, many:

> … now feel that they are giving everything and getting nothing in return. They have conceded, or been forced to concede, on issues such as the early release of prisoners, the re-routing of marches, the introduction of North-South structures and the Government of the Republic of Ireland having a say in their affairs. Many are feeling what might be described as the 'pain of parity' to be unbearable (Murray 2000: 3-4).

Understanding Contemporary Unionism

It is against this background that we must consider the growing electoral fortunes of the DUP outlined above. It has been the DUP, which has promoted the strongest traditional discourse in defence of the Union and which has sought to cohere and mobilise anti-Agreement forces within unionism. From the outset of the contemporary period the DUP had claimed that the peace process was clearly duplicit. Its real purpose was part of a grand plan to destroy Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the United Kingdom.

For the DUP the entire peace process is designed to provide concessions to the republican movement As Peter Robinson, deputy leader of the DUP puts it:
It is often as difficult to win the peace as it is to win the war. This has been the experience in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland it is not yet possible to say who won the war, because the war is not yet over. But if it is not possible to say who won the war then it is possible to say that Republicans have benefited most from the mock peace (Robinson 2003:8).

Another central discourse around which the DUP reading of unionism is restructuring is that the failures of the peace process lies squarely with the United Kingdom government. It is they who have 'betrayed' the British citizens of Northern Ireland. Further, for the DUP, the British government can no longer be trusted in any circumstance. The UK government lied about secret contacts with the IRA for years. During that time it

formulated a bargain that would ensure the move towards a United Ireland, in return for an IRA cease-fire.

The UK government has sought to delude the unionist people and offer continual concessions to the republican movement. Further, for the DUP successive UK governments have uncritically taken onboard the rhetoric of Sinn Féin and the politics analysis of the 'pan-nationalist front'. The result according to Ian Paisley is that the recent period has been used to 'eradicate all traces of our British sovereignty' (*Belfast Telegraph* June 11 2002).

A crucial part of the process has been to bring on board uncritical unionists, who have been duped by UK government propaganda and seduced by Irish America. Hence, throughout the contemporary period, the DUP have branded all those who have been prepared to make any attempt to operate within the parameters of the peace process, as treacherous. An increasing number of unionists feel that the British Government has been increasingly willing to 'sell out' to a nationalist and republican set agenda (see material in McCartney 2001a, 2001b; Roche, 1997; 2001 and Roche and Birnie, no date).

The actions and beliefs of pro-Agreement unionists are thus equated directly with undermining directly the Northern Irish state and the Union itself. From within this perspective, the peace process is nothing other than a euphemism for a 'surrender process'. This has found consistent expression from the DUP in the contemporary period (Robinson, 1996).

So why has the traditional unionist discourse as expressed by the DUP come to the fore? While the reaction of the DUP has been predictable, set against the widespread feelings of political disillusionment outlined above the explanation of the DUP remains convincing to many from a unionist background. Throughout the past 30 years, notions of political and social decline have been increasingly reinforced within sections of unionism. This rests on the erosion of a distinct sense of 'territoriality', political, geographical and ideological.

In contemporary period, the political response of Unionism to the peace process has, at best, been ambiguous. This prevailing suspicion that the 'real' process is one founded on a surreptitious deal has been strongly promoted by sections of unionism and especially the DUP. From the outset of the negotiated settlement the consistent claim of the DUP was that the betrayal of Ulster has been obscured by the professional mendacity of the UK government.

Indeed, as one unionist paper put it, Ulster's very existence is under greater threat than at any time since the Home Rule crisis of 1912-14 (*Orange Standard* September 1998). This perspective is now widespread across many sections of unionism and firmly established in sections of the Orange Order, the UK Unionist Party, that section of the Ulster Unionist Party led by Donaldson and other sections of unionism and loyalism. (see DUP 1997b, 1999, 2003; McCartney 2001a, 2001b; Paisley 1998). Such a view is clearly also articulated, for example, in the following statement from Northern Ireland Unionist Party Assembly member, Norman Boyd:

> The Agreement has at its very core the legitimation of terrorism in that it effectively placed Sinn Fein/IRA at the heart of government without any requirement upon them to decommission their weapons or dismantle their terrorist organisation. … The unionist people will not be forced against their will into an all Ireland Republic and we are determined to stand firm for the defence of the Union. Terrorism must be defeated and democracy and the rule of law restored in Northern Ireland. The Belfast Agreement must be replaced and its collapse is inevitable (Boyd 2003:1).

A future for Unionism?

How then should we best characterize contemporary unionism? Anti-Agreement unionist readings of current political events are located in the broad view that the settlement around the GFA represents a weakening of the existing constitutional link. Hence, the relative strength within unionism of the political discourse of the DUP, which most clearly articulates that the very future existence of Northern Ireland that is at stake, and that no accommodation can be made around the GFA (DUP 2003) is central to the future politics of unionism.

In recent times the DUP has consistently repeated its claim that the foundations of the Union have been made insecure (see DUP 1996a; 1996b; 1996c, 1997a). All attempts at a political settlement are seen as chapters of a longer story involving lengthening steps on a slippery slope to a united Ireland (Robinson 1996). Any form of concession or agreement involving republicanism is seen as another step along that incline.

In response anti-Agreement unionism vanguarded by the DUP has sought to return to those socially constructed traditions and political positions which best offer feelings of political stability. These offer some notion of authenticity in what most unionists recognize as a dramatically changing political world. In Northern Ireland, political position is often reinforced by the strength of collective memory, which interprets and offers understandings of the past and organises them to address the concerns of the present (see Bryson and McCartney 1994; Coulter 1999:200-252). While the past, however, may be given in memory, it 'must be articulated to become memory' (Huyssen 1995:3).

The DUP, articulate this collective memory of unionism in different ways. They link the past as shared by a distinct group (Protestants/ unionists) that gives substance to unionist identity, to the present social and political conditions of that group, through to predictions of the future. This interpretation is linked through direct reference to a continuity of treacherous events for unionists. In the contemporary period, for example, these include the Sunningdale and Anglo-Irish Agreements, the Joint Declaration, the Framework Proposals, Good Friday Agreement, prisoner releases and Sinn Féin in the Assembly. This resonates across unionism.

The DUP thus positions its supporters around this political discourse of betrayal and further suggests that it is only the DUP, which is in a position stop the slide, and to reveal the 'truth' about contemporary political events. It is this construction that is at the heart of the DUP political project (Paisley 1997; Robinson 1999). Crucially any concessions within the political process surrounding the GFA are presented as much more. Rather, they are seen as a weakening of a core identity, a lessening of what it is to be 'British', Protestant and a unionist. This reading of contemporary events suggests that their very British identity, expressed either as unionism or Protestantism, is under attack. The heart of the DUP project continues to frame the conflict in this way and to construct discourses that re-emphasize and reinforce the central anxieties of many unionists (see for example, DUP 1996a, 1999).

This insecurity has been compounded by the nebulous nature of unionist ideology. It has been evident that the 'Union' and 'Unionism' means many different things to different people (see Cochrane 1997; Foster 1995; Hall 1995, 1997, 2000; Hanna ed. 2001) and there are disparate social and cultural elements that make up the political constituents of Unionism (see English and Walker eds., 1996; Lucy and McClure 1999). For some Unionists it remains largely a contract with Britain to protect the religious and cultural heritage of Ulster Protestantism. Others mainly see it as simply another as an expression of regionalism within the context of devolved administrations of the United Kingdom. One thing it certainly does not mean, however, is accepting the legitimacy or political authority of the British state.

The broad political reaction of unionism to the peace process has further highlighted that there is no longer any uniform conception of what unionism means. Thus, when considering the political possibilities for unionism it is important to recognise the competing sets of discourses around which contemporary unionism is mobilising politically. The first appeals to unionists to reinforce its traditional form (see material in McAuley 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002; Shirlow and McGovern eds., 1997), such as that promoted by the DUP, United Kingdom Unionist Party and the Northern Ireland Unionist Party.

The second, suggests that to continue, unionism must change to adopt a more pluralist and liberal set of values. This can be found in the pro-Trimble section of the UUP and the PUP. The political manifestation of these discourses can be broadly understood as those differences between groupings that seek to fortify traditional unionist positions and oppose the Agreement, and those promoting some form of political change or flexibility within current political arrangements.

Within this, the discourses of fear and betrayal so straightforwardly projected by the DUP are non-party specific in its appeal to unionists. It is capable of arousing and mobilizing across several of the factions of the unionist political bloc, and from within other sections of non-aligned unionists. Central to this in drawing support is the DUP's self image as unwavering sentinels against Ulster's enemies (see for example, DUP 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 1999; Paisley, 1998, 2001, 2003b). Ian Paisley gave a recent example of this when he said:

> Unionist leaders who have been preaching that *the Union is safe* have been forced to face the naked truth – the Union is in danger, and in greater danger at this time than at any other time since the founding of Northern Ireland (1997:1, *emphasis in original*).

'Dislocation' of Unionist Identities

A core aspect of the contemporary period therefore, involves the struggle to reconstruct unionism, around a discourse expressing either a more pluralist identity, or one proclaiming its traditional form. The crisis for unionism around the peace process has brought about a fracturing of the existing symbolic order (see Zizek 1989). This may involve what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) term as 'dislocation'. Here 'meaning' becomes ambiguous as differing forces compete through new discursive constructs.

This 'de-centring' of the structure occurs through a variety of social processes that call into question the legitimacy of the existent hegemonic bloc. This sets in motion social forces of both destruction and creation, because, 'on the one hand they threaten identities, on the other, they are the foundation on which new identities are constituted' (Laclau 1990: 39).

Within unionism, new constructs cannot be forced onto political subjects, especially if the emergent identities are deemed as illegitimate articulations of what unionism means to most people. Ultimately, articulations that are deemed not to satisfy core criteria of unionism are destined to remain at the fringes of political life. They do not constitute any real threat to the existent hegemonic formation of unionism.

The contemporary period of the peace process brought about a political, ideological and discursive crisis within unionism. It is within this context that emergence of the new discourses, such as 'progressive loyalism' must be understood. Likewise, the pluralist unionism of pro-Agreement sections of the UUP was a result of this de-centring. It is far from certain, however, whether these new visions of unionism will be successful in re-articulating identity through the transformation of core elements within unionist.

If for example, we are to think in terms of new loyalism as having the potential to be a counter-hegemonic force, its mere existence is not enough to ensure its success. Instead, it is important to make the distinction here between the *existence* of a discourse and that of the *availability* of a discourse. That alternative political and social discourses to mainstream unionism exist and have existed within the Protestant community is well recorded (see Finlay 2001; Hyndman 1996).

Such discourses, however, only become meaningful through their articulation and mobilization. In the recent period, new discursive constructions, such as those put forward by the PUP, did gain some measure of credibility amongst sections of unionism. The continued reconstruction of the traditional hegemonic unionist bloc around the DUP has, however, halted, or at the very least severely curtailed, the flow of signifiers contained within new loyalism discourse. The same is true for the Trimble-led faction of the UUP.

Rather it is the DUP understanding of unionism, articulated through long inherited discourses making reference to core identifiers such as 'Britishness', 'Protestantism', 'tradition', 'anti-unification' and so on, has again come to the fore of unionism. These key discourses of the DUP enable both representation and recognition on the part of the subject who position themselves accordingly. In this sense it draws directly on existing collective memories while reinforcing them in a particular form of expression of political identity (see Huyssen 1995, Misztal 2003). As Norvick explains more broadly:

We choose to center certain memories because they seem to us to express what are central to our collective identity. Those memories, once brought to the fore, reinforce that form of identity (Novick 1999:5).

As the peace process has progressed those discourses that re-emphasize and reinforce the central apprehensions of many unionists have increasingly gained credence with the very existence of the Union constructed as core to contemporary events. Ian Paisley, speaking at an Independent Orange Institution demonstration on 12th July 2003 expressed it as follows:

> The current round of pandering to Sinn Fein/IRA will not be accepted by law-abiding Unionist people. The Joint Declaration is another product of the Belfast Agreement. It is the destruction agenda of Ulster within the Union and the latest stage in the surrender process started by the Belfast Agreement. It has been designed by the Government with the assistance of Dublin and with the help of Mr Trimble to deliver the Unionist people of Ulster further down the road of Irish unity (Paisley 2003a:1).

Conclusions
The period since the signing of the GFA may be characterized by a growing lack of confidence within the unionist community in politics. There is widespread belief that socially and politically the Protestant community is in decline and that the Catholic community is making gains (Brown and MacGinty 2003; Dunn and Morgan 1994; Hall 1996, 1998; Morrow 2000).

The political reactions of many unionists can only be fully understood in the context of the broader fears that the Union is under direct and continuous threat. As a result many unionists believe that they must guard unceasingly against the insidious propaganda and attempts to subvert their British allegiance and culture. Unionism is socially constructed as a call for individuals to constitute their political self around a particular reading of circumstances. Recent events highlight the increasing lack of enthusiasm in the unionist community for the GFA and the politics of the broader peace process. Overall, many unionists now fear that the safeguard on the Union is much less secure than before the

contemporary phase (see Boyd 2003, DUP 1997b, 1999, 2003; McCartney 2001a, 2001b; Paisley 1998).

Hence, unionists increasingly point out that he period of the peace process, rather than as it was 'sold' to them, as heralding the defeat of the IRA, has seen a growing prominence for Sinn Féin. Unionist support for the Agreement, (which always depended on an end to the paramilitary threat), has slowly been eroded. These ideological and political differences within unionism have been given a cutting edge in *realpolitik* by the repositioning of fractions of the UUP around the anti-Agreement bloc and the increased support for the DUP in the 2001 UK general election.

This manifests in overt confrontations between pro and anti Agreement sections of unionism. Following the failed attempt to revitalise the peace process and a working Northern Ireland Assembly in October 2003, Ian Paisley (2003b) castigated David Trimble, UUP leader in the following way:

> He was willing to accept a manifestly inadequate set of words from republicans. The language used by Gerry Adams and the IRA singularly failed to state that the war was over or the IRA would disband. Indeed today's statement is yet another fraud on the people of Northern Ireland. Whilst there is no precision about what the IRA has done the Government spells out in detail each and every concession to the IRA (Paisley 2003b).

While David Trimble (2003) may continue to highlight the view that, 'the war is over, but the battlefield needs cleared up', the front line remains a terrain of ideological and political engagement upon which the DUP and other anti-Agreement unionists are deeply dug-in. What remains foremost for the DUP is a discourse, which is capable of rallying significant sections of unionism against any continued settlement. Central is the notion that a legitimate unionist identity can only be built in opposition to political compromise. This remains a highly seductive articulation for many from that background. Just how alluring it is to unionists will be tested in any forthcoming election.

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