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**REDEFINING LOYALISM**

**—A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE**

**David Ervine, MLA**

**—AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE**

**James W McAuley**

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**IBIS working paper no. 4**

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No. 4 in the lecture series "Redefining the union and the nation:  
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## ABSTRACTS

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### **REDEFINING LOYALISM— A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Although loyalism in its modern sense has been around since the 1920s, it acquired its present shape only at the beginning of the 1970s. Then it was reborn in paramilitary form, and was used by other, more privileged, unionists to serve their own interests. Yet the sectarianism within which loyalism developed disguised the fact that less privileged members of the two communities had much in common. Separation bred hatred, and led to an unfounded sense of advantage on the part of many Protestants who in reality enjoyed few material benefits. The pursuit of accommodation between the two communities can best be advanced by attempts to understand each other and to identify important shared interests, and the peace process can best be consolidated by steady, orchestrated movement on the two sides, and by ignoring the protests of those who reject compromise.

### **REDEFINING LOYALISM— AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE**

In recent years a division has emerged within unionism between two sharply contrasting perspectives. On the one hand, traditional unionism has relied on a discourse of perpetuity, relying on long-standing values and political attachment to the old order, and seeing in the developments that have been taking place since 1998 evidence of a creeping form of Irish unity. By contrast to these, “new loyalism”, represented in particular but not exclusively by the Progressive Unionist Party, is based on a reinterpretation of the past of unionism, seeing in this a pronounced and politically significant class structure, and putting the case for the defence of working class interests. This alternative vision rests on a more pluralistic conception of the politics of Northern Ireland.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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## REDEFINING LOYALISM— A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

David Ervine

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### I

Let me give you my understanding of when and how loyalism was first defined. Loyalism was first defined around about 1971-72, when the great and the good within unionism decided that they needed to have a distancing process between themselves and those who, rather than talking a good fight or an argument, were actually physically prepared to fight. They embarked then on a process of developing for themselves a position which separated them from any sense of complicity in the problem that is Northern Ireland. I suppose it is best epitomised by identifying these people with those who live on the “Gold Coast”—and that is not Dublin 4 by the way, although it might be, it is actually an area outside Belfast where property values are very high, where the quality of life and the remuneration are substantial. The view of this group of unionists probably was that if all of the bad people would just go away, what a wonderful place it would be.

Well, of course, paramilitarism is not something that our societies are immune to. In real terms the phenomenon of paramilitarism really was created in the 1970s, and therefore the question I would have for the great and the good, and for those who believe themselves not to be complicit in the circumstances that gave shape to Northern Ireland, is what on earth went wrong in the time when there were no paramilitaries? What actually happened when there were no rampant UDA, UVF or IRA? What was so wrong in our society that the circumstances of explosion were created? Could it be that the suppression of a group of people, the denial of political exposure, the denial of any sense of capacity to influence the society in which they lived had some contribution to make or could act as some kind of cause that led to an explosion of violence?

We have got to remember that 27 years of nationalist opposition in the early years of Northern Ireland brought nationalists to the heady heights where they managed to get one piece of legislation through the Stormont Parliament, a piece of legislation so insignificant that many see it as amusing—an amendment to the Wild Birds Act. That was nationalism’s contribution to the legal framework of the Northern Ireland state. This is an indictment. It is an indictment that puts an onus on those who feel themselves not to have been complicit to begin a digging process and to begin to look at where they contributed to the circumstances of this society.

The way in which we had a one-party state; the way in which we *did* discriminate; the way in which we created circumstances where there were “them” and “us”—these were the circumstances that undoubtedly create the conditions for bitterness and hatred, because “them” and “us” translated into another language is zero sum.



Yet the two communities live and lived often no more than 50 metres apart. If our trajectory was good we could hit each other, if our voices were loud we could hear each other, but we did not know each other, and indeed, we have never really known each other. We have been born in separate hospitals, go to separate schools, sign on at separate unemployment exchanges, and to add insult to injury we are buried in separate graveyards. Although there are other societies like this, the reality is that Northern Ireland is only 90 miles long by 90 miles wide. The sectarian dichotomy is brutal and vicious. It sees 93 percent of us living in areas that are homogeneously Protestant or Catholic; only 7 percent of our society is mixed.

Now I do not for a moment believe that sectarianism does not flourish in the drawing rooms, or that it is absent among the privileged. It flourishes among all classes. In our family, we did not have a drawing room. The drawing room was in front of the fire where the TV was and where the tin bath went—nothing spectacular, nothing special. It was much the same as where many people lived in, both in Belfast and in Dublin and indeed in Newcastle and Manchester and Liverpool, Bradford and London and many other parts of this world. Here, too, sectarianism could grow. Sectarianism is a flower—a beautiful flower. It does not grow wild in a field—it is nourished. It is nourished and it is cared for; it is reproduced, generation after generation after generation.

When I talk like this I have to pinch myself, because at one time I myself shared these views. When I was imprisoned in Long Kesh in 1974, people should be under no illusion that I would have blown up members of the other community, or shot them, because that was the capacity within my heart, the capacity of sense of siege, perhaps most manifest in the fear that the other side provoke. Of course, that is fairly understandable given that you do not know the other side, given that you can never appreciate the desires and hopes and dreams that they have, ones that in many ways mirror the hopes and desires and dreams that you have.

Why is it that the price of a bag of coal, the price of a loaf, or the pathetic education system at working-class level in Northern Ireland has never drawn the people together? Could it be because of the beautiful flower? Could it be the circumstances of division? Could it be the flourishing of elitism? Could it be that there are those who do well from such division? I contend that that is the case. Why was it that in 1922 the then Unionist government paid—as some are old enough to remember—50 bob, two pounds ten shillings a week, to loyalist gunmen (even though they were not called loyalists then, they were just strange unionists) to shoot Catholics. If this sounds controversial, check the history—it is true. This arose from the interests of those who believed themselves to be in authority, those who believed themselves to be in control, those who believed that potentially they had something to lose.

## II

The position is a bit different now but there are still some similarities. Why do the drug dealers ply their trade with impunity? Why do we live life in this way? Within

the last 14 months I have buried seven of my colleagues. Why is it that what many would see as thick, Neanderthal, stupid loyalism with its knuckles trailing the ground was effectively the only real bulwark and defence for the Good Friday Agreement on the Unionist side for some time? I may be the wrong person to say this, but why is it that I had to break every inch of ground that David Trimble walked on? Why is it that this had to happen? Why is it that we constantly have to challenge the reticence within Unionism?

When my society is attacked from without, the questions and the challenges enter my community like an Exocet missile and explode inside, causing fear and trepidation—or *further* fear and trepidation. We then do what all tribes do; we weld ourselves into an homogeneous unit to be driven by the lowest common denominator because of the fear of what is outside the tribe. That tells me that the only real, valuable debate about unionism is within the unionist community. It is a question of defining who we are and what we are; the simple terms in which we see ourselves and indeed in which others see us are quite frankly frightening. There have to be circumstances within which we have our own security, our own confidence, our own belief. The alternative is that the people of Northern Ireland define that which they do not want rather than embrace that which they do want, and that, surely, leads to a constantly and continually negative politics.

What conceivable good can come out of a continually negative politics—what, other than fear and trepidation? If we are witnessing the people of Northern Ireland, especially the unionist population, living in some sense of fear and trepidation at the moment, why would they be otherwise? All of their leaders—and not just some of them—have been telling them for 30 years to look at their boots, to walk with a solemn demeanour: “you’re sold out”, “you’re beaten”; “you’ve every right to be frightened”, “the betraying British government”, “the preying Irish government”. When the violence of the republican movement is added to all of those things, it confirms for the Dr Paisleys of this world that from their own point of view it is best to be defeated than to compromise. Remember that his church is called the Martyrs’ Memorial Church!

Well there are no martyrs about my party. We are about a new society. We are about pluralism. We are about justice. We are about equality. This is the year 2000, and we have politicians on this island talking about wanting equality, talking about needing justice. The year 2000! Is that not an indictment in itself, an indictment of how the world failed to do what it needed to do what it should have done? We still have to argue that there is no consciousness abroad that fully understands the complexities of the Northern Ireland circumstances. When the Americans and indeed at times the British arrive here—people who mean very well and who think that a handshake will do the job—they have got another think coming. We all know that. We are not going to wash away or wipe away the fears and trauma of generations, passed on and nurtured, much like the flower I referred to. We have to start almost afresh, and we start on the basis of equality; we start on the basis of our own appreciation of someone else.

When I was a kid we used to shout “we are the people”. Of course, that meant that somebody else was not part of the people, but I did not realise that at the time. But now we would settle for being “a” people. We have been through a lot. We have been through some substantial trauma. But when I think about being a traditional unionist, and from a traditional unionist’s point of view that means being a respectable unionist, well I frankly have no desire to be a respectable unionist in that context. I want to be a human being, and I want the human beings in my society to recognise the politics of commonality—the issues that unite us rather than divide us, the circumstances that we need to come to terms with, the promises that we owe to each other: the right to live in peace, the right to live where you wish, the right to live free and unmolested for your political or religious beliefs.

These are true core issues for us. I remember when the Good Friday Agreement was being negotiated in its draft form we offered the theory of radical change. We argued that we did not want a “Paddy” bill of rights, we wanted a bill of rights. We did not want a bill of rights that just dealt with why Protestants and Catholics, or nationalists, unionists, loyalists or republicans had found it difficult to live side by side. We just wanted rights for human beings—whether that was in relation to the fact that you were born with a defective circumstance that made you homosexual or whether that was an accident at birth that made you disabled, or less able-bodied, or whether it was whether you were born a Protestant or born a Catholic, or the big issue: whether you were born a male or a female. All of those things, if we are about building a modern society, are vaguely important—all of them. Absolutely all of them have equal validity.

### III

If we in the Progressive Unionist Party and the so-called new loyalism are to play a role in the future of our society, it will be based on a constant, continuing fuelling of the debate within unionism. Unionism, through that debate, will become stronger. It will be less frightened, and issues such as “no guns, no government” will become less important. We have a coffee room in Stormont and the constant banter there is “no buns, no government.” The members there banter about it, we laugh about it, but we tell the population outside that we are unable to laugh with each other and that this issue is the most defining and critical circumstance that our society faces, and therefore it is always a “make or break” one.

When an issue is always a “make or break” one, it becomes dangerous. I cannot know for sure whether Mr Trimble would have achieved his recent 54 and a bit percent majority, as opposed to his 53 and a bit percent majority the last time, had he not tried to keep his supporters happy by imposing some form of sanction against Sinn Fein. I would have wished that this had not been necessary, but nevertheless he has to make that judgement call. We will never know whether or not he would have succeeded without introducing that sanction.

There are two sides to every story, and whatever about my position, there is my equal and opposite in Northern Ireland and both sides have a responsibility that I

think they are seeking to address. I believe that Adams and McGuinness are genuine. I would not have come this far if I did not believe this. The interesting thing is that loyalism was sold the Good Friday Agreement not by the television screens alone, or by the news media alone but by tramping up and down the whole of our country talking to small groups, large groups, trying to explain, explain, explain and explain again what lay in front of us. For one of the defining circumstances that was related to our supporters' acceptance of the Good Friday Agreement, and indeed the acceptance of a loyalist cease-fire in the first instance, was the constant shift of the Republican movement.

Few people will have read the "Green Book", the IRA code. But the "Green Book" is something that most unionists think is about crossing the road; they see it as a "green cross code", or something like that. Although these people in the unionist mindset believe that republicans have been killing them for 30 years, they never went out of their way to try and understand the mindset of republicanism. In understanding the mindset of republicanism we can see a seismic shift. We understand how difficult it must have been to turn the juggernaut, and we pay respect to and accept the bona fides of those who did that. No one told us it was going to be easy to accept the bona fides of the enemy, but there are some in my community who just do not want to see the wood for the trees. They do not want to know that Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness exist and, better still, they do not even want decommissioning. The reality is that if decommissioning were to happen tomorrow the Democratic Unionist Party would turn into a large pail of defecation simply on the basis that their political careers would be over. They need the retention of weapons.

Now to be a little more controversial, so do I, and let me explain why.

My community in Northern Ireland believes that conflict resolution comes in a plastic bottle that is to be found on the shelf in the chemist's shop, and you apply it like suntan lotion; or they believe that conflict resolution is an event. It is neither a suntan lotion nor an event. It is a process; and when you are a politician, process protects. Process allows you to manoeuvre and take forward the arguments and the circumstances based upon the protection that process creates. We have not educated the unionist community well enough. We in the loyalist community have educated our people and worked hard at it, but the larger unionist community has not been educated well enough on the issues of process. Indeed, I witness the potential difficulties around the corner for the peace and political processes, but remember these are not one and the same thing. It is only when the peace process and the political process converge that perhaps we will come of age.

But we watch as Gerry Adams struggles manfully with his constituency, David Trimble with his, John Hume and Seamus Mallon with theirs, me with mine, Monica McWilliams with hers, Sean Neeson with his—all of the pro-agreement parties do so. We have not yet had the brainwave of seeing the need to develop our capacity to fend off attack, given that the Good Friday Agreement and its parameters prove the interdependency of the relationships between people—not just within Northern

Ireland, but between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, and indeed between this island and the island of Great Britain. The picture is almost like a set of tent poles or a wigwam; you know that if you take one item away, they will all fall.

#### IV

So that tells me that the strength that we should be looking for is from each other. It must be based upon the “politics of need” rather than the mutually exclusive “politics of want” about which each side in a divided society keeps megaphoning the other. It is really now high time that loyalism, republicanism, unionism and nationalism began the process of choreography to deliver to the people the benefits of the Good Friday Agreement. If we fail to deliver the benefits, the people will quite reasonably argue that the Good Friday Agreement does not mean a great deal for them. But contained within the Good Friday Agreement, I believe, are substantial benefits for all of our people. It is therefore remiss of us not to get on with the job of delivering the benefits to the people as speedily as possible.

I therefore advocate, or indeed demand, that we very soon begin the process of choreography that will on the one hand protect the politicians who have to make the dangerous and risky moves, while on the other hand ensuring that the people begin to recognise the flow of benefit to them, and support the politics of a new dimension rather than the old tired politics of the past. For David Trimble, let’s hear Ehud Barak; for Gerry Adams, let’s hear Yasser Arafat; for Real IRA, let’s hear Hamas. The processes of movement, change and dynamics in any divided society, especially a divided society with violence at its core, are the same. The moralists or the fundamentalists will always bite the ankles of the visionaries. There’s nothing new in that, as we should know. We as human beings should have studied that, but of course the theories of conflict resolution or suntan lotion or event are so underdeveloped that we have no science of such a thing. It is now in embryonic form, at its very beginning, and we are going to learn more and more about it. We are never going to teach it in our schools because the issue of conflict is one of the things of which we have been victim since man inhabited this earth, and yet is the one science we do not have. We have obstetrics, we have mathematics and all kinds of sciences and yet we do not have a science that stops us killing each other.

Why is that? Why is it that we have not developed as a people enough to encourage each other to have value for all other human beings—that we know each other as people rather than focusing on our perception of an unknown ideology which is different from ours? Why is it that we do not put our children in schools together? What have we to be frightened of when children at four or five years of age begin to know each other as human beings rather than finding out that they do not like someone simply on the basis of their ideology—especially if they have never really met them anyway? Is it not better that we build a society that has people with full educational ability? This should be not just the education of the “three Rs”, the education of life. Education about how men relate to women might help us to begin to diminish the degree of domestic violence that happens not only in Belfast but also

in Dublin and right across society, whether you are working class, middle class or, indeed, if you have a few bob.

I would like to finish with this thought, and I certainly hope that I am right. It is my belief that the conveyor belt which has begun on this island is unstoppable. There are, and have been, and will be again, dark days. But I do not believe that the people can be forever denied the right to peace, justice and pluralism. I could have engaged in dialogue about the reason why I was at two funerals today. But that would be a distraction from the bigger picture. We must remember that no matter what pain goes on around us, the bigger picture means a lot more in the longer term. There will be peace on this island. Indeed, there will be peace in the British Isles. But we must all realise that no one group, no one person has the capacity to define the price of this peace.

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## REDEFINING LOYALISM— AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

James W McAuley

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Conflict in Ireland often seems so deeply entrenched as to be beyond solution. In part, this reflects the immensely powerful trope of nationalist Catholic identity which gave unionists nowhere to go. In turn, they have responded only with a conditional, ambiguous and ill-justified notion of Britishness which can never accommodate the nationalist population of Ulster. The deconstructions of monolithic representations of nationalist Irishness and unionist Britishness ... is a necessary precursor of political change (Graham, 1997: 13).

### INTRODUCTION

The contemporary politics of Northern Ireland remain dominated by the search for a stable political settlement. One of the more important outcomes of this has been the increased fragmentation within the politics and social relations of unionism. In this paper, I want to consider how sections of Ulster unionism and loyalism have responded to contemporary events in Northern Ireland.

That response has been fragmented and at times contradictory. In party political terms, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) has consistently stated its distrust of, and has organised against, the “peace process”. Further, while the largest unionist grouping, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), has recently partly re-endorsed the working of the Northern Ireland Assembly, clearly many of its supporters are engaged extremely reluctantly. The implications of the Ulster Unionist Party’s hardening attitude to “guns and government” must put a question mark over the future of Stormont “power-sharing”. Beyond that there are important consequences for any reconstruction of loyalism, some of which I shall highlight in a few moments.

Within unionism, it is only those political groupings originating in the loyalist paramilitaries, the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP), which have consistently been prepared to positively promote involvement in the search for a negotiated settlement. Central to this has been the surfacing, from deep within working class loyalism, of those openly challenging many of the values and structures of traditional unionism.

In particular I wish to discuss and analyse the attempts in the contemporary period to redefine loyalism.<sup>1</sup> Central to this will be an outline of the contours of contemporary loyalism and the development of a newly articulated social democratic politics from some sections of Protestant working class communities.

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to acknowledge the recent ESRC grant (AWARD L327253058) that I received with Jon Tonge from the University of Salford to carry out this work.

Indeed, the current period has witnessed a growing recognition from within key sections of loyalism that unionist politicians have largely absolved themselves of many social and economic responsibilities, by giving primacy to the constitutional issues. This has led not just to a reassessment of the unionist leadership and the Stormont system, but, in some cases, an attempt to redefine what loyalism means. This reflects a growing sense of awareness that the system in which they saw their unionism as playing a central role has failed for the loyalist community. Moreover, there is a growing sense that many unionist politicians are more concerned with restating their position on the constitution than they are in addressing the realities of everyday life in working class loyalist areas.

Hence, the views being expressed by the political leadership of the PUP offers a clear attempt to dispute and to reassess traditional unionist discourses. Central to this has been the challenge offered to the authority of the established unionist political leadership. As David Ervine once put it, the “bellicose ranting of the unionist that the world has become accustomed to is not real unionism. The real unionism is not unnecessarily jingoistic, it is not right wing but practical, if it is allowed to be so” (*Sunday Times*, 5 March 1995). Overall, this political movement has become popularly known as “new loyalism”.

### **WHAT IS “NEW LOYALISM”?**

So what is “new loyalism”? One way of characterising it is through those key figures, such as David Ervine and Billy Hutchinson, who have emerged to the foreground. Even so, this needs to be set in context. Both Ervine and Hutchinson are ex-members of the loyalist paramilitary grouping, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). Indeed, they both were arrested within days of each other in late 1974, for paramilitary activities. In turn, along with many others, they were highly politicised during their period in jail and greatly influenced by Gusty Spence (initially, as Officer Commanding of the UVF in Long Kesh). Indeed, as the journalist, Peter Taylor put it:

Spence more than any other single person sowed in the hard soil of Long Kesh the political ideas that were to flourish many years later in the form of the UVF’s new political party, the Progressive Unionist Party (Taylor, 2000: 141).

Hence the real genesis of new loyalism is much earlier than many believe. Its conception lies in the recognition by some of the inability of Ulster Unionism to represent their views and the growing political and economic marginalisation of many within Protestant working class communities. That is not to claim that such views were dominant, or to ignore the importance of sectarianism as an organisational feature of these communities.

Thus, in 1977, when still UVF commander in Long Kesh, Spence issued a statement claiming that violence was counterproductive and promoting reconciliation, claiming, “Let us reconcile and permit the grass and flowers to grow over the battlefields just as they have at the Somme and Passchendale” (cited in *The Irish Times*



December 1984). Spence resigned as UVF commander in March 1978 and was eventually released from prison in 1985.

While the inception of the contemporary PUP can be found in the UVF's attempt to organise party politically in 1974 (see McAuley and Hislop, 2000), its real momentum came with the release from prison of certain figures, including Ervine and later Hutchinson, who began to openly articulate criticisms of unionism and the British state. This was particularly pertinent coming from those loyalists who had served time for what they regarded as defending the state.

It should be noted that even as recently as 1995 the PUP was described by one leading journalist as a lone voice sounding in the loyalist's wilderness (Brown, *Financial Times*, 8 February 1995). Under the influence of its current leadership, however, the PUP has grown from a single branch of around 30 members located in the Shankill Road in Belfast to a structured party with a claimed membership of 600. They have also had representative success, with six local councillors elected and representatives at the Forum Talks and in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Billy Hutchinson explains the party's development as follows:

I think that ... the reason why the fringe parties have come out, [is] because there has been a war going on here for 25 years that has been fought by working-class people. The establishment parties have kept clear of it. They've never, ever got involved in it. They've always made sure that they've stayed out of jail. Whenever it came to actually trying to resolve the problem, nothing happened (*An Phoblacht/ Republican News*, 10, 2 February 1995).

### WHAT KIND OF PARTY IS THE PUP?

The party that has emerged remains "intensely Unionist, but avowedly socialist in its ideology". The party has consistently aired the view that it has been working-class people who have suffered most from the conflict. As Ervine has expressed it:

There can never, ever, be a return to the awful political and social abuses of the past and Stormont as we knew it is dead and gone, never to be resurrected. Granted there are those political dinosaurs who would opt for the "good old" sectarian and strata system of the past where everybody knew their place and forelock touching was the norm. We have had enough of that obnoxious trio ... bigotry, sectarianism and hypocrisy. We would oppose as vehemently and strenuously as anyone else a return to such a divisive and partisan system of government (PUP 2000).

One central feature of the PUP project has been an attempt to reconstruct and reinterpret loyalism's past. From this beginning the PUP has sought to locate its politics directly in the claim that this group were not being properly represented by the traditional unionist leadership and to provide a different understanding of the past from within unionism. As this statement explains:

For too long politics have been pronounced by those who have failed to consult and therefore mis-represent the views of the Unionist people especially in working class areas (PUP 1998).

Likewise the PUP has continued to articulate a coherent analysis of the class structure of unionism. Take the following for example:

We, too, the working class Protestants have felt the slow-burning agony of powerlessness and ineffectuality. Sir Edward Carson warned the majority to treat the minority magnanimously. That advice from one of the Fathers of Unionism was not heeded and we have paid a heavy price. There are still those fools in Unionism who long for the heady Stormont days of privilege and patronage (Spence, 1995: 4).

The party constitution, for example, includes the British Labour Party's old Clause Four. The PUP has also, for example, claimed the need for direct state intervention in key areas of the economy. It has emphasised the need for strong state support for the health and social security services and in particular higher education, where they advocate a full return to state subsidised funding to the equivalent levels of 1979 (See PUP, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c).

Given the above policies, the PUP has sought to create and highlight the ideological and political space between itself and mainstream unionism. Much of what the PUP currently promotes continues to suggest a distinct fracture with what has gone before. Thus, the PUP, through its distinct policies and willingness to engage in debate, has been an important element in a process that has nurtured an increased introspection amongst the Protestant working class (see Hall 1994; 1995; 1996; Ballymacarret Think Tank 1999a, 1999b; Ballymacarret Arts & Cultural Society 1999; Seeds of Hope 2000; Shankill Think Tank 1995, 1998).

In recent times, however, the PUP has also argued (echoing Spence, some 25 years before) that the increasingly weakened social and economic position which many working class Protestants now find themselves in is largely a result of the same pattern of social deprivation that affects their counterparts in nationalist areas.

Another result of this process has been the reassessment by some of the core values and beliefs that have guided unionism and their relationship to state of Northern Ireland, since its formation. As the party's official literature says:

Fifteen years ago, Republican leaders spoke of the fifty-years of hard bitter experience when referring to the old Stormont Government. Unfortunately, they did not include the Protestant or Unionist community in that experience. For fifty years there had existed the hard line two party state. Uncompromising Unionism faced uncompromising Nationalism. The politics of the mind was substituted by the politics of emotion maintaining the survival of these two extreme power blocs. The seriousness of the matter emerged even before the violent events of the late sixties. Some Unionists opposed reasonable legislation simply because it emanated from "Republicans" and the Nationalists opposed reasonable legislation simply because it was put for-

ward by Unionists. Extremist politicians came to power, not because of any votes cast for them, but for votes cast against the other side (PUP 1999).

Perhaps one of the most striking developments surrounding the PUP is not what they are saying (this has been reasonably consistent since around the mid-1980s), but, rather, the ideological space which has been created within unionism to allow them to openly express such notions. The importance for the future direction of unionism of the ability of the PUP to gain and maintain populist support cannot be overstated. Although it is of no little significance that the PUP has successfully presented its arguments further afield, it is its ability to convince its more immediate constituency that will ultimately prove of most importance.

In the past, many in the Protestant working class have steadfastly refused to believe that it was possible to seek any political accommodation with their nationalist counterparts. Any left of centre articulation of social and economic issues was often seen as a direct challenge to unionist control, and sometimes the very legitimacy and existence of the Northern Irish state itself. Such views often found little favour within working class loyalist communities. For the leadership of the PUP an important stated goal remains:

an injection of working class politics to get people to rally around social and economic issues. That won't make the constitutional problem disappear, but at least it will show that there is a common ground on which we can agree and then maybe we can find a way forward on the constitution (Cusack and McDonald, 1997: 117).

Further, the PUP argues that what they see as the intransigence of sections of political unionism (particularly the DUP and at times the UUP), throughout the peace process, has been mostly detrimental to the aspirations of the broader unionist community. Rather, the PUP support the idea of power sharing, arguing for a "shared responsibility" between the "two traditions" as the basis for a solution. As David Ervine has stated:

We need a parliament that will have within it the politics of left, right and centre. We will have the politics of realignment within the Protestant working class and the catholic working class (interview with author, Belfast, 1998).

The PUP has also increasingly expressed definite views on other social issues. Unlike most parties in Northern Ireland, they, for example, directly promote women's issues. Indeed, almost half of the PUP executive committee is made up of women. The PUP is also one of the few political organisations, certainly amongst unionism, which has been openly supportive of gay and lesbian rights (Purvis, 1998) and which is candidly pro-choice on the abortion issue (Ward, 1998). It has also given serious consideration to policies on urban regeneration, the environment and energy. Such views are far from primary to traditional expressions of unionist ideology. Further, they have in part sought to establish cross-community dialogue and support members who have become involved in such projects.

Another important aspect of PUP ideology is that which justifies its willingness to enter into debate with the traditional "enemies of Ulster". In part, this has mean-

recognition that they will have to negotiate and form a working relationship with other groupings, including Sinn Féin. In part also, it has given rise to the promotion of a series of policies suggesting the need for a Bill of Rights and the introduction a written Constitution in Northern Ireland, which are seen as essential in safeguarding minorities in Northern Ireland. Indeed, upon winning his Belfast City Council seat, Billy Hutchinson returned to a theme he had raised previously, when he said:

Why shouldn't we work with Sinn Féin in the council? The other Unionists do it at the moment. If Sinn Féin or anyone else has decent arguments to put forward we will listen to them, as long as they are for the benefit of all the people of Belfast (*Andersonstown News* 10, 26 June 1996).

David Ervine is clear in outlining the importance of achieving these goals. He has highlighted this when he said:

Unionism is extremely reticent to engage Nationalists in talks, mainly because of a lack of trust, but we must learn to trust one another. We have the propensity to blame somebody else for what is wrong and in Northern Ireland that is truer than most. We haven't grasped that responsibility and I advocate that we do that if we want to go forward. There are many roads forward, many avenues of possibility but there is only one road backwards. I would advocate that we go forward because we've been going back for twenty-five years (interview with author, Belfast, 1998).

This willingness to engage political opposition, even with those constructed as traditional enemies, directly marks out the PUP from other strands within unionism. Until extremely recently the open expression of such a political stance would have been untenable from a representative of working class loyalism. It is little wonder that such views from the PUP have raised much concern from within unionism itself, and drawn such a harsh retort from that section of it, notably the DUP, which locate their reading within unionism's traditional analysis. The PUP has been relatively successful in drawing support. Recent research in which I have been involved indicates that over 80% of PUP members have never previously been a member of any political party in Northern Ireland (McAuley and Tonge, 2001).

Needless to say, such views are far from universally accepted within unionism. One way of understanding the ruptures within loyalism is to comprehend the differing frames of reference and discourses being used to construct conflicting understandings of contemporary events. Here I shall identify two of these as a "discourse of perpetuity" and a "discourse of transformation".

## **UNIONIST DISCOURSES OF PERPETUITY**

One key discourse unifying contemporary unionists against the development of the peace process is that of betrayal by "Britain". There remains a deeply held unionist belief that the contemporary political settlement marks huge concessions to republicanism and a commitment to a form of unification by stealth. In fact, many unionists perceive the entire "peace process" as a reply by the British government to a nationalist set agenda in an attempt to "buy off terrorism". Hence, for many union-

ists, the latest initiatives surrounding the closer workings of the British and Irish Governments and even the introduction of the Northern Ireland Assembly marks political defeat.

Many of those who seek to reproduce this discourse do so in terms of the securing of traditional values and react to what they see as a recent history of unionist demise. This is given credence through direct reference to a continuity of events that includes the Sunningdale and Anglo-Irish Agreements, the Joint Declaration, the Framework Proposals and the contemporary Good Friday Agreement. All these attempts at a political settlement are seen as instalments of a longer process involving steps on a slippery slope to a united Ireland.

Sections of unionism continue to construct this powerful all-embracing discourse capable of forming a coherent social and political identity. Importantly, it is this that binds together a multiplicity of other potential identities involving, among others: class, nation, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, language, regional identity, lifestyle, religion and workplace. So while unionism is an identity that is capable of superimposing itself on these, it is neither fixed nor constant. It is socially constructed as a call for individuals to constitute their self around a particular identity.

Unionism is capable of mobilising those who have been successfully summoned by motivating them to engage in particular forms of action and experiences. Further, in Northern Ireland, unionism also often demands a public statement from its supporters. Unionism, hence, is not only important in identity formation but also in engaging its followers in activism, whether this be in voting behaviour, public meetings, rallies or other forms of public events. To be successful unionism in all its contemporary forms must draw on the above in some recognisable way. Further, it must do so in a way that is capable of confirming these core principles and solidifying together the identity of its supporters into a coherent politics.

In response to these competing discourses unionism has responded to contemporary events in a fragmented manner. Some sections of unionism have simply drawn directly on long standing discourses and sought to return unionism to the fundamentals of its doctrine and oppose what they see as a dilution of the unionist position. This can be seen, for example, within the political discourse of the DUP, within which the very future existence of Northern Ireland is at stake. Take, for example, the following from Peter Robinson, the deputy leader of the party:

I have been in this Party from its birth and there has not been a moment when we have not been in the forefront of the battle. There has not been a period where the Party has not been engaged in the struggle to save the Union. We have faced difficulties and hardships and consistently contended against unfriendly odds. We have been vilified, demonised and dismissed and our obituary has been written time and time again—but we are still here, still in the midst of the fray, still contending and still unwavering (Robinson, 1999).

In recent times the DUP has consistently repeated its claim that the foundations of the Union have been made insecure by the implementation of the “treacherous

Framework Document” (see DUP, 1996a; 1996b; 1996c; 1996d). Central to this framing is the DUP’s self image as sentinels against Ulster’s enemies (see for example, DUP, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 1999; Paisley 1998). It positions its followers around a discourse of fear. As Ian Paisley himself puts it:

Having ignored all past warnings together with all the vindication that the so-called “peace” process was a tactic and a fake, this perfidious and discredited Government now incredibly continues its obstinate pursuit of the selfsame agenda ... Blair, Mowlam and Clinton have much in common: they are all good liars but bad actors; they are tough on talk but weak on action; they all misled the people of Northern Ireland and for their deceit and incompetence they should all be impeached for taking advantage of the public trust (Paisley, 1998).

Such “traditional” unionist values have been increasingly expressed by widening factions of unionism. Another example can be found in the writings and speeches of Robert McCartney. For some time he has promoted a central duality in his politics. On the one hand he has offered important criticisms of traditional unionism, particularly in its sectarian formation. On the other, however, he has consistently utilised and drawn upon traditional unionist discourses and interpretative frames for the basis of his politics.

Hence, elsewhere he has articulated the clear view that the peace process is part of an orchestrated conspiracy against unionists and the Union and a process the implementation of which “ultimately threatens the very existence of democracy itself” (see for example, *Belfast Telegraph*, 9 July 1999; *News Letter*, 23 February 1995; *Belfast Telegraph*, 29 June 1999).

From within this perspective the central task of the British Government has been to promote a settlement that persuades unionists to sacrifice their British identity. For McCartney, the current political settlement is merely part of a broader strategy. Both governments albeit for differing reasons, are engaged in a slowly evolving scheme in which British identity in Northern Ireland will gradually be replaced with an Irish one. The Joint Declaration and the Framework Documents represent the medium for achieving this objective, central to which are the development of all-Ireland institutions with a dynamic for expansion. Unionists are to be persuaded to accept the inevitable greening of their cultural and political identity.

For the British and Irish governments to realise their joint plans, however, the continued suspension of violence is a necessary condition. Hence the argument that huge concessions have been made to the republican movement in return for the halting of violence. This was made clear when McCartney claimed the following on the issue of decommissioning of paramilitary arms:

No institution of Government can be properly termed democratic if it includes representatives of a minority party that is itself inextricably linked to a terrorist organisation insisting on remaining armed for the purpose of achieving political objectives similar to those of the minority party fronting it (*Belfast Telegraph*, 29 June 1999).

Robert McCartney argues, therefore, that it was the IRA campaign in Britain (particularly the bombs at Warrington and the Baltic Exchange in 1993) that structured the peace process and accelerated a shift in British policy from internal settlement to one of Irish unity. These bombs made the security of the British mainland an overriding political priority to which the constitutional future of Northern Ireland has become entirely subordinate. The political strategy of the two governments is considered as a direct attempt to achieve Irish unity, although economic, social, and political restraints will require its phased accomplishment.

This reading of contemporary events is supported by others whose central belief is that their British identity expressed as unionism is under attack. This has been partly reflected in the wider unionist community. One clear example surrounds the contested arenas over the routes to be taken by Orange Order parades and the "rights" of Orange lodges to march their "traditional routes" (see Bryan, Fraser and Dunn 1995; Jarman 1997, 1998; Jarman and Bryan 1996).

From a unionist perspective this broader context may be understood if we consider the following from the official magazine of the Orange Order:

The onslaught on Northern Ireland's British identity continues unabated, both overtly and covertly. It is an insidious campaign undertaken on different fronts, but with one common objective—the ultimate incorporation of the Province in an all-Ireland in which British, Protestant, Orange, and Unionist culture and identity would be swamped and eventually eradicated.

It is the traditional enemies of Protestantism and Unionism—Irish nationalism and republicanism—which is spearheading this attack on Northern Ireland's loyal ethos. But it is being aided and abetted by Government policies which can only have one outcome—a weakening of Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom (*Orange Standard*, April 1999, p.1)

Here the main dynamic of the peace process and the political settlement is seen as undermining the British ethos in Northern Ireland, and as subverting Protestants from their traditional British allegiance in an attempt to transfer this to Irish nationalism. The weakening of Orangeism is thus seen as one of the key political policies implemented by the enemies of true Ulster loyalism. The perceived drive towards "Irishness" is seen in everything from joint initiatives between the two tourist organisations on the island, through the official position of the British Prime Minister, and on to the Irish Government. This in turn rests on that construction of the current peace process as involving all sorts of hidden dangers to Ulster Protestants, who are engaged in "a last battle for Ulster". Unionists generally must guard unceasingly against the insidious propaganda and attempts to subvert their British allegiance.

This discourse emphasises a particular set of understood realities within unionism. It highlights a constructed political identity within a particular form of constitutional arrangement. The concern that these arrangements are under threat has most straightforwardly been fettered by the DUP in its representation of the situation. This is that the unionist people of Northern Ireland are being subject to a process driven by an untrustworthy British Government, the dynamic for which comes from

the combined forces of Irish nationalism and republicanism, supported by the Irish government and the Irish lobby in the USA.

The inevitable outcome of this will be a united Ireland unless unionists can be awoken to the dangers. The core of the DUP project continues to frame the conflict in this way and to construct discourses that re-emphasise and reinforce the central fears of many unionists. The broad perspective of those promoting perpetuity within unionism can thus be set out as follows. The grand strategy behind the peace process is to bring about a functionally united Ireland that will ultimately render a transfer of sovereignty inevitable, through a concealed process of unification and a conceding of executive political power to Irish nationalism and republicanism.

Such a discourse is, however, non-party specific in its appeal and capable of arousing and mobilising across several of the factions of the unionist party political bloc. The discourse and politics of perpetuity is now firmly established in the DUP, the Orange Order, the UK Unionist Party, that section of the Ulster Unionist Party led by Donaldson and across other factions of unionism. It has been given a cutting edge in *Realpolitik* by Reverend William McCrea's victory in the South Antrim by-election and by the repositioning of the UUP around the anti-agreement bloc. Both these recent events highlight the increasing lack of enthusiasm in the loyalist community for the Good Friday agreement.

## UNIONIST DISCOURSES OF TRANSFORMATION

Not all unionists, however, have adopted the above as their key frame of reference. Sections of working class loyalism in particular have begun to critically examine their historical and cultural identity in a meaningful way. This has been directly reflected politically in the rise of the smaller unionist parties, such as the PUP and UDP. This experience needs to be understood in the changing context of dramatic economic decline, political disarticulation and ideological disintegration within unionism. The period of the peace process has opened up much deliberation within loyalist working class communities, one possible reading of which suggests a marginalisation of sectarianism as a fundamental organising principle.

This has been reflected in the new politics of loyalism and the continued criticism of the traditional leadership of unionism. The Progressive Unionist Party has been to the fore in this attempt to restructure unionism. In recent times, the PUP leadership has stated its commitment to maintaining and strengthening Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the United Kingdom. It has repeatedly claimed that it will actively work by all democratic means to ensure that there will be no constitutional changes that either diminish the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom or dilute democratic structures and procedures within Northern Ireland.

The party's recent manifestos have also supported the right of any individual or group to seek constitutional change by "democratic, legitimate and peaceful means" and spoken of the rights and aspirations of all those who abide by the law



regardless of religious, cultural, national or political inclinations. They have also declared that there can never, ever, be a return to “the awful political and social abuses of the past and Stormont”.

Factors such as the above have served to expose inconsistencies in the relationships between key sections of the Protestant working class and the state. Importantly, from this section of unionism there has been a growing awareness of the consequences of a rapidly changing historical, social and economic context. The loyalist parties have effectively begun to harness views such as those expressed above. In this sense the parties have provided focal points for increasingly coherent social, economic and political challenges within unionism. They have also begun to confront some of the dominant discourses with unionism.

These processes have loosened the bonds, and shifted the interpretative frames within loyalism; but these developments have not meant that such groupings have weakened their commitment to the Union. The position of the loyalist working class should be seen in the context of the renegotiation of the ideological boundaries within which they seek to express their identity. These shifting contours of unionist identity are extremely important. As several commentators (such as Dunn and Morgan, 1994, and Shirlow and McGovern, 1997) and unionist politicians have noted, there are widespread feelings from within the Protestant working class that they are in decline, increasingly subject to forces of rapid economic, political, cultural and psychological retreat.

The hegemonic construction of a “British” identity by Ulster loyalism has not only traditionally included but also absorbed a multitude of other key identities, such as gender, geographical location, sexual preference, class identity, and so on. These have been organised into a collective political will through an all-embracing discourse. New loyalism may provide the dynamic to begin to separate these key identities, and to reformulate its central components. This may form the basis for the creation of alternative discourses and locations of identity within unionism, beyond those examined below.

## CONTESTING LOYALISM’S FUTURE

The contemporary period has often revealed overt antagonism between the PUP and other sections of the unionist political leadership of the UUP and the DUP. The broad politics of those promoting unionist perpetuity can be set out as follows. The current political settlement is merely part of a broader strategy whereby unionists are to be persuaded to accept the inevitable greening of their cultural and political identity. The grand strategy behind the peace process is to bring about a functionally united Ireland that will ultimately render a transfer of sovereignty inevitable, through a concealed process of unification (see the *Irish Times*, 26 January 1998). Here the main dynamic of the peace process and the political settlement is perceived as undermining the British ethos in Northern Ireland, and as subverting Protestants from their traditional British allegiance in an attempt to transfer this to Irish nationalism.

Whether tangible or not, there is strong historical evidence to suggest that whenever this discourse has become dominant, unionists have traditionally returned to an entrenched position. Many of those that seek to reproduce a discourse of perpetuity do so in reaction to what they see as a recent history of demise. This is given credence through direct reference to a continuity of events that includes the Sunningdale and Anglo-Irish Agreements, the Joint Declaration, the Framework Proposals and the contemporary Good Friday Agreement. All these attempts at a political settlement are seen as instalments of a longer process involving steps on a slippery slope to a united Ireland (see most recent editions of *The Orange Standard* or the DUP website: <http://www.dup.org>). The growing prominence of the PUP clearly has not gone uncontested from within these sections of unionism.

Another focus of hostility towards the PUP comes from those forces coalescing around sections of the loyalist paramilitaries, particularly the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) and parts of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). The LVF, led until his murder by the late Billy Wright, was formed by disillusioned paramilitaries from within the UVF and UDA. It broke with the leadership, claiming that the UDP and PUP were selling out the “loyalist people” through an uncritical acceptance of the peace process.

This grouping openly seek to oppose what they call the “peace (surrender) deal” and to undermine the PUP leadership. A special loathing appears to be reserved for Ervine, who has been accused in pamphlets and graffiti of “treachery”, of being an “MI5 agent”, of working “hand-in hand with the enemies of Ulster” and of having lost contact with his loyalist roots (see various editions of *The Volunteer, Leading the Way, The Wright View*). They have also claimed that, “Billy Hutchinson and Davy Ervine are more than willing to sit around a table with the enemies of our country” (*Leading the way*, no date). Such views played a central role in the loyalist feud that occurred during much of 2000. The tensions are far from resolved and it is conceivable that the section of the loyalist paramilitaries who seek to reaffirm the conflict or break with the political settlement may yet undermine the political, organisational and electoral position of the PUP.

## SOME CONCLUSIONS

These shifting contours of unionist identity are extremely important. The hegemonic construction of a “British” identity by Ulster loyalism, has not only traditionally included, but also absorbed a multitude of other key identities, such as gender, geographical location, sexual preference, class identity, and so on. These have been organised into a collective political will through an all-embracing discourse. New loyalism may provide the dynamic to begin to separate these key identities, and to reformulate its central components. This may form the basis for the creation of alternative discourses and locations of identity within unionism.

At one level, shifts in unionist politics have been intricate. At another, however, they have been remarkably simplified. It is possible to suggest two major readings around which unionism is politically mobilising. The first suggests that unionism

must strengthen its traditional form; the second, that to continue, unionism must change to adopt a more pluralist form. These discourses can be broadly addressed as those that seek to reinforce traditional unionist perspectives and those promoting some form of social or political change. Fragmenting as it has along these fault lines; unionism as an ideology and as a political force is in no small state of upheaval.

In the period following the ceasefires and the Good Friday Agreement "traditional unionism" found it increasingly difficult to dominate the discourses of identity. Unionist hegemony was increasingly challenged from within by those with alternative notions of the nature of unionism. These groupings set about articulating a class and sometimes a gender perspective concerning the right to have their respective politics included within a redefinition of unionist identity and political unionism (see McAuley 1994a, 1994b, 1995, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1998, 1999; Sales 1997a, 1997b, 1998; Rooney 1992, 2000; Democratic Dialogue 1996).

The most recent period, however, has witnessed a strong restatement of unionism's previously dominant values. The DUP remains foremost in its continued criticism of those loyalists engaged in the search for a settlement. Further, the DUP is no longer marginalised in this position. The discourse constructed is capable of rallying significant sections of unionism against any continued settlement.

In this context, therefore, there are serious and difficult questions to be asked about for whom the PUP speak and how far the leadership's thinking may be ahead of the ordinary working class Protestants they seek to represent. It is also clear that because of its origins the PUP may only be able to draw upon a limited, if still growing, constituency. The society in which the PUP exists largely remains structured and determined by sectarian social relations. Given its origins and the still close relationship with a particular paramilitary organisation, one of the indisputable tests for the PUP is whether it can develop any genuine cross community recognition for the merit of its position. Such a task is not made easier in the wake of a bloody feud between the major loyalist paramilitary groups.

That is not to say that key individuals within the PUP leadership, such as Ervine and Hutchinson, are not serious in their belief that the approach of the PUP is the key to unlocking divisions within Northern Ireland and bringing "real" politics to the fore. Their first goal, however, must remain that of convincing working class unionism of the validity and substance of the PUP's position.

Factors such as those outlined above have served to expose a growing awareness of some of the consequences of a rapidly changing historical, social and economic context. The PUP, certainly in the period immediately following the ceasefires and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, harnessed this dynamic and provided key focal points for increasingly coherent challenge within unionism. This should be seen in the context of the renegotiations of the ideological boundaries within which they seek to express their identity.

These processes have loosened some of the political and ideological bonds within unionism, and shifted some of the interpretative frames within loyalism. Should the PUP project succeed, then what we may well witness is a permanent breach within unionist politics and ideology. This would offer the possibility of the development of an authentic cross-community politics developing in Northern Ireland. However, whether or not that is the final outcome of the contemporary period is still some way from being determined.

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