

Sectarianism In Northern Ireland

Dr. Marc Mulholland, St Catherine's College, Oxford

Northern Ireland was clearly a 'cold house' for nationalists. Of course, Northern Ireland was not homogenous. In 1885, indeed, nationalist Home Rulers had won 17 of the 33 (nine counties) Ulster seats. The six county state was more secure, particularly after the limited flight of Catholics south during the 1920s 'Troubles'. The Catholic population as a percentage in the six counties fell from 41 per cent in 1860 to 39.5 per cent in 1911, then steeply to 33.5 per cent by 1926, stabilising thereafter around 34 per cent.

Electoral Systems and Gerrymandering

There is no doubt that nationalists were poorly thought of by Unionists. In a series of speeches and statements in 1933, Basil Brooke, Minister of Agriculture and later Prime Minister, 'codified' Unionist attitudes. Too many unionist employers took on "Roman Catholics ... who were really out to cut their throats if opportunity arose." In whatever guise, he thought, the "Catholic political party" was committed to "the destruction of Ulster, as a unit and as a constitution". He advised "after careful consideration" Unionists "not to employ Catholics ... their religion is politically minded ... [they are] out to destroy us as a body."¹

There are a number of points to be made about discrimination, however. It was not simply 'blanket' discrimination against Catholics born or a general distaste for 'inferior' people (though this was a factor). Importantly, it was designed to preserve the power not just of unionism generally, but of the Ulster Unionist Party. For example, the main aim behind the abolition in 1929 of proportional representation in Stormont elections was to weaken small parties, particularly Labour and 'independents' including Unionists outside the Ulster Unionist Party. Labour and independent representation in the Stormont Parliament fell from eight seats in 1925 to four in 1929, despite an increase in the share of their vote.

Secondly, discrimination was defensive and particularly acute not in areas of greatest Unionist power, but precisely in those areas where Unionists were weakest. In Stormont elections, thus, the aim was to secure border areas. By the

re-drawing of electoral boundaries in 1929 it was ensured that nationalists were under-represented, possibly in Armagh and certainly in Fermanagh, where the nationalist majority gained only one seat out of three. However, this was to be compensated for by drawing constituency boundaries in Belfast so as to create two new nationalist seats (though one, as it happened, proved marginal).

Thirdly, discrimination was designed to preserve a perceived balance, not to sweep up all power for Unionists. This ensured that the system was conservative in that it did not adapt well to change. To this extent it became more, not less unjust as time went by, as Northern Ireland fell behind evolving liberal democratic norms. The local government franchise, for example, included only rate-payers and their spouses, and so excluded over a quarter of the parliamentary electorate. This was in line with arrangements elsewhere in the United Kingdom at the time of partition. However, when universal adult suffrage was introduced for local government elections in Britain in 1945 (as it had been in southern Ireland in 1937), Stormont retained the old system. The majority of disenfranchised electors were Protestant, but Catholics were over-represented (being poorer and having larger families with more adults in the family home). Only for one local authority – Armagh Urban District – would universal suffrage have over-turned Unionist control.

Far more important than the limited franchise, but intimately connected, was gerrymandering, that is, the drawing of electoral boundaries in such a way as to under-represent certain groups. Just as the franchise embodied 'rate-payer power', so also were constituencies designed to be equal not in population size, but in rateable value. On this principle, local government boundaries were redrawn in 1923, leading to the transfer of some 15 councils from a nationalist or no overall majority to Unionist

This article is from *Northern Ireland: A Divided Community, 1921-1972*, a Gale Digital Collection, www.gale.com/DigitalCollections

Sectarianism In Northern Ireland

Dr. Marc Mulholland, St Catherine's College, Oxford

control. Omagh Urban District was again gerrymandered in 1935, Derry County Borough in 1936, Armagh Urban District in 1946, Fermanagh County Council in 1967. There is no question at all that gerrymandering was a reality. In Londonderry, a local Unionist (later an MP for the city) privately admitted in 1936 that "As regards 'gerrymandering' wards here in Derry City – we certainly are and, in my opinion, with every justification."²

Fourthly, this precise tinkering to preserve a balance meant that discrimination was precisely deployed at the local level. It was not a sweeping strategy, but the sum of innumerable tactics. In public housing, Catholics were not refused houses (by the late 1960s about 35 per cent of Catholics, generally poorer and in greater need, lived in public housing, as against 30 per cent of Protestants) but they were corralled into local government wards where they were already a majority, so as not to disturb the electoral balance. This quite often led to bottle-necks and waiting lists, and housing as it turned out was the spark which launched the 1960s civil rights movement.

Employment

Catholics were not under-represented in public employment, but they were clustered in the lower grades, and kept away from sensitive areas such as security, policy and behind-the-scenes unionist conclaves. While Catholics made up about 40 per cent of lower grades, they held only a shade above ten per cent in the higher grades. Such raw figures overlook a clear gradation. Catholics were massively over-represented in labouring jobs and barely present in top administrative grades. An internal enquiry by the Ministry of Finance in 1943 found that there were only 37 Catholics out of 634, or 5.8 per cent, in the higher grades. There were no Catholics at all in the 55 most senior posts. A factor in this spread was the relatively lower educational attainment of Catholics, and an unwillingness amongst nationalists to sustain the administration of a Unionist state.

Private employment presented a similar picture of Catholics clustering in unskilled work and Protestants dominating skilled work and management. The Catholic unemployment rate, moreover, was two and a half times higher than the Protestant. Catholics were unfortunate in

being concentrated in rural areas near the border which attracted little job-creating investment. Throughout the Stormont era, there were numerous Unionist injunctions in favour of partiality in employment, whether coded or not. Brian Faulkner, the future Unionist Prime Minister, in June 1956 told employers that they owed their unemployed Orange brethren a "responsibility to find them work."³ In Londonderry in the 1960s, evidence emerged that there existed the 'Faceless Men', a cabal of Unionists lobbying for investment to be directed away from Derry for fear of upsetting the delicate population balance behind the city's gerrymander.

Though one third of the places in the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) were reserved for Catholics, they made up 17 per cent in 1936, including a good number of veterans from the pre-partition Royal Irish Constabulary. This percentage had declined to only 11 per cent by 1969. The counter-insurgency Ulster Special Constabulary – the B-Specials after the A and C Specials were stood down – was completely Protestant. The extent of even-handedness in the application of law was in inverse proportion to the prominence of nationalist agitation.

It is certainly the case that there were structural disadvantages suffered by Catholics, rooted in history, not related directly to discrimination, and largely impervious to the practical politics of the mid-twentieth century. More Catholics lived in declining areas, especially on the province's periphery. Even within prosperous areas they bore the brunt of unemployment because few new sources of job creation emerged while existing firms tended to favour the families and communities of those they already employed, thus perpetuating established Protestant advantage. A long standing worker and trade unionist at Harland and Wolff, an overwhelmingly Protestant shipyard, in the post war years recalled: "My boss said to me one day: "Do you know anyone you could trust who is looking for a job?" I said, my friend Joe Jeffrie, who is working in Mackies, might like the job." Joe got the job"⁴ So it went. On top of this, Catholics were hindered by poorer education and something of a 'grievance culture'.

According to A.C. Hepburn during the first half of the twentieth century the condition of Catholics in Belfast actually declined. They became more concentrated in

Sectarianism In Northern Ireland

Dr. Marc Mulholland, St Catherine's College, Oxford

unskilled work while Protestants tightened their grip on skilled positions and public and professional occupations. 1951 represented a low point, thereafter retrieved somewhat by expansion in industries such as construction and so-called 'sheltered' white-collar occupations like education.⁵

Political Culture

Jennifer Todd has argued that the diversity that lay behind the anti-Home Rule campaign of Unionism, before partition, became after 1921 compressed into homogeneity by the pressures of maintaining one party rule. It became stamped with an exclusivist ethos, with Catholicism denied representation in the public sphere.⁶ Orangeism, for example, was the de facto official culture of Northern Ireland. When the Prince of Wales visited Stormont there was an honour guard of 5000 Orangemen.⁷ The Protestant Orange Order was a divisive force. Patrick Shea was only one of two Catholics to become Permanent Secretary in the Northern Ireland Civil Service: while Bonaparte Wyse rose to head a department in the 1920s, Shea had to wait until the 1970s. A sympathetic superior had told him in 1958 "Because you are a Roman Catholic, you may never get any further promotion. I'm sorry."⁸

Patrick Buckland, in contrast, focuses upon the structures of devolution itself. Northern Ireland was exiled from the mainstream of politics in the multi-national UK. While politics along a left-right axis cut across national identities in Britain, Northern Ireland stewed in a closed world of 'partition politics'. With Stormont unable to diverge widely from British socio-economic policy, Westminster being the only effective institution at this level, there was no opportunity for class politics to attain vigour. Buckland concludes that "Parliamentary devolution cannot be a permanent settlement of the political and constitutional problems of the United Kingdom. There is really no half-way house between union and complete separation."⁹ Buckland may overstate the inability of Stormont to have an impact for good or ill. For example, though Northern Ireland adopted – at the UK Government's expense – the Welfare State, constructed from 1944, its particular form owed more to local considerations than has been allowed. Notably, local eligibility regulations were designed to exclude citizens of the Republic, and ministers reinforced Unionist fine-tuning by appointing statutory bodies

charged with such matters as hospitals, housing and youth employment.¹⁰

Culture was deeply divided, with polarised political values. Tom Samways, a writer for the Irish News, a nationalist newspaper, recalled that in the 1930s sub-editors, if pressed for time, rather than re-write copy from a reporter from a Unionist rival paper simply changed 'loud applause' to 'cries of derision'.¹¹ A Welsh barrister, called in for the defence of an IRA member in a 1958 murder trial, recalled that "Swearing in the jury took some time, Prosecution and Defence both exercising their powers of peremptory challenge of persons about to be sworn. The Crown challenged people with names like O'Flaherty and O'Driscoll when they were called to be sworn. My instructing solicitor challenged the Smiths and the Joneses. It was the Northern Ireland divide in action."¹² Indeed, the anthropologist Rosemary Harris, who conducted research in the rural 'Ballybeg' district in 1952-53, found that it was proximity, not separation, that generated political antagonism. Hill farmers who had most contact with their neighbours, because they competed with them for the same scarce resources, were the most bigoted in word and in deed. Though cordial relations were common, anger easily flared over the vexed questions of mixed marriages and 'the national question'.¹³

It's important to recognise that Northern Ireland in the Stormont era was always in a state of unstable equilibrium. The American political scientist Richard Rose argued that regimes are either "stable ... [or] moving towards true legitimacy, [or] towards repudiation or, like Northern Ireland, is agitated at some point in between."¹⁴ Frank Wright did not see Northern Ireland as so unusual in this. He compared it to the pre-1939 eastern frontiers of Germany/Austria, the southern states of the USA and Algeria. All were cases, he argued, of ethnic frontiers with a background in settler colonisation. Modernisation did not erode ethnicity but rather underpinned these divisions by overlaying them with a heightened consciousness, in the context of evolving liberal democratic norms, of first-class and second-class citizenship. All maintained a precarious peace only on the basis of communal deterrence, prone to collapse should the balance of forces shift.¹⁵

Northern Ireland's politics of uncertainty reflected a situation where multiple potentials for growing disorder or

Sectarianism In Northern Ireland

Dr. Marc Mulholland, St Catherine's College, Oxford

growing cohesion boiled under an often frozen surface. Bew, Gibbon and Patterson argue that Unionism was not monolithic or Neanderthal. Rather it was a pan-class, single-issue voting bloc that might have been prised apart by the politics of a 'democratic alternative'.¹⁶ Terry Cradden argues that the appeal of this incipient 'democratic alternative' was evident in the post-war success of left-wing parties – led by the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) – which secured nearly 126,000 votes in 1945.¹⁷ In some respects, the civil rights movement of the late 1960s was a product of the forces for 'democratic consensus'.

How oppressive was Stormont? There is debate over the extent of discrimination. Apologists pointed out that political patronage was embedded into the structures of Irish political life, and in this context there was nothing markedly corrupt in Unionist practice.¹⁸ Others have argued, on the contrary, that the Protestants, due to their 'settler' status, had inherited an effectively racist view of the 'native' Catholics as in thrall "to laziness, inefficiency, emotionality, superstition and violence."¹⁹ A middle way suggests that a sectarian labour market had developed in the nineteenth century not due to Unionist conspiracy but because of the pressures of industrialisation in the context of a rural society already endemic with sectarian collisions over access to land, labour and power.

Whatever we may make of the impact of conscious discrimination of Catholic life-chances, there seems little doubt that Unionists encouraged the 'natural' functioning of what might be called a 'sectarian political economy' with rhetoric and fine-tuning manipulations. They were particularly concerned to manage the balance of Catholics and Protestants within established constituencies – many gerrymandered – so as to maintain a sharp demarcation between permanently minority Nationalists and permanently majority Unionists. Much of this was to prevent Unionist votes fragmenting off to Labour or independent candidates, and thus threatening the Ulster Unionist Party with severe electoral reverses in a first-past-the-post system.²⁰ This was particularly important as Britain was an obviously unreliable guarantor of the Union. Neville Chamberlain was very clear that: "The interests of Northern Ireland could not be allowed to stand against the vital interests of the British Empire." Every

election in Northern Ireland was a de facto referendum on the constitution, designed to impress on British opinion Ulster's unwavering stand. There was little space for political evolution.

NOTES

- [1] Brian Barton, *Brookeborough: The Making of a Prime Minister* (Institute of Irish Studies, 1989), pp 78, 79, 81.
- [2] Paul Bew, Kenneth Darwin and Gordon Gillespie (eds), *Passion and Prejudice: Nationalist-Unionist Conflict in Ulster in the 1930s and the Founding of the Irish Association* (Institute of Irish Studies: Belfast, 1993) p 53.
- [3] Andrew Boyd, *Brian Faulkner and the Crisis of Ulster Unionism* (Anvil: Tralee, 1972), p 24.
- [4] Shankill Stress and Trauma Group, *Shankill Memories* (Belfast, 1999), p 25.
- [5] A.C. Hepburn, *Employment and Religion in Belfast 1901 – 1971* (FEA, 1981).
- [6] Jennifer Todd in Boyce, Eccleshall, Geoghagan (eds), *Political Thought in Ireland Since the Seventeenth Century* (Routledge, 1994).
- [7] Gillian McIntosh, *The Force of Culture: Unionist Identities in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Cork University Press, 1999).
- [8] Patrick Shea, *Voice and the Sound of Drum: An Irish Autobiography* (Blackstaff, 1981).
- [9] Patrick Buckland, *The Factory of Grievances: Devolved Government in Northern Ireland 1921 – 1939* (Gill & Macmillan, 1979).
- [10] John Ditch, *Social Policy in Northern Ireland* (Avebury, 1989).
- [11] Hugh Oram, *The Newspaper Book: A History of Newspapers in Ireland 1649 – 1983* (MO Books, 1984).
- [12] Lord Elwyn-Jones, *In My Time: An Autobiography* (Futura: London, 1988), p 167.
- [13] Rosemary Harris, *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ulster: A Study of Neighbours and 'Strangers' in a Border Community* (MUP, 1972).
- [14] Richard Rose, *Governing Without Consensus* (Faber, 1971).
- [15] Frank Wright, *Northern Ireland: A Comparative Analysis* (Gill and Macmillan, 1987).
- [16] Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, *Northern Ireland 1921 – 93: Political Forces and Social Classes* (Serif, 1995).
- [17] Terry Cradden, *Trade Unionism, Socialism and Partition: The Labour Movement in Northern Ireland 1939 – 1953* (December Publication, 1994).
- [18] John Biggs-Davison, *The Hand is Red* (Johnson Publications, 1974).
- [19] Pamela Clayton, *Enemies and Passing Friends: Settler Ideologies in Twentieth Century Ulster* (Pluto, 1996).
- [20] Marc Mulholland, 'Why did Unionists Discriminate?' in Sabine Wichert (ed.), *From the United Irishmen to twentieth-century unionism: essays in honour of A.T.Q. Stewart* (Dublin, 2004).