CONTEMPORARY UNIONISM AND THE TACTICS OF RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

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This paper emphasises the importance of the political context for shaping unionist tactics for defending the Union and resisting Irish unity. Some draw a sharp dichotomy between “constitutional” and “unconstitutional” unionism. The Ulster Unionist Party, and perhaps the Democratic Unionist Party, are seen as “constitutional”, while the loyalist parties associated with paramilitary organisations, the Ulster Democratic Party and the Progressive Unionist Party, are seen as “unconstitutional”. Some unionists readily advocate violence while others completely reject any use of violence. The principal unionist parties (UUP, DUP), it is argued, have operated in the “grey area” between violent and non-violent politics, veering towards one pole or the other depending on the wider political context. In particular, it will be suggested that unionists tend towards “more direct” methods of political action when they fear—often with good reason—that their position within the Union is becoming undermined. When these fears are heightened the room for unionist political elites to contemplate accommodation with nationalists is constrained.

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INTRODUCTION

In the propaganda war waged over Northern Ireland the unionists are often portrayed as suffering from a “siege mentality” or as paranoid and irrational in their resistance to various British-Irish constitutional initiatives.¹ By contrast this essay argues that there is evidence to substantiate unionist concerns about British policy and their place within the Union, concerns which date back at least to the start of the recent conflict. This argument is illustrated with evidence from two periods of high unionist insecurity: 1970-76 and the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish agreement 1985.

There are four principal elements to the argument:

• Firstly, British interests in Northern Ireland—while they are not static—are not as strong as unionists would like them to be. For much of the period since partition Britain has had no *overriding* selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland beyond stability.

• Secondly, as a result of this lack of interest—as well as a lack of identification with Ulster unionism—the British (or any other external force) do not provide the support for unionism that the Southern Irish provide for nationalism. The isolation of unionism compounds its insecurity over the constitutional future of Northern Ireland.

• Thirdly, as a result of British untrustworthiness and unionist isolation during periods of heightened constitutional insecurity unionists (whether “constitutional” or “unconstitutional”, “respectable” or “unrespectable”) tend to shift towards more militant and violent tactics to defend the Union. Such tactical forms of unionist resistance to Irish unity during the recent conflict are not necessarily irrational, paranoid or counter-productive in achieving their strategic aim.

• Fourthly, the political leaders of unionism operate within in a political context that both constrains and enables them to lead their parties and followers towards accommodation with nationalists. In periods of heightened constitutional insecurity their ability to control their followers, prevent violence and promote accommodation with nationalists is more limited.

¹ In this paper the term British will be used to describe those living in Great Britain rather than Northern Ireland. This should not be taken to imply that there are no British people living in Northern Ireland.
The argument presented here is less about morality—and the intention here is not in any way to legitimise unionist violence—than about trying to understand unionist tactics for preserving the Union and the constraints operating on unionist politicians. A “realistic” appraisal of these constraints is important in understanding just how far unionists can move towards a more inclusive civic unionism (Dixon, 2000) and an accommodation with nationalism.

BRITISH INTEREST IN THE UNION WITH NORTHERN IRELAND?

Republicans have traditionally argued that British imperialism is determined to hold onto its “first and last colony”. Particularly since the end of the 1980s, however, some within the republican movement have begun to reassess this analysis and to some extent accept that Britain has “no selfish strategic or economic interest” in Northern Ireland. Alongside this has come a more sophisticated understanding of how the British state operates and the tensions within it, for example between the “securocrats” and the political elite. The nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) has argued that Britain has “no selfish strategic or economic interest” in Northern Ireland since the early 1970s (Dixon, 2001b).

Unionism has been divided in its attitude to the British state and its policy towards Northern Ireland. In the 1970s the moderate unionist Prime Minister Terence O’Neill favoured a more trusting attitude towards British intervention, while unionist hardliners were more resistant. As British governments were perceived to adopt a more “interfering” and pro-nationalist stance, so unionists took a more sceptical view of British policy and the more trusting approach of moderates was undermined. The problem for more accommodating unionists is that their moderation is often interpreted by outsiders as a sign of weakness on the Union. If the election of moderates is seen by the British government as indicating a weakness on the Union, then unionists are more likely to vote for hardline candidates to communicate the strength of their opposition to Irish unity.

The integrationist wing of unionism, which saw its heyday in the late 1980s, was remarkable for the trust it placed in the British state. It argued that Northern Ireland should be treated like any other part of the United Kingdom, and was therefore opposed to devolution to Northern Ireland. The leader of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) during 1979-95, James Molyneaux, was remarkable for being a hard-line unionist who felt able to put his trust in successive Conservative governments to defend the Union. The Anglo-Irish agreement (1985) and the Framework documents (1995) undermined Molyneaux’s trusting approach. Bob McCartney, a leading integrationist figure in the UUP, later formed the United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP) and, echoing the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), expounded a highly negative view of British policy. Since partition, they argue, the British government’s strategic aim has been to gradually ease Northern Ireland out of the Union.

Unionist perceptions of the treachery of British policy and the threat to their constitutional position have often been dismissed (particularly by republicans who hold a strongly contrasting view) as unfounded or even paranoid. There is, however,
plenty of evidence to support the sceptical position adopted by unionists towards British policy during the recent conflict (Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, 1979; Patterson, 1986; Dixon, 2001b). British “untrustworthiness” dates back at least to partition, which was imposed on the unionists by the British government. Northern Ireland’s position in the United Kingdom has been unique since the Government of Ireland Act 1920 provided for a Council of Ireland and for the Northern and Southern parliaments to vote themselves into a united Ireland. The Ireland Act 1949 permitted Irish unity with the consent of the Northern Ireland Parliament, and after 1972 the consent of the people. No other part of the United Kingdom was allowed a similar right. The British government’s apparent offer to the Irish government of unity if they would enter the Second World War on the side of the allies was for unionists a further example of British untrustworthiness. The prospect of a Labour government at Westminster in 1964 apparently committed to civil rights and an interventionist approach to the economy revived unionist anxieties that their position in the Union could become undermined (Dixon, 2001b: 57-58). Harold Wilson’s “surrogate nationalism” and sympathies for Irish unity although shallow further alarmed unionists (Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, 1979; Dixon, 2001b: 60-64). The principal objection of the Labour government to Irish unity appears to lie in the opposition of unionist opinion rather than any over-riding selfish, strategic or economic interest. Premature unification would result in a unionist backlash, nationalists would have to conciliate Protestants if they wanted a united Ireland (Dixon, 2001b: 109).

Unionist fears of British treachery may have been exaggerated, or may have been misperceptions of the intentions of the Labour government, but there was nonetheless evidence to suggest that there was substance to these beliefs. The case study presented below of British policy 1970-76 illustrates the substance of continuing unionist concerns over their place in the Union. On 9 November 1990 the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Brooke, announced that “The British Government has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland, our role is to help, enable and encourage”. While this has been presented as a sea change in British policy this stance was apparent in the early 1970s. Britain has long ceased to have any overriding interest in retaining the Union and it is retained because it offers the best prospect for a stable solution to the conflict. Northern Ireland had long ceased to be a net contributor to the British exchequer and was a “drain” on the rest of the United Kingdom. Any economic interests could have been ensured in a united Ireland. Ireland’s geographical proximity makes it of strategic interest to Britain, but these interests could be ensured in a united Ireland and it does not appear to be of overriding importance to British policy-makers. There is evidence that the Republic would have given the British security guarantees in exchange for Irish unity. The end of the Cold War made even more obvious Britain’s lack of strategic interest in Northern Ireland. Opinion polls and British political discourse suggest that Northern Ireland is not seen as a part of the Union and the “British nation” in the way that England, Scotland and Wales are. Since the mid-1970s opinion polls have shown consistent support for British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. The need for stability in the island of Ireland best explains Britain’s continuing presence in Northern Ireland. British withdrawal and Irish unity or an independent Ulster threatened to
plunge the island into civil war with overspill effects in Britain, particularly in cities with a large Irish-descended population. The Irish government could be destabilised and the island vulnerable to take over. The destabilisation of Ireland would not be in Britain’s economic interest, the Republic is a leading trading partner, or strategic interest. It might also draw severe international criticism, particularly from Europe and the USA. The integration of Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom would not accommodate nationalist aspirations, would undermine nationalist “moderates”, would reduce the co-operation of the Republic of Ireland, and consequently is likely to provoke an upsurge of republican violence and offer no prospect of a stable settlement.

The British political elite considered withdrawal, independence and integration in their search for a stable settlement to the conflict in Northern Ireland but these options were rejected on the grounds that they were likely to worsen the conflict. The constraints on British policy were such that the only stable solution appeared to lie in a package somewhere between power sharing and power sharing with an Irish dimension (Dixon, 2001a; Dixon, 2001b). Any British politician making progress towards a settlement in Ireland could also calculate on receiving a reward from the British electorate for removing such an intractable problem from the political agenda.

ASYMMETRY AND UNIONIST ISOLATION

The British government has not been the sponsor of Ulster unionism in the way the Irish government has supported Irish nationalism. This is not only the result of the lack of British interest in the Union with Northern Ireland but arises also from the government’s perceived need to act in an “even-handed” manner towards both unionists and nationalists. The British government must act as “champion of the Union” to reassure unionists that their place in the Union is guaranteed by the British. Simultaneously, the British government claims to act as a “neutral arbiter” to reassure nationalists that they will be dealt with fairly in any negotiations towards a political settlement. The British government also reassures nationalists that it will end the Union with Northern Ireland if that is the desire of a majority of people living there.

The asymmetrical relationship between the British/unionists and Irish/nationalists leaves unionism vulnerable. At a fundamental level, according to opinion polls, the citizens of the Republic tend to regard Northern Ireland as part of their nation while the British on the whole do not. The plight of nationalists in the North has a resonance among political and public opinion in the Republic in a way that the plight of unionists does not in Britain; the unionists cannot draw on the same sympathy and support in Britain that the nationalists can in the Republic and further afield. British public opinion has consistently favoured withdrawal from Northern Ireland since the mid-1970s and there is only limited, qualified support for the retention of the Union with Northern Ireland (Dixon, 1995a). There was even an opinion poll as far back as June 1967 showing 45% of a British sample approving of the proposition that the British government encourage Northern Ireland to join up with the Republic (19%
disapproved and 36% didn’t know). Unionism’s alienation from British public opinion is not the recent, dramatic shift that some pundits would like to suggest (*The Guardian*, 21 Aug 2001).

The lack of *overriding* British strategic, economic or political interests in Northern Ireland has further fed unionist insecurity about Britain’s commitment to the Union. Northern Ireland is not seen as part of the “British nation” in the same way England, Scotland and Wales are. Among the political elite there is very limited sympathy with the unionist cause in either the Labour or Conservative parties, as even pro-Union Conservatives have admitted. During the history of the recent “troubles” it has been only in exceptional periods (when the support of Ulster Unionist MPs in the House of Commons has been sought after) that British governments have paid close attention to unionist interests. The British Labour Party’s support for Irish unity, and sympathy for this option among some Conservatives, underlines the asymmetrical relationship and isolation of unionism. In addition to this, northern nationalists have worked effectively to cultivate support and influence in the USA and Europe. It is this array of national and international forces which are ranged behind the nationalists (the so-called “pan-nationalist front”) which goes some way to explaining the oft-cited siege mentality of unionists. Given the “unreliable” record of successive British governments on Northern Ireland, it is hardly surprising that unionists are insecure about their constitutional position in the United Kingdom and regarded both the first and second “peace processes” with such suspicion. The asymmetry in British/unionist and Irish/nationalist relations leads to unionist insecurity over the constitutional future of Northern Ireland. British ambiguity over the constitutional position of Northern Ireland within the Union promotes insecurity. If constitutional methods seem unlikely to guarantee unionists their place within the Union then they are likely to turn towards more militant tactics including violence to prevent their incorporation in a united Ireland. The turn towards violence and consequent polarisation makes the prospects of accommodation with nationalists less likely. In the context of this asymmetry moves towards Joint Authority are not as balanced as their advocates would like to think (Dixon, 1995b).

While ambiguity over Northern Ireland’s constitutional position may contribute to paramilitary violence, it is possible that the opposite is also true—that declarations of total constitutional security may also be counterproductive (if not without credibility). In an interview in 1989 Peter Brooke referred to the example of Cyprus, in 1954 a British minister declared it would “never” leave the Empire but by 1960 had won its independence. If the British government, as some urge, was to declare that Northern Ireland will be forever part of the United Kingdom then this might inflame nationalists and republicans (along with the Republic of Ireland and international opinion), destabilise the situation further and contribute to an upsurge of violence. Leaving open at least the possibility of Irish unity by consent and peaceful means would seem to be not only democratic but the minimum required incentive if the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), or other republican paramilitaries, is to be induced to become involved in the democratic process. The consent formula is democratic, has widespread agreement, as demonstrated by its presence in the
Good Friday agreement, allows nationalists to retain their aspirations and gives unionists some guarantee about their future in the United Kingdom.

**UNIONIST CONSTITUTIONAL INSECURITY, VIOLENCE AND LEADERSHIP**

During periods of high insecurity about their constitutional position unionists have generally been readier to advocate more violent tactics, against both the state and republicans, to achieve their strategic aim—defence of their position within the Union. These perceptions of British policy may be exaggerated, but there is a rational basis to them (Dixon, 1996: 132-33). When non-violent tactics and constitutional methods appear to be failing to secure Northern Ireland’s place in the Union then unionism shifts towards less constitutional methods of influencing British policy.

The sharp dichotomy drawn between “constitutional” and “unconstitutional” unionism disguises the “grey area” in which unionist politics has often operated. The UUP and the DUP are often portrayed as “constitutional”, although the UUP appears “more respectable” than the DUP. The loyalist paramilitary organisations are seen as “unconstitutional” and their associated parties, the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) and the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), at best “semi-constitutional”. The advent of the peace process has to some extent changed this perception. The UDP and PUP came out in support of the process while the DUP continues to oppose it, having been joined by the “Liberal Unionists” of the UKUP and the Northern Ireland Unionist Party (NIUP), the paramilitary Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) and an influential faction within the UUP itself.

The principal unionist parties (UUP, DUP) have operated in the “grey area” between the poles of violent and non-violent tactics, veering towards one pole or the other depending on the wider political context. In particular, it will be suggested that unionists have shifted towards “more direct” and violent methods of political action when they fear—often with good reason—that their position within the Union is becoming undermined. When these fears are heightened the room for unionist political elites to contemplate accommodation with nationalists (in British-sponsored initiatives) is constrained. Political leaders can act either to incite or control violence. Whether or not these leaders act to exacerbate or control violence has to be judged by the context in which the leaders operate—the constraints and opportunities operating on those politicians (Dixon, 2001b: 24-46). Assessing these constraints and opportunities is difficult and controversial. For example, a speech by a unionist leader using aggressive rhetoric could represent an attempt to increase tension and incite violence against nationalists. On the other hand, the unionist leader may be attempting to head off the militant challenge and act as a safety valve to express unionist concerns. In this way steam can be let off and passions channelled away from more violent expression. An understanding of the constraints and opportunities operating on unionist leaders enables a more nuanced—and less stereotypical—understanding of unionist politics (see Dixon, 2002, on the types of political skills deployed by Northern Irish politicians).
A unionist shift towards more violent tactics and failure to engage with British initiatives for resolving the conflict can undermine unionist strategic aims. Intransigence and violence—if they are taken too far—could further endanger British support for the Union with Northern Ireland and provoke an anti-unionist response.

**BRITISH AMBIGUITY AND UNIONIST INSECURITY 1: 1970-76**

The election of a Conservative government in June 1970, with its traditional links to unionism and more repressive approach to security policy, may have initially done something to settle unionist anxieties. However, following internment leading politicians in both the Conservative government and Labour opposition were becoming more sympathetic to the goal of Irish unity (Dixon, 2001b). The British Prime Minister, Edward Heath, in his Guildhall Speech to the City of London, declared that the nationalists’ aspiration for Irish unity by democratic and constitutional means was legitimate and that if a majority in Northern Ireland wanted Irish unity “I do not believe any British government would stand in the way”. There were reports in the newspapers that Conservative ministers were sympathetic to Irish unity. Such reports were necessarily off-the-record in order to minimise the impact on unionist opinion. *The Economist* reported in January 1972 that “… ministers have made little secret of their belief that the most satisfactory solution in the end would be if a political solution were created over the years in which the Protestant majority in the north could come to recognise a future for itself in a united Ireland.” (Patterson 1986). Peter Jenkins wrote in *The Guardian*

Ministers would like nothing better than to be shot of the problems of Northern Ireland. Some privately conceded that probably the only permanent long-term solution to the problem of Ireland is its reunification. They would be happy in the meanwhile to see the Stormont [sic parliament] cut down to size as the Belfast Urban District Council. These views are even more prevalent and more strongly held within the civil service. (*The Guardian*, 8 Nov 1971)

According to these reports, reunification was not seen “as a dramatic act of policy” but “as the eventual result of a growing together process. … For in the meanwhile—and the meanwhile might be 20 or 25 years—Northern Ireland must be a place worth living in. The development of common interests between the two islands, facilitated by common membership of the European Community, must become the basis of co-operation, between the two communities in Northern Ireland” (*The Guardian*, 22 Nov 1971; see Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, 1995: 169 for further evidence of Conservative sympathies for Irish unity).

The Bloody Sunday Inquiry has uncovered cabinet documents revealing the extent of the Conservative Cabinets’ ambivalence over the Union with Northern Ireland. Reviewing the minutes of a Cabinet meeting shortly after Bloody Sunday, Eamonn McCann points out, “The minutes suggest that the British government was far from dogmatic about the constitutional future of the North. None of the ministers is recorded expressing a straightforward defence-of-the-realm position” (*Sunday Tribune*, 26 Sep 1999). The Minister of Defence, Lord Carrington, even argued that expecting nationalists to wait 20 years for a united Ireland was asking too much,
which may suggest that there was no overriding defence objection to Irish unity (Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, 1995: 169). Unionists were enraged by the “softly, softly” security policy of the Conservative government towards the PIRA, the introduction of direct rule (a key PIRA demand) and by secret talks between the Conservative government and the PIRA in July 1972 (shortly after the Conservatives had said they would not negotiate with the PIRA).

The conflict, particularly on the left, was seen increasingly by the political elite as a colonial one rather than an internal United Kingdom problem. The logical corollary of this position was British withdrawal and Irish unity. In November 1971 Harold Wilson put Irish unity, albeit by consent, on the agenda in his 15 point plan. Conservative reactions to Wilson’s proposals were notable by their restraint. In December 1971 Wilson declared that “No democratic politician can negotiate with people who are murdering people” (The Times, 7 Dec 1971). In March 1972 the Labour leader secretly met the PIRA. Senior Labour politicians began to discuss British withdrawal under the code name “Algeria” so that they could publicly deny any such discussions (Haines, 1977). Although the Labour party were in opposition they were a credible alternative party of government and so unionists had good reason to fear these developments in Labour party thinking.

Significant sections of the British political elite publicly and privately favoured Irish unity as means to extricate Britain from a problem in which it had little interest other than stability (Dixon, 2001b: 98-128). The untrustworthiness of the British political elite undermined those unionists who wanted to trust British guarantees on the Union and share power with nationalists. The shift in British political elite attitudes towards Northern Ireland, along with a poll in September 1971 showing 59% public support for withdrawal, was noticed by unionist opinion (Patterson, 1986). A unionist backlash developed, encouraged by what they saw as the appeasement of the PIRA by the British political elite. The British-driven, power-sharing experiment was opposed by loyalists as a step down the road to Irish unity.

The British might well have gradually eased Northern Ireland out of the Union had some hard-line unionists not demonstrated their ability to bring Northern Ireland to the brink of civil war. The loyalist mobilisation was apparent in demonstrations, strikes and in the sectarian murder of Catholic civilians. Hard-line unionists were dissatisfied at the failure of their own government and the British government to take a more repressive approach in the face of growing PIRA violence. The introduction of internment in August 1971 precipitated a rapid escalation of violence and in its wake loyalism mobilised. The mass-based Ulster Defence Association was formed in September 1971 as an umbrella body for loyalist vigilante groups. At its peak in 1972, it was estimated to have 40,000 members (Elliott and Flackes, 1999: 474). The same month Ian Paisley and his Protestant Unionist Party joined forces with the working class unionism of Desmond Boal in establishing the hard-line DUP.

The Ulster Vanguard group embodied the overlap between the respectable unionism of the UUP and paramilitarism. It was formed in early 1972 as an umbrella organisation to overcome party divisions. Significantly, it recruited members from the
“respectable” UUP even though it had direct links to the Vanguard Service Crops, a paramilitary organisation. The rhetoric of the Vanguard leader, William Craig, was aggressive. He told a rally in March 1972 “if the politicians fail, it will be our duty to liquidate the enemy”. In Autumn 1972 Craig declared his willingness “to come out and shoot and kill”. David Trimble—signatory of the Good Friday agreement, Nobel Peace Prize winner and leader of the UUP—was an active member of Vanguard (as were David Burnside, later MP, and Sir Reg Empey, a pro-agreement member of the UUP) and some claim Trimble was a member of the Vanguard Service Corps (McDonald, 2000: 39, 41). Ulster Vanguard was highly sceptical of British policy (Trimble argued that it had perhaps mortally wounded the Union), opposed direct rule and reluctantly flirted with Ulster nationalism and independence. While Ulster independence has not been a popular option among the unionist electorate; it may be hinted at by unionists as an attempt to threaten the British government that in the event of a sell-out unionists have an alternative option to Irish unity.

During 1972-73 a loyalist backlash developed raising the prospect of the British Army facing a war against both loyalist and republican paramilitaries. Loyalists, fearing that the truce with the PIRA was the prelude to a sell-out by the British government, began to establish their own barricades in loyalist areas. On 3 July 1972 a standoff between 8,000 members of the UDA and the outnumbered Army threatened to lead to heavy bloodshed if soldiers were forced to fire on the advancing loyalists. An historian of the Army in Northern Ireland argued that such a clash “would have put the Army in an unenviable and probably impossible position” (Hamill, 1985). While, to some extent the Army was prepared to take on loyalists, there were limits to how far they could go without provoking an unsustainable war on two fronts against both the PIRA and loyalist paramilitaries. There were also concerns as to how far the locally recruited security forces would police their own community (Dixon, 2001b: 98-128).

The loyalist backlash culminated in the Ulster Workers’ Council (UWC) strike of May 1974 which succeeded in bringing down the power-sharing experiment and with it the collapse of British policy since 1972. The loyalist backlash 1971-74 demonstrated the power of unionism, and British government policy shifted away from power-sharing, and perhaps the hope of Irish unity, towards accommodating the new reality of unionist power (Dixon, 2001b: 158-89). British (and Irish) calculations altered radically; independence rather than Irish unity appeared to be the best route to British withdrawal. For all the Irish government’s nationalist posturing, British withdrawal represented a considerable threat to the southern state. A British withdrawal would most likely have resulted in civil war in which the Irish government would have found itself embroiled. By the mid-1970s the British calculated that normalisation (Ulsterisation and criminalisation) and containment offered the best prospect for insulating itself from the conflict and minimising instability. Whether or not the British government had been serious about easing Northern Ireland into a united Ireland through power sharing and an Irish dimension, the ability of unionists to mobilise and threaten civil war may well have scuppered those hopes.
During 1974-76 there was a widespread expectation that the British were about to withdraw from Northern Ireland. After 1976, as British policy-makers took steps to reassure unionists, these fears subsided and loyalist violence decreased. The assertion of unionist power 1971-74 (should this be 1974-85?) changed calculations as to what was politically possible in Northern Ireland in the unionist’s favour. The finely balanced House of Commons also gave leverage to unionist MPs, forcing the British government and Conservative opposition to attend more closely to their interests. There followed a period in 1976-79 that was without a major constitutional initiative to raise unionist concerns. The loyalist strike of 1977, unlike the UWC strike, failed. The parameters of British policy had been tested; neither independence, integration nor withdrawal appeared likely to produce the stability that the British desired. While Ian Paisley went on the “Carson Trail” in 1980 over Anglo-Irish initiatives that developed into the Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985, loyalist paramilitaries remained relatively quiet.

The unionist revolt: violence and the union

In retrospect there was probably more reason for unionists to fear that British policy in the early 1970s was about manipulating Northern Ireland out of the Union than was the case later with the Anglo-Irish agreement (AIA). The legacy of previous British policy may have influenced unionist perceptions about the agreement. Margaret Thatcher's intention was probably not to push Northern Ireland out of the Union but to increase security co-operation with the Republic of Ireland. Others with influence on British policy probably saw the agreement as a step towards an historic accommodation between unionism and nationalism (Dixon, 2001b: 8). The unionist sense of betrayal and insecurity was heightened by the fact that it was a Conservative (rather than a Labour) government, led by an avowed unionist, which had betrayed them. The security priorities of English unionism and preparedness to “compromise” the constitutional position of Northern Ireland was in contrast to Ulster unionism’s strength on both issues.

British and Irish politicians underestimated the strength of unionist opposition to the AIA. Unionists saw the AIA as a step towards a united Ireland, and their reaction was overwhelmingly hostile. All the indicators suggested strong unionist opposition to the AIA. Even the moderate Alliance Party was threatened with a split. On 23 November there was a huge demonstration against the AIA, with 250,000 demonstrators (out of a total unionist population of about a million), “the biggest rally of the Protestant people since… 1912” (Needham, 1998: 76-77). On the first anniversary of the signing of the AIA there was a protest of 200,000 people and rioting in loyalist areas. A petition in January-February 1987 raised 400,000 signatures. A Sunday Times/MORI opinion poll published on 24 November 1985 found 83% of Protestants did not think the AIA would improve the prospects for peace while just 7% thought it would. The poll asked those opposed to the AIA to indicate their support for different ways of protesting: 53% favoured signing a petition; 44% a mini general election; 39% mass demonstrations; 27% strikes; 15% rent and rate strikes;
14% refusal to pay water/electricity charges; 14% a declaration of independence; 10% armed revolt (Sunday Times, 24/11/85). The unionist MPs at Westminster resigned their seats so that a poll could be taken in Northern Ireland on the Anglo-Irish agreement. In the following by-elections 418,230 votes were cast for anti-AIA candidates, representing 43% of the electorate as a whole, although one unionist lost his seat to Seamus Mallon of the SDLP. The vote for the centrist Alliance Party slumped. Unionist councils refused to set rates and were fined.

Constitutional politics could not guarantee the Union, the unionist MPs could easily be outvoted in the House of Commons and, as the Anglo-Irish agreement appeared to demonstrate, the unionism of their Conservative allies was suspect. To prevent Northern Ireland being rolled out of the Union unionists took politics into the streets and used the threat of violence to demonstrate to the British and Irish governments (and perhaps the nationalists) the limits to which unionists could be pushed—underlining the parameters of British policy. Had unionists failed to mobilise and show the strength of their opposition to the agreement, then the two governments might have taken that as a signal that the British-Irish process could be accelerated towards joint authority (Seldon, 1997: 432). The unionist dilemma was that constitutional unionists by threatening violence could encourage and legitimise the position of those who actually used violence. The leaders of the constitutional unionist parties, Molyneaux and Paisley, were entering a grey area in which it was difficult to discern whether their intention was to incite or contain violence. Unionist politicians were not only expressing the outrage of unionist opinion but also attempting to mobilise unionist power and using the threat of violence to set limits on British policy. At the same time unionists ran the risk of inciting and escalating violence which would split unionism, worsen relations with nationalists and further damage the Union. The Ulster Clubs were formed shortly before the AIA was signed and occupied this political ground between constitutional and unconstitutional politics, including a place on its steering committee for John McMichael of the UDA (Bruce, 1994: 104). The chairperson of the Ulster Clubs, Alan Wright, argued “Ultimately, because my faith, my province and my children matter, if violence is the only way that I can uphold these things then I will, while not being a violent man, resort to force” (quoted in Kenny, 1986: 120). David Trimble, future leader of the UUP, was a member of Ulster Clubs and he described the “unionist dilemma”:

If you have a situation where there is a serious attack on your constitutional position and liberties—and I regard the Anglo-Irish agreement as being just that—and where the Government tells you constitutional action is ineffective, you are left in a very awkward situation ... do you sit back and do nothing, or move outside constitutional forms of protest? I don’t think you can deal with the situation without the risk of an extra-parliamentary campaign. ... I would personally draw the line at terrorism and serious violence. But if we are talking about a campaign that involves demonstrations and so on, then a certain element of violence may be inescapable” (Cochrane, 1997: 157-8)

While unionists like Trimble encouraged more militant tactics for defending the Union, the problem was that this could play into the hands of the paramilitaries at the expense of the political parties, and damage the Union. Chris McGimpsey argued
that the dilemma “which faces the unionist community is how to maintain opposition to the agreement which does not, as a by-product, also weaken the union” (Aughey, 1989: 72).

**UNIONIST POLITICIANS: LEADING OR FOLLOWING?**

At the end of February 1986, Molyneaux and Paisley appeared willing to try and reach agreement with Thatcher. At a meeting in Downing Street the leaders of the DUP and UUP were assured that the AIA would be operated sensitively and were offered concessions: on new arrangements for enabling unionists to make their views known to the government; on consultations about the handling of Northern Ireland business at Westminster and on the need for discussions on devolved government (*Irish Times*, 26-27 Feb 1986). Molyneaux and Paisley agreed to reflect on the British government’s proposals and the UUP leader expressed the hope that a forthcoming loyalist strike might not go ahead. The unionist leaders had shifted from saying initially that they would accept no part of the AIA to agreeing to discuss devolution if the AIA was suspended. The British government wanted to be seen to be meeting unionist demands and calming their misgivings about the AIA (*Irish Times*, 27 Feb 1986). Tom King claimed that after devolution only cross-border security and economic co-operation would be dealt with by the Intergovernmental Conference. When the unionist leaders returned to Belfast they were forced to retreat by their supporters and subsequently announced that they would hold no further talks with the Prime Minister unless the AIA was scrapped (*Irish Times*, 27 Feb 1986). Thatcher continued to oppose suspending the AIA, and it was “a gap” in the meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference that allowed the all-party Brooke Talks to get underway in 1991.

The significance of this episode is that it illustrates the constraints operating on the unionist political elites and the problems they were to have in managing unionist opposition to the AIA. Molyneaux and Paisley had worked hard to find a compromise with the government and “This was almost their undoing” (Aughey, 1989: 89; Bruce, 1994: 113). According to the *Sunday Times* it was obvious that Molyneaux and Paisley had been “running to keep up with the pace of events in Ulster”, and it would require some effort for the constitutional politicians to reassert their leadership (Owen, 1994: 61, 75-76). The British Prime Minister recognised the dilemma of unionist leaders: “Ian Paisley was in the forefront of the campaign against the agreement. But far more worrying was the fact that behind him stood harder and more sinister figures who might all too easily cross the line from civil disobedience to violence” (Thatcher, 1993: 403).

The unionist party leaders struggled to contain and control unionist protest against the AIA. On 3 March 1986 the loyalist strike against the AIA was accompanied by intimidation and rioting in which police were shot at 20 times and 47 RUC officers were injured. Attacks followed on police homes. The UUP leader, James Molyneaux, roundly condemned the violence and declared that future strikes would not be supported by his party. He was criticised by the DUP for giving up at least the threat of another day of action and the leverage this gave unionists against the Brit-
The DUP argued that the level of violence had been exaggerated and that unconstitutional action had to be “bold and unapologetic” if it was to be effective against the British. In April a young Protestant, Keith White, was killed by a plastic bullet during rioting in Portadown. In the wake of this incident, Paisley hardened his rhetorical stance against rioting, risking the opposition of radicals within his own party (Cochrane, 1997: 149-50, 153). Unionist leaders were concerned that protest might escalate beyond their ability to control it. Molyneaux commented, “the reality is that Mr Paisley and I … have been overtaken by the people of Northern Ireland” (Owen, 1994). On 23 April 1986 a programme of protest and civil disobedience was launched to assert the control of politicians rather than paramilitaries over the anti-agreement campaign.

On 10 November 1986 a paramilitary-style militant loyalist group, Ulster Resistance, was formed. Ian Paisley participated in this group, although it has been argued that he played a moderating role within the organisation attempting to keep control of protest and ensure it did not turn into revolt (Aughey, 1989: 76-77, see also Cochrane, 1997: 162, 159-60). Cochrane argues that

the DUP hoped that by supporting Ulster Resistance they could manipulate and harness what was essentially an inexperienced political leadership and thus align it more closely with the priorities of the DUP. Additionally, Paisley hoped that his donning of the red beret would re-establish his Carsonite credentials with the radical elements within his own party, who were becoming restless with the pace of the anti-agreement campaign and disillusioned with the unionist pact” (Cochrane, 1997: 159-60).

Whether unionist leaders exerted a moderating influence over their parties or not depends on the observer’s assessment of whether the people they led within their party and their electorate tended to be more “extreme” or “moderate” than their party leaders. In other words, to what extent do the structures in which politicians operate constrain their ability to lead their parties? The “orthodox nationalist view” would condemn the unionist party leaders for stirring up loyalist opposition to the agreement and encouraging it onto the streets with the resulting violence and intimidation. This view would suggest that the unionist people are more “moderate” than their unrepresentative politicians and that, generally, it is the politicians who cynically stoke up and exploit sectarian sentiment to further their own political ambitions. The constitutional pretences of unionist politicians are contrasted with the violence which follows from their political rhetoric.

An alternative (some would say unionist) perspective would recognise the role Paisley and Molyneaux played in attempting to avert confrontation in February 1986. Finding unionist party, and perhaps also, public opinion opposed to negotiation, the two party leaders attempted to restrain and control unionist protest by leading that protest and channelling it, to some extent, into non-violent tactics. This view would emphasise the importance of unionist leaders being seen to represent and articulate unionist grievance, in order to maintain their leadership positions, but at the same time attempting to control and restrain the political expression of that grievance. In this view the unionist electorate tend to be more “extreme” than their
political leaders. Molyneaux took “the long view” that the existence of a united unionist front on the AIA was an end in itself, maintaining unionist morale and allowing the letting off of steam “which had it not been released, may have been used for more destructive purposes” (Cochrane, 1997: 193). Protest would continue until the British realised the AIA was not working. An indication that there was more extreme loyalist opinion than that being expressed by DUP leaders is apparent in the emergence and relative electoral success of the “extremist” Protestant Unionist George Seawright. Seawright was expelled from the DUP for anti-Catholic remarks but subsequently succeeded in winning significant support as a “Protestant Unionist” and was elected to Belfast City Council (Bruce, 1994: 143-5).

POWER, DEMOCRACY AND VIOLENCE

Behind the façade of constitutional democracy lies the unequal distribution of power and the threat of violence and force that has played a continuing role in the conflict over Northern Ireland. Both “constitutional” nationalist and unionist politicians have benefited (and suffered) from the threat and use of violence, whether or not they have encouraged it (Dixon, 2001b). The border was formed after threats of violence by unionists. Since partition unionists have employed state violence to maintain their dominance, while republicans have employed it to challenge the state. Nationalists during the civil rights campaign demonstrated the effectiveness of taking politics into the streets and the threat to violence that this implied. The civil rights movement swiftly won its demands, but by then republicans were exploiting the mobilisation of the Catholic community to re-open the border question by escalating conflict with the British Army. The rising tide of violence was successful in shifting the political agenda away from civil rights and towards the border question, eventually resulting in the suspension of Stormont and the power-sharing experiment. British ambiguity over Northern Ireland’s constitutional position, its record of withdrawal from Empire and evidence of withdrawal sentiment in Britain encouraged republicans to believe that they were on the verge of victory over the British. The continuing violence of the PIRA’s campaign during “the troubles” has contributed significantly to the polarisation of public opinion and enormous suffering. But it has also proved a powerful tool for drawing the attention of the British government to republican grievances. The mobilisation of republicans during the Hunger Strike and Sinn Féin’s successful entry into electoral politics were catalysts of the Anglo-Irish agreement in 1985. For some unionists, it is the continuing PIRA threat of a return to violence that has driven the British government’s “appeasement” of the republican movement during the peace process.

In the wake of the Anglo Irish agreement unionists mobilised once again to set limits on British policy. Unionist politicians, as they had in the early 1970s, entered the grey area between democratic politics and advocacy of violence. Without strong unionist resistance and the taking of politics into the streets of Northern Ireland unionists feared—with some reason—the extension of the AIA and their coercion into a united Ireland. Unionists, by taking politics into the streets used the threat of violence and the reality of limited violence against the British government. Employing the rhetoric and threat of violence, however, could incite some to violence, and le-
gitimise paramilitary violence, running the risk that this could escalate out of control and damage the Union. A more passive response might have failed to communicate the depth of unionist attachment to the Union and determination to preserve it.

The political realities of Northern Ireland have led to “constitutional” unionist and nationalist politicians benefiting from the activities of violent paramilitaries and having links with them. This is not to say that they necessarily condone those activities, and constitutional politicians from all the major parties have been strong in their condemnation of paramilitary violence. But the benefits these politicians have received through the use and threat of violence—and a perception that they have from time to time actually inspired or antagonised that violence—has coloured the other community’s view of the intentions of those politicians. The SDLP benefited from the republican campaign by using the leverage that this violence gave them to win the AIA and concessions during both “peace processes”. Similarly, unionist constitutional politicians benefited from loyalist violence in the early 1970s and mid-1980s, since this helped to establish the parameters to British policy in a way that purely peaceful protest might not have done. By taking politics into the streets, unionist and nationalist politicians were employing the threat of civil disturbance to influence policy.

During the recent peace process “constitutional” unionist politicians have continued to operate in the grey area between “constitutional” and “unconstitutional” politics. While David Trimble refused to talk with Sinn Féin, he did engage in talks with Billy Wright, leader of the paramilitary LVF, to discuss the impasse at Drumcree. In September 1997, the UUP entered all-party talks with nationalists flanked by the political representatives of the loyalist paramilitary parties, the PUP and the UDP.

The DUP have had a closer relationship with loyalist paramilitaries than the UUP. Leading members of the DUP have shared platforms with loyalist paramilitaries while others have acted in ways that could be interpreted as lending legitimacy to the LVF. There are advantages to the DUP in its ambiguity on the use of violence and association with loyalist paramilitaries. This ambiguity allows the DUP to present a different face to the different constituencies which it is trying to court. On the one hand it can reach out to those hard-liners in the unionist community who support a militant and perhaps violent defence of the Union and keeps the DUP in control of this extremist constituency and prevents the emergence of an even more extreme loyalist party. Simultaneously, the ambiguity over violence and paramilitarism allows the DUP to present a more “respectable” image to appeal to mainstream unionists and those who now vote for the more respectable UUP. The political parties of the loyalist paramilitaries have been notoriously unable to win significant electoral support, and the Vanguard Unionist Party suffered electorally from its association with paramilitaries (Bruce, 1986 p. see above [should be 1989? not cited above]).

The attempts of various parties and governments to incorporate republican and loyalist paramilitaries into the democratic process has been brought about by accommodating—to some extent—the power of the gun. “Absolutists” decry any dealings with paramilitaries for undermining elected representatives and thereby compromis-
ing democratic principles. These “absolutists” include politicians who themselves have had links with paramilitaries. Probably most politicians would accept to some extent the “realist” position that compromise is legitimate based on the grounds that “the ends justify the means”. Politics is a dirty business and deception and manipulation are justified on the grounds that they hold out the promise of peace and a lasting settlement (Dixon, 2002). The problem is in trying to distinguish shades of grey. At what point does compromise with paramilitary organisations invalidate the objective of creating a democratic society? Are politicians seeking to exacerbate or contain paramilitary violence? Is there a moral equivalence between Sinn Féin, which has a private army, and has engaged in violent rhetoric, and the DUP which has consorted with paramilitaries and engaged in violent rhetoric?

CONCLUSION

The strategic objective of unionists is to preserve the Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Until 1972 unionists wielded the power of the Northern Ireland state to secure this objective. Since the 1960s some unionists have also used unconstitutional tactics to defend their place in the Union. The shift from constitutional to unconstitutional methods has in part reflected a perception among unionists that the British government and its guarantees could not be trusted, and constitutional methods were failing to secure the Union. This was most starkly apparent during the period 1970-76 when there was evidence of sympathy among the British political elite for Irish unity, suggesting no overriding British interest, beyond stability, in preserving the Union. If the British had been intent on edging Northern Ireland out of the Union during this period then the “loyalist/Protestant backlash” of 1971-76—while morally repugnant—might well have succeeded in preventing the British from withdrawing. The British believed that withdrawal was likely to lead to civil war, destabilising the island of Ireland and perhaps also Britain. By demonstrating the power of unionism, the backlash set the parameters to British policy.

In retrospect, the Union was not as threatened by the Anglo-Irish agreement as it was by British policy during the early to mid-1970s. However, the strength of the unionist reaction to the agreement was a reminder of continuing opposition to Irish unity and a warning to British policy-makers not to push unionists “too far”—for example, extending the AIA into Joint Authority—or else risk civil war. While unionist politicians shifted to more militant “unconstitutional” tactics to defend the Union there were limits to how far they could contain their supporters. The danger of this was that if violence got out of control, which it threatened to do, this could further damage the unionist cause in Britain. Widespread violence might also see further polarisation in Northern Ireland, with the result that power shifts from the hands of the elected politicians and towards the paramilitaries. Unionist politicians had to walk a fine line in the grey area between constitutional and unconstitutional tactics. A shift by unionists towards more militant tactics did not come without risk to the overall strategic objective, defence of the Union. But if unionists could no longer accept the Union on British terms then some contemplated independence.
The political career of David Trimble has illustrated the dilemmas facing unionists. As a member of Ulster Vanguard, Trimble was driven to despair by British policy and was prepared to flirt with paramilitarism. Following the Anglo-Irish agreement he expressed again the tactical dilemma that unionists faced in setting limits on British government policy. If constitutional methods failed, then more militant tactics were necessary to defend the Union. In 1998, Trimble signed the Good Friday agreement on behalf of the UUP. The agreement was endorsed by unionists in a referendum on the assumption that Sinn Féin would not enter government without some decommissioning. Trimble gambled that British policy, of which he has long been sceptical, would be sufficiently supportive to protect him and his more pro-active and positive tactics for defending the Union. It remains to be seen whether this trust is misplaced.

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