



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Fantasy Politics? Restructuring Unionism after the Good  
Friday Agreement

James W. McAuley

Éire-Ireland, Volume 39:1&2, Earrach/Samhradh / Spring/Summer  
2004, pp. 189-214 (Article)

Published by Irish-American Cultural Institute

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2004.0006>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/170167>

# Fantasy Politics? Restructuring Unionism after the Good Friday Agreement

The current arrangements are not a settlement, but a process of concessions—concessions that have turned conventional wisdom on its head. Government policy has been to reward those who do wrong whilst punishing those who want to be democratic. What kind of peace process is that? Democracy must not be held to ransom by gunmen.<sup>1</sup>

Peter Robinson, Deputy Leader of the Democratic Unionist Party

While most Protestants welcomed the improved atmosphere arising from the peace process and the cease-fires, they remained suspicious of the motives of those involved, including the Labour government, Dublin, the SDLP and, particularly, Sinn Féin. Although they stood to gain from the restoration of devolved government and nationalist endorsement of the principle of consent, they had lost, at least psychologically, by having to include Sinn Féin in the new administration. They were fearful for the long-term future of the British link, with devolved structures evolving in Scotland and Wales and with nationalists given equal representation with unionists in the 10-member executive.<sup>2</sup>

Barry White, *Belfast Telegraph*

1. Peter Robinson, “Why Unionists are Waking Up,” *Right Now!* (March/April 2003), 8–9.

2. Barry White, “The Peace Process: A Question of Definition,” in Dominic Murray, ed., *Protestant Perceptions of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland* (University of Limerick: Centre for Peace and Development Studies, 2000).

## INTRODUCTION

Politics in Northern Ireland is again in no small state of upheaval and confusion. The strength of political division was reflected directly in the November 2003 Assembly election, when the Democratic Unionist Party (hereafter DUP) and Sinn Féin emerged as the two largest political parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, the election accelerated the erosion of the already tenuous center ground, with the Women's Coalition losing both of its representatives and the Alliance Party reduced to six seats. Among nationalist parties, Sinn Féin's 23.5 percent of the vote far outpaced the Social Democratic and Labour Party (hereafter SDLP), which received only 17 percent of the poll.

The changes in the electoral map were even more dramatic within unionist politics, where the DUP claimed victory over the Ulster Unionist Party (hereafter UUP), a result that certainly reinforced its claim to be the true voice of Ulster unionism. As the strongest opponents of any political settlement, the DUP demonstrated the ability to mobilize large sections of the unionist community behind its position.<sup>4</sup> Overall, the election results again highlighted increasing levels of unionist disillusionment with the arrangements outlined in what is known as the Belfast Agreement, or more commonly, the Good Friday Agreement,<sup>5</sup> and the workings of the Northern Ireland Assembly.<sup>6</sup>

The prelude to the election demonstrated the fragility of the political accord. The British government suspended the Northern Ireland Assembly in October 2002. Direct rule from Westminster was again imposed, widely perceived as the only short-term solution to increas-

3. Overall the DUP won thirty seats; the UUP twenty-seven; Sinn Féin twenty-four; the SDLP eighteen; and the Alliance Party six. The PUP and the UKUP each won one seat, and one Independent was elected, totalling 108 seats.

4. See "Ulster Turmoil as Paisley Roars Back," *The Independent*, 29 November 2003; "Hardline Victors Reject Accord: Power-Sharing Hopes Fade with Paisley's Success," *The Guardian*, 29 Nov. 2003.

5. Like much else in Northern Ireland, terminology can reflect the sectarian divide. Most unionists call it the Belfast Agreement, while most nationalists refer to it as the Good Friday Agreement. Here I use the latter term simply as the one in most common usage.

6. See Brendan O'Leary, "The Nature of the British-Irish Agreement," *New Left Review* 233 (1999), 66-96.

ingly tense political discord in Northern Ireland. This, the fourth suspension of devolved government in Northern Ireland since February 2000, occurred after it became clear that the working relationships upon which the power-sharing government rested could no longer be sustained.<sup>7</sup>

Political tensions predictably centered on unionist opposition to Sinn Féin's participation in government. Much of this was triggered by a series of controversies involving Sinn Féin that included the arrest of three IRA members in Colombia accused of training FARC rebels,<sup>8</sup> and a Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) raid on Sinn Féin's Stormont offices on suspicions that an IRA "spy ring" was operating within the Assembly. The two DUP Assembly ministers, Peter Robinson and Nigel Dodds, reacted by resigning from their posts, refusing to share power with Sinn Féin. Moreover, the Assembly's First Minister, David Trimble, threatened to withdraw UUP ministers if Sinn Féin were not immediately excluded.

While Sinn Féin members angrily denounced the foray as a politically motivated stunt, many unionists emphasized republicans' seeming refusal to fulfill the terms of the agreement, particularly the section that stated that objectives should be pursued solely by peaceful, democratic means. This controversy had an immediate and negative impact on political behavior, as there had been some evidence that suggested the beginnings of the development of reasonable working relationships across republican and loyalist parties in the Assembly.<sup>9</sup> Political reaction to the controversies surrounding the allegations against Sinn Féin stopped this process short and made the continuance of the Assembly untenable.

7. The Northern Ireland Assembly was first suspended by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland from February to May 2000 due to a perceived lack of progress on arms decommissioning. It was then suspended twice for 24 hours in 2001 as a technical device to ensure the re-election of David Trimble as First Minister. Despite new elections in November 2003, direct rule remained in place at the time of this writing.

8. The group's name translates as the "Marxist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia." See Sandra Jordan, Henry McDonald, and Ed Vulliamy, "Sinn Féin's big blunder," *The Observer*, 28 April 2002; "Possible IRA and FARC links undermine Sinn Féin," <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1496153.stm> [downloaded 17 Aug. 2001].

9. The extent of cooperation between Sinn Féin and the PUP within the Assembly was recorded in James W. McAuley and Jon Tonge, "The Role of 'Extra-Constitutional' Parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly," Final Report to the ERSC, Award L327253058, 2001.

Of course, these controversies had an even wider impact, disrupting the intricate choreography involving the British and Irish governments, Sinn Féin, and the UUP.<sup>10</sup> The latest of these “set pieces” involved further IRA weapons decommissioning. The intricacy of this process can be seen by looking closely at the events of 21 October 2003. The day began with Tony Blair announcing new elections to the Assembly. Blair’s announcement was followed by keynote speeches by Gerry Adams of Sinn Féin and General John de Chastelain, the head of the decommissioning body, both hinting that things were moving forward. Any hopes that real progress would be made were soon dashed, however, when it became clear that the statements had failed to convince the UUP leadership that republicans had moved significantly on the arms issue. David Trimble then announced that he was putting “the deal on hold,” citing the lack of transparency around the acts of decommissioning and the failure of the republican movement to hold to the agreements it had made. Looking on from the sidelines, the DUP claimed vindication for its position of no public contact with Sinn Féin. As one commentator put it, “the day which was supposed to herald a breakthrough . . . instead ended in a messy breakdown.”<sup>11</sup>

Such episodes reflect the enigmatic ways that unionists have reacted to recent political events in Northern Ireland. In broad terms this essay will critically analyze unionist and loyalist responses to the contemporary peace process. Fundamental to this is an understanding of the ways that unionists have sought to interpret contemporary events and to assert their sense of social identity and history in the peace process. Moreover, it is clear that this response has involved an attempt to restructure unionist politics in the post-Good Friday Agreement era. This realignment has largely taken place around the counter-hegemonic politics of the past, presently best represented by the DUP. Throughout this article I will therefore endeavor to outline the range of understandings and values that unionists use to weave their world-views and construct their interpretations of day-to-day events. These beliefs include notions about the nature of political and social life, the

10. Paul Dixon, “The Northern Ireland Peace Process: Political Skills or Lying and Manipulation,” paper presented at the 51st Political Studies Association Conference, Manchester, UK, 10–12 April 2001.

11. David McKittrick, “Peace Hopes are Shattered by One Downbeat Speech,” *The Independent*, 22 Oct. 2003.

role of the state, and the central values of the political system in Northern Ireland.

## UNIONISM AND THE PEACE PROCESS

The foundations of the formal peace process in Northern Ireland rest in a round of 1992 talks that involved the British and Irish governments and the main Northern Irish political parties. This paved the way for public declarations made by both governments promising to be magnanimous in the event of a cease-fire. The leading paramilitary organizations did indeed call cease-fires in 1994 (initially by the IRA and slightly later by loyalist paramilitaries). Underpinning all of this was widespread support by critical players in the international community, most notably the Clinton administration in the United States.<sup>12</sup> Subsequent events have been traced in great detail elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Briefly, the process precipitated an inclusive agreement in February 1995, which contained a series of initiatives designed to refashion the triangular relationship between London, Dublin, and Belfast and British proposals for the creation of new devolved institutions in Northern Ireland.

Following protracted political negotiations lasting some twenty-two months, the process produced a multiparty peace agreement in April 1998. The Belfast, or Good Friday, Agreement granted legislative and executive powers to Northern Ireland in more than ten areas of government. The arrangements were overwhelmingly approved by referendum in both the Republic and Northern Ireland on 22 May 1998. Subsequent elections were called to choose the 108 members of the new Northern Ireland Assembly. Most importantly, the agreement was seen as the mechanism to begin to mollify the ethnically constructed

12. See, for example, Paul Arthur, *Special Relationships: Britain, Ireland and the Northern Ireland Problem* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2000); Andrew J. Wilson, "The Billy Boys Meet Slick Willy: The Ulster Unionist Party and the American Dimension to the Northern Ireland Peace Process," *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 11 (2000), 121–36.

13. For useful reviews, see Thomas Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process: Ending the Troubles?* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 2000); Jeremy Smith, *Making the Peace in Ireland* (London: Longman, 2002); Joe Ruane and Jennifer Todd, eds., *After the Good Friday Agreement* (Dublin: University College, Dublin Press, 1999); Marianne Elliott, ed., *The Long Road to Peace in Northern Ireland* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002).

political blocs of Protestant loyalism/unionism and Irish nationalism/republicanism. Since then, however, these political formations have, if anything, been reinforced, a trend highlighted by the 2003 Assembly election results. Indeed, all of the political parties have spent a great deal of effort convincing intra-bloc groupings that they can best secure the deal for unionism over nationalism or vice versa.

Consequently, the Northern Ireland peace process has been characterized by a whole series of crises, with both the elected Assembly and the wider peace process repeatedly teetering on the verge of outright collapse. Much of this is tied to the very nature of the peace process, which at its heart has always been based on a series of interlocking political ambiguities. On the one hand, Irish republicans believe they have a position in the power-sharing executive and in the Assembly as a matter of right, exercising representative political power based on the mandate of those who voted for Sinn Féin. On the other hand, many unionists believe republicans are only in the position they are because they promised to make a transition from a past in which political violence was central to the movement, toward a future in which they would use only constitutional and democratic means to obtain their objectives. For many unionists the slowness of paramilitary decommissioning thus represents a core failure of the agreement.

According to this view, post-Good Friday Agreement politics can be characterized as a “one-way street” of concessions to republicans, a notion that reinforces the idea that the peace process is failing. As Jeffrey Donaldson has written, “There are times when I hesitate to use the words ‘peace process,’ because I am not convinced that the end of the process will be peace. There are times when I think the word ‘appeasement’ is more apt.”<sup>14</sup> In short, like Donaldson, many unionists feel that the contemporary phase of the peace process has weakened rather than safeguarded the union.<sup>15</sup>

14. Jeffrey Donaldson, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process: Blurring the Lines Between Democracy and Terrorism* (London: Friends of the Union, 2000).

15. See Norman Boyd, “Belfast Agreement’s Collapse Inevitable,” Northern Ireland Unionist Party Press Release (Belfast, 11 April 2003); Democratic Unionist Party, “Peter Robinson’s Speech to United Unionist Rally,” DUP Press Release (Belfast, 27 Oct. 1997); “The Real Drumcree Issue,” DUP Press Release (Belfast, 1 July 1998); DUP, “The Tragedy of a False Peace,” <http://www.dup.org.uk> [downloaded 14 Jan. 1999]; *Towards a New Agreement: A Critical Assessment of the Belfast Agreement Five Years*

## UNIONISM AND THE AGREEMENT

Over the past five years unionists have articulated a wide variety of political responses to the Good Friday Agreement.<sup>16</sup> The current skepticism was not the immediate response of the majority of unionists. Rather, the initial mood in both nationalist and unionist communities was one of euphoria, many expressing feelings that Northern Ireland had emerged out of the darkness to welcome a new period of peace and prosperity. This confidence is reflected in the following assessment of the unionist position, made by David Trimble in 1998:

The people of Northern Ireland are not fools. They can see that we have achieved all that we wanted in the constitutional arena. They will not listen to those voices who cry out “treachery” and accuse us of selling the Union . . .

What mattered most to the UUP negotiators above all else, was that the Talks process be used as a vehicle to strengthen the Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. For the first time since 1972, the people of Northern Ireland are to have the democratic deficit removed. For the first time in 26 years it will be for the people of Ulster to determine their future. No longer will we be at the whim of Secretaries of State who neither care nor understand our Province. . . .

We have sought and secured a permanent settlement not a temporary transitional arrangement. More than that we have copper-fastened partition. The Union is secure.<sup>17</sup>

*On* (Belfast, 2003); Robert McCartney, *Reflections on Liberty, Democracy and the Union* (Dublin: Maunsel and Company, 2001); “Gerry Pandering?” *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 Oct. 2001; “The ghost train of progress hurtles down twin tracks that aren’t there,” *News-Letter*, 30 Nov. 2002.

16. For a broad range of views, see Ruane and Todd, *After the Good Friday Agreement*; Rick Wilford, ed., *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); John Coakley, ed., *Changing Shades of Orange and Green: Redefining the Union and the Nation in Contemporary Ireland* (Dublin: University College, Dublin Press, 2002).

17. David Trimble, “An Immediate Assessment: Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue, 17 April 1998.” Reproduced in *To Raise up a New Northern Ireland: Articles and Speeches, 1998–2000* (Belfast: The Belfast Press, 2001).



In the ebullient atmosphere following the referendum result, however, the fact that a significant minority of Northern Ireland Protestants had voted against the agreement passed almost without comment. Despite the fact that the new arrangements replaced the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, so much despised by unionists, there was still strong opposition to the accord from key sections of unionism.

Initially, the “anti-agreement” camp, particularly the faction led by Ian Paisley and the DUP, was politically marginalized and portrayed in the media as a group that merely represented the politics of the past. Three years later, this position had changed dramatically. By this point unionist voices of opposition to the agreement had grown louder.<sup>18</sup>

The growth and extent of unionist disillusionment was seen in the results of the June 2001 elections. Both the Westminster and local council results revealed increased support for unionist politicians against the new political arrangements. This was most obvious in the general election, where the pro-agreement UUP lost four of its ten seats, and the anti-agreement DUP gained three seats.<sup>19</sup> Of course, opposition to the accord haltered various expressions of unionist discontent, many of which were tied to deeper and more long-term processes.

The direction of political events in Northern Ireland has produced increasing dissatisfaction from within core sections of unionism. Unionists have suggested that it was a “pan-nationalist front” that was providing the real momentum behind the “peace process.” Moreover, the British government was seen as willing to “sell out” to this nationalist and republican agenda. There was a prevailing suspicion that the “real” process was founded on a surreptitious “deal” involving the British and Irish governments and the republican movement. One leading scholar of contemporary unionism has suggested that in broad terms many unionists now feel that they are giving everything and get-

18. For a useful outline of Protestant and unionist responses, see Murray, *Protestant Perceptions of the Peace Process*.

19. The local council results mirrored the results of the general election. These trends have of course only accelerated since 2001. The 2003 election saw the DUP increase its share of the vote from 13.6 percent (1997) to 22.5 percent, while the UUP share of the vote declined from 32.7 percent to 26.8 percent.

ting nothing in return.<sup>20</sup> At the very least this contemporary phase of the peace process has presented direct challenges to core concepts of unionist culture and identity. Moreover, the DUP's success reflects a broad belief that the very existence of Northern Ireland and its union with Britain may be in question.

In short, recent political developments can be fully understood only in the context of an increasing sense of trepidation among growing sections of the unionist communities of Northern Ireland. The contours of these sentiments are outlined below. This has been manifested most overtly in political divisions between those unionists who support and those who oppose the agreement. Such divisions are, however, reflections of much longer-standing ideological and social divisions within unionism.

#### **"NEW" LOYALISM AND THE AGREEMENT**

Not all unionists directly opposed the agreement. Indeed, one of the most important developments in contemporary politics in Northern Ireland has been the emergence of new unionist political groupings that have openly challenged many of its established values and structures. Loyalist paramilitaries have provided much of the core direction of this attempted political realignment. Two loyalist parties have emerged in recent years: the Progressive Unionist Party (hereafter PUP), linked to the Ulster Volunteer Force (hereafter UVF), and the Ulster Democratic Party (hereafter UDP), representing the Ulster Defence Association (hereafter UDA).

Both the UDP and the PUP took seats in the Forum following the elections of 1996. When the first elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly eventually took place, however, the UDP failed to have any representatives elected, whereas the PUP secured two seats. The UDP has since disbanded, fracturing over irreconcilable disagreements within the broader leadership of the UDA.<sup>21</sup>

The PUP, however, has continued to function and presents itself as a working-class, at times even socialist, alternative to the established unionist parties. The politicization of key sections of working-class loy-

20. Murray, 3–4.

21. See *Irish News*, 29 Nov. 2001.

alism has resulted in a degree of self-criticism and political reflection rarely seen in unionist politics. In the early stages of the peace process, the PUP facilitated the opening up of discussion and debate within many loyalist communities, particularly those traditionally excluded from the domain of politics.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the PUP has consistently argued that, unlike traditional unionists, its members are seeking to move away from “tribalism” and “sectarian politics” in order to redefine unionist politics. Importantly, the PUP was able to convince its immediate constituency of working-class Protestants that the peace process had secured the union for the foreseeable future and would bring widespread benefits to Northern Ireland.<sup>23</sup> The party’s growth also sparked the partial renegotiation of the ideological boundaries within which many unionists sought to express their identity and frame an understanding of loyalism.<sup>24</sup>

Support for the PUP has, however, remained largely confined to identifiable working-class areas in Belfast and its immediate environs. Any hope that the party may have had for expanding its electorate floundered with the paramilitary feuds between the UDA and the UVF during the summer of 2000. Within wider unionism (and beyond) these events firmly repositioned the PUP within the confines of its paramilitary past.

Beyond this, the PUP has had difficulty in continuing to convince its core constituencies that the peace process has delivered any tangible benefits. Party members have found themselves defending an agreement that was not delivering anything to the working-class unionist areas where the PUP’s electoral base rests.<sup>25</sup> By continuing to support

22. See James W. McAuley, “(Re)constructing Ulster Loyalism: Political Responses to the Peace Process,” *Irish Journal of Sociology* 6 (1996), 165–82; “Flying the One-Winged Bird: Ulster Unionism and the Peace Process,” in P. Shirlow and M. McGovern, eds., *Who are the People?: Unionism, Protestantism and Loyalism in Northern Ireland* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 158–75; “The Ulster Loyalist Political Parties: Towards a New Respectability,” *Etudes Irlandaises* 22:2 (1997), 117–32.

23. See Progressive Unionist Party, *Manifesto for the Forum Election* (Belfast, 1996); “Dealing with Reality” (Belfast, 1996); “PUP Election Material,” <http://www.pup-ni.org.uk/> [downloaded 21 Nov. 1998]; “The Hard Bitter Experience,” <http://www.pup-ni.org.uk/> [downloaded 14 Nov. 1999].

24. See Shankill Think Tank, *A New Beginning* (Newtownabbey: Island Publications, 1995); *At the Crossroads?* (Newtownabbey: Island Publications, 1998).

25. Peter Hadden, *Northern Ireland: Towards Division not Peace* (Belfast: Socialist Party, 2000).

the peace process, the PUP has appeared to be defending David Trimble and the UUP, particularly against the rising DUP challenge. This has not helped the party to gain votes in a unionist community increasingly disillusioned with the workings of the Good Friday Agreement.

The other major site of unionist political support for the agreement has of course been the UUP. In many ways, recent politics in Northern Ireland has been driven by the UUP's emphatic engagement with the peace process. This support, however, is not uncontested within the party. Considerable divisions remain within the UUP surrounding the party's continued support for the agreement. Such debates are likely to intensify following the November 2003 election. Not surprisingly, opponents have focused their attack on the UUP leadership's willingness to work with Sinn Féin and the republican movement.

Within the UUP those most strongly opposed to the party's pro-agreement stance have coalesced around Jeffrey Donaldson. Indeed, David Trimble has now survived at least eleven leadership challenges in his tussle with Donaldson and his supporters. Along with two other unionist MPs, Donaldson has refused to take the Unionist Party whip in the Westminster parliament.

Donaldson's criticism of the political direction taken by the UUP has consistently undermined David Trimble's position as party leader. More specifically, political differences within the UUP have resulted in a series of overt confrontations at meetings of the party's executive body, the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC).<sup>26</sup> In April 1998 some 72 percent of the UUC endorsed support for the Good Friday Agreement. Since then, the support base for the accord within the UUP has steadily diminished. On a range of important votes, including a decision to continue power-sharing with Sinn Féin before decommissioning and a leadership challenge by Martin Smyth, MP for South Belfast, Trimble's support within the UUC has fallen to from 53 to 58 percent.

At the core of Trimble's leadership has been the promotion of the agreement as a way of bringing unionism back to "the heart of government."<sup>27</sup> Underpinning this has been the argument that the UUP

26. Created in 1905, this is a formal grouping within the party that has sought to act as a key intermediary between the parliamentary group and the wider unionist electorate, local unionist associations, and the Loyal Orange Order.

27. Trimble, *To Raise up a New Northern Ireland*.

could secure devolution and bring about complete decommissioning and perhaps even the eventual disbanding of the IRA. Always hesitant to accept this view, Jeffrey Donaldson and his allies have become increasingly dismissive of Trimble's belief that the Good Friday Agreement brings benefits to unionists and secures the union. On 5 January 2004, this culminated in Donaldson's defection to the DUP (with two other newly elected UUP MLAs), a decision based on his belief that the DUP now comprised the true representatives of "mainstream unionism."<sup>28</sup>

### UNIONISM AFTER THE AGREEMENT

Given the strength of this reassertion of traditional unionist values, there are important questions to be asked regarding the extent to which unionism has altered its form in the contemporary period.<sup>29</sup> At the core of unionist political realignments is the perception that neither the British government nor Sinn Féin is meeting the terms of the agreement. Overall, there is a broad crisis of identity within contemporary unionism underpinned by an overriding sense of insecurity created by the peace process, the changing nature of relationships with both the British and Irish governments, and the political outcomes of the agreement. In this crisis environment the politics and rhetoric of traditional unionism have re-emerged as the most potent force in unionist politics. Part of the response (and the politically successful one) has been a re-emphasis by the DUP of what are seen as the core values and politics of so called "traditional unionism."

#### *Unionist Politics "On the Streets"*

The day-to-day life experiences of many unionists shape the nature of their response to the agreement. At everyday community levels many

28. See "Donaldson announces DUP move," BBC News, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/3368223.stm](http://www.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/northern_ireland/3368223.stm) [downloaded 5 Jan. 2004] and Angelique Chrisafis, "Paisley top dog at last as defectors shift the balance," *The Guardian*, 6 Jan. 2004.

29. For different perspectives on this, see Andrew Finlayson, "Loyalist Political Identity After the Peace," *Capital and Class* 69 (1999), 47–75; Johnston Price, "Political Change and the Protestant Working Class," *Race and Class* 31:1 (1995), 57–69; and James W. McAuley, "Mobilising Ulster Unionism: New Directions or Old?" *Capital and Class* 70 (2000), 37–64.

social relationships have remained as divided as they were before the cease-fires.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, many commentators have emphasized the persistence, and in some cases acceleration, of sectarian tensions between loyalists and republicans, resulting in a sectarian divide that is at least as deep, if not deeper, than it was when the peace process began.

Brendan Murtagh has provided convincing evidence of segregation's negative political, social, and economic impact on those living in the most differentiated areas of Northern Ireland.<sup>31</sup> This notion is reinforced by the research of Peter Shirlow, who argues that Belfast has become more segregated since the peace process began. His findings indicate that social segregation and sectarianism are particularly prevalent among younger people. Prejudice is so marked among eighteen to twenty-five year olds that a large majority of Shirlow's sample group (68 percent) had never had a meaningful conversation with anyone from the other community. Despite five years of relative peace and the continual decline in the level of violence, Shirlow concludes that social relations between Catholic and Protestant communities have not significantly improved.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the hopes of more stable relations offered by the Good Friday Agreement, entrenched social divisions continue to be exhibited at many different levels of Northern Irish society.<sup>33</sup> For many, particularly those living in working-class areas, incidents of sectarian violence continue to dominate much of their day-to-day experience. There are many examples of such clashes. Throughout the summer of 2002 there was extensive intercommunal violence around the Protes-

30. See John Darby and Roger MacGinty, *The Management of the Peace Process* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000).

31. Brendan Murtagh, *The Politics of Territory: Policy and Segregation in Northern Ireland* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002).

32. This was based on a survey of 4,800 households in 12 neighboring estates on interface areas of Belfast. See Peter Shirlow, "Segregation in Belfast since the peace process," paper presented to the Royal Geographical Society Conference, Belfast, 5 Jan. 2002; "Fear, Mobility and Living in the Ardoyne and Upper Ardoyne Communities," Mapping the Spaces of Fear Research Team, University of Ulster, <http://www.cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/community/survey.htm> [downloaded 10 June 2002]; "Who Fears to Speak: Fear, Mobility, and Ethno-sectarianism in the Two 'Ardoyne's,'" *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 3:1 (Sep. 2003), 76-91.

33. Robin Wilson and Rick Wilford, *Northern Ireland: A Route to Stability?* (ESRC: Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme, n.d.).

tant/Catholic interface area of East Belfast.<sup>34</sup> These clashes mirrored other recent violent exchanges, particularly those involving interfaces in North Belfast and the controversy over the route taken by Catholic children walking to the Holy Cross Primary School in the Ardoyne area of Belfast.

Such conflicts reveal the sense of “defensiveness” within current constructions of unionism. The strength of this construct can be seen more fully if we consider unionist interpretations of other recent political events in Northern Ireland. Another clear example can be found in the series of bitter and sometimes violent disputes that have surrounded the Orange Order’s parade at Drumcree since the mid-1990s. For many unionists Drumcree has become a symbolic stand against a peace process that involves appeasing republicans and gives them nothing in return.

In 1995, Orange processionists found their way blocked when they left Drumcree parish church and turned toward the predominantly nationalist Garvaghy Road area. Local residents staged a sit-down protest along the contested route, and the Royal Ulster Constabulary held the marchers back. Orange members responded by saying they would stay until they were allowed to walk their traditional route, even if it took “hours, days, or weeks or months.” After several days a deal was eventually mediated and the march went ahead.

The confrontation set the parameters for subsequent events. The following year saw the RUC announce its intention to re-route the parade. Outraged by this affront to “tradition,” the Orange Order mobilized to meet the RUC lines at Drumcree. In the days that followed, levels of loyalist violence increased as sympathizers blocked roads across Northern Ireland. In response, the RUC shifted official policy to force the march through the nationalist housing estate. The situation was repeated in the following July.

In July 1998, the Parades Commission re-routed the parade and again a stand-off took place. This time the situation was only resolved following the tragic killing of three young Catholic children in a petrol-bomb attack on their home. In the aftermath of this tragedy many of the Drumcree protesters returned home, although small-scale loyalist

34. On the worst night of violence, three people were shot following four successive nights of rioting. See *News-Letter*, 4 June 2002; *Irish News*, 4 June 2002.

protests continued. By the time of the 1999 march, and following the Orange Order's and the Garvaghy Road Residents' Association's mutual refusal to negotiate, the parade was re-routed and the security forces again erected barriers to bar the route. At the 2000 demonstrations the resulting conflict was all too familiar to the world media.<sup>35</sup>

The parade has remained highly controversial ever since, although with a somewhat lower profile. The dispute remains unresolved, however, as can be seen in this editorial from the December 2003 edition of *The Orange Standard*:

. . . just because the protest over the denial of civil rights has become more low-profile does not mean that Orangemen have accepted that they should be denied their right to complete the traditional parade back to the town centre.<sup>36</sup>

Why, then, has an Orange march that was for a number of decades fairly inconspicuous, unleashed such overt fury and discord? To answer this we need to consider the symbolic construction of community in Northern Ireland. For many nationalists the march directly represents the imposition of a culture of unionist domination and the flaunting of the symbols of Protestant supremacy.<sup>37</sup> From an increasingly threatened unionist perspective, however, this parade represents a loyalist subject's right to march "the queen's highway."<sup>38</sup>

Orange processions are of special importance because they remain one of the very few public occasions whereby "ordinary" unionists can

35. For a detailed outline of events at Drumcree from competing perspectives, see Garvaghy Residents, *Garvaghy: A Community Under Siege* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 1999); Chris Ryder and Vincent Kearney, *Drumcree: The Orange Order's Last Stand* (London: Methuen, 2001).

36. "Marching into 2004 with Confidence," *The Orange Standard*, Dec. 2003/ Jan. 2004.

37. See Garvaghy Residents, *Garvaghy*.

38. In this context the deep historical symbolism of Drumcree for unionists is crucial. Portadown was the scene of a formative massacre of Protestants during the 1641 uprising. In 1795, the Orange Order was formed a few miles west of the town. The Portadown Orange lodges were the first to form into a district, and the first recorded parade to the church at Drumcree occurred in 1807. Portadown has thus been termed "the Orange Citadel" by unionists and it continues to occupy a central place in Unionist mythology and commemoration as a key line of defense against the enemies of Ulster.



experience a sense of political involvement and power.<sup>39</sup> This reinforces, and is reinforced by, the increasing perception that contemporary events represent a challenge to Northern Ireland's very existence, against which "ordinary" unionists must make a stand. As the Orange Order's official newspaper put it, Ulster's very existence is under greater threat than at any time since the Home Rule crisis of 1912–14.<sup>40</sup>

Unionist reactions to Drumcree must be seen in a much broader context than as a simple knee-jerk reaction to republican opposition. Rather, this is merely one indication of wider responses that have been increasingly dominated by notions of betrayal and the deterioration of unionist culture. This theme is exemplified by the following parliamentary question, asked by Jeffrey Donaldson in December 2001 of John Reid, then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland:

(You) will be aware of the offence caused to many in the community in Northern Ireland by the decision to haul down the Union flag from police stations, the decision to remove the royal title and the crown insignia from the Royal Ulster Constabulary—the only constabulary in the United Kingdom that will not have the crown in its badge—and the proposal to remove the royal coat of arms from our courtrooms. The Secretary of State recently said that there was a danger that Northern Ireland would become a "cold house for Unionists." What does he propose to do about that?<sup>41</sup>

This resonates with widespread unionist concerns over a wide range of contemporary contentious issues. The re-routing of Orange parades is just one example of these concerns. For unionists there are many others, such as the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, the nature of policing, the election of Sinn Féin ministers in the Assembly, and so on.

39. See Neil Jarman, *Material Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Berg, 1997); Neil Jarman and Dominic Bryan, *Parades and Protest: A Discussion of Parading Disputes in Northern Ireland* (Coleraine: Centre for the Study of Conflict, University of Ulster, 1996).

40. *The Orange Standard*, September 1998.

41. "Oral Answers to Questions to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland," *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* (5 Dec. 2001), 315–16.

As a result, there are strong indications of increasing levels of unionist disengagement from the political process. This reflects a burgeoning lack of confidence in the idea that the peace process can fulfill the assurances granted at the time of signing the Good Friday Agreement. The power of unionist reaction can partly be explained by two beliefs: an increased sense of the British government's betrayal of the cause; and a consistent belief in republicans' breach of faith.

What is also apparent from recent findings is a widening gulf between unionists and nationalists surrounding contemporary political issues in Northern Ireland. That Catholic/nationalists and Protestant/unionists have different worldviews and aspirations is hardly a revelatory statement. What is important, however, is the continued gulf in opinions between Protestants and Catholics on how to secure a lasting peace and make political progress in Northern Ireland. This was readily displayed in a 1998 survey that indicated that for a large majority of Protestants (70 percent) questioned, the most important step toward a lasting peace was to disband paramilitary groups. For Catholics, however, the leading priority (78 percent) was the creation of a Bill of Rights that guaranteed equality for all citizens. Complete and full reform of the RUC was the second most popular choice for Catholics, with 70 percent declaring it essential. Only 7 percent of the Protestant respondents thought that this was fundamental, placing it as their sixteenth most important priority. British withdrawal was predictably the least popular choice for Protestants, with only 1 percent believing it essential. Catholics ranked this as their ninth choice overall, with 46 percent deeming it crucial.<sup>42</sup>

Growing unionist disillusionment with the political outcomes of the Good Friday Agreement was again revealed in 2003 in a Queen's University/Rowntree Trust poll, which indicated that active Protestant support for the agreement had hit record lows, with just over one-third saying they would vote "yes" in a new referendum. While a majority of Protestants (some 60 percent) claimed that they would still be happy to see the agreement work, that figure had also fallen to its lowest level since the 1998 referendum.<sup>43</sup>

42. This survey, conducted by Colin Irwin of the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen's University, Belfast, was published in the *Belfast Telegraph*, 10 Jan. 1998.

43. See Chris Thornton, "Ulster Poll Shock Rocks Agreement: Voters are Disillusioned," *Belfast Telegraph*, 19 Feb. 2003.

For most Protestants, there is little doubt about who is to blame for the political breakdown; 73 percent directly blame republicans for the failure of the agreement. Unionists frustrated at the changes wrought by the accord point to a wide variety of republican activities. These include the election of two Sinn Féin ministers to the power-sharing executive; the release of IRA prisoners; the transformation of the Royal Ulster Constabulary into the new Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI);<sup>44</sup> allegations of a republican-led break-in at Castlereagh Police Centre; IRA gun-running in Florida; continuing street violence at sectarian-interface areas in Belfast; and, most importantly, the IRA's failure to fully and openly decommission its weapons.

This lack of trust in the political process is now deeply established across unionism and is often used as the reason to promote oppositional politics. This is evident in a November 2002 survey conducted by a community-based newspaper, *The Shankill Mirror*. Within this key loyalist constituency, results demonstrated that fewer than 10 percent of its sample supported the Good Friday Agreement, and 88 percent believed that they could not trust the British government to look after the interests of the unionist people in Northern Ireland.<sup>45</sup>

Many unionists' views of the peace process are increasingly shaped by the notion that the republican movement is "getting away" with too many violations of agreed processes. As a result, there is a widespread belief throughout sections of the Protestant community that unionist politicians are being constantly out-thought and outmaneuvered by the guile and tactics of their republican counterparts as part of a "pan-nationalist front."<sup>46</sup>

### *Unionist Political Cultures: Melting into Air?*

The nationalist threat cannot simply be understood on a narrow political level. Many unionists believe that the Good Friday Agreement represents a cultural attack, a direct and deliberate attempt to undermine

44. The Patten Report on the future of policing in Northern Ireland made 175 recommendations, including proposals to reduce the force's size from 11,400 to 7,500 while increasing Catholic representation from 8 to 30 percent within ten years.

45. See "We Don't Trust Tony Blair Says Shankill," *Shankill Mirror* 39 (Nov. 2002).

46. See Duncan Morrow, "Nothing to Fear but . . . ? Unionists and the Northern Ireland Peace Process," and White, "The Peace Process," in Murray, ed., *Protestant Perceptions of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland*.

their sense of Britishness. By promoting the agreement, the British government has in fact been asking unionists to sacrifice their British identity. This is something that Ian Paisley has described as “a long chain of events designed to drain away the Britishness of Ulster.”<sup>47</sup>

This sense of the demise of Britishness has found expression across unionism. Robert McCartney of the United Kingdom Unionist Party has long articulated this view. He has, for example, consistently promoted a view of the peace process as part of a broad conspiracy to dupe unionists and sabotage the union itself, in an attempt to create a functionally united Ireland.<sup>48</sup> For McCartney, the best that unionism can expect from the peace process is a stay of execution for the union as the British government seeks to disengage from Northern Ireland. McCartney further claims that the peace process is designed to persuade unionists to accept the inevitable greening of their cultural and political identity.<sup>49</sup> According to this view, the main dynamic of the settlement is a cultural one—an effort to shift Protestants from their traditional British allegiance to support of Irish nationalism. The weakening of unionist culture is thus seen as one of the key policies implemented by the enemies of true Ulster.<sup>50</sup> This perceived drive toward “Irishness” is seen everywhere by unionists fearful of the outcome of the political settlement.<sup>51</sup> Many unionists now regard the consequences of the contemporary phase of the peace process with some alarm, perceiving recent events as a direct challenge to their culture and identity and, at an extreme, to the very existence of Northern Ireland. As noted earlier, these fears also find articulation through the view that “unionist culture” is being relegated and downgraded by the peace process. In this view the British government, having set about removing unionist political rights, is now seeking to remove their cultural rights as well.

For anti-agreement unionists the current political settlement is seen as nothing more than the latest installment of a longer process involving a move toward a united Ireland. They believe that the peace

47. See “Address by Ian Paisley at the Centenary Demonstration of the Independent Orange Institution, Ballymoney,” 11 July 2001, <http://www.dup.org/> [downloaded 7 Aug. 2003]; *The Orange Standard*, 1 April 1999; *News-Letter*, 23 Feb. 1999.

48. See *The Irish Times*, 26 Jan. 1998.

49. *Ibid.*

50. See *The Orange Standard*, 2 April 1999.

51. See DUP, “The Tragedy of a False Peace.”

process has raised Irish nationalist expectations to unrealistic heights, which can only be met by a weakening of the unionist position. As McCartney argues, by increasing an awareness of Irish culture and tradition, the symbols of British identity "are being systematically eroded to meet the requirements of violent republicanism."<sup>52</sup>

Unionists traditionally have accepted a particular core version and understanding of history. This has been transmitted to, and understood by, generations of those growing up within unionist and loyalist communities. This political culture needs to be understood as the product of a specifically constructed history. These discourses legitimize unionism as a form of political identity and give unionism its political cohesion.<sup>53</sup> Direct references to formal politics and political parties are therefore only a part of unionist political culture. Representations of unionist culture are concentrated into a rich variety of symbols, icons, and slogans. The contemporary phase of the peace process has witnessed a vast output of populist-produced material in this area. Within loyalist communities this has included wall murals, paramilitary and community-based newspapers, posters, prose, songs, records, audiotapes, and CDs of loyalist music.<sup>54</sup>

This symbolic discourse is understood and broadly accepted by most unionists, across all social and economic groupings. Such socially constructed and informal loyalist traditions offer notions of authenticity and stability in what many unionists recognize as a dramatically changing world in which unionism is in an accelerated process of decline. This has become a key organizational point in restructuring loyalist identity, reinforced by the strength of collective memory, which interprets the understanding of past events and organizes them to address present concerns.<sup>55</sup>

These collective memories directly inform the contemporary political debate for unionists. Interpreting recent trends as a dilution of

52. *The Irish Times*, 8 Dec. 1997.

53. See material in Shirlow and McGovern, *Who are the People?*

54. See Jarman, *Material Conflicts*; Bill Rolston, "Music and Politics in Ireland: The Case of Loyalism," in J.P. Harrington and E.J. Mitchell, eds., *Politics and Performance in Contemporary Northern Ireland* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 29–56.

55. See Lucy Bryson and Clem McCartney, *Clashing Symbols* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1994); A.D. Buckley, ed., *Symbols in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1998).

their political position, many unionists have drawn directly on long-standing cultural discourses, seeking to return unionism to what they see as its doctrinal fundamentals. For many, although Northern Ireland's place within the union might remain guaranteed for the foreseeable future, it is, at best, a different, less "British" union.

The contemporary phase of the peace process has been seen as eroding core elements of unionist identity and key institutions of the Northern Irish state. As one grouping of Protestant church officials recently put it,

There is a sense for Unionists of "everything solid melting into air," which the Good Friday Agreement is accelerating. The Agreement created a fluidity and malleability about the Northern Ireland State; the whole framework of society is altering. Further, the State and its institutions are being remodelled and this is most evident in the reform of the RUC. Reform of the RUC also raises the issue in its most potent form: who will protect us now? The release of paramilitary prisoners has offended a community's sense of right and wrong. . . . A party with paramilitary links is allowed to enter government. Thus, it appears, the moral universe is turned upside down.<sup>56</sup>

In this environment one response has been to restate unionism in its most fundamental form, a trend directly reflected in the DUP's electoral success.

## UNIONISM BEYOND THE AGREEMENT

As a counter to the discourses of fear and betrayal within unionism, the DUP's resolution has found broad appeal among the many who feel alienated by a peace process that seems to undercut unionist political and cultural identities. While these feelings have manifested themselves across the unionist spectrum, sentiments of retreat have been particularly powerful within sections of the Protestant working class because of their heightened vulnerability to dynamic forces of rapid economic, political, cultural, and psychological change.<sup>57</sup>

56. Faith and Politics Group, *Transitions* (Belfast: Faith and Politics Group, 2001).

57. See Seamus Dunn and Valerie Morgan, *Protestant Alienation in Northern Ireland: A Preliminary Survey* (Coleraine: Centre for the Study of Conflict, University of Ulster, 1994); Morrow, "Nothing to fear but . . . ?," in Murray, ed., *Protestant Perceptions*, 11–42.

It is the DUP that has proved most capable of arousing and mobilizing people across several of the factions of the unionist political bloc and within other sections of non-aligned unionists. The strength of the DUP's appeal centers on its members' ability to frame the conflict in a way that re-emphasizes and reinforces the central fears of many unionists.<sup>58</sup> The DUP's perspective is legitimized by a potent historical narrative that includes the Sunningdale and Anglo-Irish Agreements, the Joint Declaration, the Framework Proposals, and the contemporary Good Friday Agreement.

This position was made crystal clear in the party's 2003 Assembly manifesto, which claimed that "we are closer to a united Ireland than we have ever been."<sup>59</sup> The manifesto also projected an image of the "immediate future," with terrorists running the police, a joint role in Northern Ireland's affairs for Dublin, and the Irish language and Gaelic culture given prominence. Within this vision British culture and identity are no longer in existence in many parts of the province, Sinn Féin ministers are in charge of policing and justice, and large areas of "our" towns and cities are abandoned to the will of terrorists.

Such a discourse transcends partisan allegiance in its appeal. In short, underlying fears of betrayal and a strong mistrust of government intentions serve to unify much of contemporary unionism. Such factors help to explain why an increasing number of unionists have become more and more alienated from the Good Friday Agreement.

The response of many unionists has been to reassert and fortify what they see as traditional unionist values. With its consistent anti-agreement discourse and excellent political organization, the DUP has been the prime beneficiary of this trend. It is this sense of disengagement from the consequences of the Good Friday Agreement that has been harnessed by the DUP. From the outset the DUP has claimed that the real intentions behind the peace process were clear; this was part of a grand plan to weaken, if not destroy, Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the United Kingdom.

For the DUP all those who have been willing to operate within the parameters of the agreement have been playing the "pan-nationalist

58. See DUP, "Tragedy of a False Peace"; *Towards a New Agreement: A Critical Assessment*.

59. DUP, *Fair Deal Manifesto* (Belfast: UDUP, 2003).

game.” By doing so, they are undermining the very existence of the Northern Irish state. Against this the DUP has sought to mobilize anti-agreement forces by taking strong and undiluted positions in defense of the union. For the DUP and increasing numbers of its unionist supporters, the British government clearly can no longer be trusted. It had lied about secret contacts with the IRA for years and betrayed the union and its unionist supporters by formulating a bargain that moved Northern Ireland toward a United Ireland in return for a cease-fire. This discourse of British betrayal suggests that the British government has uncritically taken on board the political rhetoric of Sinn Féin and thus forwarded the republican agenda.<sup>60</sup>

For the DUP and its increasing numbers of supporters, the “peace process” is thus nothing more than a euphemism for a “surrender process.” The party has consistently led those sections of unionism that have expressed their opposition to the Good Friday Agreement, basing their arguments around the notion that the union is under direct threat. The DUP has warned the British government against allowing republicans to prescribe the terms of the peace process, and the government has failed to ensure that the republican movement keeps its end of the deal. Indeed, the party’s deputy leader, Peter Robinson, has suggested that Tony Blair was playing “fantasy politics” if he believed that the IRA would disband.<sup>61</sup>

For an increasing number of unionists, the British government’s strategy “merely allows republicans to dictate terms, sage in the knowledge that the Labour government will pay any price to save its own skin.” By allowing “unrepentant and armed terrorists at the heart of the government,” the current peace process is in fact a betrayal of the democratic values it purports to uphold.<sup>62</sup> As the recent election returns show, this position has attracted support far beyond the DUP’s traditional constituencies.<sup>63</sup>

60. See *Towards a New Agreement: DUP Analysis Vindicated* (Belfast: UDUP, 2003).

61. Carl Thornton and Noel MacAdam, “DUP warns of ‘fantasy politics,’” *Belfast Telegraph*, 22 Oct. 2002.

62. See *Towards a New Agreement: DUP Analysis; Fair Deal Manifesto*.

63. For McCartney, the strategy surrounding the proposed political settlement in the Framework Document long predated the IRA cease-fire. The suspension of vio-



## CONCLUSIONS

Unionism is not a monolithic social and political movement, and the dynamics involved in any political realignment are complex and sometimes extremely subtle. The hegemonic construction of unionist identity has traditionally absorbed and superseded a multitude of other key identities, such as gender, ethnicity, age, sexual preference, and class. These have been organized into a collective political identity through an all-embracing discourse which finds political expression through unionism and cultural identity through "Britishness."

It is in the nature of unionism as an ideological force that the commitment to the union often generates a defensive, insular, "broad-church" alliance between the disparate social and cultural elements that make up its major political constituencies. By emphasizing many of the incompatibilities within contemporary Northern Ireland politics, the peace process initially exposed the different, sometimes conflicting, sometimes overlapping, forces that shape and reframe unionism. It was within this ideological space that groupings such as the PUP found an outlet for their expression of politics.

The years following the Good Friday Agreement have seen increased levels of uncertainty among unionists regarding the future. Several key notions within contemporary unionism have driven this uncertainty. First, everyday lived experiences, especially within working-class interface areas, have continued to demonstrate the salience of sectarian division. Second, there is a strongly located sense of betrayal by "their" British government. Third, there is the perceived erosion of unionist cultural and political identities. Fourth, many unionists continue to believe that the peace process is still being driven by a republican agenda. Finally, there is an increasing feeling that, while unionists make an endless series of concessions, republicans are not even adhering to the basic terms of the agreement.

The resulting lack of confidence has been reflected in political realignments within unionism. There is now a widespread belief that

lence, however, was a necessary precondition for "selling" it to unionists and convincing them of its merits. According to this view, the British government has offered a conditional surrender to the IRA, as peace on these terms could have been obtained at any time over the past twenty-five years. See Robert McCartney, *Reflections on Liberty, Democracy and the Union*.

unionism is in decline both socially and politically, and that the nationalist community is making huge gains at unionist expense. More broadly, there is embedded fear that the union is under direct attack. As an editorial in *The Orange Standard* explained,

The official drip-feed to the insatiable demands of the pan-nationalist front has been aided by the outpourings of the Belfast Agreement of April 1998, which clearly has been a disaster for the Unionist community and, sadly, is still being facilitated by some Unionists in the corridors of power at Stormont. Unionism is in a state of disarray largely through the battering it has received from its own Government and the deep divisions which have arisen in the Protestant and Unionist community over tactics used by elected representatives to defend the Union.<sup>64</sup>

As a result, many unionists believe that they must turn to those who offer the strongest defense against the subversion of their British allegiance and culture. It is the DUP that has most clearly articulated this counter-hegemonic position, harnessing widespread unionist fears into a coherent oppositional discourse. Moreover, the DUP has successfully constructed a particular reading of recent circumstances that appears relevant to the experiences of many unionists.

At the core of the DUP's recent success, therefore, is the party's ability to frame itself as the only real protection on offer against the move toward a united Ireland.<sup>65</sup> According to this view, all other unionist parties, including the PUP and especially the UUP, have played complicit roles in bringing about a weakening of the union. In harnessing these sentiments, the DUP draws on long-standing core concepts of unionist and loyalist political cultures. These include the construction of an enemy that is always deceitful and double-dealing.<sup>66</sup>

64. *The Orange Standard*, Dec. 2001.

65. This has, of course, been central to Ian Paisley's political rhetoric since the outbreak of the contemporary conflict in the late 1960s. For some recent examples, see "Speech at the Annual Party Conference, 29 November," Press Release (Belfast: DUP, 1997); *The Fruits of Appeasement* (Belfast: DUP, 1998); "IRA Move Yet Another Cynical Gesture in Latest Agreement Farce," at [http://www.dup.org.uk/NewsArticles.asp?Article\\_ID=812](http://www.dup.org.uk/NewsArticles.asp?Article_ID=812) [downloaded 22 Oct. 2003].

66. For historical analysis, see Richard English and Graham Walker, eds., *Unionism in Modern Ireland* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1996); John Wilson Foster, ed., *The*

Finding this analysis compelling, many unionists increasingly point out that a peace process that was sold to them as heralding the defeat of militant Irish republicanism has actually seen a growing prominence for Sinn Féin. Under these circumstances it is the DUP (and its invocation of so-called traditional unionism) that best articulates the fears and concerns of a growing number of unionists.

In the period since the signing of the agreement, the critique offered by the DUP has gained the party increased credibility among unionist voters. The “sell-out thesis” has of course been central to DUP politics since the formation of the party. With Sinn Féin in government in Northern Ireland, however, many unionists have been alarmed and convinced that this amounted to a concrete move toward the withdrawal by installments of the British government.

There remain key sections of working-class loyalism and middle-class unionism hostile to the advance of Ian Paisley and the DUP. It is these factions that are still inclined toward the pro-agreement unionism of the PUP and the UUP. At the moment, however, this appears to be a constituency on the wane, in retreat both ideologically and at the polls. Such a dynamic is hardly a positive one for the future of the Good Friday Agreement or the attainment of political accommodation in Northern Ireland.

*Idea of the Union* (Vancouver: Belcouver Press, 1995); Ronnie Hanna, ed., *The Union: Essays on Ireland and the British Connection* (Newtownards: Colourprint Books, 2001).