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HENRY PATTERSON

The Limits of “New Unionism”: David Trimble and the Ulster Unionist Party*

ACADEMIC DISCUSSION of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) is still thin on the ground. Since John F. Harbinson’s pioneering history appeared in 1973,¹ there has been only one serious academic study of the party.² The academic writing that has been done on mainstream unionism has tended to focus on it as an ideological tradition. Important work has been done here starting with Jennifer Todd’s path-breaking article.³ However, ideology is only one dimension of any attempt to produce a comprehensive analysis of contemporary unionism. Parties play an essential role in the development and propagation of ideologies; they are the essential mediators between the ideological realm and that of politics and government. In the case of unionism, much of the academic discussion that has occurred has tried to identify those components of unionist ideology that would be most conducive to the forging of some sort of political accommodation with nationalists and republicans. Various sources of “new” or “civic” unionism have been identified, but these have tended to be defined as intellectual currents

* Much of the research on which this article is based has been supported by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme. The author would like to thank the ESRC for its support.

1. John F. Harbinson, *The Ulster Unionist Party 1882–1973* (Belfast, 1973).

2. David Hume, *The Ulster Unionist Party 1972–1992* (Lurgan, 1995).

3. Jennifer Todd, “Two Traditions in Unionist Political Culture,” *Irish Political Studies* 2 (1987), 1–26.

or if they have a party political basis to be sought among the fringe political formations of unionism. One recent analysis of unionism and the peace process, for example, focuses almost entirely on the role of the small loyalist parties linked to paramilitaries and Dr. Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party.⁴ Despite the crucial role that the members of the Ulster Unionist Party played in attempting to work the new dispensation in Northern Ireland created by the Belfast Agreement, knowledge of that party is still extremely limited. What follows uses the Ulster Unionist Assembly Party as a prism through which to analyze the undoubtedly radical shift in unionist strategy initiated by the leader of the UUP.

DAVID TRIMBLE'S PROACTIVE UNIONISM

Held on a bleak November day in 2003, the elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly marked the end of the Ulster Unionist Party's (UUP) almost century-old political hegemony within Ulster's Protestant community. Although its vote increased slightly compared to the previous Assembly elections in 1998, the more hard-line Democratic Unionist Party surged ahead on a wave of Protestant disillusion with the out-workings of the Belfast Agreement.⁵ The end of the UUP's political hegemony also marked perhaps the final phase of the leadership of David Trimble and his proactive and modernizing project.

In the 1995 leadership contest that followed the resignation of the then leader of the UUP, James Molyneaux, Trimble was seen as the most articulate and dangerous candidate of the right. In large part, this reflected his role in the major confrontation between the security forces and the Portadown Orangemen who were blocked from marching down the largely Catholic Garvaghy Road after their annual service at Drumcree Church. As tens of thousands of Orangemen from all

4. James W. McCauley, "Mobilising Ulster Unionism: new directions or old?" *Capital and Class* 70 (Spring 2000), 37–64.

5. In the 1998 Assembly elections the UUP won 21.3 percent of the vote and twenty-eight seats to the DUP's 18 percent and twenty seats; Paul Mitchell, "Transcending an Ethnic Party System?" in Rick Wilford, ed., *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement* (Oxford, 2001), 33. In the November 2003 election the respective figures were UUP: 22.7 percent and twenty-seven seats; DUP: 25.5 percent and thirty seats (*Irish Times*, 29 Nov. 2003).

over Northern Ireland came to give support and others blocked roads and the port of Larne, Trimble, in whose constituency the conflict was taking place, was intensively involved in trying to resolve the issue. However, the positive role he played in bringing the stand-off to a peaceful conclusion was all but obliterated when he joined with Ian Paisley in greeting the returning Orangemen in the center of Portadown in what many perceived as a display of triumphalism.⁶ His role at Drumcree would have appealed to the many Orangemen who were delegates to the ruling body of the party, the 850 person Ulster Unionist Council that elected Molyneaux's successor. Yet those in the upper reaches of the Northern Ireland Office who were aghast at Trimble's election misread both the man and the circumstances of his victory. In a party as bereft of intellectual ballast as the Ulster unionists, it was no great compliment to Trimble to point out that he was by far the most cerebral of the candidates for the leadership. He was the only mainstream unionist figure who had the intellectual and strategic capacity to enter into a serious contest with the leaders of constitutional nationalism and republicanism, John Hume and Gerry Adams.

In the 1970s Trimble had been in the right-wing Vanguard movement led by the anti-reformist, former cabinet minister Bill Craig. As such he was involved in the popular Protestant uprising, the Ulster Workers' Council strike, which destroyed Northern Ireland's first attempt at cross-community power-sharing in 1974. However, in the aftermath of the strike Trimble had been part of the minority within Craig's party that had supported Craig's idea of an emergency coalition government with the constitutional nationalist party, the SDLP. This willingness to share power with nationalists was one indication of Trimble's growing political realism: his acceptance of the fact that no British government would return devolved institutions to Northern Ireland without a power-sharing government. At the same time he had been a severe critic of Molyneaux's trust in the supposedly pro-union sentiments of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. A law lecturer at Queen's University, Belfast, until he won the Upper Bann seat at Westminster in 1989, he was also an omnivorous reader of books on

6. Ruth Dudley Edwards, *The Faithful Tribe: An Intimate Portrait of the Loyal Institutions* (London, 1999), 315.

Irish history and had published two serious works of amateur history.⁷ This historical perspective provided him with a useful corrective to the overly pessimistic view of political developments that gripped many in the unionist community in the 1990s.

For Trimble the IRA cease-fire was an admission of the failure of the armed struggle, although he had no doubt that a possible return to violence would play a role in republican strategy until the decommissioning issue was adequately addressed. His views were set out clearly in an interview soon after he became leader of the UUP:

Even though the cease-fire may be merely a tactic the fact that they have had to change their tactics is an admission that the previous tactic (armed struggle) has failed. Although there are elements in the republican movement that desire a return to violence, they will be returning to a tactic that was not working. . . . So, in that sense the republican movement is being defeated slowly. It is a slow process but that is what is happening. From our point of view, what we have to ensure is that while their campaign is winding up it does not cause any political or constitutional change which is contrary to the interests of the people of Northern Ireland. And we also want to do everything possible to ensure that the Union is strengthened.⁸

This was a sophisticated analysis, too sophisticated for the many unionists who still preferred the Paisleyite vision of a republican movement with almost demonic powers that was molding Anglo-Irish policies to its will through the continuing threat of force. Trimble was aware of the unionist unease with the peace process as he pointed out to some of his most vocal critics at the Ulster Young Unionist Conference in October 1998, “The event that has caused the greatest problem for Unionists in recent years is the adoption by the Republican movement of a different political approach.”⁹ Trimble’s acceptance of the necessity of the UUP working within the inclusive settlement framework promoted by the British and Irish governments as the inevitable

7. David Trimble, *The Foundation of Northern Ireland* (Lurgan, 1991) and *The Easter Rebellion of 1916* (Lurgan, 1992).

8. Rogelio Alonso, *Irlanda del Norte: Una historia de guerra y la búsqueda de la paz* (Madrid, 2002), 390–91 (my translation).

9. “Engaging reality” in David Trimble, *To raise up a new Northern Ireland: Articles and Speeches 1998–2000* (Belfast, 2001), 41.

price of republicans' move away from armed struggle was opposed by approximately one-third of his party while it disconcerted many of those who remained loyal to the leadership.

The fact that a small majority of unionists, approximately 55 percent, voted in favor of the agreement in the referendum in May 1998 was in large part the result of frequent visits to Northern Ireland by Tony Blair during the final two weeks of the campaign—and his numerous reassurances to the unionist community, particularly that the IRA would have to decommission its weapons if Sinn Féin, the political wing of the republican movement, was to be brought into the government of Northern Ireland. Blair was backed up by a cavalcade of British political leaders and international figures, including Nelson Mandela. The result was an unprecedented mobilization of the unionist community. At 81 percent, the turnout for the referendum was the highest ever in Northern Ireland. In the Republic, where a separate referendum was held on the same day, the turnout was only 56 percent. This surge in participation was disproportionately drawn from the predominantly unionist areas in the east of the province, where turnout was traditionally lowest.¹⁰

Although the 71 percent “yes” vote was a strong boost for the agreement, its basis in the unionist community was relatively precarious. As one leading member of the Democratic Unionist Party observed: “They came out to vote for what they saw as peace and now they will return to political hibernation for another 30 years. But those who voted ‘No’ are not so apathetic.”¹¹ The prediction appeared to be confirmed a month later with the results of the election for the Northern Ireland Assembly. Many of those unionists who had voted “yes” in the referendum stayed at home, and the UUP turned in its worst-ever performance with 21.3 percent of the vote and twenty-eight seats, the same number of seats as the aggregate of the Democratic Unionist Party and other anti-agreement parties. Only the support of the two Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) from the Progressive Unionist Party, the small loyalist group with links to the paramilitaries

10. Richard Sinnott, “Historic Day Blemished by Low Poll,” *Irish Times*, 25 May 1998.

11. Suzanne Breen, “United No Parties Set their Sights on Assembly,” *Irish Times*, 25 May 1998.

of the Ulster Volunteer Force, allowed Trimble to be elected First Minister.¹² Gerry Adams commented accurately on the results that as far as unionism was concerned it would now be “trench warfare all the way.”¹³

Since then the electoral performance of the UUP has continued to disappoint many of its core activists. In the 2001 Westminster election the UUP’s vote fell by almost 6 percent compared with results from the previous election in 1997, although its overall share of the vote at 26.8 percent was up on the Assembly elections. However, the UUP lost five seats while the DUP gained three, leaving the parties with six and five seats, respectively.¹⁴ Opinion poll evidence also showed growing Protestant disenchantment with the agreement. The *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* for 2001 found that 63 percent of Protestants believed that the agreement had benefited nationalists more than unionists, while only 17 percent believed that devolution had strengthened the United Kingdom. Moreover, only 28 percent thought that the Northern Ireland Assembly was good value for the money.¹⁵ The QUB/Rowntree polls have shown that the proportion of Protestants saying they would vote “yes” in a referendum on the agreement has dropped from 49 percent in October 1999 to 36 percent in February 2003.¹⁶

THE “TRIMBLEISTAS”

David Trimble’s support base within the ruling body of the Ulster Unionist Party, the approximately 850 strong Ulster Unionist Council, was reduced from the more than 70 percent who supported the Good Friday Agreement to 53 to 57 percent who continued to back him at subsequent meetings after the momentous November 1999 decision to go into government with Sinn Féin. At the same time his strategy was opposed by a clear majority of the UUP MPs at Westminster. Only among the twenty-eight UUP MLAs did Trimble appear to have a secure majority. Just two UUP MLAs opposed going into government

12. Paul Mitchell, “Transcending an Ethnic Party System?” 33.

13. Frank Millar, “This can still all be saved,” *The Irish Times*, 12 Oct. 2002.

14. Feargal Cochrane, “The 2001 Westminster Election in Northern Ireland,” *Irish Political Studies* 16 (2001), 186.

15. *Northern Life and Times Survey*, <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results>.

16. *Belfast Telegraph*, 19 Feb. 2003.

with republicans.¹⁷ The UUP Assembly group provided the vanguard of what some Trimble supporters defined as “new unionism.” Although there has been some quite serious journalistic comment on “new unionism,” “proactive unionism” and even the “Trimbleistas,”¹⁸ we still know very little about the men—all twenty-six of them—and the women—all two of them—who make up this group.

The research on which this article is based centers on a series of interviews with Ulster Unionist MLAs.¹⁹ Most of these were conducted between March and May 2000 at a time when the Belfast Agreement’s institutions were in suspension. Twenty-four of the twenty-eight MLAs were interviewed. Only one of the more public critics of the leadership, Pauline Armitage, an MLA for East Londonderry, did not respond to a request for an interview. The issues that affected the political atmosphere within the UUP Assembly Party at the time the interviews were carried out were in some form or other to continue to dominate intra-unionist debates over the next three years.

At their core was the linkage between Sinn Féin as a party of government and the IRA as a still-functioning paramilitary organization. Due to what he regarded as the Belfast Agreement’s inadequate provision for Sinn Féin’s exclusion from the government if the IRA did not set about divesting itself of its arms, Jeffery Donaldson, the UUP MP for Lagan Valley, had refused to support his leader’s pro-agreement position. In December 1999, after intensive discussions with Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, Trimble believed he had a commitment from the republican leaders that once they were in government the IRA would deliver on the arms issue. When they failed on this front, the devolved institutions were suspended by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Mandelson, in February 2000. Since then there has been movement in the sense that the IRA has committed itself to “putting its arms beyond use” but the lack of transparency involved and continued evidence of IRA activity (from allegations of

17. Frank Millar, “Ten days that shook life back into power-sharing project,” *Irish Times*, 29 May 2000.

18. See in particular Henry McDonald, *Trimble* (London, 2000).

19. The research project “Unionism and the Creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly” was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the award reference number: L327253050. I am grateful to the assistance of Mr. Alex Kane of the UUP for his invaluable assistance in setting up the interviews.

links with left-wing guerrillas in Colombia to the so-called “Stormontgate” crisis of October 2002) led to another suspension of the institutions, which remained in place until the 2003 elections.

Among unionist MLAs, there was concern at what Sam Foster, (MLA for Fermanagh and South Tyrone and Minister of the Environment in the Executive) referred to as the “in-your-face” behavior of Sinn Féin ministers during their time in government. Particularly controversial was Barbara de Brun’s decision to close the Jubilee Maternity Hospital in South Belfast and centralize maternity services in the Belfast area in the Royal Hospital in her own West Belfast constituency. The fear produced by the de Brun decision on the Jubilee demonstrated that the core question of whether ministers were to be collectively responsible and accountable to the Assembly was not resolved and as such contained the potential for continuing unionist grief. Associated complaints concerned the refusal of Sinn Féin ministers to allow the flying of union flags on departmental buildings on designated days; de Brun’s insistence on responding to questions in the Assembly in Irish; and Minister of Education Martin McGuinness’s reference to his days on the run when he was visiting a school as part of his ministerial itinerary.

However, the issue that caused most concern to the MLAs, in part because of its impact on rank-and-file unionists and the Protestant electorate, was the Patten Report on policing. Published in September 1999, the report by the Independent International Commission on Policing had been one of the most controversial elements in the Belfast Agreement. The commission, headed by the ex-Conservative politician and former Governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patten, produced a report that although it did not recommend disbanding the Royal Ulster Constabulary, as Sinn Féin demanded, put forward proposals for radical police restructuring. Perhaps most controversial was the report’s call to change the name of the police force and to forge new symbols that did not reflect the Irish or British states. The report produced fierce denunciations from all shades of unionism. As the vanguard of pro-agreement unionism, the Ulster Unionist Assembly party faced a major task in articulating a coherent and progressive response to these challenges.

THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST?

One MLA, himself a relative newcomer to UUP politics, claimed that the Assembly Party contained “the largest concentration of bright Unionists in the country.” He emphasized that a sizable proportion comprised fairly recent arrivals in the party. They had not simply “trogged up” through local councils and parish pump politics. They were “more cosmopolitan with a wider and more pluralistic point of view” (Alan McFarland, North Down). If this was the case then the judgment of Professor Paul Bew that “there has as yet been little sign of an influx of middle class talent into the UUP” might need to be questioned.²⁰ In fact, McFarland had been a member since 1992, and only three members of the Assembly group had joined the party during that decade: Esmond Birnie, South Belfast; James Leslie, North Antrim; and Duncan Shipley Dalton, South Antrim. Eighteen members of the Assembly Party were also in local government, many of them with a long history of involvement in unionist politics at a local level. One MLA had a much more astringent view of the quality of some members of the Assembly Party:

You don't progress in Unionism simply on the basis of merit. It is not that they don't like clever people . . . but they like people who work for the party . . . very often it tends to reward people at local level because of their active participation in politics, rather than a particular ability that they might have in a given subject. So, therefore you find some very nice, very good and very honourable people who have had a long career in local government, who have fetched and carried for the party, who have been loyal to the party and the leadership of the party, but quite frankly are not up to the job of government. (Danny Kennedy, Newry and Armagh)

This critical viewpoint was amplified by Alex Kane, a party researcher at Stormont:

We're a party that puts far too much emphasis on local, really local politics. Outsiders tend not to get even elected as MPs in our constituencies. They tend to come up through the ranks: Orange man, local coun-

20. *Irish Times*, 28 Dec. 1999.

cillor, MP and that doesn't encourage talent. Let's face it if a lot of people are interested in politics, in unionist politics, if they're not in the Orange like I'm not, they wouldn't even get to join the party.

The Orange Order is still an influential organization within the UUP. It has the right to send 120 delegates, chosen by the County Grand Lodges of the Orange Order, to the UUC; according to informed estimates, three-quarters of these delegates would be hostile to the agreement. More than 50 percent of the constituency delegates to the UUC would also be members of the Orange Order, but these are less likely to take a hard-line position on the agreement than the Orange activists directly chosen by the Order as delegates.²¹

Orangeism is not as influential among the UUP MLAs as it was for unionist MPs under Stormont, where over 90 percent were members. Twenty-seven of the group were eligible for Orange membership as Sir John Gorman (North Down) is Catholic (and incidentally a member of the UUP since 1959). Nineteen of the twenty-five for whom reliable information could be obtained were in one or other of the loyal orders. Only two of the unionist ministers, Michael McGimpsey (South Belfast) and Dermot Nesbitt (South Down) are not members. None of the MLAs who were members were Orange activists and tended to be sympathetic to proposals to modernize the party's structure to remove the Orange "bloc vote." They hoped in this way to make the party more attractive to urban professionals and at the same time to weaken the influence of the right on the UUC.

Some of the full-time researchers and advisers employed by the UUP were scathing about the quality of the average UUP MLA. Alex Kane hoped that

in five or six years time we may get a new generation of politicians moving in with degrees and a higher degree of intellect—that sounds very arrogant . . . but if you look at the research background of Sinn Féin or the SDLP a lot of them are degree and university orientated and some of them have been in other professions as well. We are just not attracting that calibre of person.

21. These figures come from an ongoing research project that Dr. Eric Kaufmann of Birkbeck College and I directed: "The decline of the loyal family? Popular Unionism and the devolution process" as part of the Economic and Social Research Council's *Devolution and Constitutional Change* programme.

In fact, fourteen of the twenty-eight MLAs had degrees in comparison to ten of the twenty-four SDLP MLAs, six of the eighteen Sinn Féin MLAs, and five of twenty DUP MLAs.²² As Kane also ranked the DUP and Sinn Féin as the most coherent and competent Assembly parties, it is important to register that this does not in fact seem to be related to the educational factors he mentions.

However, a clue to Kane's overly critical evaluation of the educational attainments of the UUP Assembly Party may be in his own family's history of involvement in "pre-Troubles" unionism. His father had been chairman of the Armagh Unionist Association, a member of the Executive of the UUC, and a party officer. He was election agent for Jack Maginiss, Westminster MP for Armagh in the 1960s, and for Sir Norman Stronge, MP for Mid-Armagh at Stormont from 1938 to 1969. Maginiss was a large farmer and a company director, and Stronge was an Eton-educated landowner and company director. As Kane was brought up when landed and bourgeois elements were still dominant within unionism, it is unsurprising that the disappearance of these social forces over the next two decades has colored his views.

In terms of class there is some evidence of the "de-bourgeois-ification" of unionism since the collapse of the Stormont regime. In what remains the only serious academic analysis of the structures and composition of the party, John Harbinson noted that although the general picture of the party during the Stormont years was one dominated by businessmen and professionals, by the end of the 1960s there had been a substantial decline in business representation.²³

The Assembly Party has far fewer representatives of the bourgeoisie than was the case under the Stormont regime even in the 1960s. What used to be called the "higher professions," doctors and lawyers in particular, were heavily represented under Stormont but were only present in the Assembly group in the form of two junior barristers. The decline of bourgeois representation reflects international trends that have seen the disappearance of distinctive national and regional bourgeoisies. This trend is accompanied in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, by the shrinkage in the size of the classic industrial working class. It is

22. Figures worked out from *The Directory of Northern Ireland Government, 1999/2000* (Watford, 2000).

23. Harbinson, *Ulster Unionist Party*, 109.

therefore of little surprise that the biggest professional category in the Assembly Party are teachers and lecturers (seven MLAs) and that the other significant group is petty-bourgeois (five MLAs who owned their own businesses and two farmers).

The lack of middle-class talent involved in unionist politics has become something of an obsession with Trimbleista MLAs and some commentators. Though the social composition of the Assembly group is certainly “middle class,” the problem seems to be, from this modernizing unionist perspective, that there are not enough of the “right sort” of middle class—too many unimaginative petty bourgeois and former teachers and technical college lecturers and not enough university lecturers and more substantial professional figures. It is also the case that some of Trimble’s most loyal supporters in the group are valued much more for their unquestioning support than their contribution to discussions on policy and strategy.

While the party’s failure to recruit from key sections of the Protestant middle class is certainly a problem, what is perhaps more surprising was the lack of concern among UUP strategists about their support base within the Protestant working class. This may reflect in part at least the weak representation of working-class Protestants in the Assembly group: only three MLAs were still proletarian when they became seriously involved in the UUP. Of course, since the Troubles began, working-class representation in the UUP has always been vestigial, leaving it open to a populist DUP assault. The success of that very assault might have been expected to encourage more concern in the party about its working-class electoral base.

Class was also reflected in MLAs’ response to the question of which party they would vote for if they lived in Britain. Four MLAs described themselves as left-of-center and said they would vote Labour (Fred Cobain, North Belfast; Ken Robinson, Antrim East; Ivan Davis, Lagan Valley; and Michael McGimpsey, South Belfast). With the exception of one MLA who defined himself as an “independent,” the rest stated that they would vote Conservative. For one MLA, at least, the influence of class can be seen on the central issue of education. According to Fred Cobain, the Assembly Party had still not got a position on the province’s controversial transfer test for eleven-year-olds because the issue threatened to divide the group along class lines. It is certainly doubtful that Cobain, with his Northern Ireland Labour Party and

trade union background, would have got much support for his proposal for a comprehensive system to replace the grammar schools, so beloved by the Protestant and Catholic middle class.

ORGANIZATION AND EFFECTIVENESS

Alan McFarland described the Assembly group as “the most effective part of the UUP.” However, as his experience of the rest of the party involved working at Westminster, where he described the UUP as “permanently in a state of chaos,” this might not represent a particularly glowing endorsement. In fact, the party’s failure to modernize itself has exacerbated its problems. The basic structures of the Ulster Unionist Council remain those bequeathed by the pan-Protestant mobilization against Home Rule in the early twentieth century. The result was an unwieldy and complex organization of all social classes and all shades of unionist opinion. The structure remains more that of a populist movement than a modern political party. It provides various important checks on the party leadership. For example, the constituency associations, not party headquarters, choose all candidates for elected office. An emergency meeting of the council has to be convened by the party officers at the request of sixty constituency association representatives, a provision which was exploited relentlessly by Trimble’s critics. The leader of the party and key party officers are elected each year at the council’s annual general meeting, providing another opportunity for the right of the party to embarrass the leadership. Most importantly of all, according to some of Trimble’s closest supporters, is the Orange bloc vote where a substantial section of UUC delegates are chosen, not by party branches but instead by Orange activists, the vast majority of who are anti-Agreement and some of who could even be members of other unionist parties, particularly the DUP.

In 1990 the annual conference of the party supported a resolution to reform the party structure. The proposer of the resolution was Jeffrey Donaldson, future MP for Lagan Valley and prominent critic of Trimble, who told the conference that theirs was “a very conservative party and seems a little slow to adapt to changes in the world.”²⁴ The

24. Hume, *Ulster Unionist Party 1972–92*, 40.

modernization agenda was overtaken by the unfolding peace process and, after his accession to the leadership, David Trimble's intellect and energies were almost totally given over to the high politics of negotiations with the two governments, and the other main parties and party reform slipped down the agenda. By the time it was raised again it had become yet another issue in the conflict between "pro" and "anti" agreement factions in the party with former modernizers like Donaldson claiming that proposals for reforming party structures were aimed at marginalizing anti-Trimble elements like the Orange delegates. A new set of party rules that would have reformed but not severed the Orange link failed to get the necessary two-thirds majority at a party executive meeting in March 2003.²⁵

It was in this context of the wider party that the majority of interviewees believed that they were well organized, coherent as a group—and that they were kept well informed by the leader and UUP ministers on all major issues. It was also the case that after almost three decades of direct rule devolution came as a shock to the system for all parties. This feeling was well described by Esmond Birnie (South Belfast): "We've had such a long period of direct rule that people are not used to being in government . . . not used basically to the hard work of it and the sheer volume of decisions that have to be taken with a very rapid response time."

However, there was some evidence of concern that the UUP's performance in the Assembly was inferior to that of the other main parties. The MLAs who were among the most skeptical about the period in government and who could be regarded as only conditional supporters of Trimble's strategy were also damning about the lack of preparation for government and the organization of the party in the Assembly. There was a more widespread feeling that in terms of research, preparation of policy positions and general effectiveness the UUP was lagging behind the other three main parties. There was no agreement as to who was best prepared but some at least rated the DUP as the most effective performer:

25. The Ulster Unionist Party, *Modernising Unionism* (Belfast, 2003). I am grateful to Dr. Steven King, Political Adviser to David Trimble, for providing me with a copy of this pamphlet produced by UUP headquarters to help explain the proposed rule changes.

There were great holes exposed in us when we were in government . . . the SDLP would not be that far ahead of us—they have got their cart horses too . . . the Party that impressed me most was the DUP . . . the big hitters that they have may [have] flawed ideology but they have genuine ability . . . they were able administrators and effective politicians. (Danny Kennedy, Newry and Armagh)

This party has been talking of working towards a form of devolution since Trimble became leader so we have had five years to have a programme of government and we have not done anything about it. Sinn Fein have full time researchers. I saw Sinn Fein documents on health and education two or three days after their Ministers were appointed. They had obviously done the work. I saw some of the SDLP stuff—excellent material, been worked on for years. Ulster Unionists—nothing. (Alex Kane, UUP Researcher)

We're "sucking the hind tit" to some of the other parties, particularly the DUP. (Derek Hussey, Tyrone West)

It might be argued that the only really important question about the composition and organization of the Assembly party was how many could be regarded as loyal to the leadership and how many were potential defectors. The view from the party whips was that two-thirds of the members were possible defectors but only in "extreme circumstances" (interview with Ivan Davis, Lagan Valley). But a largely loyal and compliant Assembly Party had its dangers for the broader process. It could encourage the other parties and the two governments to underestimate the precariousness of Mr. Trimble's position in the Unionist Party and even more importantly with the Protestant electorate. In sections of the unionist community it may have produced an image of UUP political passivity in the face of a perception of nationalist and republican activism on a range of fronts. One of the paradoxes thrown up by the research was that although the bulk of the group had "trogged" it up through parish pump politics, there was remarkably little reflection of the concern in sections of the Protestant community over the direction of Northern politics since the agreement. What we appeared to have was an Assembly group that displayed many of the weaknesses of a localistic and a rather amateurish and bewildered approach to broader political issues, with no compen-

sating ability to communicate the undoubted unease with the direction of the peace process that existed in party grassroots and the broader unionist electorate.

THE “NEW UNIONIST” VISION: STRUCTURAL UNIONISM

When Steve Bruce analyzed the state of unionist politics and ideology in the early 1990s, the dominant framework he used was what he called the “Dismal Vision”: an amalgam of perceptions of long-term unionist decline and British governments’ “appeasement” of republican violence through more and more concessions to a pan-nationalist agenda of creeping unification.²⁶ Despite the IRA’s failure to move on the arms issue, the resultant suspension, raw memories of Sinn Féin ministers, and the running sore of Patten, the striking thing about most of my interviewees was their relatively confident and even optimistic mood.

Arthur Aughey has described the psychological basis for intra-unionist divisions as between “confident” and “fearful” unionists.²⁷ The bedrock of this confidence was what can be termed a “structural unionist” analysis of the agreement and devolved institutions. When asked why they had supported the agreement the most common response was that it involved nationalist and republican acceptance of the “consent” principle. The working of devolution was seen to have provided practical proof that Sinn Féin was, whatever its formal ideological position, now in effect a partitionist party. David Trimble published an article in the main unionist daily paper on the day of the UUC vote regarding whether to return to government expressed it clearly:

Consider the Sinn Féin slogans years ago—no return to Stormont, no Unionist prime minister, no Unionist veto and no decommissioning. On all these issues we drove them far beyond their bottom line. . . . only by continuing to work this process will Unionists finally corner the republican movement inside the structures set up by the Belfast Agreement.²⁸

26. Steve Bruce, *The Edge of the Union: The Ulster Loyalist Political Vision* (Oxford, 1994).

27. Arthur Aughey, “Trimble hangs on for a white-knuckle ride,” *The Guardian*, 26 March 2000.

28. “We won the war now for the peace,” *The Newsletter*, 20 May 2000.

For a number of MLAs the limited experience of working a committee system with Sinn Féin seemed to demonstrate the fundamentally partitionist nature of the settlement. One MLA and member of the Finance and Personnel Committee thus commented on Francie Molloy of Sinn Féin, the committee chairman:

Very constructive and seemed to have a good grasp of issues . . . what pleased me most was that he seemed to get into the whole swing of a partitionist system. There was one occasion when we were talking and I asked a question about how long it would take to deal with a proposed piece of legislation and he replied “Another couple of meetings and then we could wrap it up and get the royal assent.” (Billy Bell, Lagan Valley)

Even Derek Hussey, one of the MLAs who did not support the decision to return to government with republicans in May 2000, still believed that “all in all Sinn Féin want to operate the system to the benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland.”

The argument that the agreement and the devolved institutions are structurally unionist is a powerful one. Trimble and his supporters had some strong intellectual backing from a quite unexpected source when a former member of the Provisional IRA and leading dissident republican intellectual, Anthony McIntyre, talked about the “capitulationist” trajectory of modern Irish republicanism.²⁹ In practical terms, however, this analysis has weaknesses that were well pointed out in Dr. Esmond Birnie’s evaluation of the devolved government’s seventy-two day tenure:

The problem with the period of devolution was that the negative aspects are very obvious but the positive aspects from a Unionist point of view are much more subtle. The negative and painful things were up front: Sinn Fein presence in high profile ministries, some of the decisions they took, the debate about flags. The positive things were more subtle and not so much appreciated by the Unionist public or our own members:

29. Anthony McIntyre, “Modern Irish Republicanism and the Belfast Agreement: Chickens coming home to roost or turkeys celebrating Christmas,” in Wilford, ed., *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement*. McIntyre maintains a running critical commentary on mainstream republicanism on his web-journal *The Blanket*. A similar critique of Gerry Adams and the leadership of the republican movement can be found in Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London and New York, 2002).

an end to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, changes to the Anglo-Irish Secretariat and Conference, Articles 2 and 3 and the new British Irish Council. (Esmond Birnie, South Belfast)

One way of dealing with this problem on the part of some of Trimble's supporters was to dismiss the criticisms as the product of an "emotional" over-reaction to symbolic issues that would dissipate once the institutions were up and running and delivering stability and economic improvements. This was a faded reprise of the old and demonstrably false constructive unionist assumption that economic and social improvements, now spiced up by the "equality agenda," would take the sting out of ethnic grievance.

The problem with "structural unionism" can be illustrated by the bitter intra-unionist debate on the Patten Report. Michael McGimpsey (Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure and MLA for South Belfast) commented on the report: "if you don't look at symbols—the name and the badge—a lot of Patten recommends itself." It was the exploitation of a number of "emotional" and "symbolic" issues by a "small minority" that "threatened to destroy what the overwhelming majority of people voted for" (interview with Michael McGimpsey, South Belfast). Similarly, the Industry Minister, Sir Reg Empey stated:

The negative aspect (of Patten) is played up for purely political reasons. The fact remains that on the substantive issues, namely the structures, the nature of policing republicans didn't get their way. They wanted a totally different type of police force: a regional one. The SDLP wanted two tier policing. All of these things they didn't get. But everybody's hung up on the name. I suspect that if you had an unarmed police force of 500 officers for Northern Ireland and you called it the RUC at the present moment, Unionists would be happy. Even though it would be totally incapable of doing any work of any significance. But because people have for political reasons focussed on these issues because of inter-rivalries within Unionism, one section of Unionism has to define everything as a total loss for Unionism, even though in fact on probably nine out of ten key points our arguments have prevailed. (interview with Sir Reg Empey, East Belfast)

Apart from the fact that the fierce conflict between the British government and nationalist Ireland over legislation to implement the report seemed to indicate that there was more substance to the union-

ist dislike of Patten than is implied in Sir Reg's response, there is a more fundamental problem with this dismissal of critics as over-immersed in the "emotional" and "symbolic." Emotionalism and symbolism are powerful components of ethno-national politics wherever they occur. The "structural unionist" analysis neglected this reality at its peril. There was a tendency among the leadership of Ulster unionism, a morally commendable if potentially politically suicidal tendency, to treat devolution as a *tabula rasa* on which a brave new pluralist Northern Ireland could be built. According to this view, the pro-union essence of the agreement and the devolved structures, of which they are intellectually convinced, would in time reveal itself to all but the most obdurate of those caught up in short-term emotional spasms.

The problem was to an extent recognized by Michael McGimpsey when explaining why the UUP chose his ministry. He argued that since republicans had moved from armed struggle to unarmed struggle, "culture is a battleground." But the true dimension of the challenge resided in the fact that all areas of public policy are a battleground for republicans. They may well have settled in the short to medium term to, in Francie Molloy's words, "administering British rule in Ireland," but they were determined to do so in as robustly an ethnic manner as possible. In a desire to disprove the republican charge that they "don't want a Fenian about the place," Mr. Trimble and his main lieutenants tended to avoid saying anything that might be regarded as too abrasive toward their new colleagues in government. The result was a reluctance to provide what might be termed a positive unionist narrative of the agreement and devolution. The only aggressively sold unionist narrative is the one of "appeasement" retailed by the DUP and other anti-agreement parties.

The lacuna in the "new unionist" approach was well described by the dissident North Down MLA, Peter Weir (Weir subsequently defected to the DUP and was returned on a higher vote for North Down in November 2003):

I think there has been a weakness at times in David Trimble's approach to these things. He has looked at things in one sense rather coldly and logically in the sense that he has looked at the agreement and judged it on the basis of whether he thinks the institutions are correct in the con-

stitutional settlement and looked at a lot of other issues as essentially emotional issues and issues which would have been gone along with anyway by the government. I think politically he has made mistakes in terms of massively underestimating the extent to which some of these issues would impact among the unionist population. He massively underestimated the impact of the prisoner issue in the run-up to the referendum. I think he hadn't calculated the impact that Patten could have on people.

This failure seems to reflect in part at least the influence of class on unionist politics. A defining characteristic of Trimble's pro-active unionism is its withering contempt for what it defines as a defeatist mentality in the unionist community. In the speech that Trimble himself has declared most clearly sets out the strategy he followed since becoming party leader he declares: "Many unionists now seem to lack confidence in their arguments and in their abilities. Many have fallen into a self-pitying mode of saying 'everything is against us, we are doomed to defeat and it doesn't matter what it happens it is bound to fail.'"³⁰

But the problem is not simply psychological, it's structural as well. For a significant section of working-class Protestants the experience of the last three decades has been difficult to comprehend except as a process of decline and increasing embattlement. The problem was most concentrated in North and West Belfast, where a combination of de-industrialization and demographic decline produced a degree of Protestant alienation reflected in some of the evidence to the independent Opsahl Commission.³¹ In 1992 no secondary school pupils went on to higher education from Greater Shankill schools.³² Although the problems of the Shankill Road were extreme, they reflected a more general tendency: according to one academic study in 1991 only 26.6 percent of Protestant entrants to higher education were from a manual working-class background compared to 43.2 percent of Catholics.³³

30. David Trimble, *To raise up a new Northern Ireland*, 46.

31. Andy Pollok, et al., *A Citizens' Inquiry: The Opsahl Report on Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 1993), 43.

32. Island Pamphlets, *Ulster's Protestant Working Class* (Belfast, 1994), 15.

33. Robert D. Osborne, *Higher Education in Ireland North and South* (London and Bristol, Penn., 1996), 35.

The problems and concerns of working-class Protestants do not appear to have registered on the “new unionist” agenda. In June 2000 a new Ulster unionist grouping was launched to promote “new unionism” and stem what was referred to as the “alarming dip” in unionist voting figures over the previous two decades. Called “Re-Union,” its primary aim was “to ensure that the Unionist cause is articulated in such a way as the brightest and best choose to vote for Unionism and accept new responsibilities within the UUP.”³⁴ Sipping wine and munching canapes in an East Belfast hotel, the gathering, perhaps unfairly, suggested that those in the DUP and PUP who used to denounce the UUP as “the fur coat brigade” might update their populist language to “yuppies for Trimble.” It was certainly the case that the focus was almost exclusively on the business and professional classes.

TOWARD REALIGNMENT?

Frank Millar, the journalist with by far the best insider knowledge of unionist politics as a former general secretary of the UUP, has argued that the strong performance of anti-agreement candidates in the 1998 Assembly elections had radical implications for the future of the UUP: “Nothing can ever be the same again for Unionism . . . Remember this word: realignment. We will hear more of this in the coming weeks and months.”³⁵ Millar’s reporting on internal debates within Ulster unionism over the next three years was often discounted as unnecessarily bleak by leading Trimbleistas. Yet the question of realignment is a serious one. This is particularly the case given the emergence of a more secular and pragmatic leadership group within the DUP centered on the MPs for East and North Belfast, Peter Robinson and Nigel Dodds. Trimble himself had commented on how intra-unionist divisions have weakened the unionist cause.

The divisions within the unionist community over the Belfast Agreement and the new dispensation that has developed from it would seem to create the basis for such a realignment. The clear tendency of “new unionism” is to focus its appeal on the Protestant middle class, in particular that section of the Protestant middle class that does not tend to

34. *The Newsletter*, 23 June 2000.

35. *Irish Times*, 27 June 1998.

vote. Paul Bew has claimed that the middle class is the key to the political problems faced by Trimble since the agreement: “The failure of the middle class to rally decisively behind a leader who has given the leadership the middle class claimed to want, is the clue to the uncertainty which marked Mr Trimble’s prospects for the last two years.”³⁶

The potential for UUP expansion within the middle class was set out in an analysis of electoral trends in Northern Ireland from the 1980s produced by party researcher Alex Kane. Kane’s argument was that the overall level of support for unionism, which he defined as the combined UUP/DUP vote, was in long-term decline: from 52.7 percent in the 1982 Assembly elections, when the nationalist vote was 32 percent, to 39.4 percent in the 1998 Assembly elections, when the nationalist vote was 40 percent. There was therefore no salvation for the UUP in “fishing in a small pond already dominated by the DUP.” This was particularly the case as “a worryingly high percentage of our traditional voter base are finding it increasingly easy to vote for the DUP or UKUP.”³⁷

Only through appealing to those of a unionist disposition who did not come out to vote for unionist parties was there a possibility of stabilizing the unionist position. The basis for this argument was the difference between the pro-agreement vote in the referendum and the subsequent vote for unionist parties in the Assembly elections. Kane’s report cited a number of reasons why the 80,000–100,000 small “u” unionists were not voting for the UUP: the alienation of the young and middle class because of their perception that the two main parties were ineffective and incapable of delivering on their pledges; lack of clearly defined strategies and policies for the future, and confusion and frustration over the divisions within unionism. Crucially, Kane believed:

there is evidence that many non-partisan unionists are turned off by the antics of the DUP and the more extreme elements of our own party. Those unionists . . . have been alienated by our reluctance to sell or promote the Agreement. We let the DUP and ‘Union First’ (a right-wing pressure group set up by younger critics of Trimble in the UUP) set the

36. Paul Bew, “Trimble’s win may bring about serious unionism,” *Sunday Tribune*, 28 May 2000.

37. Alex Kane, untitled paper on electoral trends and their implications for the UUP, April 2000. I am grateful to Mr. Kane for providing me with a copy of the paper.

political agenda and allowed them to narrow the debate to the emotional rather than the political issue.³⁸

The strategic implications of this analysis were a much more aggressive promotion of the agreement, a dropping of the decommissioning issue, and a modernization of the party to eliminate the Orange Order's "bloc vote" at the UUC. This line was most associated with the South Antrim MLA, Duncan Shipley Dalton, who refused to canvass for David Burnside, the UUP candidate in the by-election for the South Antrim Westminster constituency, because of Burnside's declaration that he no longer supported the Good Friday Agreement. There is certainly evidence of a substantial social basis for a "new unionist" politics. The RTE/*Irish Times* exit poll for the 1998 Assembly elections showed that one of the three best predictors of support for pro-agreement unionist parties was a middle-class occupation.³⁹ There is also survey evidence that the Protestant middle class was the social group with the highest level of political partisanship in the sense of saying that they were supporters of a particular party. It also showed that while 42 percent of working-class Protestants supported the UUP, the figure for the middle-class Protestants was 48 percent.⁴⁰

Modernizers like Duncan Shipley Dalton have argued that the party could become more attractive to middle-class Protestants turned off by its connections with less civic forms of Ulster Protestant identity if it delivered a clearer "civic unionist message." But this could also accelerate the tendency for the UUP to become a much more sectional political force, albeit of a secular and modernizing nature. This could mean the end of its pretensions to hegemony in the Protestant electorate. "Civic unionism" was a viable message in a number of largely Protestant urban and wealthy constituencies like East Belfast and North Down where there has been an influx of younger Protestants from the professional classes since Trimble became leader. In Shipley Dalton's own constituency of South Antrim, with its large working-class estates and a substantial rural component, his modernization emphasis lost

38. Alex Kane paper on electoral trends.

39. *Irish Times*, 27 June 1998.

40. Mary Duffy and Geoffery Evans, "Class, community polarisation and politics," in Paula Devine and Richard Breen, eds., *Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland: The Sixth Report* (Belfast, 1997).

him the nomination for the 2003 elections, and he has since left the province.

Ulster unionism was from its origins a pan-class phenomenon. In an interview in 1991 Trimble referred to unionism as an “all-class political alliance.”⁴¹ At times the alliance came under strain as when, in the early 1960s, the unionist government and party were extremely concerned to win back support from those working-class Protestants who had defected to the Northern Ireland Labour Party because of growing unemployment in the shipyards and engineering factories.⁴² In a recent attempt to reassert the significance of class for our understanding of Northern Ireland politics, Colin Coulter emphasizes the “machievellian skill” of the unionist élite in maintaining this class alliance.⁴³ In fact what is most striking about the “new unionism” is its lack of concern for the party’s working-class support.

Symptomatic of this trend is Trimble’s increasingly friendly relationship with the leadership of the Conservative Party.⁴⁴ In his address to the Tory conference in October 2001 he bemoaned the “communal” nature of the party system in Northern Ireland and his desire that in the longer term “real politics” should be developed through the main British parties organizing in the North. He added that the bulk of Ulster unionists were small “c” conservatives. The open identification of the UUP with the right was not something that former leaders would have considered precisely because it might have enabled laborist or Protestant populist parties to make inroads into the UUP working-class electorate. The shrinkage in the size of the Protestant working class, and its increasing disposition to support the DUP have encouraged some UUP strategists to consider it a lost cause.

The logic of Trimble’s modernizing strategy is becoming increasingly clear and may be accelerated by the recent election results. It is to give

41. Feargal Cochrane, *Unionist Politics and the Politics of Unionism since the Anglo-Irish Agreement* (Cork, 1997), 61.

42. Henry Patterson, *Ireland since 1939* (Oxford, 2002), 139–47.

43. Colin Coulter, *Contemporary Northern Irish Society: An Introduction* (London & Sterling, Va., 1999), 98.

44. Before Iain Duncan Smith resigned as leader of the Conservative Party there were reports of an agreement with Trimble that the unionists would form a coalition with the Tories in the Westminster parliament, and Trimble would take a position in the shadow cabinet: Frank Millar, “Trimble may join shadow cabinet in pact,” *Irish Times*, 9 Dec. 2002.

up the traditional pretension to be a “broad-church,” a pan-class party with a vocation to hegemony within the unionist community. There is a precedent here, although perhaps not an encouraging one. When a majority in the UUC voted against the Sunningdale Agreement in 1974, Brian Faulkner resigned as leader of the party, and he and his supporters left to form the Unionist Party of Northern Ireland. The party failed to win much support and had faded away by the end of the decade. David Trimble and his supporters may not have to resign from the UUP, however, as there is clearly a much more substantial constituency for “new unionism” than there was in the 1970s. In fact it was his arch-critic, Jeffrey Donaldson, and two other recently elected UUP MLAs who resigned from the party in December 2003, claiming that it had failed to learn the lesson of the Assembly election result, which they claimed showed that two-thirds of the unionist electorate supported the renegotiation of the Agreement.⁴⁵

The problem for the British and Irish governments and Irish nationalists and republicans who want the resurrection of devolved government in Northern Ireland on the basis of the Good Friday Agreement, is that this option has the support of only a minority within Ulster’s Protestant community.⁴⁶ Trimble and the UUP face a difficult decision. The departure of Donaldson and his supporters has increased the pressure from the more militant proponents of “new unionism” like Alex Kane for a wholesale modernization of the party and a much clearer commitment to the agreement.⁴⁷ On the other hand there remain many members of the party who have been shocked by the success of the DUP and, while they have no love for Mr. Donaldson or the DUP which the dissidents are about to join, they have no great enthusiasm for a return to a devolved government within which republicans would be in an even stronger position than before. Trimble may decide

45. Ross Smith, “Donaldson—the aftermath,” *Newsletter*, 20 Dec. 2003.

46. In a poll prior to the election only 16% of Protestants supported the implementation of the agreement while 61% wanted it renegotiated by the political parties and 18% wanted it abandoned altogether. *Belfast Telegraph*, 13 Nov. 2003.

47. Kane criticized the UUP election campaign in 2003: “There was a mixed message, very little promotion of the Agreement,” quoted in Ciaran McKeown, “Party Executive faces stormy poll post-mortem today,” *News-Letter*, 12 Dec., 2003. More realistic advisers had warned Trimble that the UUP campaign was failing to address Protestant dissatisfaction with the implementation of the agreement.

to adopt a waiting strategy hoping that as the DUP is forced to divulge its negotiating position, internal conflicts and contradictions will open up between its modernizing and Free Presbyterian wings. But although Trimble may be prepared to take a more critical tone with regard to the agreement and a harder line against republicans' failure to deliver on the issue of weapons, there is little sign that he will depart from his basic conviction that, from a unionist perspective, a form of devolved regime involving Sinn Féin is the only real secure defense of Northern Ireland's position within the union. He calculates that the visceral anti-republicanism, not to say anti-nationalism and anti-Catholicism which motivates many DUP activists and voters will make it impossible for party "pragmatists" like Robinson and Dodds to make a deal with Sinn Féin. Faced with the prospect of either direct rule from London with the strong possibility of an increased role for Dublin or even of another Assembly election in June to coincide with the 2004 European election, Trimble may hope that his strategy will be validated and the UUP will be able to recover its leadership role in the unionist community. Whether his at present rather shell-shocked party will accept this interpretation of the current situation remains to be seen.