

From Deference to Defiance: Popular Unionism and the Decline of Elite Accommodation in Northern Ireland

Devolution Briefings

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Key Points

- Since the 1950s, grassroots Unionism has become less willing to defer to the policy positions of the traditional Ulster Unionist elite. This makes elite accommodation, which is key to power-sharing with Catholics, more difficult.
- The Unionist elite's legitimacy collapsed during 1965-75 due to reforms, Direct Rule and the unpopular Sunningdale initiative of 1973-4
- The UUP remained the most popular party in part because James Molyneaux, party leader from 1976 to 1995, rejected power sharing and received strong support from Orange Grand Master Martin Smyth. Neither man came from a socially elite background
- In 1995-96, the Smyth-Molyneaux axis came to an end. New UUP leader David Trimble's willingness to share power with Catholics (including Sinn Fein) alienated him from the Orange Order and much of grassroots Unionism
- The shift from the UUP to the DUP is partly related to short-term events, but is also rooted in long-term generational change. In 2001, the UUP was the most popular party, but age was the strongest predictor of UUP voting and most young people already favoured the DUP
- The breaking of the Orange-UUP link in 2005 and increasing Orange support for the DUP marks the culmination of a half century of change whereby Unionist populists finally overthrew their more accommodationist social elite
- History tells us that key popular Unionist leaders like Molyneaux, Smyth and Paisley are too deeply embedded in ethnic social networks and have invested too much in ethnic Unionist identities to compromise. This makes any Paisley-Adams 'deal' extremely unlikely and casts doubt upon the medium-term outlook for devolution in Northern Ireland

Introduction

On 29 November, 2003, The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the only party to govern Northern Ireland since Partition in 1921, lost its primary position as the leading Unionist party in the N.I. Assembly to the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Reverend Ian Paisley. On 5 May, 2005, the electoral revolution was completed when the DUP trounced the UUP in the Westminster elections, netting twice the UUP's popular vote, ousting

David Trimble and reducing the UUP to just one Westminster seat. In March, 2005, the Orange Order, which had helped to found the UUP exactly a century before, cut its links to this ailing party.

That explains this political earthquake? The press and most Northern Ireland watchers place a large amount of stress on short-term policy shifts and events. The failure of the IRA to show 'final acts' of decommissioning of weapons is fingered as the main stumbling block which prevented a re-establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly and, with it, the credibility of David Trimble and his pro-Agreement wing of the UUP.

Our analysis suggests that longer-term factors are at work within Unionism which severely limit the scope for moderates to achieve a lasting power-sharing deal. In order to understand these processes, we must look at the history of two key Unionist institutions, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Orange Order. First, it is important to note that both the UUP and Orange Order are highly democratic, decentralised institutions. Within the UUP, constituency associations have a high degree of local autonomy from the party centre. In the Orange Order, a system of elections elevates leaders from local lodges through district, county and then Grand lodge levels. All of this theoretically allows the grassroots to keep their leaders close to popular opinion.

Yet, despite their democratic structure, both institutions were dominated for a long time by small cliques drawn from the Ulster-Protestant social elite. This socio-political system held until the mid-twentieth century. The Ulster Unionist Party was formed a century ago, well before Partition, and was dominated by an elite of Belfast merchants and large rural landowners. The Orange Order, formed in 1795, is a fraternity whose network of some 800 lodges reaches into almost every Unionist community in Northern Ireland. The Order provided the Unionist Party with support and acted as a mobilising agent for the UUP machine. As a result, the upper echelon of the Order, focused on the 40-odd members of the Central Committee of the Grand Lodge, was dominated by the same social class as the UUP elite. Meanwhile, private lodges were mostly working class. Within the UUP, a similar discrepancy ensured that the party leadership was far more socially elite than its footsoldiers at branch level.

Social Revolution

However, during the twentieth century, the Orange Order underwent major social changes. In 1954, for example, the Order's Grand Master was former Northern Ireland Prime Minister John Millar Andrews. Its 35-member Central Committee was dominated by grandees: just nine lacked a title and there were 16 JPs and 5 OBEs. In 1995, the Order's Grand Master was Martin Smyth, a Presbyterian preacher of middling Belfast origins. In that year, the 41-members of Central Committee contained just ten titled delegates, with only 5 JPs.

The UUP mirrors this shift: in its first 42 years of existence, it had only three leaders: James Craig, John Andrews and Basil Brooke. All came from the landed or business

class. Things changed in 1976, when Faulkner was replaced by James Molyneaux, a farmer's son, who served nearly 20 years as UUP leader. Molyneaux and Smyth both took office in 1975-76 and exemplify the decline of deference within Unionism and the rise of a more self-confident, populist grassroots.

This social revolution went well beyond the pinnacle of these organizations to encompass a wider elite down to the level of the hundred-odd Orange districts. In 1901, a majority of district lodge officers worked in white-collar occupations and were more socially elite than local lodge officers and the Unionist population. By 2001, MOSAIC postal code analysis shows that there was no status difference between the top and bottom of the Orange Order, while its class composition slipped *vis á vis* the wider Unionist population.

Political Revolution

The social revolution within Orangeism, and, to a lesser extent, the UUP, was linked with a major political revolution in which the rank-and-file gained the confidence to challenge their 'betters'. Prior to the 1960s, there were instances of challenges from the grassroots, but this was held in check by the norms of deference expressed so well by a Tyrone district Orange lodge as late as November 1967:

"In view of the vacancy for Grand Master, this lodge recommends the Marquis of Hamilton, MP...it would be an honour for County Tyrone to have such a worthy brother in this high office. He would bring grace and dignity to this office [and this would] mean much goodwill for the Orange Institution in Ireland" - Fintona District Lodge #8, Co. Tyrone.

However, the reforms of the 1960s begun under Terence O' Neill's leadership and maintained during the tenure of reformist leaders Chichester-Clark and Faulkner, alienated many Unionists from their political class. Though there was a solid bloc of pro-power sharing Unionists ranging from 30-50 percent of the total Unionist population, these tended to be disproportionately better educated and resident in greater Belfast. Thus they were largely absent (or passive) within the rank-and-file of Orangeism, though some did play a role in the Unionist Party and its liberal offshoots like the UPNI or Alliance Party.

What emerges from meetings and resolutions is increasing hostility between the Orange Order and reformist prime ministers. Populist leaders like Martin Smyth, James Molyneaux, John Brown and William Douglas had emerged within the Order's Central Committee from the mid-1960s. These figures challenged the patrician leadership of the Order and opposed any concessions to the Nationalist minority - even if this put the Stormont administration's life in danger. The British were equally adamant that the Unionist-led government pursue reform, and forced these administrations to change or face fiscal and political sanctions. As the Unionist regimes of 1969-74 haltingly embraced reform, they incurred the wrath of the Orange Order and many within the Unionist party branches. Whereas even in the 1960s it would have been considered shocking to chastise the Prime Minister, this was no longer the case. In the witty words of

Antrim Orange leader Rev. John Brown:

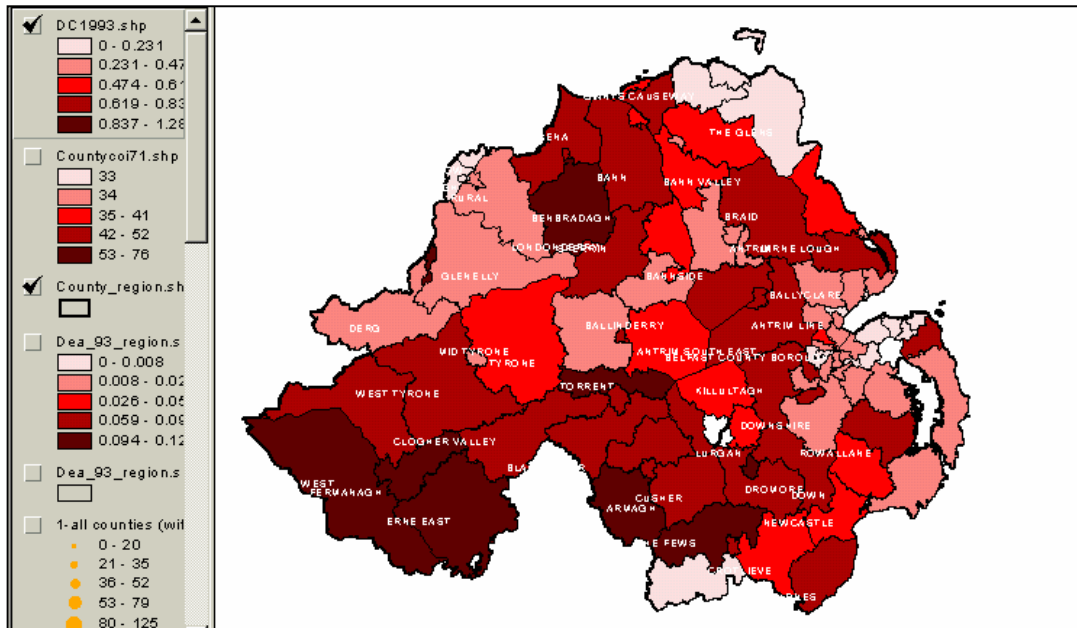
"The P.M. [James Chichester Clark] is at heart an Englishman...keen to obey the generals". (August 1970)

"The man [Prime Minister James Chichester Clark] is stupid, unreliable, and depends on his blind acceptance of the 'advice' of his 'professional advisers'." (November 1970)

Northeast vs. Border

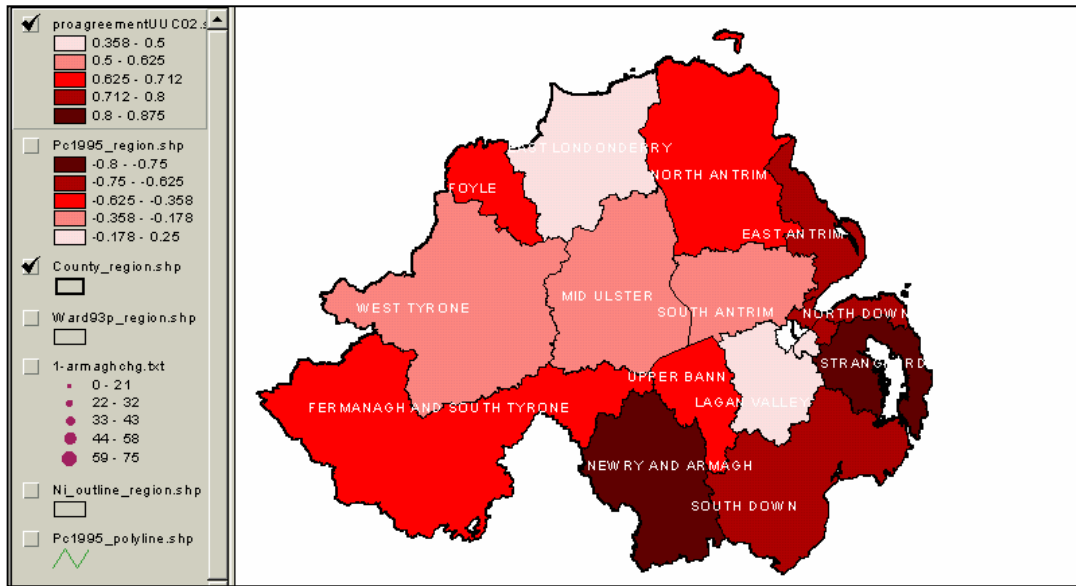
Another important facet of popular Ulster Unionism is region. Northeast Ulster (Antrim, Belfast, North Down) has a very different Unionist tradition than border counties. In the northeast, there are few Catholics, and most Protestants are Presbyterians or Methodists. There is a long tradition of tenants-rights or working-class populism which has bred a more 'rebel' mindset that is suspicious of authority (including that of the Crown). In border areas, Catholics are often a majority, and more Protestants are members of traditional institutions like the Church of Ireland, UUP and Orange Order. Their mindset is more 'traditional' and less willing to challenge the continuities of loyalty to the Crown, Party and Government. In this curious way, 'tradition' is more moderate than rebellion.

Border Protestants - exemplified by figures like Harry West - initially opposed reforms in local government and housing. As late as 1980, surveys showed Protestants in border areas to be more hostile to power-sharing than in Belfast. However, this was grounded more in a 'rational' fear of losing local government control than in militant Protestantism. 'Loyal' border Unionists were more likely to stick with the UUP (as 'our party') than their northeast Ulster counterparts. Today, in interviews, border respondents stress their need to work with the Catholic majority in their areas. Border constituency associations were thus more likely to support the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) after 1998.



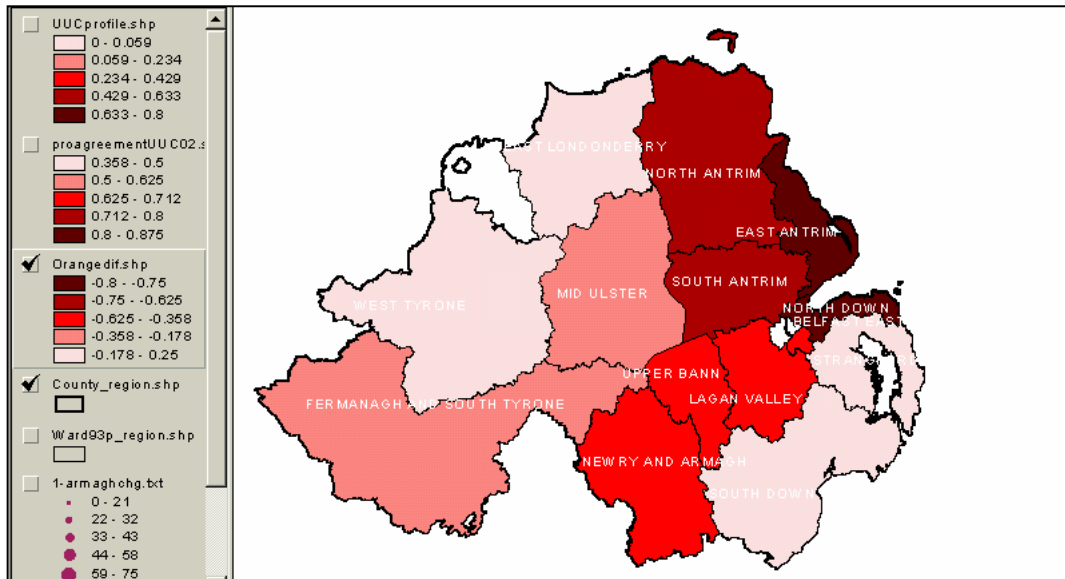
Map 1. UUP Share of Protestant Vote at Local Government Level, 1993

Thus, by the 1990s, Border Unionists' staunch opposition to power sharing had turned to moderation - especially in southern Armagh, Tyrone and Fermanagh. This is illustrated by maps 1,2 and 3. Map 1 shows that the UUP vote amongst Protestants at local level in 1993 was weakest in North Antrim and greater Belfast, and strongest along the southern border and County Londonderry. Map 2 examines the inclinations of UUP constituency associations in 2003. Notice that unlike Londonderry, southern border associations are solidly behind Trimble and the GFA. Thus border areas are generally the only places where voters solidly backed the UUP and the UUP solidly backed the Agreement.



Map 2. Support for the Good Friday Agreement, UUC Constituency Association Delegates, 2003

This pattern is especially pronounced within the Orange Order, and this 'Orange divide' is highly significant statistically when it comes to explaining voting patterns within the UUC. Map 3 shows the difference between two groups of delegates from the same constituencies: Orange delegates and UUP constituency association delegates. Note that in northeast Ulster, Orange UUC delegates are 'rebels' who stand out from their non-Orange constituents as militantly anti-Agreement: they are 63 to 80 percentage points more anti-Agreement than their non-Orange counterparts. In border counties, by contrast, Orangemen are more 'traditionalist' and differ a great deal less in their views from their non-Orange neighbours. In four areas, Orange delegates were actually more pro-Agreement than non-Orange delegates!



Map 3. Difference between Orange and non-Orange (UUC Delegate) Support for the Good Friday Agreement, by Constituency Association, 2003

Looking more broadly at patterns within the UUC in 2003, delegates' gender, class and education made little difference to their vote. Instead, delegates' constituency association or, if Orangemen, their county lodge, was statistically most significant in explaining their stance toward the Good Friday Agreement. Moreover, Orange delegates and Young Unionists tended to oppose the Agreement while the 17 MLAs (who stood to lose status and salary if the Assembly was suspended) were almost unanimously pro-Agreement. In effect, local networks mattered more than individual characteristics when it came to a vote on the UUC floor.

What of the wider swath of the Unionist population and the rise of the DUP? In 2001, when the UUP still held an electoral advantage over the DUP, long-term signs pointed toward an in-built DUP demographic advantage. This is because, as table 1 shows, age was by far the most important predictor of a DUP vote. Education and support for private enterprise were also very important, though class and gender were not significant. (N.B. Insignificant factors are excluded from the graph) Recent research on the Orange Order undertaken by Jocelyn Evans and Jon Tonge confirms this finding: younger Orangemen are significantly more likely to vote DUP than their older counterparts. It seems that 'rebel' Unionism has transcended its roots in North Antrim and Belfast and is being carried by less deferential new generations throughout Northern Ireland.

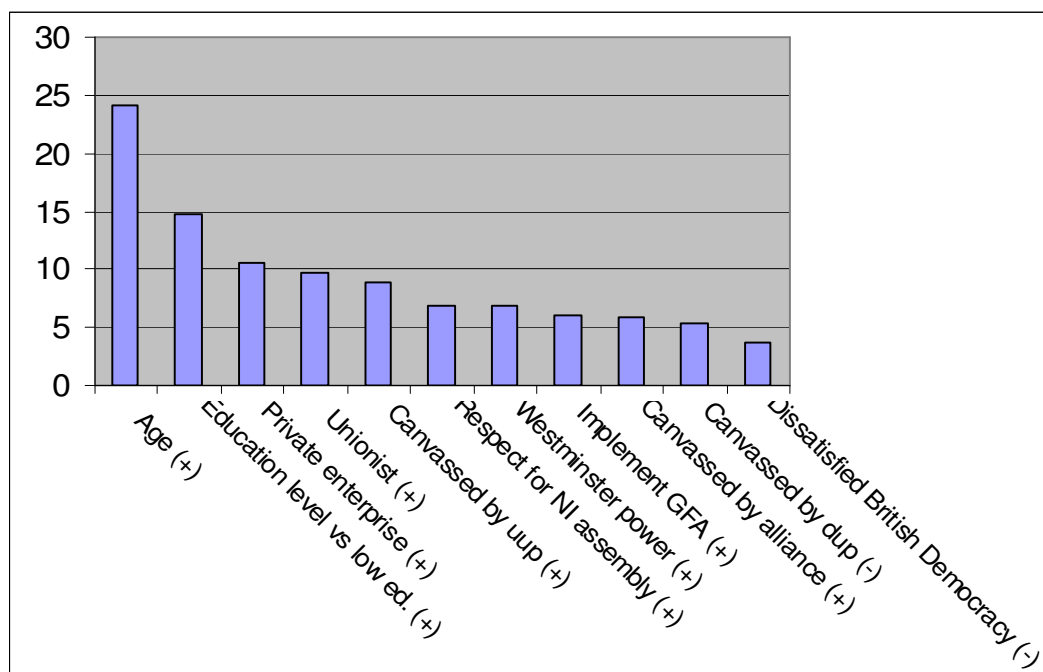


Table 1. Predictors of Support for the UUP in the 2001 Election (Protestants only), by Statistical Significance (Wald Test)

Conclusions

The period since 1998 has been one of electoral realignment within Unionism. Unquestionably, this is linked to short-term shifts in public opinion revolving around issues like decommissioning. But beneath the surface, a longer-term cultural shift has been taking place from 'loyalty' to 'rebellion' which made a UUP-DUP 'tipping point' increasingly likely. The Unionist population has become less willing to defer to its social elite, and newer generations are expressing this new 'defiance' by voting increasingly for the DUP. This shift in attitude is partly due to a modernisation process that has swept through the western world and challenged status hierarchies of all kinds since the 1950s. In Northern Ireland, it is also related to the decline of the Stormont majoritarian system. Unionist elites were pressured by the British to reform to reach an accommodation with the Catholic minority. As Unionist leaders acceded to reform in the 1965-75 period, they lost legitimacy in the eyes of Unionist working and rural people.

Within the Orange Order, a new generation of 'self-made' populists replaced the old 'squirearchy' in leadership roles by the early 70s. In the UUP, populists made important inroads after 1975. The grassroots were rising, and in the 1975-95 period, their sentiments were expressed by Martin Smyth, the Orange Grand Master, and James Molyneaux, the UUP leader. More recently, modernisers under David Trimble regained control of the UUP and engineered a compromise with Nationalists which took the form of the historic Good Friday Agreement. This accommodation ultimately ensured that

Trimble met the same fate as Faulkner did in 1974-5. In short, a more anti-elitist Unionism is in the ascendant, rendering elite accommodation (which is key to all power-sharing systems) difficult.

Martin Smyth, James Molyneaux and Ian Paisley emerged from the grassroots, have histories of populist activism and thus identify with their anti-Establishment origins. Their biographies are hence quite different from previous Unionist leaders and from David Trimble. Given this pattern, it is unlikely that Paisley's DUP will reach an accommodation with Sinn Fein that will relaunch devolved government in Northern Ireland.

This *Devolution Briefing* was written by Eric Kaufmann (Birkbeck College) and Henry Patterson (University of Ulster). It reports findings from the project 'The Decline of the Loyal Family? Popular Unionism and the Devolution Process', which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of its programme on Devolution and Constitutional Change. Grant number L219 25 2131

The Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme was set up by ESRC in 2000 to explore the series of devolution reforms which have established new political institutions in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, London and the other English regions since 1997. It has commissioned 35 projects around the UK to carry out top-class academic research and to contribute to the policy debates surrounding devolution.

For more information see the Programme website at www.devolution.ac.uk or contact the Programme Director, Professor Charlie Jeffery at ESRC Devolution Programme, School of Social and Political Studies, Adam Ferguson Building, George Square, University of Edinburgh. Tel 0131 650 8489, Fax 0131 650 6546, Email charlie.jeffery@ed.ac.uk