

ULSTER UNIONIST PARTY

Introduction

1. In trying to assess the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) it should never be forgotten that the present Party emerged from the disintegration, between 1968 and 1974, of the original Unionist Party whose antecedents can be traced back to the early years of the 20th century when a need was perceived for a body to act as a focal point for Unionist opposition to the emerging effectiveness of the campaign for Home Rule for Ireland. Indeed it began not as a Party, as such, but as a Unionist Council which first met in 1905 in response to a devolution crisis which arose following the proposals contained in the Land Act of 1903. Land owners in the south of Ireland, in order to oppose these reforms, banded together and Unionists in Ulster saw this as the onset of Home Rule by degrees. Because the Unionist movement was essentially northern (all but 2 of the seats held were in Ulster), it was a natural step for Ulster Unionists to band themselves together to form a northern-based group separate from the earlier (all Ireland) Irish Unionist Party.

Structure

2. The character of the Party that emerged was for many years influenced by its origins although as Unionism grew, in the aftermath of partition and the formation of the Stormont Parliament, a certain amount of structural change took place. The original Ulster Unionist Council consisted of 200 members of which 100 were nominated by local Unionist Associations, 50 were nominated by the Orange Order and more than 50 were co-opted distinguished Unionists. The Council was served by a Standing Committee of 30-10 nominated by the Chairman of the Parliamentary Unionist Party and 20 elected by the Council. This framework ensured that the traditional elements of Unionism - the landowners; the aristocracy; the clergy; and the newly emerged industrial middle classes - retained power and influence. This meant also of course that the machine was inflexible and resistant to changing times and values. It was only

reluctantly, therefore, that the Party moved to become more representative of new social structures and in some ways even the changes that did occur were more apparent than real. By the late 1940s the Ulster Unionist Council consisted of 996 persons drawn from a wide range of bodies which now included amongst others: the Ulster Unionist Labour Association; the Young Unionists; and the Ulster Women's Unionist Council. Further change meant that by 1970 the UUC Standing Committee consisted of: 238 nominees from Divisional Associations and affiliated organisations; 69 Peers, Senators and MPs; and 23 other ex-officio or co-opted members.

3. In practice, however, the Standing Committee had become but a smaller version of the larger Council and was unsuitable to run a political Party. Consequently, a smaller executive committee of 36 was formed to conduct the business of the Party between meetings of the Standing Committee and the Council.

Political Philosophy

4. Because the Unionist Party was borne of opposition to Home rule, and post-partition opposition to unification, much of unionist thinking stems from a negative, not-an-inch, perception rather than any forward-looking plan for progress or policies formed around a central core of political thinking. Thus it has been said that unionism is not a political philosophy but a tradition.

5. Therefore, there has never been a cohesive political philosophy which united them in the way that conventional political parties are bound together. Consequently the Unionist Party, locked as they were into a defensive sectarian posture, never fully realised that as the Party of Government it should attempt to develop a political way forward which could command respect throughout its own Party and throughout the country at large. For example, it is said that a Minister of Health once explained his absence from a vital Cabinet meeting (on a Health matter) by saying that he had been "at the dedication of an Orange banner" on the night in question. Whilst this is probably an apocryphal story, it does nevertheless give some

flour of the major dilemma which tasked unionism. That is that they expected, as of right, to be the Party of Government but not necessarily the Party who governed.

6. However, insofar as they had a philosophy, broadly speaking the Party line would have been fairly far right of centre, allied with an inflexibility and reaction against change of any sort - all of this based on the principle that any change might rock the applecart. Nevertheless, there were signs in the early nineteen sixties that some fresh blood was entering into the Party and men of greater ability (Brian Faulkner as Minister of Commerce stands out in memory) began to introduce new and forward-looking ideas to bring Northern Ireland into the latter half of the 20 century and beyond. It was against this background that the Unionist Party faced the development of the Civil Rights Movement, the emergence of a new and more virulent IRA and the changed political environment following the prorogation of Stormont and the emergence and subsequent demise of the power-sharing Executive.

Fragmentation of the Unionist Party

7. The tensions that were always present within Unionism came to the fore in the late 60s and early 70s and led to the break-up of the original Party. Those who subscribed to a more progressive pluralist society (O'Neill and latterly Faulkner) became the UPNI, later to disappear completely. At the other extreme, Protestant fringe elements who wished to see staunch defence against anything which smacked of compromise either in terms of religious or political development became, through the transitional route of the UUUC, part of the DUP.

8. The rump that was left became what is now recognised as the UUP. It contained within it the tradition and backing of the original Unionist Party although some will say that it came by its inheritance by default. Prominent among those of this view were the traditionists who believed that one of the strengths of the old Party lay in the very diversity of opinion which, conversely, became one of the weaknesses which caused its division. Certainly those

While the political careers developed in the 50s and 60s see little of any substance in the men who now run the Party, and many have turned away from politics, being content to return to more normal occupations.

The present power structure

9. The key relationships that now exist are between the Leader, the Parliamentary party, the Executive and to lesser degrees the Unionist Council, the Association of Unionist Councillors and the constituency committees. One of the significant factors has been the shift in emphasis that occurred following the reorganisation of local government and the emergence of Direct Rule.

10. Traditionally, since the seat of real power was at Stormont, those with most ability went first into the council Chambers with the eventual aim of obtaining a safe Unionist Stormont constituency. Largely therefore those of lesser ability, or lesser ambition, sat for a Westminster seat which became more or less sinecures for some of the Party faithful. However the withdrawal of many executive functions from the Councils, and the removal of the upper tier of local government, left Westminster as the only political forum of real influence and this marked a radical shift in the balance of power within the Party - towards the Parliamentary group.

11. A corollary to the move away from local influence was that the Unionist Council became much less important because the need to maintain a power base here among the Unionist "county" and "blue rinse brigade" became much less important. It is significant therefore that the Unionist Council, which met frequently to discuss the various crises that developed between 1969 and 1971, meets only infrequently now. The real power lies with the Executive Committee and the Parliamentary group of MPs.

12. Having said all that however the difficulty of actually trying to lead unionists cannot be ignored. An analogy has been drawn by some between the leadership structure of the Unionist party and the

structure of the Presbyterian non-conformist traditions. In other words each individual constituency group (like each separate church) may be prepared to vote for a leader (the Moderator) who represents the views of the corporate body; but that election does not pass on with it the ability to speak for, or direct the policy of, the group as of right. It is therefore incumbent upon the leader to make sure that whatever subject he speaks upon he does so strictly within defined parameters. To step outside these is to risk his position. This is often described as the O'Neill/Faulkner syndrome of unionist politics in that they both, in their separate ways, stepped outside their remit and were smartly dismissed by those who professed to support them.

13. It is therefore against this background that the present leader moves and shows both his greatest strengths and greatest weaknesses. He is a prime manipulator of his party, one who knows how (by a wink and a nod) to express his views and opinions and convey the impression clearly and equally to all that he will accommodate each of their points of view. Also by recognising the weakness of any of the other potential leaders, both in terms of charisma and real political ability, he has managed to convince most of those of influence within the Executive Committee and his Parliament colleagues that any other candidate would be a disaster so that he has effectively placed himself beyond challenge.

14. This however shows that his purpose in staying in leadership is solely to retain leadership but not to lead. He clearly lacks the courage or indeed the conviction to do anything which might be readily construed as constructive or forward looking or in any way likely to break the political deadlock. Indeed there are some who say that he considers that the Prime Minister (for whom he had a very high regard prior to Hillsborough 1985) personally affronted him by the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and therefore, because he has a rather small petty mind, he is determined to remain in a position to block any progress which might be an accommodation with the great (personal) betrayal.

15. There are those within the party, of course, who see other ways of dealing with the problems and who harbour political ambitions for themselves. But some of the potential leading candidates have effectively ruled themselves out: Taylor's association with a right wing group in Europe has ensured that he will never be the leader; McCartney is now no longer a member of the party; McCusker is tainted with the Task Force report; Miller (too soon for him in any case) has gone; and many of the rest of the MPs are nonentities. It is more or less by a process of elimination therefore rather than by a process of selection (plus the probable backing of the Orange Order) that Martin Smyth is recognised as the heir-apparent should Molyneaux fall under the proverbial bus. The very lack of talent among the party is of course one of the strong cards that has kept Molyneaux leader for so long.

Policy

16. Although they claim to have a full range of policies on all subjects the UUP showed little evidence of this. The manifestoes in which they have fought recent elections have centred on three subjects: security; the constitutional question; and opposition to the Agreement.

Security

17. All party members of influence, and especially the MPs, speak frequently on the subject of improving security but the main spokesman is Ken Maginnis. The party policy, insofar as there is an agreed one, is to call for greater commitment and effort not especially from the security forces (in whom they profess full support) but from HMG - in other words for more draconian legislation and actions such as selective internment and relaxation of the yellow card conditions of engagement. In truth however their ideas are unstructured and often reflect the general frustration that often follows a particular terrorist outrage.

Constitutional Position

18. The perennial argument within the party (even from the earliest days) was the exact relationship that should be sustained with Westminster in order to achieve the most reliable formula to ensure maintenance of the Union. Devolution has always been regarded with suspicion and the ease with which Stormont was prorogued in 1971 did little to convince unionists that it could ever provide a lasting solution again. The logic of this being that it could as easily be set aside again by any Government of the day should that Government deem it necessary in order to further the cause of a united Ireland.

19. This has helped the integrationist faction, for so long dormant, to re-emerge with fresh vigour. Included among the integrationist faction are the leader and other senior party members. The overt logic of their case is that if Northern Ireland were treated as any other part of the United Kingdom then the constitutional purity of the position would be a perpetual protection. Moreover the covert attraction in this is that unionism need do nothing about looking at improving relationships between the 2 communities in NI. Indeed integration ensures that they need not look back at past mistakes in handling the other tradition nor do they need to look forward to face difficult tests and choices associated with building new bridges across the community divide.

20. Some, and in particular Robert McCartney, have taken this further to develop the philosophy enshrined in the Campaign for Equal Citizenship (CEC) - that is integration with the added dimension that the local political parties should be replaced by the main GB parties so that voters here would be able to choose between candidates who would eventually form the Government. This of course has a perfectly attractive logic if one ignores the fact that it begins from the false premise that this would contribute to the solution of the community differences which divide Northern Ireland society. It has however proved to be sufficiently persuasive (because it further reduces the need to take positive steps to make progress) to form another splinter group which has separated itself from the UUP. It should be said that McCartney's own personality is

a major factor in causing the CEC to break away. Although he has some of the basic credentials, and the charisma and oratory, that could have made him a natural leader of the party,

In fact his personality is such that it was certain that at some time he would come into conflict with the leadership and it was equally certain that he would lose.

21. The remaining option, devolution, is favoured among many of the more able and thinking elements within the Unionist party. Certainly Frank Miller, Peter Smyth, Ken Maginnis and Raymond Ferguson have all played their part in trying to bring it to the front of the party's thinking. However the current framework, with the Agreement in place, leads many rank and file unionists to believe that any discussions now, which lead to an accommodation with the SDLP, would be tantamount to abject surrender. This would leave the Agreement in place to be used against them as a bargaining tool, at a later stage, to take them further down the road to a united Ireland. Consequently suggestions on devolution are less popular among active UUP party workers than they appear to be among the Unionist population at large. For example the views of Maginnis and Ferguson who spoke on this theme at the recent Unionist Party Conference, were firmly rejected by most of those attending. It is the case however, that the UUP MPs with the exception of Maginnis, McCusker and possibly Roy Beggs are not in favour of devolution.

22. The conclusion to this is that the Party is split into a number of opposing factions each with its own view on how matters may develop in the future. What does hold the party together at this stage is a commitment to oppose a united Ireland (which sounds the same as, but is not synonymous with, maintenance of the Union) and an inflexible opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. There have, however, been some interesting signals recently from Molyneaux following the approaches from the present Taoiseach Mr Haughey. These have allowed some speculation that the UUP are prepared to accept some role for Dublin, within the "totality of relationships" in the British Isles. It is too early to assume that this is a

significant shift in opinion. We believe that it may only be a way of saying that the Anglo-Irish Agreement should extend the Anglo-Irish process to the whole of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. This fits neatly into unionist thinking both as an extension of the integrationist philosophy that Northern Ireland should be treated like any other part of the UK and also as a ploy to embarrass both governments who would not wish the other to have a say in their internal affairs. Even if it were to develop into a move to accommodate a Dublin dimension there is ample evidence to suggest that the UUP position has as its first objective the provision of an alternative to the Agreement and as its second achievement of some kind of local accommodation whether that be integrationist or devolutionist. This places a role for Dublin a long way third in their list of priorities and then only to encompass a certain range of matters of common interest.

Anglo-Irish Agreement

23. There are a number of points of Unionist objection such as: negotiation in secret from them but, they allege, in consultation with the SDLP; the prospect of changes in the administration of justice; and implied criticism of the RUC and especially the UDR. Valid as these may be in unionist eyes they are not enough of themselves to sustain the unmoving depth of unionist antagonism. The fundamental flaw in unionist eyes, and this sits at the very heart of the unionist position, is the presence of Dublin both implicit, in its oversight of events here, and explicit in the involvement of Dublin Ministers in the Anglo-Irish Ministerial Conference and Civil Servants at Maryfield. There have been, and continue to be, differences within the UUP as to the handling of the campaign against the Agreement. Most significantly UUP councillors have objected to being used, through the Council boycott, as front-line troops when MPs have continued to frequent (if not attend) Westminster. However these differences concern strategy and tactics, not objectives, so that whilst the presence of the Agreement may have created tensions within the party - and in some instances led to fractures, Millar and McCartney being examples - in a peculiar sense it has also acted as a cohesive force. Certainly

so who might have reservations about the leader have remained faithful on the basis that now is not the time for change. Whilst this reaction continues - and it must be said that there are few signs that pressure for movement is building up within the party - and if the leader himself remains inflexible there is little likelihood in the near future of movement, or constructive dialogue, on the Agreement or the broader political scene.