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REDEFINING UNIONISM
—A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE
Dermot Nesbitt, MLA

—AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE
Richard English

IBIS working paper no. 2
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No. 2 in the lecture series “Redefining the union and the nation: new perspectives on political progress in Ireland” organised in association with the Conference of University Rectors in Ireland

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ABSTRACTS

REDEFINING UNIONISM—
A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

The main unionist political demand in the years immediately after 1972 was for the return of the Northern Ireland parliament based on the principle of majority rule. Government-sponsored efforts to provide alternative solutions collapsed. More recently, attempts to resolve the problem on the basis of human rights and equality have been made, and the new unionist case is grounded largely on the belief that non-unionists should be persuaded that there is a place for them in Northern Ireland. The Belfast Agreement offers hope of a real and honourable accommodation, even if there continue to be difficulties in its implementation.

REDEFINING UNIONISM—
AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

The contrasting attitudes of unionists towards the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 and the Belfast Agreement of 1998 illustrate a significant change in unionist politics. The perspective of paramilitary groups has changed, and a section of unionism prepared to negotiate a deal with nationalists has emerged. This was a response *inter alia* to changes in the character of republicanism, to social and political change in the Republic and to devolution in Great Britain. The new unionism is, by comparison with unionism in the past, more fluid, more complex internally and more articulately defended by intellectuals. Although it can also be accommodated to a developing rapprochement between Ireland and Great Britain, there is little evidence of the emergence of a stable sense of communal self-confidence.

Publication information

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**BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION**

**Dermot Nesbitt, MLA**, has been a member of the Northern Ireland Assembly since 1998 and is Junior Minister at the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. A university lecturer by profession, he was a member of the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue and of the Ulster Unionist talks team at Castle Buildings in 1996-98.

**Richard English** is Professor of Politics at Queen’s University, Belfast. His books include *Ernie O’Malley: IRA intellectual* (Oxford University Press, 1998) and (with Graham Walker) *Unionism in modern Ireland: new perspectives on politics and culture* (Macmillan Press, 1996).
When I agreed to contribute to this lecture series my mind turned to a song from that famous musical *Les miserables*—a musical I have seen both in London and here at The Point. In one scene the star of the musical, Jean Val Jean, asks in song “Who am I?” One telling line is “If I speak I am condemned, if I stay silent I am damned.” Too often the easy road is to say nothing. Indeed I have often been asked, why are you in politics? My answer is simple—I enjoy politics. But as often as I am asked that question I am told what I should do—"don't give in", "stand firm", "you live in history, think of the future"—to name but a few words of advice.

However, it is more than enjoyment—there must be hope for a better future for all. We cannot subscribe to that phrase of Oscar Wilde, “Something was dead in all of us and what was dead was hope.” Not so indeed, unionism has come a long way over the past decades. It is the following questions that I have been asked to address today: What has been the traditional position of the Ulster Unionist Party? What reasons have there been for change? What main changes have there been in recent years? And, finally, what are the implications for relations within these islands?

The initial Ulster Unionist Party position before 1920 (properly called the Ulster Unionist Council)—we are not officially a political party, now there is an "Irishism" for you!—had been to reject any form of devolved (or self) government. However, the Northern Ireland parliament (Stormont) became in due course, as viewed by unionists, a bulwark for the Union—even though it was accepted by unionists at the outset that Northern Ireland was being marginalised from mainstream politics. Also, some non-unionists hoped that the separate parliament would lead to a united Ireland.

Unionists therefore sought for many years the return of a parliament, which, in their view, had been unfairly removed in March 1972. From that time there was much debate within unionism as to the best way forward—devolution/integration, majority rule/power sharing. Such continued debate had been to the detriment of the unionist case and it could be contested, with some justification, that for many years since 1972 unionism had not a clear and focused policy, argued with consistency, conviction and clarity, to match the case presented by nationalists.
Nationalists’ position seemed clear. In 1978 the SDLP document *Facing reality* stated:

... the British Government should enter into immediate discussion with the Irish Government in order to promote jointly matters of common concern to both parts of Ireland. They should also develop jointly a programme for the harmonisation of the laws and services on both sides of the border.

The “devolution/integration” debate had been a very divisive issue within unionism. In reality, however, these words lack precision. Any form of government below the Westminster level is devolved government. Equally, within certain parameters, there is no one unique form of government called “integration”. Essentially the difference between the two views, when used in political debate, refers to whether or not an elected body at Stormont should or should not have the authority to make some of its own laws as Stormont had between 1921 and 1972.

It is worth noting that the Government of Ireland Act (1920) gave no guarantee that Stormont would have the finance available to provide services comparable with Great Britain. At the time of the home rule bills it was estimated that there would be a financial surplus of income over expenditure of £5.7m and £1.9m for the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland respectively. Northern Ireland’s predicted surplus in reality was a deficit and public provision in general fell below GB standards, not because the Ulsterman was conservative but because the government was chronically short of money. Unionism believed, however, that the political gains of self-governement more than outweighed any financial constraint.

In the 1970s and 1980s what were the perceptions? Certainly unionist policy has always been aimed at securing and enhancing the Union. It was broadly accepted that social disobedience or a “unionist” terrorist campaign would not preserve the Union and thus clear policies were essential that would be reasonable, achievable, believable and convincing. It had not been a rarity for unionists to say: “we’re finished”, “we’ve been sold down the river”, or “you’re not worth voting for”.

Throughout the period 1974-95 there were at least eight significant attempts to restore accountable democracy in Northern Ireland. These ranged from the power sharing executive of 1974 (headed by the late Brian Faulkner) to the *Frameworks document* of 1995. Though most Ulster Unionist Party leaders during this period were called “traitor” by some, I believe each leader did his best given the circumstances; on each occasion the package was rejected by some grouping—governments, nationalists or unionists; and on each occasion unionism was worse off next time.

An indication of thinking in the 1970s and 1980s can be obtained from the following quotes from leading politicians of the day.

It would be improper and highly dangerous to our case for any party member to suggest or volunteer or hint at any deviation from or amendment to the main principles of our scheme .... and these do not include administrative devolution, a single elected regional council as an upper tier of local government or total integration.
The number one policy in our books is the return of a devolved government to Northern Ireland. Yes indeed, we are looking for the big one here. We must insist that the devolved government that was taken away from us several years ago be given back to us.

The obvious alternative is a strong devolved government based on the principles of democracy and majority rule. Such a development would be a hammer blow to the morale of the IRA.

These unionist politicians shall remain anonymous, but none is active now in politics.

III

Unionism in 1987 began to recognise that new thinking was needed. A document entitled *An end to drift* was published in June 1987. This was prepared by a unionist cross-party group and presented to both Mr Molyneaux and Dr Paisley. It contemplated that unionists should not be “ashamed to adapt to changing circumstances” and that both parties perhaps abandon “pure majority rule”. This represented new thinking.

Remember, this was against a recent background of not only a boycott of elected institutions by unionists but also various petitions—retention of the Governor, rejection of the Anglo Irish Agreement—and all unionist MPs resigning their seats and fighting by-elections. Over 400,000 votes returned the unionist MPs to Westminster on an anti Anglo-Irish Agreement “ticket”—a substantial number in the context of Northern Ireland. From a unionist perspective, none of these actions had any measurable impact on the situation.

From a personal viewpoint I can accept that all these proposals by the government for the governance of Northern Ireland required agreement among the participating parties (including unionists). However when considering the merits of any new proposal one doesn’t make a judgement in favour simply because it requires one’s approval. A judgement is made in the context of a proposal in the “up and running” mode. To make clear my point, when purchasing a car the decision is made on how the car performs, not on the fact that the purchase will only take place by agreement between the buyer and seller. In short it was absolutely irrelevant that, at regular intervals throughout the 1995 *Frameworks document*, it was stated that agreement by all parties was needed as if to make the proposals somehow more acceptable to unionists.

Entering the 1990s, as unionism was rethinking its strategy, other events—on a grander scale—were impacting upon the thought process. Indeed, the world is ever changing and the world is never without problems to solve—Northern Ireland is not alone in this context. In this ever-changing world there are from time to time new paradigms. One such paradigm, I believe, was the break-up in 1989 of the USSR. You may wonder, why is this mentioned? A major result of this break up was that the threat to peace and stability within Europe became more intra-state than inter-
state. The major governments in Europe turned anew to the problem of accommodating diversity within states. The last time this had been addressed had been before 1939.

Intra-state conflict within the European context is additional to other problems such as the transition from totalitarianism to pluralist democracy and the social and economic move from centrally planned economies to market economies.

The solution of intra-state conflict has often been referred to as “group accommodation” or “minority protection”. Indeed, a former senior member of the SDLP, Mr Austin Currie—now a member of Dial Eireann—had described our problem in this context as follows:

Fundamentally the Northern Ireland conundrum is one of conflicting national identities between those who believe themselves Irish and those who believe themselves British. There are religious, social, cultural, political and other dimensions to the problem but they are only dimensions of that central issue.

IV

Further, my opponents have also defined the problem in the context of “Rights” and “Equality”. Pat Doherty, Sinn Fein Vice-President, writing in *Belfast Telegraph* 25th February 2000, stated that:

Probably more significant is the lack of product on the human rights front. While the Human Rights Commission has been established, none of the many obligations in the Agreement has been honoured. We have yet to produce and ratify a Bill of Rights. We have yet to incorporate the European Convention of Human Rights into local law.

I believe this represents a position constantly adopted by Sinn Fein, namely an expressed concern regarding the “rights” (or perceived lack of “rights”) of the nationalist/republican community.

I, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, fully agree “rights” should be protected. The basic requirements for order in any democratic society today are found within international human rights law. In the context of Northern Ireland there is no more important issue to be addressed than how we organise our society with respect to human rights.

The protection of rights is a central part in the establishment and functioning of democracy. International standards of human rights go to the very heart of democratic values. Failure to abide by these universally accepted human rights standards within a state brings into question whether or not that state is democratic. Mr Ahern referred in an *Irish Times* article on Tuesday of this week, in reference to the present problem of asylum seekers, to his Government’s obligations to international human rights standards.
These rights embrace a number of categories: civil, political, economic, social, religious and cultural. The question has been how can we manage the differences that exist in Northern Ireland in ways consistent with democratic values and human rights.

This commitment to human rights reflects much more than a personal obligation on my part; it should be an obligation on all involved to subscribe to international human rights norms. The Irish government, in the 1990s, convened a “Forum for Peace and Reconciliation”. Like similar fora elsewhere, this forum heard evidence and commissioned studies.

Professors Kevin Boyle, Colm Campbell and Tom Hadden wrote for the forum in May 1996 the following:

Decisions on what should constitute fundamental human rights can no longer be regarded as a matter for people in individual states to decide as best they can. The substance of fundamental human rights is now determined by international consensus.

The first mentioned academic was a leading civil rights activist in Northern Ireland in the 1960s.

A clear framework such as that found today within international human rights law provides a coherent approach that should give a consistent thread to both words and deeds by both unionists and nationalists/republicans. Without such a clear framework, policy could veer first one way and then another. I am happy to redefine unionism in a rights/equality framework.

In trying to redefine unionism an understanding of the word “minority” is required. I remember very well during the talks process the first time that I mentioned “minority rights”. I was abruptly told by Mark Durkan that, and I quote, “I don’t ever again want to hear you use the word minority in these Talks when you are referring to nationalists.”

I have learned to understand the word “minority” carries with it an implication of being somewhat less in importance. The Council of Europe is the foremost organisation regarding the implementation of human rights—it is responsible for the European Court of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.

The Council has referred to a national minority as a group of persons within a state “who display distinctive ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics” and are “motivated by a concern to preserve together that which constitutes their common identity.” Such a national minority is to be “sufficiently representative, although smaller in number than the rest of the population of that state or a region of that state.” This reflects more truly—and sensitively—my concept of a minority; merely smaller in number than other groupings within a state.

Dr Michael Briesky, the Austrian Ambassador to Ireland, gave a lecture in October 1998 at Queens entitled “Dealing with Minorities: A Challenge for Europe”. He was
very clear on this point. While it is necessary, as a first element, that minorities are protected by the norms of international rules, a second and equally important element, requires the breaking down of psychological barriers: the sense of superiority/inferiority must be eliminated. The building of confidence and trust is required.

V

I appreciate that unionists must convince nationalists/republicans that there will be a fair deal for all within Northern Ireland—that they have a stake in Northern Ireland and can play an important role at each level of government. Equally unionists must be convinced that all will work within the institutions of government in Northern Ireland—in the context of a peaceful environment. This is where real confidence building is required.

It goes without saying that others, in addition to unionism, need to redefine their thinking. I believe that part of the inherent past difficulty was the way previous United Kingdom, and Irish, governments approached a resolution to our divided society. It was based on a belief that they faced a unique problem. In February 1995, the Frameworks document described Northern Ireland as being in a “special position”. The then Prime Minister, John Major, described Northern Ireland in the foreword as “unique”.

The assertion that the central problem in Northern Ireland is unique is not based on objective judgement: there are perhaps a hundred million people across Europe who consider themselves to be on the wrong side of a border. Whether it be Russians in Estonia, Hungarians in Slovakia, Austrians in Italy, or for that matter Muslims in the Philippines—to name but some examples—the dynamics of community division are the same and thus subject equally to international human rights standards.

I believe that in fully supporting the Belfast Agreement we have at last correctly defined and reflected the concept of “the totality of relationships” as was stated in the various communiqués issued by Mr Haughey and Mrs Thatcher in 1980. There is more in common between the two main islands than there is in division between us. We use the same first language, are joint heirs to a rich Anglo-Irish culture, share many customs and practices, are accessed by the same media, drive on the same side of the road and have a similar climate which impacts upon many aspects of life. The Belfast Agreement reflects both political and geographic reality. It reflects also best international practice—in a maximalist way—for accommodating diversity.

The Ulster Unionist Party gave absolutely its commitment to create an inclusive government—unionist, nationalist and republican—for Northern Ireland. That executive was created in December 1999. For confidence to develop and the process to continue, unionism’s commitment needed to have been matched by a commitment from the republican movement regarding a complete end to all violence.
This unprecedented commitment to inclusiveness has in my view been too little acknowledged. The inclusiveness was of course built into the Belfast Agreement to which my colleagues and I agreed as a settlement of Northern Ireland’s longstanding conflict. Yet our commitment to inclusivity has not been enough to receive a matching commitment concerning an end to violence. Sinn Fein insisted that it be let into government without any certainty or clarity that decommissioning would take place.

Indeed there seems little understanding that without matching commitments made and honoured by the republican movement after so many months, unionists would naturally lose faith with its intentions and come to fear that the republican game plan was not peace and stability in Northern Ireland.

I have to say that those of us involved closely in the process were disappointed, to put it mildly, at the overt support by the Irish Government for the “spin” adopted by Sinn Fein. A Sunday Independent article on 19 March 2000, written by John A. Murphy, summarises well the Ulster unionist perception. It commenced: “De Valera would be alarmed at the propaganda boost Sinn Fein is getting from Fianna Fail.”

In a much more disturbing vein, I give you a quotation from the Sunday Business Post of 26 March 2000. In this paper columnist Tom McGurk wrote:

For 30 years now we have tried every conceivable political and constitutional arrangement to retain the linkage with Britain in order to placate them. Not only constitutional nationalism but even republicanism has turned itself inside out in ever more radical attempts to show them a face they might accept. But the answer again and again is no.

I am honestly at times left wondering. For all the millions of words written and spoken on the Northern Ireland problem the gulf in comprehension between some remains dauntingly large.

VI

However, in conclusion I want to be positive. The Northern Ireland problem is not insoluble. Real progress is truly possible, however progress must be based on accepted international standards of democracy. As long as all sides subscribe to the same principles of democracy, I firmly believe that we can navigate a path through the present political impasse.

In Northern Ireland, most people wish to live in peace with their neighbours while recognising the right of those neighbours to be different from a cultural, linguistic, educational or religious perspective.

Unionists accept the international norms for a divided society. Indeed we have interpreted them in a maximalist fashion, going further to accommodate diversity than in any other European country. While we have moved to the centreline of interna-
tional best practice and beyond it, the republican movement still remains short of this centreline.

Our position is not one of unionism making more demands upon republicanism than are made upon us. Nor is it merely about the implementation of the Belfast Agreement. It is much more fundamental than that. It is about an issue that goes to the very heart of democratic values, the protection of democracy against the threat of violence.

Let me make it clear, Sinn Fein has a conditional right to participate in the government of Northern Ireland at executive level: this automatic inclusiveness would indeed be a unique form of government. However, to exercise this right Sinn Fein must show responsibility towards democratic values accepted elsewhere.

No other part of the democratic world would accept entry to government by a party which has direct linkages with a paramilitary organisation that has merely declared a cease-fire. A cease-fire alone by the IRA is not enough to demonstrate commitment to peace and democracy. There is an obligation by the republican movement at this time to deliver a clear message that it is committed permanently to peace.

We wish to see a real and honourable accommodation based on the Belfast Agreement and accepted standards of democracy. For our part, we have been, are and will remain, committed to universally accepted standards of human rights and democracy. We have no desire to seek to define these in any restrictive manner.

If that willingness from all to deliver balanced commitments is forthcoming—and I have not closed my mind to that possibility—we have another opportunity to put aside old enmities and focus on building a healthy society and a strong economy: a Northern Ireland where human rights of all sections of the community are sacrosanct.

That is the future that the vast majority of unionism wants. The next few weeks will show whether or not we can begin finally to put to rest this long out-dated quarrel.
If one compares unionist responses to the 1998 Belfast Agreement with those to the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, dramatically different pictures emerge. In 1985, the unionist community was almost unanimously hostile to the Thatcher-FitzGerald accord. In the post-1998 period, unionists have been profoundly, and almost evenly, divided as to the proper response to the 1998 Belfast deal. These statements are as true of unionist politicians as of the unionist electorate, and this situation is especially striking because the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement began a curve which reached fulfilment in the 1998 Agreement. The philosophy embodied in the Anglo-Irish Agreement, has run through much governmental thinking (in Dublin as well as London) in the years up to and beyond 1998: parity of esteem for two rival traditions, a structural role for Dublin in the politics of Northern Ireland, and the simultaneous offering of reassurances to unionists and promises to nationalists.

During the same, post-1985 period another—less obvious, but arguably important—change has also occurred, this time in terms of analysis surrounding unionism. Most of the books and articles now cited and debated on the subject have been published during the years since the Anglo-Irish Agreement. These include the work of Steve Bruce, Jennifer Todd, Arthur Aughey, Alvin Jackson, Feargal Cochrane, Norman Porter, Joseph Lee, and numerous others. Remove such works and the shelf of writings addressing Ulster unionism is surprisingly, perhaps embarrassingly, short; the analysis of unionism has, therefore, witnessed a dramatic shift in terms of depth.

In my lecture tonight I want to reflect on these two developments, the political and the analytical, and their implications for our subject: redefining unionism. The two developments clearly have some relevance for one another, which I will discuss towards the end of my talk. But first I will consider unionist politics, and then the analysis of unionism.

**UNIONIST POLITICS**

What has changed? One significant development has been the emergence into prominence of paramilitary parties, which have built on the longstanding (but for a long time unobserved) hostility between the respective cultures of Paisleyism and of paramilitary loyalism. And the comparative salience of the Progressive Unionist Party and the Ulster Democratic Party has reinforced and highlighted another key development over recent years: the dramatic fracturing of unionist politics in Northern Ireland. Divisions within the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) have become famous,
but exist alongside the broader divide between pro- and anti-Agreement unionists, and the rancorous divisions variously involving the Democratic Unionist Party, United Kingdom Unionist Party, Northern Ireland Unionist Party, and the aforementioned Progressive Unionist Party and Ulster Democratic Party. If Irish republicans did want to see unionism bitterly and lastingly divided by the peace process, then they have surely got their wish.

But the most important change in unionist politics in recent years has been the emergence of a significant section of the unionist family looking to make a new deal with Irish nationalism. The key figure here is clearly David Trimble. The UUP leader is, as his biographer recently put it, “prepared to give up some ground to his enemies so that the overall siege of his state can be lifted” (McDonald, 2000: 6). In contrast to the stereotypical unionist “no”, this new unionism epitomised by Trimble shows a preparedness to say “yes” to a series of specific as well as general innovations; this is a process which stretches back beyond Trimble’s accession to the leadership of the UUP, but which has been reinforced powerfully since then. In contrast to the frequently crude, inward-looking expression of unionist argument, new unionist politicians have demonstrated sophisticated skills of presentation, and have offered an articulate defence of their views, policies and principles. If for a long time the unionists of Ulster tended to put a reasonable case badly, while Irish nationalists put a sometimes exaggerated case well, then at least part of that picture has begun to change.

Why? In part, individual contributions—talents, ambitions, and so on—are essential to any understanding of this development. This is clearly true of the fracturing of unionism to which I referred—in which clashing personalities have played a significant role—but it is also relevant to the emergence of a new unionism centred around the impressive abilities and calmness of Mr Trimble and some of his allies. In part also, there has emerged a sense of the increasingly worsening terms on which unionists are able to make some kind of deal, and of the fact that unionists can neither create nor veto developments indefinitely in Northern Ireland. To govern the place effectively, some serious accommodation is required with at least a section of Irish nationalism, and it has been recognised that, for the interests of unionists, this should happen soon.

Indeed, it is the context for change, and the changing contexts, which are vital for an understanding of the true nature of new political unionism. And the key changes concern Irish nationalism. The cultural and economic confidence, and the profound social changes, evident in the Republic of Ireland, probably provide surer ground for unionist engagement with Irish nationalism than many unionists yet realise. For the more secure the twenty-six county sense of identity, self and success, the less relevant to the southern state is that traditional nationalism about which Ulster unionists were understandably wary. There is much in the new Republic to give unionists ground for confidence, not least the comparative indifference of most of the Republic’s population towards Northern Ireland and its peculiar politics. There is, among those in the Republic who do consider Northern Ireland, no longer a dismissal of the problem which Ulster unionism poses for Irish nationalism. There is no
longer the axiomatic assumption that nation is co-extensive with island, or that separatism, Catholicism or Gaelicism are necessarily indices of authentic Irishness; or, indeed, that progress towards peace in Northern Ireland must be harmonious with progress towards traditional Irish nationalist goals.

Among Irish republicans, of course, there remains the idea that there is a natural unity of Ireland, which will encompass unionists (once they effectively cease to be such). But even here, there have been huge changes which both help to explain new unionist politics, and to defend, to legitimate its approach. Republican leaders have moved towards the decision that the rewards of paramilitary violence will not include victory, and indeed that they might be outweighed by alternative methods. This point is so important for understanding where unionism currently stands, that it is worth some consideration. The IRA faced problems during the late-1980s. It was increasingly vulnerable both to intelligence penetration and to military strikes; damaged by publicity disasters involving the IRA killing of civilians; suffering comparative eclipse by constitutional nationalists; and most crucially, lacking the kind of generative, spectacular grievance which had given rise, momentum, and regeneration to Provisional republican culture—rise, with the 1969 attacks on Northern Ireland Catholics; momentum, with early-1970s internment and Bloody Sunday; regeneration, with the 1981 hunger strike. Such episodes, more than anything else, explain the dynamism and energy of Provisional Irish republicanism, and by the late 1980s and early 1990s, republicans lacked such stimulating grievances.

They recognised—as had been clear enough to many, for a long time—that, militarily, there existed a three-way stalemate between the respective forces of loyalism, republicanism and the British state. Where, for example in the early 1970s, republicans had thought that victory was coming and coming soon, by the late 1980s and early 1990s many of their leaders had realised that it was not coming at all. And this sea change has had the most profound implications for unionist politicians, helping to produce a situation in which a significant section of Ulster unionism believes that a deal can be done which will not be accompanied by republican, oppositional violence.

The partial redefinition of unionism which has occurred has also been influenced by the particular combination of political forces triangularly arranged in London, Dublin, and Washington. And the longer-term development of the British state itself has also had clear implications for a changing unionist politics. In a stimulating recent article, UCD’s Professor Tom Bartlett has argued that the decline and fall of the British empire has left Ulster Protestants feeling “cast adrift, for that which had given them sustenance and identity has now gone” (Bartlett, 1998: 10). This theme might be considered particularly apposite for an evening at the Institute for British-Irish Studies, focusing attention, as it does, on the complicated inter-relationship between the islands. And clearly, the decline of empire has had profound significance for Ulster unionists.

Yet, while it is clearly right to explain the rise of Britishness by reference, in part, to the empire, that was by no means the full story. So, too, the end of empire has not
meant that Britishness no longer exists, but rather that adjustments have been made by British people to their changing status in the world. The end of empire has forced the redefinition, rather than the destruction, of Britishness, and I think a similar lesson might be drawn in relation to Ulster unionism. There is no inevitable disintegration of Ulster unionists' Britishness as a consequence of the end of empire, any more than as a consequence of changes in British attitudes towards religion or the monarchy. Indeed, close scrutiny of the debates on British decline tends to imply that the extent and uniformity of that decline have been less great than frequently assumed (English and Kenny, 2000). It may, for example, be as important to explain why Britain still possesses a peculiarly prominent role in military and diplomatic events world-wide, as it is to explain the less surprising fact that British world dominance failed to survive indefinitely.

Devolution is another change in British politics with implications for Ulster unionist redefinition. For the devolving of power and consequent reinforcement of regional identity need not be accompanied by the end of the United Kingdom. When examined closely, developments in Scotland and Wales, as well as in Belfast, might suggest serious modification rather than abolition of the union. But they surely change the context for unionist argument. To argue, in the mid-1980s, that one wanted to be governed as was the rest of the United Kingdom meant something very different from such an argument now. And this is a point which might suit the instincts not merely of Trimble-style unionists. The Democratic Unionist Party's Sammy Wilson has stated:

I believe that there is wide diversity within the United Kingdom, and I am not just talking about the diversity between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. It is now quite apparent that the Scots feel the same, the Welsh feel the same, even people in the North of England feel the same, and therefore the kind of unionism that I would want to see would allow for an expression of that diversity, and allow for some kind of institutional expression of the diversity as well.¹

But it is Trimble unionism which has most energetically embraced the prospect of newly devolved and newly defined Belfast authority. And, as I say, this occurs against a background of changes which have encouraged, or forced, reappraisal. Alterations in Irish republican politics, in the politics of the Republic of Ireland, in the British political system and in wider historical and political realities have all played their part in suggesting that unionists should engage with London, Dublin and Washington on the basis of seeking a new deal with Irish nationalists; and that they should do so with a grasp of their strengths, their weaknesses, and the need for some change (for example, in the religious inflection of Ulster unionist politics: here, changes in British popular attitudes surely point the way towards a less exclusivist formal politics in Ulster, whatever one's private religious beliefs).

But as with all such redefinition, successful change requires that much remain the same. And the constants should not be played down. There remains among union-

ists an understandable hostility to being expelled from the state of their choice, and to which (for a variety of economic, political, cultural, symbolic, religious, historical reasons) unionists give allegiance. And there remains the economic and security-based reality that a straightforwardly united Ireland is not feasible in the immediate future (a fact reinforced rather than undermined by the Republic’s economic success as a twenty-six county state).

ANALYSIS OF UNIONISM

If post-1985 unionist politics have changed in complicated ways, then it is also a complex picture which emerges from what might be called the new analysis of unionism. But the weight of scholarly and other analytical judgement certainly now suggests that we should treat the phenomenon with more seriousness than was typically the case of Irish nationalist, and orthodox international, thinking. A former professor of politics in Dublin and Belfast, John Whyte, summarised one aspect of this very well, with his observation of the sturdy, self-reliant quality of unionism: “On the whole, recent historians have been struck by the depth of Ulster unionist opposition to a united Ireland separate from Britain, and the independence of that opposition from British support” (Whyte, 1990: 125).

A number of points emerging from the new analysis of unionism seem to me particularly important for our question tonight, that of redefining unionism. And I want to identify five of them.

The first is fluidity. Jennifer Todd’s rightly influential 1987 article, “Two traditions in unionist political culture”, provides a useful example here (Todd, 1987). Todd identified Ulster loyalism and Ulster British ideology, as two key traditions within Ulster unionism, and speculated upon the possibilities of change in each. This speculation reflected a proper sense of the fluid state of Ulster unionism, as does the fact that her own dichotomous pattern no longer truly holds in some key respects. Her argument that Ulster loyalists see religion and politics as inextricably intertwined is, for example, no longer sustainable, given the clearly secular emphasis of the newly conspicuous Ulster loyalist parties in recent years. But her focus on fluidity, typical also of much of her later work, remains important. And it is supported by a similar emphasis in the work of other scholars, most engagedly perhaps that of Norman Porter, who has argued strenuously for change in unionist politics—away from cultural and liberal, and towards civic, unionism (Porter, 1996).

Allied to fluidity, analysis over the last 15 years has repeatedly demonstrated the complexity of what for long (and still for many observers) appears a monolithic unionist political community. The annual hit-and-run journalistic summer ritual (fly to Belfast, photograph some incomprehensible Orangemen in baffling outfits, talk—if possible—to a cabaret-performing Ian Paisley), is almost upon us again. Every year it occurs, and every year it denies the complexity of unionist politics evident in the complicated mosaic painstakingly traced in serious analysis. The pioneering work of Boal, Campbell and Livingstone, for example—examining the actual, rather than the supposed, political attitudes of Belfast Protestants—argued “how misconceived
have been the many previous unquestioning, overhasty monolithic representations of Protestant opinion in Northern Ireland” (Boal, Campbell and Livingstone, 1991: 128). Again, Feargal Cochrane’s study of post-Anglo-Irish Agreement unionism argues that the diversity within unionism is both its strength and weakness: a strength in that it encompasses a mass movement which can agree on what it dislikes and which it can therefore resist; but a disadvantage in that unionism “tends to disintegrate” when unionists have to adopt a more positive course (Cochrane, 1997: viii). While Cochrane’s argument was set out before the 1998 Belfast Agreement, it clearly finds some vindication in unionist responses to that deal. Other work, too, such as that by Shirlow and McGovern (1997), has attempted to emphasise the degree to which unionist politics is diverse.

A third, more controversial but more significant, development has been the attempted rehabilitation of the idea of unionism as a rational, defensible ideology. Here academics have provided scholarly (Aughey, 1991) as well as more polemical arguments. They have stressed that there is nothing inherently irrational about preferring membership of the United Kingdom to expulsion from it; that there is nothing necessarily more exclusivist about Ulster unionism than about Irish nationalism; that there are sound economic and other reasons for supporting unionism; and that the partition of Ireland in the 1920s reflected rather than created Irish divisions. This last point has been strongly argued by one of unionism’s most striking defenders, Conor Cruise O’Brien: “nationalists are in the habit of referring to the ‘artificial partition’ of the island. In principle, there is nothing artificial about the partition: it is a result of history, traditions and demography” (O’Brien, 1994: 152).

The fourth point worth emphasising is the long overdue attention now devoted to east-west relations as well as north-south dimensions: a point powerfully reflected in this Institute for British-Irish Studies itself. The British dimension to the thinking of even the most apparently anglophobic of Irish republicans is a theme on which I have written elsewhere (English, 1998), and I do not want to dwell on that here. But writing the east-west axis into Ireland’s story is clearly of vital significance for our understanding of unionism in a number of ways. Unionism, if it is properly to be understood, must be understood in a two-island as well as a purely Irish framework. In particular, the Scottish dimension to unionist identity and experience has now, thankfully, received careful attention (Walker, 1995).

Fifth, there emerges from the new analysis of unionism the vital question of confidence, or, more specifically, the lack of confidence so typical of unionist culture. Neurosis and lack of confidence were evident even in the career of that supposedly rock-like defender of the union, Edward Carson (Jackson, 1993). And one of the great problems of twentieth-century Ireland was the persistent lack of unionist confidence. Indeed, the problems of Northern Ireland, and of Catholic experience there, would not have been as they were had unionist confidence been greater. The work of scholars such as Graham Walker and Steve Bruce epitomises much of what analysts have had to say on this subject, the latter referring to a Northern Ire-

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2For one such set of defences, see Foster, 1995.
land Protestant “sense of inadequacy” (Bruce, 1994: 62)—a far more persuasive explanation of phenomena such as Orange marches than the more common belief that such events reflect a deep-seated unionist sense of superiority. Vulnerability and insecurity are key themes which recur in closely focused studies of Ulster unionism.

I am not attempting to suggest that an agreed picture can be drawn about unionism, from the materials which scholars have amassed over the last 15 years. Academics rarely agree on anything too comfortably. But I think it is possible to claim that serious students of Ulster unionism in recent years have tended to stress that unionism is not properly understood if it is read as being static, homogeneous, necessarily irrational, superior in its self-image, or adequately understood in a one-island framework. It is none of these things.

CONCLUSIONS

There are clearly a number of links between my two preceding sections (unionist politics, and the analysis of unionism). The most facile and deceptive of these is that some scholars and commentators have had some input into the political new (and old!) unionism which I first addressed. But what I want to do here is consider the connection rather differently, and more subtly. If we read unionist political change in the light of analytical developments such as I have discussed, I believe we can redefine our response to unionism and to Northern Ireland politics as they have developed over the last 15 years. This will produce a perhaps heretical argument, and one which will serve, I hope, to stimulate some discussion and reflection.

My argument is this. The last decade and a half has witnessed some changes in unionist politics which are encouraging (an articulate, sophisticated section of the family, keen to engage with nationalism in new ways), and some which are deeply discouraging (profound divisions and bitterness, and among many unionists a depressing lack of confidence and security). Both the positive and negative developments are, in part, responses to the kind of politics practised by London and Dublin in the Anglo-Irish Agreement-Belfast Agreement period.

Now if scholars are to be believed, then the fluidity and schism here identified should come as no surprise, and the absence of confidence should cause us some considerable alarm. Put bluntly, if one wants a community traditionally accustomed to advantage to yield some of that advantage lastingly, smoothly and peacefully, then the worst context in which to do it is one where that community is fractured, internally embittered, and substantially lacking in confidence in itself, its government and its neighbours. That is the situation we have faced, and face.

But it could have been different. The positive aspects of new unionism could have been nurtured and sustained, and accompanied by unity and confidence, if a different route had been followed over the last 15 years. Here the problems began with the era of Margaret Thatcher. Mrs Thatcher’s crude inflexibility produced the pyrrhic victory of the 1981 hunger strike, which could have been avoided, and which gave
the republican movement an undeserved, unexpected energy injection. Fear that republican energy would exceed that of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) encouraged London and Dublin to engage in a process which was embodied in the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and which intended to work towards an overall constitutional settlement at the same time as addressing what in the eighteenth century might have been called Catholic reform.

But the pursuit of a constitutional settlement which unionists held to be a political defeat, and the tying of that pursuit to the question of quotidian reform, made the achievement of that reform much more difficult. If you weave together questions of jobs, policing and parades, to the structural involvement of Dublin in what Ian Paisley calls “in embryo a condominium”\(^3\), then the achievement of extensive, smooth reform at the expense of Paisley’s community will be more difficult to obtain. It is far more difficult to adjust an unequal set of societal arrangements between two divided communities, if the community which is expected to give, constantly feels that every concession is tied to the broader political goal of securing its defeat, and driving it out of existence. This is especially true if the government cannot be trusted, and there is a neighbouring enemy with a foothold inside your state. Catholic grievances were (and are) more likely to be satisfactorily addressed if the majority community does not believe every concession to be part of a wider defeat.

Had there been a separation of the pursuit of a still elusive constitutional settlement, from the question of Catholic reform, then unionism could indeed have been redefined, in ways more fruitful and positive than those which have ambiguously occurred to date. The unity and self-confidence sustained by confidence in their government and in their sure place within the United Kingdom could have provided the foundation on which to build more extensive reform on questions affecting Catholic life in Northern Ireland, much earlier and more effectively than we have even yet seen.

The most significant part of this picture is the question of loyalist violence—easily the most appalling thing experienced by Northern Ireland Catholics. Even if she had known it, Mo Mowlam would not have told you that loyalist violence had effectively ended before the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the beginning of the long peace process. If the post-1994 period has witnessed a partial taming of the beast of paramilitary violence (and that is a big “if”), then, on the loyalist side at least, this was a beast stirred into life by the philosophy of the peace process itself. In 1985 loyalists murdered two people; in the eight years following the Anglo-Irish Agreement they averaged 28 murders a year. This development was primarily due to the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the politics which it initiated. Over the 1985-2000 period, the genuine nurturing of unionist confidence (through trustworthy government, and the absence of any grand constitutional settlement plans) could have ensured the effective removal of loyalist violence from Northern Ireland.

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\(^3\)Ian Paisley: “we have in embryo a condominium in the [1985] Anglo-Irish Agreement and in the [1993] Downing Street Declaration” (interview with the author, Belfast, 21 February 1994)
There are, of course, no such alternatives today and, despite my ambivalence about aspects of the now corrupted Belfast Agreement, I did vote for it, and still believe that the more positive wing of unionism has grounds for its case. But surer, better government—and possibly less overall violence too—was available to us through a different route from that down which we have travelled. There was an alternative in the mid-1980s which would have allowed for a road to peace at least as quick as this one, and which was much more just and more soundly based on principles of democracy and good government. Most crucially, this alternative route would have involved far more gains and far less suffering for northern Catholics than they have experienced under the long peace process.

I have said that a major ingredient in the emergence of a redefined unionist politics has been the view, held by some, that republicans have shifted ground having recognised the futility of their violence. Had republican vibrancy in the mid-1980s been recognised for what it truly was—substantially a function of the 1981 hunger strike, and not a lasting threat to the SDLP—then a redefined unionism could earlier, more securely have been built. If from 1985 there had been virtually no loyalist violence, no catastrophic stimuli for Provisional republicanism, significant progress made regarding policing, parades and jobs, then we might have seen a redefined, united and confident unionism as the condition for a redefined Northern Ireland.

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Please address queries to:

Managing Editor
IBIS Working Papers
Department of Politics
University College Dublin
Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland

tel: +353-1-716 8397
fax: +353-1-716 1171
email: ibis@ucd.ie
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