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## ABSTRACT

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### **“DUBLIN IS JUST A SUNNINGDALE AWAY”? THE SDLP, THE IRISH GOVERNMENT AND THE SUNNINGDALE AGREEMENT**

This paper examines the roles played by the Irish government and more particularly Northern Ireland’s Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in both the making and the breakdown of the 1973 Sunningdale agreement. It asks whether the combined efforts of the SDLP and the Irish government pushed unionist negotiators too far at Sunningdale, producing a settlement which was predetermined towards Irish reunification, and so justified loyalist claims that “Dublin is just a Sunningdale Away”. The paper draws on recently released archival material to show how the SDLP was, to a significant degree, able to dictate Dublin’s policy on Northern Ireland in the early 1970s, suggesting that this led to a uniform and highly ambitious agenda on the part of nationalist participants at the Sunningdale conference. However, it also demonstrates that this agenda was not realised, and that the deal made at Sunningdale was not, as many scholars have suggested, an unqualified success for the SDLP. Nonetheless, the paper maintains that the dynamic rhetoric and perceived momentum of Irish nationalism—orchestrated largely by the SDLP—served to distort that which was actually agreed, and in this undermined the prospects of broad unionist support for Sunningdale.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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***Peter John McLoughlin*** works in the Institute for British-Irish Studies as a Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Research Fellow. His research project, funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, is entitled: “John Hume and the Revision of Irish Nationalism”. His research interests include Irish history and politics; nationalism; and political leadership in the context of ethnically divided societies.



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# “DUBLIN IS JUST A SUNNINGDALE AWAY”? THE SDLP, THE IRISH GOVERNMENT AND THE SUNNINGDALE AGREEMENT

PJ McLoughlin

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## INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in August 1970 suggested a major shift in the politics of Northern Ireland’s nationalist community.<sup>1</sup> The main political voice of the Catholic minority hitherto, the moribund Nationalist Party, had spent some 50 years arguing the illegitimacy of Ireland’s partition. For most of this time, Nationalist MPs had abstained from Belfast’s Stormont parliament so as to demonstrate their unremitting opposition to the Northern Ireland state. By contrast, the SDLP, led by the Belfast socialist, Gerry Fitt, proposed to participate in the Stormont system as a means to bring about its reform (*Irish Times*, 22 Aug. 1970). However, this did not mean that the new party had abandoned the nationalist aspiration towards Irish unity. Indeed, the SDLP’s constitution explicitly committed the party to “the cause of Irish unity”, but this was to be achieved through “the consent of the majority of the people in Northern Ireland” (McAllister, 1977: 168). Acceptance of this—later to be known as “the principle of consent”—represented a major departure from traditional nationalist thinking, which denied a unionist right of veto over Irish unity. Endorsement of this principle saw the SDLP become the first political party, on either side of the Irish border, to enlist significant support for an approach to reunification which required the backing of at least a section of the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland.

However, within less than a year of the party’s formation, the SDLP’s participatory, reformist philosophy—and the consensual, gradualist approach to Irish unity which flowed from this—appeared to have perished amidst a growing civil conflict. After the rejection of its request for an inquiry into two controversial and fatal shootings by British troops (Ó Dochartaigh, 1997: 267, 270), the SDLP—like the Nationalist Party many times before—formally withdrew from Stormont and declared its intention to abolish the Belfast parliament. The continued failure of the Unionist government to deliver any real change in Northern Ireland, and now the increasing repression of the minority community, led the SDLP to believe that Stormont had determined to suppress rather than address Catholic grievances (*Irish Times*, 17 July 1971). The introduction of interment without trial the following month only confirmed this opinion. The incarceration of hundreds of Catholics, most of them innocent of any involvement with republican violence, pushed the SDLP into an even greater display

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “nationalist” and “unionist”, and “Catholic” and “Protestant”, are used interchangeably when referring to the two main communities in Northern Ireland, this to allow for variety of expression in the text. For the same reason the appellations “majority” and “minority” are also used in reference to the unionist and nationalist communities respectively.



of disaffection. The party now joined more radical opposition groups in sponsoring a campaign of civil disobedience, and vowed to resist all forms of negotiation until internment was brought to an end (Currie, 2004: 175, 177; Devlin, 1993: 161-2; McAllister, 1977: 100).

Despite the growing crisis, it was not until the tragedy of “Bloody Sunday” in January 1972—when British paratroopers indiscriminately fired on an anti-internment march in Derry, resulting in 14 deaths—that Westminster finally accepted the need to assume direct responsibility for the governance of Northern Ireland, and suspended the Stormont parliament. By this point, though, even moderate nationalists were despairing of the possibility that peace or justice could be obtained while the British state remained in Ireland.

Such alienation amongst the Catholic community clearly impacted on the SDLP’s position, and was evident in the political proposals put forward by the party in the wake of Stormont’s suspension. In essence, the *Towards a new Ireland* (1972) document argued for a form of joint British-Irish sovereignty over Northern Ireland. However, this was advocated only as an interim solution. The SDLP also called for a British declaration of support for Irish reunification, and proposed a “National Senate of Ireland”, which would “plan the integration of the whole island by preparing the harmonisation of the structures, laws and services of both parts of Ireland” (SDLP, 1972: 6). Irish unity had, of course, always been the party’s ultimate aspiration, but it seemed now that the idea of gradually persuading Protestants to embrace this end had been eclipsed by the SDLP’s determination to dismantle partition.

Unsurprisingly, the British government rejected the radical ideas of *Towards a new Ireland*. Instead, officials in Whitehall and the newly established Northern Ireland Office (NIO) were working towards a seemingly more obtainable objective: a restructured local administration in which political representatives from both the Protestant and Catholic communities would share executive power. However, in a government Green Paper outlining this agenda, London also took on board some of the arguments made by the SDLP in recognising an “Irish dimension” to the Northern Ireland problem, namely the need for new arrangements which took account of the region’s relationship with the Republic of Ireland (UK, 1972: paras 76-8). Fleshing out this concept in a subsequent White Paper, the British government offered a “Council of Ireland” as a forum for North-South co-operation (UK, 1973: para. 109). This, and the promise of a share in executive power by participating in a new Northern Ireland Assembly, was enough to win the SDLP’s guarded approval of the White Paper as a basis for formal discussions (*Irish Times*, 23 Mar. 1973).

## THE SDLP AND THE IRISH GOVERNMENT

The SDLP’s plans to drive a process of reunification of Ireland obviously depended on the support of the Irish government. Hitherto, with Fianna Fáil in office, this had been forthcoming. By instinct the most anti-partitionist of the southern Irish parties, Fianna Fáil was vocal in its encouragement of the SDLP, and gave unambiguous

endorsement of the *Towards a new Ireland* proposals.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, there were questions raised about the realism of the SDLP document on the Dáil's opposition benches (*Irish Times*, 25 Sep. 1972). It is most likely, then, that the SDLP watched the Irish election of early 1973 with particular interest.

The outcome of this election is crucial to understanding the nature of SDLP-Dublin relations in this period. After 16 years in power, Fianna Fáil was finally removed from office by a coalition of the Fine Gael and Labour parties. However, the new government, headed by Liam Cosgrave, held only a two seat majority in the Dáil. Nonetheless, the result did open up the possibility of a change in the way Dublin dealt with the SDLP. Indeed, with Fine Gael leading the government, there was less ideological compulsion towards a strong line on Northern Ireland. Moreover, whilst the junior partner in the new administration did have organic affiliations with the SDLP's left wing, these had been severely damaged by Labour's spokesman on Northern Ireland, Conor Cruise O'Brien.

Although a number of then opposition leaders were thought to be uneasy with the SDLP's *Towards a new Ireland* document, Dr O'Brien was the most openly disapproving of the party's proposals (*Irish Times*, 25 and 26 Sep. 1972). Incensed by this criticism, the SDLP's Paddy Devlin chose to announce publicly that there had been a split with the party which he and his socialist comrade, Gerry Fitt, had previously considered their southern sister (*Irish Times*, 3 Oct. 1972). Following on from this, Devlin placed an open letter to Brendan Corish in the *Irish Times*, denouncing the Labour leader for his failure to reprimand O'Brien (13 Oct. 1972). This—and a month later a highly charged debate between O'Brien and the SDLP's John Hume on Irish state television's ever-popular *Late, Late Show* (*This Week*, 16 Nov. 1972)—was considered costly by many of O'Brien's party colleagues, particularly with a general election on the horizon. The fear was that opposition to a northern nationalist party could be portrayed as being pro-partitionist, and against the founding ideals of the Irish state. As O'Brien caustically remarked in his memoirs: "In those terms, it has long been mandatory—and remains so—to say 'me too' to whatever John Hume says" (O'Brien, 1999: 338).

After surviving a clumsy attempt by his opponents to expel him from the Labour party (O'Brien, 1999: 339-40), O'Brien became a minister in the new government, but carried with him a warning of the danger of criticising the SDLP. Nonetheless, it is evident that he and other members of the coalition government remained more sceptical about the SDLP's approach than the previous administration. Despite this, it was not until negotiations for a new settlement in Northern Ireland were due to begin that any real division between the SDLP and Dublin became apparent.

It is clear that the SDLP went into these discussions holding to the ideas put forward in *Towards a new Ireland*, arguing for new political structures that would be essentially transitional; structures that would expedite the goal of Irish unity. Indeed, com-

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<sup>2</sup> Government Press Release, 28 Sep. 1972, in National Archives of Ireland, Dublin (hereafter, NAI), Department of Foreign Affairs, 2003/17/319.

menting on the British government's proposed Council of Ireland, John Hume suggested that the body should play essentially the same role as the National Senate augured in *Towards a new Ireland*: examining the laws, structures and services in both parts of Ireland with a view to bringing about their harmonisation. "Once that is done and the problems in the way of unity removed," Hume said, "that council should have the power to plan a constitution for a new Ireland" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 29 May 1973). The SDLP also adhered to the position enunciated in *Towards a new Ireland* on the need for new policing arrangements in Northern Ireland in which the Irish government would have a role (SDLP, 1972: 5, 11-2), and again it was the SDLP's deputy leader who was most vocal on this point. Hume's interest in the issue was understandable. Large parts of his Derry constituency were being policed by the British military rather than the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), whose brutal reaction to the Northern Ireland civil rights movement had wholly discredited the force in nationalist eyes (Ó Dochartaigh, 1997: 52, 60, 312). In the various political talks that took place over the following months, it became clear that Hume, more than his party colleagues, was convinced of the need to overcome the minority's alienation from the RUC by creating a new force with which Catholics could identify, and which was accountable to Dublin as well as London.

Even before the formal negotiation of new structures of government for Northern Ireland had begun, however, it was clear that the SDLP was concerned that the new administration in Dublin would undermine its objectives. In a party meeting in early July, concern was expressed about

the present government's statements on National Unity which indicates a clear drift away from the stance of the last government. ... Equivocation similar to that emanating from the Coalition government could be damaging to us at a time when we appear to be on the verge of a breakthrough.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, the party agreed to send a delegation to Dublin in order seek assurances on the government's position.

As leader of the SDLP deputation that arrived at Leinster House six days later, Hume opened the meeting with government ministers by expressing the concern which had arisen in his party as a result of the seeming shift in Dublin's policy on Northern Ireland towards what was termed "appeasement" of the unionist community. Hume made it clear that the SDLP expected the government to support its view of the need for a "real Irish dimension", namely a high-powered Council of Ireland, and radical change to policing in Northern Ireland. With regard to the latter, it was hoped in the first instance that Dublin would assume joint responsibility alongside London for policing Northern Ireland. If this could not be effected, it was expected that the Irish government would have some formal say in the administration of law and order through the Council of Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Minutes of meeting of SDLP Assembly Party, 6 July 1973; cited in Bew and Patterson (1985: 72, fn. 81).

<sup>4</sup> Minutes of meeting between Taoiseach and cabinet ministers and SDLP delegation, 12 July 1973; NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, 2004/21/670.

The same message was conveyed to the British government in the SDLP's talks with the Northern Ireland Secretary, William Whitelaw, a few days later. The party also told Whitelaw that internment without trial, which was still being employed in Northern Ireland, would have to be discussed alongside moves towards a power-sharing executive (*Irish News*, 17 July 1973). However, in the course of these discussions, the SDLP became further concerned about the intentions of the Irish government when Whitelaw claimed that Dublin had already told London that it did not support the party's position on policing and the need therein for an Irish input.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of Whitelaw's claim, another SDLP envoy was dispatched to Dublin in order to challenge the coalition government. Here the taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave, assured the party that his administration had not led London to believe that it was at odds with the SDLP.<sup>6</sup> Despite this, he was no doubt dismayed when, only a few days later, reports appeared in the Irish press—based on information leaked by Paddy Devlin—which brought public attention to the perceived rift between the SDLP and the coalition government (*Sunday Press*, 29 July 1973; *Sunday World*, 29 July 1973). It was interesting, then, that immediately after these reports Dublin was seen to swing back behind the SDLP's line on the Council of Ireland and policing (*Financial Times*, 30 July 1973), this after confidential talks took place between the party and the Irish Attorney General, Declan Costello (*Irish Independent*, 30 July 1973).

It was Hume who instigated this rapid *rapprochement*. He invited Costello to come and speak to SDLP representatives and members of constituency organisations, and to reassure them of Dublin's position *vis-à-vis* the political process.<sup>7</sup> It may well have been Hume's thinking that directly exposing Costello to the feeling of the party rank and file would give the Irish government a greater appreciation of the SDLP's position. If this was the intention, it was certainly successful. For in his report of meetings with various SDLP members, Costello noted the great dissatisfaction expressed by some with regard to the government. It was generally considered, he recorded, that Dublin was "going soft" in its attitude towards the unionist community, and failing to back the SDLP in a public manner. On the issue of the Council of Ireland, Costello recalled party members emphasising that the primary objective should be to achieve structures that would bring a "lasting" solution to the Northern Ireland problem:

The view was strongly expressed that it was wrong to approach the negotiations on the basis of ascertaining what would be possible to obtain from the Unionists. The proper approach was to work out what was the way to settle the Northern Ireland problem and demand this solution. The view was expressed that the Unionists had been forced to accept a great deal in the last three years, that it could be said that

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<sup>5</sup> Minutes of meeting between the Taoiseach and cabinet ministers and SDLP delegation, 26 July 1973; NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, 2004/21/670.

<sup>6</sup> Minutes of meeting between the Taoiseach and cabinet ministers and SDLP delegation, 26 July 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Report by Declan Costello on meetings with SDLP, 28-29 July 1973; report dated 30 July 1973; NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, 2004/21/624.

they had given their retrospective “consent” to the changes, and that if a strong and firm enough line was taken on the Nationalists’ demands that they would be accepted.<sup>8</sup>

This demonstrated just how far the principle of consent, the most important axiom of the party’s founding philosophy, had depreciated within the SDLP’s collective mind. It now appeared that “consent”—and it is perhaps suggestive that Costello also chose to put the word in inverted commas in his report—amounted to unionist acceptance of *faits accomplis*. It could also be assumed that those structures appropriate to achieving a “lasting” solution to the Northern Ireland problem were those which would deliver unionists into a united Ireland, at which point their retrospective consent to having arrived there would no doubt be warmly received. It was this mode of thought which made the SDLP’s policy unacceptable to even moderate unionists, and which contributed to the failure of the settlement which the party won in the coming months.

Despite the ambition of the party’s agenda, Cosgrave acceded to Costello’s advice by writing to Gerry Fitt and proposing a more formal liaison between the Irish government and the northern party. But the taoiseach’s letter also recommended that the SDLP should confine their delegation numbers in such talks to a minimum, and expressed the hope the party’s relationship with Leinster House could be conducted in a less public manner in the future.<sup>9</sup> Reading between the lines, this suggested the damage done to the government’s reputation by Devlin’s press leak. As a result, meetings between the SDLP and Dublin became more confidential; the press was no longer informed in advance and SDLP delegates declined to make comments to the media after they had taken place (*Irish Press*, 30 Aug. 1973; *Irish News*, 7 Sep. 1973). But their silence was a small price to pay for having gained Dublin’s undivided attention.

The reason for the Irish government’s change in tack can be surmised. Although he did not explicitly say so in his report of his meetings with the SDLP, it is likely that Costello found a number of party members, in expressing their dissatisfaction with the coalition government, implying that they might have to turn to Fianna Fáil for support instead. The possibility that the opposition could exploit this situation would undoubtedly have weighed heavily on some minds within a coalition whose parties had not experienced office since 1957, and who even now held only a two-seat majority in the Dáil. Seeming to confirm this hypothesis, Paddy Devlin—who had actually boasted to Costello about his part in the damaging leak to the press<sup>10</sup>—later admitted that there was “an element of implicit blackmail” in relations with Dublin at this time (quoted in Bew and Patterson, 1985: 72, fn. 84). As a result, argues Henry Patterson: “Fearful of being portrayed as letting the ‘separated brethren’ down, the Irish government’s position soon shifted to one of uncritical support for Hume’s analysis and prescriptions” (Patterson, 2002: 238). The archival documents detail-

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<sup>8</sup> Report by Declan Costello on meetings with SDLP, 28-29 July 1973.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Liam Cosgrave to Gerry Fitt, 2 Aug. 1973; NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, 2004/21/670.

<sup>10</sup> Report by Declan Costello on meetings with SDLP, 28-29 July 1973.

ing the more secretive interactions between the SDLP and the government that followed Costello's report appear to support Patterson's opinion. They show the coalition to be far more accommodating of Hume's and his colleagues' demands from here on.

At the end of August, in the first of a series of meetings with the taoiseach and other government ministers, the SDLP again looked to gain assurances that Dublin wholly supported what the party termed its "package approach" to negotiations. In this, the SDLP wanted movement on the issues of internment, policing, and the Council of Ireland before it would commit to a power-sharing executive. The reason for this approach, Hume emphasised, was a fear within the party that if the SDLP joined a new administration and then found that progress promised on other fronts was not forthcoming, they could not then withdraw without being seen as "wreckers". Also expressed was an apprehension that the party leadership might be perceived as being motivated by financial gain if they looked too eager to form an executive.<sup>11</sup> Clearly the party was concerned that the Catholic community might feel the SDLP could be "bought off" by the British government.

Within days of this meeting, the SDLP had forwarded its formal proposals on policing and a Council of Ireland to Dublin. These documents showed the party holding its line in advocating a North-South body with the potential to evolve without hindrance from London and which would be responsible for policing in both jurisdictions in Ireland.<sup>12</sup> However, Dublin was still less sanguine than the SDLP, and after a summit meeting between the British and Irish governments in mid-September, Cosgrave sought to inject a sense of realism into the party's thinking. Cautiously, he tried to persuade the SDLP of what had been made clear by Edward Heath in the two premiers' discussions: that Westminster was not prepared to relinquish any power over security in Northern Ireland—an understandable position given the disasters that led to Stormont's abolition—and as such could not countenance any role for the Council of Ireland in policing the region.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of Dublin's counsel, the SDLP persevered with its ideas. After further discussions with William Whitelaw, Hume felt that the British government was coming round to his arguments. In particular he believed the NIO was opening up to his idea of a Council of Ireland with responsibility for law and order in Northern Ireland if this meant that the southern Irish police force, the garda síochána, would also come under the new body's control.<sup>14</sup> It is possible that London was interested in an ar-

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<sup>11</sup> Minutes of meeting between government ministers and SDLP, 29 Aug. 1973; NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, 2004/21/670.

<sup>12</sup> SDLP proposal papers: "Proposals for A Council of Ireland by the Social Democratic and Labour Party"; "The Police Service of Northern Ireland"; conveyed to Dublin on 15 and 16 Sep. 1973 respectively; NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, 2004/21/670.

<sup>13</sup> Minutes of meeting between government ministers and SDLP, 20 Sep. 1973; NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, 2004/21/670.

<sup>14</sup> Minutes of meeting between government ministers and SDLP, 12 Oct. 1973; NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, 2004/21/670.

rangement that would tie Dublin into more effective policing of the border, as Irish Republican Army (IRA) activists continued to escape to the Republic after launching attacks in Northern Ireland. But in relaying this information to Irish ministers in a meeting in October, Hume immediately sensed their apprehension to any deal which would allow for a British influence in affairs south of the border as a *quid pro quo* for an Irish say in Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, he continued to make his case for an all-Ireland approach to law and order. Hume felt that this would help overcome nationalists' hostility to the security apparatus in Northern Ireland, but also could be sold to unionists on the grounds that it would facilitate the pursuit of IRA suspects who sought refuge in the South. Again he claimed that the British government had shown interest in this idea as a way to win unionist approval for new policing arrangements. But Hume was clearly concerned that Dublin would not seize the opportunity he perceived.<sup>15</sup>

Hume's concern was well-founded, and he and his colleagues were sorely disappointed with the proposals which the Irish government turned over to London shortly afterwards. These suggested that the police forces in both Northern Ireland and the Republic should regularly account to the proposed Council of Ireland, but that the North-South body would have no real authority over them.<sup>16</sup> The SDLP's response once again showed that it was prepared to bring into question the coalition government's nationalist credentials, claiming that the British government had been right all along to suggest that Dublin was not behind the party. The SDLP maintained that the government's latest proposals for a Council of Ireland were "generally partitionist and indicated that Dublin may not be sincere in its approach to Irish unity." Once more a veiled threat was made that the SDLP might have to turn to Fianna Fáil for support instead.<sup>17</sup>

Again, the SDLP's concern was for how the northern minority would perceive the structures being proposed. The party was adamant that the Council of Ireland should have real responsibility for policing, claiming that "'accounting' is meaningless" and that unless it had genuine authority the new institution "would be regarded as 'collaboration' in the Provo [Provisional IRA] sense of the word." On Dublin's suggestion of the introduction of special courts for the trial of political offenders in both jurisdictions, the party argued that they would "hardly be identifiable to the man in the street as all-Ireland courts", providing further evidence of the electoral importance which the SDLP now attached to the "Irish dimension".<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Minutes of meeting between government ministers and SDLP, 12 Oct. 1973.

<sup>16</sup> Letter, including proposals document, from CV Whelan, Assistant Secretary to the Department of Foreign Affairs, to Dr D O'Sullivan, Irish Ambassador to Britain, 26 Oct. 1973; NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, 2004/21/670.

<sup>17</sup> Report by Seán Donlon on meeting with John Hume, Paddy Devlin, Gerry Fitt, Austin Currie and Ivan Cooper, Belfast, 29 Oct. 1973; dated 30 Oct. 1973; NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, 2004/21/625.

<sup>18</sup> Report by Seán Donlon on meeting with John Hume, Paddy Devlin, Gerry Fitt, Austin Currie and Ivan Cooper, Belfast, 29 Oct. 1973.

The party's outburst provoked another *volte-face* by Dublin, which now promised to create a new policing authority in the Republic as a means to get around the constitutional problems involved in allowing the *garda síochána* to come under direct control of any body other than the government.<sup>19</sup> With a similar such institution in existence in Northern Ireland since the Hunt reforms of 1969, it was felt that this would provide for symmetrical arrangements which would both come under the Council of Ireland. As a result, Irish officials were able to report back to the cabinet of the SDLP's seeming satisfaction with the new proposals.<sup>20</sup>

Having secured Dublin's compliance, the SDLP could now concentrate on its talks with the British government and the Unionist party. Already the SDLP had given some ground here, having at least begun discussions on the formation of the executive prior to agreement on a Council of Ireland. Now, however, with the Irish government seemingly locked into their strategy, the party appeared more confident of their position, and on 21 November the SDLP finally agreed to the formation of a power-sharing executive. However, the party only did so on the understanding that the Council of Ireland and all other outstanding issues would be addressed at a tripartite conference—between the executive elect and the two governments—to be convened the following month. Only then would the executive actually take office.

### THE SUNNINGDALE EXPERIMENT

On 6 December 1973, a conference between the British and Irish governments, the SDLP, the Unionist Party, and the Alliance Party was convened at Sunningdale Civil Service College, Berkshire. Its purpose was to put into place the final pieces of the political settlement envisaged by the White Paper which Westminster had published the previous spring. In short, this meant finding agreement on the exact nature and powers of the proposed Council of Ireland; deciding Dublin's relationship to Northern Ireland in the context of the new political arrangements; and resolving law and order arrangements, both within Northern Ireland and in a cross-border context. Following four arduous days of talks, a joint communiqué announced that an agreement had been reached.<sup>21</sup>

The actual negotiation of the Sunningdale agreement has been well documented in a number of first-hand accounts.<sup>22</sup> There is thus little need to recount these discus-

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<sup>19</sup> Report of the legal committee on the implications of reform of the security forces in Northern Ireland; NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, 2004/21/624.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Seán Donlon to Dermot Nally, Assistant Secretary, Department of the Taoiseach, 6 Nov. 1973; NAI, Department of the Taoiseach, 2004/21/625.

<sup>21</sup> In truth Sunningdale was, in the words of one senior official, "an agreement to reach an agreement" (Bloomfield, 1994: 203), with the understanding being that a second conference would be held in early 1974 at which a formal accord based on the December communiqué would be signed by the two governments and the participating parties. This second conference never took place. In spite of this, convention is followed in referring to the communiqué as "the Sunningdale Agreement" in the main text. A copy of the communiqué can be found in Deutsch and Magowan (1974: appendix 7).

<sup>22</sup> Written from a variety of political perspectives, together these accounts provide a well-rounded narrative of the Sunningdale conference; see Bloomfield (1994: 185ff.); Currie (2004: ch. 19); Devlin (1993: 203ff.);



sions in any detail; suffice to say that the majority of these memoirs, and indeed most academic commentaries, concur in their depiction of the SDLP, and in particular John Hume, as the driving force at the Sunningdale conference. Together they tend towards the conclusion that the Unionists were out-negotiated at Sunningdale and that the agreement arrived at was, by and large, a triumph for the SDLP (Bew and Gillespie, 1999: 74-5; Bew and Patterson, 1985: 64; Dixon, 2001: 144-5, 156-7; McAllister, 1977: 131; Patterson, 2002: 239). Given the ever-increasing momentum of the party in the run-up to the conference, and particularly its success in securing a united front for Irish nationalism by co-opting the Dublin government into its strategy, it is easy to go along with the idea that the SDLP forced an unfair settlement onto the Unionist Party at Sunningdale.

Interestingly, the memoirs of the Unionist leader, Brian Faulkner, contradict this interpretation:

All of us in the Unionist deputation were convinced that we had come off the best at Sunningdale ... We felt elated and expected our success to be recognized. One member of our delegation remarked that Sunningdale would go down in history as a Unionist victory (Faulkner, 1978: 236-7).

It is fair to say that the Unionists conceded much ground at Sunningdale. But if this judgement is made in the light of what the Unionist Party had up until 1972, that is a state system over which they had complete hegemony, it could be said that they had a lot more *to concede* than the nationalist participants at the conference. However, on the core constitutional issues at stake at Sunningdale, the Unionists gave very little, and so Faulkner had good reason to feel victorious.

The fact is that Sunningdale did not change in any way the existing constitutional relationship between Belfast and London: Northern Ireland was to remain part of the UK so long as a majority of people in the region so wished it. Moreover, to all intents and purposes, this was accepted by the Irish government. Although the Irish constitution did not allow Dublin to give formal, *de jure* recognition of Northern Ireland's position in the UK,<sup>23</sup> in a solemn declaration included in the Sunningdale communiqué, the Cosgrave government accepted the existing constitutional status quo and the fact that it could not change without the consent of a majority in Northern Ireland.<sup>24</sup> This was the closest Dublin could go to accepting unionists' right to self-determination as demanded by Faulkner (Faulkner, 1978: 237).

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Faulkner (1978: ch. 17); FitzGerald (1991: 210ff.); Heath (1998: 243-4); McIvor (1998: 100-5); O'Brien (1999: 350-3); on all of which the following draws.

<sup>23</sup> The only way that Cosgrave's government could have given unambiguous recognition of Northern Ireland's status would have been to hold a referendum to allow for the deletion of the Republic's constitutional claim to sovereignty over the entire island of Ireland. However, it is likely that the coalition government would have lost such referendum with a Fianna Fáil opposition mobilising the country in defence of the constitutional claim, thus jeopardising the entire Sunningdale settlement. Cosgrave consequently decided against such a move; Currie (2004: 229-30); Faulkner (1978: 231, 247); FitzGerald (1991: 223-4).

<sup>24</sup> Sunningdale communiqué, article 5.

Of course, the obvious question over the constitutional integrity of Northern Ireland was that posed by the Council of Ireland, particularly as the SDLP had, since the institution was first proffered, championed the body as an engine of Irish reunification. But in spite of the strongly “unificationist” intentions of the SDLP as it went into the conference, the North-South structure actually agreed at Sunningdale could *not* be a harbinger of Irish unity. First, although the Council of Ireland did have administrative functions in a number of areas, the principle of consent was actually built into its workings as the executive arm, the Council of Ministers, had to operate on the basis of unanimity.<sup>25</sup> As a result, no decision with regard to North-South relations could be taken without unionists’ agreement. Therefore, whilst they would be outnumbered by nationalists—SDLP and Dublin representatives—on the Council of Ministers, unionists could not be overrun. They could resist any act of “harmonisation” which they felt compromised the constitution of Northern Ireland. Second, those fields in which the Council of Ireland did have competence were limited to areas of common interest,<sup>26</sup> and they could not be extended without further assent from the Northern Ireland Assembly, where unionists had a clear majority. This gave Ulster unionism a double veto over the power of the proposed Council (FitzGerald, 1991: 209).

This explains why Faulkner had such confidence in the settlement that was brokered in 1973. Moreover, whilst he recognised that both his own community and history had come to quite a different verdict on Sunningdale, Faulkner remained unrepentant of his part in the agreement: “All this may seem in retrospect ironic and unreal. But I do not think if one examines the balance-sheet our conclusions can be shown to have been poorly judged.” Moreover, it is very difficult to contradict his final appraisal of the Agreement:

Nothing agreed on at Sunningdale infringed on the powers of the Northern Ireland Assembly by which everything would have to be approved and delegated. Given the overwhelming Unionist composition of that body and the unanimity rule in the Council of Ministers we were satisfied that the constitutional integrity of Northern Ireland was secure. ... The Council of Ireland was not the massive Trojan Horse people were led ... to believe. ... We had ... control over the direction and pace of its developments and ... its establishment would in no way compromise ... [our] position as citizens of the United Kingdom (Faulkner, 1978: 237, 253).

## SUNNINGDALE AND THE IRISH GOVERNMENT

What Faulkner did not anticipate, however, was how badly the Irish government would let him down in delivering its side of the bargain agreed at Sunningdale. Immediately undermining the Unionist leader’s presentation of the agreement and the significance of Dublin’s recognition of Northern Ireland therein, Cosgrave gave an interview to the *Sunday Press* in which—either conceding to nationalist hopes, or fireproofing himself against Fianna Fáil criticism—the taoiseach said that in his in-

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<sup>25</sup> Sunningdale communiqué., article 7.

<sup>26</sup> These were: the environment, agriculture, trade and industry, electricity, tourism, transport, public health, sport, culture, and the arts; Sunningdale communiqué, article 8.

terpretation of the agreement a united Ireland was indeed on its way (*Sunday Press*, 16 Dec. 1973). Faulkner believed that he had secured an informal agreement from the Irish government at Sunningdale to rescind its claim to Northern Ireland at the earliest opportunity (Faulkner, 1978: 231, 237), but any such idea was now clearly contradicted by Cosgrave: "There is no question of changing our Constitution with regard to our claim of sovereignty over all of Ireland" (*Sunday Press*, 16 Dec. 1973). In a debate in the Northern Ireland Assembly a few days later, the anti-agreement leader, Ian Paisley, quoted from Cosgrave's interview, claiming it as evidence that the Irish government's declaration on the status of Northern Ireland in Sunningdale was worthless (*NI Assembly debates* 1: 1964-7, 1988).

Even more damaging for Faulkner was the challenge to the constitutional legality of the coalition's Sunningdale declaration, moved by the former Fianna Fáil government minister, Kevin Boland, immediately after the Agreement was announced. In order to defend the charge that it had negated articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution and their claim to sovereignty over the whole of Ireland, the coalition government was forced to refute the idea that it had acknowledged Northern Ireland's status as part of the UK in the Sunningdale communiqué. Under the advice of its legal team, the coalition instead maintained that its declaration merely enunciated the policy of the Irish government as to the manner in which a united Ireland could come about, that is by the consent of a majority in Northern Ireland. As the then Irish Foreign Minister, Garret FitzGerald, later explained:

Legally we had an impeccable defence—and it succeeded. Politically, in its impact on unionist opinion, it was totally *disastrous*. The subtle legal arguments used to defend the agreement were not merely lost on unionists: they totally destroyed the value of the declaration, undermining Faulkner's already shaky position (FitzGerald, 1991: 226).

Along with recognition of Northern Ireland, Sunningdale's promise of improved security co-operation from Dublin was seen by Faulkner's Unionists as the *quid pro quo* for their acceptance of the Council of Ireland. But the Irish government's failure to live up to this commitment, particularly with reference to the extradition of fugitive offenders (Dixon, 2001: 144, 146), further aroused unionist suspicions by suggesting a certain ambivalence towards the republican movement on the part of the southern establishment. Moreover, as the IRA escalated its campaign of shootings and bombings as a means to destabilise Sunningdale, unionists could see no gain from the new political arrangements (Dixon, 2001: 133, 150; Faulkner, 1978: 254-5).

Loyalists were able to exploit this situation and, playing on unionist fears with their infamous declaration that "Dublin is just a Sunningdale away", they turned the untimely Westminster election of February 1974 into an effective referendum on the accord. Coming together as the United Ulster Unionist Council, anti-Agreement unionists won eleven of twelve Westminster seats, and showed a clear majority of the Protestant community in opposition to Sunningdale (Elliott and Flackes, 1999: 537). Using this as a mandate for further action, loyalist activists and paramilitaries coalescing under the Ulster Workers' Council (UWC) organised a general strike in May. Crucial to its success were loyalist workers' positions in key utilities, which allowed

them to disrupt power supplies and bring Northern Ireland to a standstill. With a new and insecure Labour government in London unwilling to intervene to save the Agreement, the Sunningdale experiment collapsed within 14 days.

### SUNNINGDALE AND THE SDLP

In the period that followed Sunningdale's demise, the SDLP showed great resentment towards the British government for its failure to stand against the UWC strike (Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, 2002: 190). The party was convinced that decisive action by the state security forces against road blocks and barricades during the early days of the stoppage would have saved Sunningdale (Routledge, 1997: 137). However, whilst the strike was, in its initial stages, undoubtedly enforced by loyalist intimidation, it did go on to win the support of a wider range of unionist opinion (Currie, 2004: 266; Ruane and Todd, 1996: 133). This confirmed the result of the Westminster election three months earlier, which suggested that it was not just loyalists who had turned against Faulkner, and that more moderate sections of the Protestant population were concerned about Sunningdale too (McAllister, 1977: 143). It was probably this, the realisation that the Agreement had already lost legitimacy amongst the greater part of the unionist community, which led the new Labour government in London to the conclusion that the executive was doomed, thus explaining the absence of any genuine effort to avert its fall (Cunningham, 2001: 17; Patterson, 2002: 240; Ruane and Todd, 1996: 133).

Whilst it may have speeded Sunningdale's demise, the Agreement had already begun to unravel before the UWC strike. For though they were adept at manipulating Protestant fears, loyalist leaders were tapping into a deep-rooted suspicion of Sunningdale amongst even moderate unionism.<sup>27</sup> However, as reasoned above, the threat to the Union which was posed by the Agreement was more imaginary than real. The new settlement did not alter the existing constitutional relationship between Belfast and London in any way, and the Council of Ireland could not have brought about the dissolution of partition without the consent of unionists. To a large degree, the fact that unionists became so anxious over Sunningdale was a consequence of nationalist rhetoric. In their interpretation of the accord, both the Dublin government and the SDLP served to fuel unionists' fears that they were being railroaded into a unitary Irish state by Sunningdale.

The SDLP was particularly guilty in this respect. Rather than a framework within which nationalists, North and South, might co-operate with unionists and persuade them of the value of Irish unity, the Sunningdale Agreement was extolled as a mere precursor to that seemingly inescapable end. It was this, the party's *presentation* of

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<sup>27</sup> Gillespie (1998) traces the gradual erosion of Faulkner's position from even before the Sunningdale conference, and in doing so questions the nationalist interpretation that it was the loyalist strike, and the British government's failure to act against it, which ended the Agreement. For Gillespie, Sunningdale had lost legitimacy amongst the unionist community, and thus become politically bankrupt, as early as January 1974, when the Ulster Unionist Party's ruling body, the Ulster Unionist Council, rejected the "proposed all-Ireland Council settlement" and thus obliged Faulkner to resign as the party leader.

Sunningdale, rather than the actual content of the Agreement, which brought its ruin by providing a ready-made propaganda package with which loyalists were able to raise the spectre of *Hibernia irredenta* and the idea of the impending destruction of Ulster unionism. The most memorable and oft-cited example of this *faux pas* was provided by the SDLP's Hugh Logue, when only a month after the Sunningdale conference he told a Dublin audience that the Council of Ireland was "the vehicle that would trundle unionists into a united Ireland" (quoted in Bew and Gillespie, 1999: 77).

As suggested, the fact is that the Council of Ireland, functioning on a basis of unanimity, and incapable of expansion without assent from the Northern Ireland Assembly, could not "trundle unionists into a united Ireland", at least not without their agreement. But the conclusion to be drawn from Logue's comment was that unionists could not but agree to join a united Ireland; that soon enough they would submit to the supposedly irresistible logic of Irish unity. In this, despite recognising the need for unionist consent for the creation of a united Ireland, their right to actually *withhold* that consent simply did not, judging by the party's rhetoric, seem to be within the SDLP's comprehension at this time. Thus the party's most sacred principle was debased in its presentation of Sunningdale.

The question is: why was the SDLP so willing to play the role required of them by loyalists? Why did the party feel the need to portray the Sunningdale settlement, erroneously, as simply a stepping-stone to a united Ireland? In answering this question, the political climate within which the SDLP was operating needs to be considered. This helps to explain the continued deviation of the party from its formative philosophy.

First and foremost, there was the issue of the SDLP's participation in a Stormont administration. For many Catholics, the very name, "Stormont", had become a byword for discrimination and repression. Although the new dispensation could be seen as much reformed in nature—not least in its guaranteeing seats for nationalists in its executive office—there remained problems related to the *ancien régime*, most obviously the continuation of internment without trial. This emotive issue had restrained the SDLP since the very first arrests in August 1971, following which the party had sworn not to enter any negotiations until all internees were released. After the suspension of Stormont, the SDLP changed its tack, arguing that it would bring an end to internment by brokering a new political settlement. However, the party left Sunningdale with only a promise from the British government that it would phase out the policy as the security situation allowed (Devlin, 1993: 210). By joining an administration that continued to practice detention without trial, the SDLP appeared to be turning its back on the principles of justice which it had loudly proclaimed during the civil rights period.

Related to the issue of internment was that of policing. In fact it was this, rather than the Council of Ireland or Dublin's recognition of Northern Ireland, that had been the main debating point at Sunningdale, delaying the conclusion of the conference by some 30 hours (Currie, 2004: 235; FitzGerald, 1991: 217). As noted, Hume had been the main advocate of changes to policing in negotiations prior to Sunningdale,

even demanding that the Council of Ireland be given responsibility for law and order on both sides of the border as a means to overcome the minority's alienation from the security forces. By all accounts, he pushed the Sunningdale conference to breaking point on this issue. Indeed, in an attempt to secure the changes which the SDLP felt necessary, Hume stayed up all night, and was still negotiating with Heath at seven in the morning on the final day of the conference. In the end, Hume's intransigence exasperated even some of his own party colleagues (Currie, 2004: 239; Devlin, 1993: 209; FitzGerald, 1991: 216-21; O'Brien, 1999: 351). But his position on policing was undoubtedly informed by the experience of his own community in Derry. Since the early days of the Troubles—from the suppression of the first civil rights march in the city in October 1968, to the infamous "Battle of the Bogside" between Catholic residents and the RUC in August 1969—Derry nationalists had come to reject the Stormont security forces outright. The failure to deliver in full the reforms recommended by Lord Hunt in October 1969 ensured that they, and Catholic communities across Northern Ireland, continued to withhold their consent to be policed by the RUC. This created the state of disaffection and, in parts, particularly areas of Hume's constituency, outright lawlessness in which the IRA was able to sustain itself. Because of this, Hume was convinced that the reconstitution of the RUC and the agencies of its control was a fundamental part of any political solution that would deliver lasting peace.

But in spite of his convictions, and his arduous efforts, Hume failed to achieve any real change to policing in Northern Ireland through Sunningdale. The simple reason was that, just as he saw the need for a complete restructuring of policing in Northern Ireland in order to *undermine* the republican movement, so did British officials believe in the need to maintain current security arrangements as the only way to *contain* it. London could not countenance any reform which would unsettle unionists and thus diminish the efficacy of the overwhelmingly Protestant RUC on whom the government still heavily relied in order to police Northern Ireland. William Whitelaw had made this clear in a discussion with Garret FitzGerald a month before the Sunningdale conference, when he rebuffed the SDLP's demands for a change in the name of the RUC by claiming that this was "like the 'Ark of the Covenant' for many", and that to do so would precipitate the resignation of 300 of his best officers.<sup>28</sup> In spite of Whitelaw's departure from the Northern Ireland Office prior to the Sunningdale conference, there Heath maintained the line that there could be no concession on policing. Unsurprisingly, Faulkner was also vehemently opposed to further changes to the RUC, or to any role for the Irish government in the force's control. But it was the obduracy of the British government over policing that ultimately defeated the SDLP's ambitions. In this, contrary to accounts which show the Sunningdale talks as an unmitigated success for the party, on what proved to be *the* decisive issue at the conference, it was the SDLP who were forced to back down (Faulkner, 1978: 236; FitzGerald, 1991: 221).

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<sup>28</sup> Minutes of meeting between Garret FitzGerald and William Whitelaw at the NIO in London, 8 Nov. 1973; NAI, Department of Foreign Affairs, 2004/15/23.

The vigorous struggle which the SDLP had fought in the run-up to Sunningdale in order to get Dublin to agree to link the Garda to the Council of Ireland—with Hume believing that the British government would then be prepared to do likewise with the RUC—had all been in vain. Whether or not Whitehall ever genuinely considered the possibility of such a *quid pro quo* in order to obtain better policing of the southern side of the Irish border is a moot point: when the cards were on the table at Sunningdale, it was clear that London, still mindful of such disasters as the introduction of internment and Bloody Sunday, was not prepared to relinquish any control over security in Northern Ireland, nor even to give Dublin the kind of consultative role that it would concede a decade later in the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement. As such, the best the SDLP could obtain was a vague and unspecified commitment that “the governments concerned will cooperate under the auspices of the Council of Ireland through their respective police authorities.” Following from this, an extremely tenuous association between state security in Northern Ireland and the Irish government was achieved through the provision that appointments to the Northern Ireland Police Authority would “be made after consultation with the Northern Ireland Executive which would consult with the Council of Ministers of the Council of Ireland.”<sup>29</sup>

Faulkner was quite right to consider this to be “simply a link to cover the abandonment by Dublin and the SDLP of their earlier positions” (Faulkner, 1978: 236). Indeed, the policing arrangements agreed to at Sunningdale fell short of even the Irish government’s pre-conference proposal that the forces in both jurisdictions should regularly account to the Council of Ireland—memorably dismissed by the SDLP as “‘collaboration’ in the Provo. sense of the word”—never mind the party’s initial hope of securing an actual role for Dublin in the control of the security apparatus in Northern Ireland.

The SDLP’s failure at Sunningdale to secure any real change in the administration of law and order in Northern Ireland was critical. In particular, the party’s inability to resolve the highly emotive issue of internment meant that, on taking office, the SDLP found themselves part of what was, in nationalist eyes, a punitive Stormont regime—precisely that which the party had repudiated with its withdrawal less than three years before. This left the SDLP open to much criticism from republicans and other radicals in the nationalist community, who had long predicted that the party would fall into line as an instrument of British state strategy and a proponent of the political status quo (Bew and Patterson, 1985: 65-6). This, in turn, helps to explain the particularly defensive behaviour of the SDLP at this time. For the party’s response to the criticism levelled at it with regard to Sunningdale was to hold all the more tenaciously to its ever more nationalist credentials, and in particular to the idea that the Council of Ireland would deliver Irish unity. Indeed, it should be remembered that Hugh Logue’s infamous comment that the Council was “the vehicle that would trundle unionists into a united Ireland” was made in direct response to a republican heckler amongst his audience, who accused the party of “selling out” on the national issue (Coogan, 1996: 209; Dixon, 2001: 147). As a consequence of such criticism, even after anti-agreement unionists’ overwhelming victory in the Feb-

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<sup>29</sup> The Sunningdale communiqué, article 15.

ruary general election, the SDLP continued to hold a strong line on the Council of Ireland, and dismissed suggestions from Faulkner's camp of a renegotiation of the Sunningdale settlement which would see the North-South body put into cold storage (Currie, 2004: 262, 270; Bew and Patterson, 1985: 66; McAllister, 1977: 141, 142).

It was only when the UWC strike began to genuinely threaten the Agreement that the SDLP leadership eventually acceded to a plan for a phased introduction of the Council of Ireland. This meant that the North-South body would not become fully operational until there had been a further test of the Northern Ireland electorate's opinion of the new arrangements in the next Assembly elections, due in 1977-8 (McAllister, 1977: 143). Even Dublin was shocked by the extent of this climb-down (FitzGerald, 1991: 240-1), and the SDLP's backbenchers immediately voted down the deal. After being persuaded that the phasing in of the Council might be the only means to save Sunningdale, they reluctantly accepted the plan on a second vote, but the episode left some considerable bitterness between the middle-rank party activists and the SDLP leadership. Moreover, the plan to phase in the Council of Ireland was only seen as a sign of weakness by loyalists, and encouraged rather than averted their ambition to destroy Sunningdale. This ambition was realised only days later, when the Unionist ministers decided they could no longer maintain their position in the face of the ongoing strike, and duly resigned from the executive.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Sunningdale Agreement was not the unqualified success for the SDLP that has often been suggested. Rather, it was the way the party presented the settlement that so prejudiced unionist opinions. For even before the agreement was announced, Sunningdale had been pre-sold on the premise that it would prepare the way for Irish reunification. Indeed, as far back as the collapse of Stormont, the SDLP's entire political strategy appeared predetermined towards the creation of a united Ireland. This was a consequence of attitudes in both communities in Northern Ireland during this period. On the nationalist side, the radicalisation of the minority produced by events like internment and Bloody Sunday, and then the rising level of expectation engendered by Stormont's fall, was difficult to reconcile with the reformist, gradualist doctrine initially proffered by SDLP. This—and the challenge posed by the republican movement in its promise to overthrow the British state, smash partition, and lead nationalists directly to the promised land—caused the SDLP to adopt a more dynamic language, which portrayed the negotiation of a new political settlement as an incontrovertible process towards a united Ireland. Meanwhile, in the unionist community, the division and demoralisation that followed Stormont's demise led the SDLP to the erroneous conclusion that a significant section of the Protestant populace would actually acquiesce in the reunification of Ireland if nationalists, North and South, seized the initiative and set in motion such a process. In both respects, the evolutionary and consensual conception of Irish unity at the heart of the SDLP's original thinking was effectively eclipsed.

A host of reasons account for the failure of the Sunningdale experiment: the inability of the Irish government to honour the commitments it made in the agreement; the continuing campaign of the IRA; the manipulation of the situation by loyalists; the



reluctance of the security forces to act against strikers and Protestant paramilitaries; and, ultimately, the weakness of Harold Wilson's Labour government. But the demise of Sunningdale should also be seen in a broader chronological perspective. Indeed, it could be argued that there is a need to go all the way back to 1968, the beginning of the civil rights movement, to fully appreciate the reasons for the agreement's failure.

From the late 1960s, the nationalist community in Northern Ireland appeared to continually escalate its demands, from equality within Northern Ireland, to an end of Stormont rule, and ultimately to a revision of the 1920-21 Irish settlement that would allow for the gradual reunification of Ireland. But it was because of this, the ever-increasing momentum of Irish nationalism, rhetorical and real, that unionists could not accept Sunningdale. They felt that they had been in retreat ever since 1968, and that now they had to hold firm or be totally absorbed by nationalist Ireland, a feeling which nationalist discourse, North and South, did little to dispel. In particular, the SDLP's lexicon of progressive reunification unnerved even moderate unionists. By the time of Sunningdale, the SDLP was seen by most Protestants to differ from the old Nationalist Party only in its sophistication, and from the Provisional IRA only in its constitutionalism. As such, comments such as Hugh Logue's merely confirmed unionists' belief that the SDLP saw the Sunningdale settlement as nothing more than an *interregnum* between British and Irish rule.

The irony in this is that Sunningdale actually represented the realisation of the SDLP's original project. The agreement was not a harbinger of Irish unity, but it did reform Northern Ireland in such a way as to allow Catholic identification with and participation in the state on terms of equality. It also provided a constitutional framework in which the two communities in Northern Ireland, and indeed the two traditions on the island, might co-operate and over time reconcile their differences. In this it allowed the possibility that, at some future stage, Ulster Protestants might genuinely reconsider their relations with the Catholic majority in Ireland, and perhaps contemplate some form of Irish unity.

But whilst consonant with its formative philosophy, the Sunningdale agreement was, for the main, misrepresented by the SDLP. Both the opportunities afforded and the pressures endured by the party in the period following the fall of Stormont led the SDLP to stray from its founding principles, to overstate both the dynamic and the potential of the Sunningdale experiment from a nationalist perspective, and so to debase the project in unionist eyes. For while the agreement suggested that constitutional nationalists accepted that unionists' agreement was necessary for the creation of a united Ireland, their words and their deeds with reference to Sunningdale appeared to suggest that they did not believe unionists had any right to withhold this assent. Indeed, the strategy of nationalist Ireland as a whole appeared to unionists as one of coercion over persuasion, and compulsion over consent. Divided and disorientated by the end of Stormont, they were reunited and re-energised by Sunningdale, and this led to a triumphant intransigence that would govern unionist politics for the remainder of the decade.

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