

ULSTER UNIONISM IN 1980

1. From 1920 to 1970 the Unionist tradition in Ulster was represented by a single monolithic Unionist Party. Throughout the 1970s the tendency has been for this unity to fragment. There is now a spectrum of Unionist groupings. The twin centres of this spectrum is formed by the Ulster Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party. At one end it shades away into the Alliance Party (non-sectarian but standing fully for the union) and at the other into the various Protestant paramilitary groupings whose influence under extreme conditions, as in 1974, can exceed that of the conventional political parties.

*What is
new about
way of
pulling it*

2. The strong common bond between the various Unionist groupings remains their aversion to incorporation into a united Ireland. But they disagree about how best to ensure this objective and about how the Province should be governed within the union. The changing face of Unionism since 1970 has not now settled into a new fixed pattern. The situation remains dynamic and the fortunes of the various groupings may continue to rise and fall as they have done over the last 10 years, not excluding the possibility of the eclipse of particular parties as happened to Mr. Faulkner's Unionist Party of Northern Ireland. As of June 1978 45% of the population of the Province were estimated as under 25, and no adults in that group have lived under the dominance of one single Unionist party. It is perhaps significant that the average age of the dozen leading members of the DUP, whose star at the moment seems to be waxing, is 10 years lower than the average of their counterparts at the head of the Ulster Unionist Party.

*After the
proposed
lower price?*

3. The extreme wing of Unionism represented by the paramilitary organisations is currently quiescent, lacking an issue on which to bring mobs on the street. According to intelligence sources the UDA's flirtation with ideas of independence for Ulster may be coming to an end in favour of a demand for at least interim devolution. The Alliance Party holds its share of the vote, but with no Westminster or European MPs cannot play the role it would hope to do under a devolved government. There are a number of minor Unionist parties,

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two of which have an MP at Westminster (Mr Dunlop and Mr Kilfedder) and three others with representatives in local politics in the Province. They are all broadly devolutionist rather than integrationist but their personal and political antagonisms continue to prevent cooperation. The UUP and the DUP are thus the most significant parties and the rest of this paper concentrates on them.

4. The UUP remain notionally committed to the restoration of a devolved majority-rule government, devoid of any concessions to the minority. They do not expect to attain this and Mr Powell, the dominant figure in the essentially Westminster-based leadership of the Party, does not want it. The leadership's strategy is integrationist. They hope to proceed down this path via the failure of the Government's initiative to restore devolved government, followed by implementation of the Government's manifesto commitment to strengthen local government which they would hope to dominate as they did before 1970. But there are clear indications from both open and secret sources that there is considerable support among traditional UUP voters in the Province for a firm devolution line. (It is noteworthy that a public opinion poll taken in December 1979 showed 84% of the population of the Province to be in favour of the Government's conference on devolved government.) Various senior figures in the UUP would almost certainly be prepared to break the Party's fragile unity to represent the devolutionist cause. All 5 UUP Westminster MPs must be acutely aware of the implications for them at the next election of the sharp rise in the DUP vote at the European Assembly Election

5. Dr. Paisley's ambitions have changed sharply since his remarkable success at the European Elections. Formerly essentially a wrecker, he now sees a prospect of attaining power as the only strong Unionist voice making the traditional Unionist case for a devolved Parliament and Government. His immediate ambition is to supplant the Ulster Unionist Party as the main voice of the Unionist tradition, using this platform to do so. He has his two colleagues in Parliament as well as the Party in the Province solidly behind him. Both from secret and overt sources there is evidence that the DUP is making some in-roads into UUP support, partly as a consequence

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of the greater efficiency of their party machine which is now being geared up in preparation for the District Council Elections in May 1981.

CONCLUSION

6. There is no united Unionist view on the future government of the Province, nor any sense of common purpose except of resistance to unity with the Republic. The various parties are preoccupied with securing their own position within the Unionist community. The fortunes of each will wax and wane as circumstances dictate. This means that there is at present no Unionist party leader who can be regarded as speaking for the whole spectrum of Unionist opinion or who could guarantee to deliver solid Unionist support for any of the conflicting views on how the Province should be governed.

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